Chapter 4

Mapping Hardy and Brontë

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Cartography illustrates the contours and limits of national identity as well as a nation’s fictions. As Benedict Anderson writes, maps give shape to national definition. Pamela K. Gilbert explains that maps help people see where they fit: they “perform an important function in defining communities—not only spatial communities, but interpretive and identity-based communities.” Maps reflect a widespread cultural interest in discovering, defining, and incorporating space—an interest that is illustrated but also problematized in fiction. J. Hillis Miller claims that “A novel is a figurative mapping,” part of a “series” along with the “real landscape” it describes diachronically. The connection between fiction and cartography is a political project, for as Franco Moretti writes, “Geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens’, but an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth.” In Atlas of the European Novel, Moretti creates maps based on novels in order to see the ways in which geography “shapes the narrative structure of the European novel.” Novels, writes Moretti, function “as the symbolic form of the nation-state [. . . ] an essential component of our modern culture.” Novels, like maps, create political realities.

Both Miller and Moretti describe the way novels are structurally and politically analogous to maps, but I am interested in a more literal interaction between novels and maps during the Victorian era—specifically, British novels that use cartography to rethink the relationship between individual characters and geopolitics. In Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891) and Villette (1853), for example, Thomas
Hardy and Charlotte Brontë respectively superimpose fictional names on factual geographies. Imaginary place settings are nothing new, even in works of realism, but *Tess* and *Villette* are exceptions in that each takes factual locations and renames them with a hyper-specific attention to geography as well as the isolation of their protagonists, Tess and Lucy, within that geography. In mapping Tess’s and Lucy’s isolation to these renamed places, Hardy and Brontë mimic cartographic imperialism subversively, critiquing territorial expansion by depicting protagonists who are tied to and yet displaced from the imperial worlds they inhabit. Tess and Lucy are mapped subjects who experience national identity as isolation and death.

Wessex was the name given to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom in southwestern England that existed from the sixth to the tenth centuries, and the cultural memory of the kingdom persisted long after its demise through texts such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The name was evoked throughout the nineteenth century as part of the Victorian medieval revival, but it was Thomas Hardy who did the most to re-popularize Wessex. Yet Hardy did not merely revitalize the Wessex name; he invented an entire system of place names for his fictionalization of what had become Dorset County, replacing the actual names of counties, towns, rivers, roads, and woods in southwestern England. In the Wessex novels, “real” named locations pepper the landscape occasionally as well, though they frequently refer to locations off the fictional map. London is “within a four hours’ journey” from Marlott, yet London is always out of the picture and is for all intents and purposes as distant as the Brazil to which the character Angel travels. The places in Hardy’s novels are thus not uniformly fictional or factual. Wessex is not so comprehensive a world.

True palimpsests, Hardy’s Wessex names “overwrite” Dorset ones, yet Hardy’s descriptions clearly identify their Dorset referents. Indeed, the realism of Hardy’s “traces” has sent many an enthusiast on “Wessex tours” of Dorset and has produced an entire Wessex tourist industry. Hardy either created or sanctioned at least 12 maps of Wessex for use in various editions of his novels, and critics and enthusiasts have produced countless others, in addition to place-name keys and the like. Hardy claimed that “the places in the novels” must be understood to be “only suggested by those real ones given—as they are not literally portraits of such,” but this claim seems to have largely fallen on deaf ears by Wessex tourists and scholars alike. Indeed, each fictional locale in Wessex is identifiable as a factual town or landscape in late nineteenth-century England.