

# This Is Not a Map

*Maps are not always works of dutiful representation. Sometimes they are tickets to flights of the imagination.*

BY MAX BYRD

IN THE MELANCHOLY YEAR 1882, ROBERT LOUIS Stevenson was 31 years old and in poor health. Though he had published by then, as he modestly said, “little books and little essays”—including *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), the immortal tale of his tour through central France—his burning ambition was to write and publish a novel. He had actually begun a great many novels, from the age of 15 on, but none were ever finished. They all seemed to go along for a while, he observed, then suddenly quit, “like a schoolboy’s watch.” Meanwhile, his essays and books earned him not quite £200 in a good year, which was far from enough to support a family. That summer, he and his wife were forced to go and live with Stevenson’s parents in the mountains above Pitlochry, Scotland.

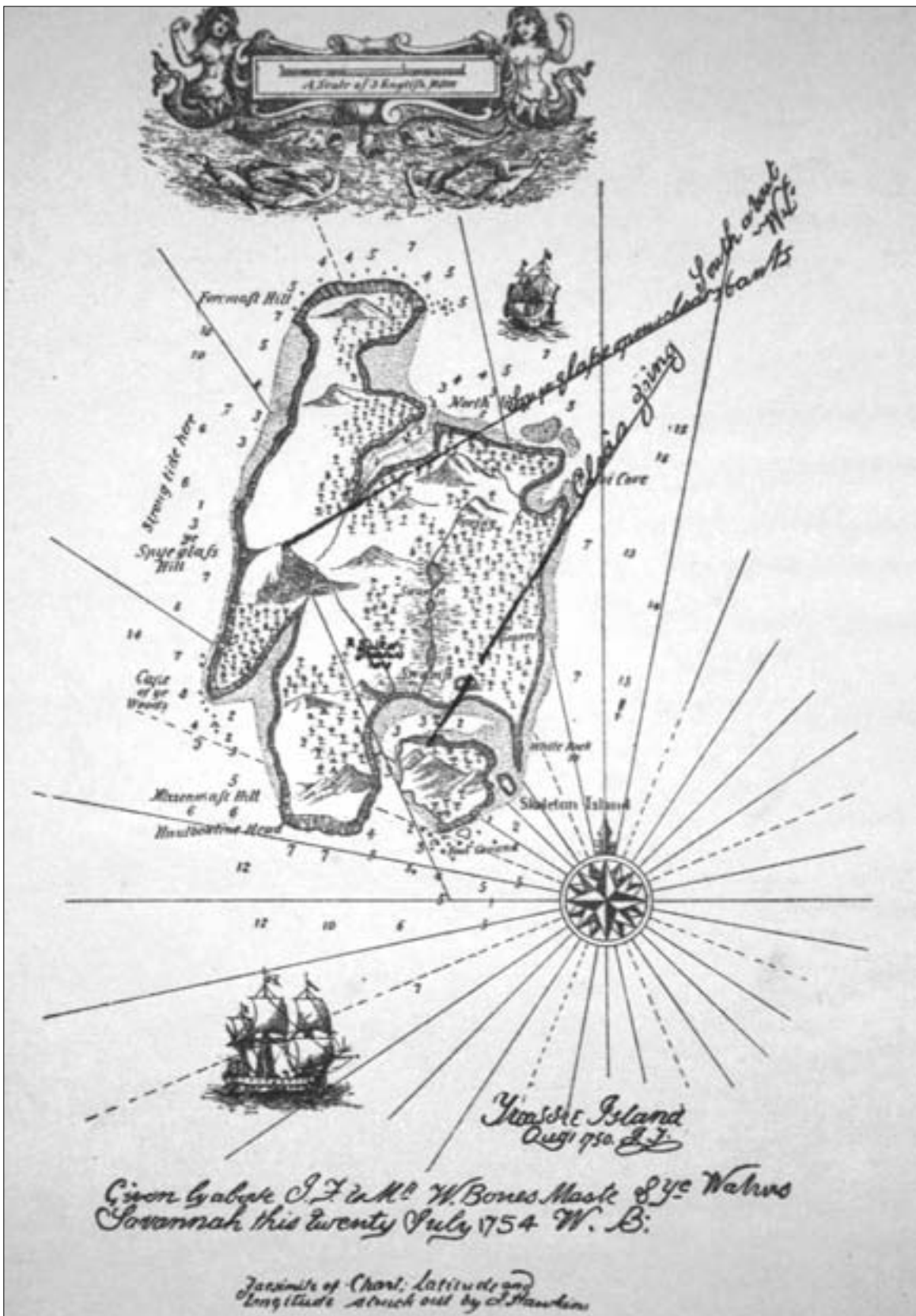
Then his bad health drove him farther north, to a retreat at Braemar. And there, as an escape from the Highland rain, he passed a great deal of time indoors as friendly companion to a local schoolboy, home for the holidays, who had a passion, not for literature, but for watercolors. Some days the two of them would spend whole afternoons standing side by side painting together. Soon enough, doubtless in a fit of jealousy, the Muse of Fiction looked down and took a hand. “On one of these occasions,” Stevenson recorded in the most charming

possible understatement, “I made the map of an island.” Few readers will need to be told what happened next. The shape of the map, he said, “took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance *Treasure Island*.”

Stevenson is the only novelist I know of who was inspired by imaginary inlets and hills and harbors to begin a book. He wrote the story, as he cheerfully confessed, “up to the map. The map was the chief part of my plot.” But he is hardly the only novelist to have drawn a map of his fictional creation. William Faulkner drew at least two maps of Yoknapatawpha County, one for the first edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* published in 1936, and a slightly different one 10 years later for *The Portable Faulkner*. J. R. R. Tolkien sketched several maps of Middle Earth for *The Hobbit* (1937); his son Christopher made the ones for the subsequent *Lord of the Rings* volumes. James Michener is said to have painted a map of the setting of each of his many novels. And if you had read Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878) as a magazine serial first, then later picked up the three-volume novel version, you might have been surprised to find opposite the title page a very somber-appearing “Sketch Map of the Scene of the Story,” drawn by the very somber author himself.

Hardy may have had several reasons for adding the

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In 1882, Robert Louis Stevenson sketched the map that inspired his classic tale. But the drawing reproduced in the book's many editions is not the original, which was lost after he mailed it to his publisher. Stevenson reconstructed the map, but mourned, "Somehow it was never Treasure Island to me."



Thomas Hardy, above right, set his gloomy 1878 tale *Return of the Native* in a “vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath,” of which he made a painstaking map. The setting, he explained in a preface, was a composite of at least a dozen real heaths.

map. For one thing, he was proud of having observed a classical unity of place, confining the whole story to a single setting, the fictional Egdon Heath. For another, the novel itself concerns characters so psychologically disoriented and lost—adultery, mother-son estrangement, and two drownings figure in the plot—that he may have been projecting for the reader a kind of graphic key to its

themes. But surely at bottom was the motive that underlies all such fictional maps: the drive for realism, verisimilitude, mimesis—the nearly perfect representation of reality that makes a fiction seem to be true.

We trust a map. It describes the known physical world, the most certain knowledge we have, and in such detail that we can easily check its accuracy. If a map sometimes reveals things we didn't know—for example, that Italy, as seen from above, is the shape of a boot—that only increases its air of authority. Some part of our mind is probably always aware that the map is not the real thing itself, or even always truthful—certain Soviet maps used to omit from the city plan of Moscow the streets where the KGB was headquartered. But usually, staring with studious

frown at the folded squares of paper or the colored grid on our dashboard screen, we assume the map to be an authentic, reliable guide to reality. And if you are making up a story that you want people to believe, even if just for a moment, you take all the reality you can get.

Something like this was certainly in Daniel Defoe's mind when he included a map of the world in the fourth

edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (it was published nine times in 1719), with dotted lines inked in by the novelist himself to show where Crusoe had voyaged. And a desire for verisimilitude undoubtedly led Jonathan Swift to include five quite plausible maps in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), including one that tacked the fictitious land of Brobdingnag on to the actual coast of northern California. These are maps to persuade readers of what mere, unreliable text has already described: This story is true. It happened *here*.

Such authenticity, many novelists believe, is so important that it can be felt, like the submerged nine-tenths of an iceberg, even when it isn't seen. Though there was no map in the finished book and no one was likely to check, James Joyce wrote the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of *Ulysses*, his friend Frank Budgen said, "with a map of Dublin open before him on which were traced in red ink the paths of the Earl of Dudley and Father Conmee. He calculated to a minute the time necessary for his characters to cover a given distance of the city." Even so romantic and mythopoeic a novelist as Herman Melville tried to anchor his fiction in an invisible but not irrelevant reality: Using a naval sea-chart that showed the migratory patterns of the sperm whale in the Pacific, he worked out exactly when and where in his story Ahab and Moby-Dick might plausibly meet.

## II

**N**ow let me contradict myself. Deep down, we recognize that a map is not to be confused with reality. A map is not a mirror. Even where there is no intent to deceive, as there was in the Soviet maps of Moscow, every map ever drawn is incomplete, and incompletely truthful. On any map, some things must be included, and most things must be left out. The *principle* of selection will vary, depending upon the purposes of the mapmaker—roads and towns will be

shown for a gas station foldout, but not necessarily elevation or topography. Like novels, maps have points of view (literally "orientation"). Their details are selected for a particular effect or use, like the details a novelist chooses in describing, say, Crusoe's island. Even purportedly truthful maps can be embellished with imagi-

**FICTIONAL MAPS, like the one of Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels*, are intended to persuade readers that a story is true. It happened *here*.**

nary details. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for example, maps often showed the location of Eden off to the east, or sea serpents, or fire-breathing dragons and a caption: "Here Be Monsters." Robert Louis Stevenson understood instinctively that a map is a setting. A map is a fiction.

Indeed, when it is not a fiction, the result is so completely realistic as to be absurd, unimaginable. In the story "A Universal History of Infamy," Jorge Luis Borges describes a map of the "Empire" that is constantly being revised and enlarged by a team of mapmakers for precision and accuracy. With each revision, it grows larger and yet more accurate, down to the least rock and tree and tuft of grass, until at last the map becomes precisely and exactly the size of the Empire itself.

To complicate the matter, we can add that quite often novels contain maps that are obviously not "real" maps at all and contribute nothing whatsoever to verisimilitude. This is true, for example, of that very large category of maps that appear in fantasy novels such as *The Lord of the Rings* or Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), depicting lands (sometimes drawn by the author, sometimes supplied by the publisher) that the reader knows from the start are perfectly nonexistent. Maps in many science-fiction novels likewise superimpose a fiction upon a fiction, or occasionally a fiction upon a reality—for his Red Planet stories, Edgar Rice Burroughs drew maps that showed cities and

canals on Mars, and for Tarzan and Jane he located the land of Pal-ul-Don, with its striped lions and hairy-tailed men, in the present-day Republic of Zaire.

There is yet another category of unreal maps, more suggestive if less imaginative. The earliest map in a novel of which I am aware appears in Madeleine de Scudéry's 10-volume romantic tale *Clélie* (1654)—her "Carte de Tendre" (Map of Tenderness) shows, among many other topographical features, the Lake of Indifference, the River of Inclination, and the Dangerous Sea, which evidently borders the Unknown Land of Matrimony. This, one may object, is not really a map, but simply a diagram or a chart meant to help us understand the story—stripped of allegorical labels, it would resemble something like that staple of genteel detective novels, the bare schematic rooms in an English country house where Hercule Poirot has come to solve a crime.

But landscape and allegory have a strong affinity. In a different vein, many editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) contain maps very like Scudéry's chart. And these maps not only show the moral world of the story but also summarize its narrated action: In my own copy, Christian, the everyman protagonist, begins on the bottom far-right-hand side of one page at the City of Destruction and proceeds through Vanity Fair and the Slough of Despond all the way to the Delectable Mountains and the Place of Deliverance, on the top of the facing page.

Carrying this idea to its logical extreme, there are maps that tell a story but do away with the written text altogether. They consist only of geographical features, names, and captions. An 1868 single-sheet evangelical handbill published in St. Louis, "Two Roads From the Cradle to Eternity," has no more than a few exhortative quotations from Scripture and two diverging paths heading toward the "Sweet Fields of Everlasting Green" or, alas, the "Deep Gulf of Fire and Brimstone." The quite wonderful 1908 "Gospel Temperance Map" has no quotations or exhortations at all, only railroad tracks that rise to the Beulah Land of Sobriety, or else drop like a stone through "Rum Jug Lake" and "Broken Home" in a pretty straight line toward "Suicide Tunnel." Here, we may think, we have reached the ultimate point—two meanings of "plot" have simply folded into each other: The plot of ground or space where the story happens has become, without any intervening narrative words, the

plot or action that is the very story itself. The map stands alone.

### III

I have left two obvious questions for last. First, after he had finished his drawing of a map and stepped back to admire it, what exactly did Robert Louis Stevenson *do then*?

I don't mean the question literally, for we have Stevenson's testimony as to that:

As I paused upon my map of Treasure Island, the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among the imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection. The next thing I knew I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters.

And we have further amplification in the text of *Treasure Island* itself, for the boy Jim Hawkins is clearly a version of Stevenson himself, and his thought processes are exactly like those of his author. In the story, as in real life, the map simply appears one day, full-blown, like Athena springing from Zeus's head: Jim opens an old sea-chest—and there the island is, depicted complete "with latitude and longitude, sounds, names of hills, and bays, and inlets. . . . It was about nine miles long and five across, shaped, you might say, like a fat dragon standing up." As Jim broods over the map, he too begins to populate it with men and creatures:

Sitting by the fire in the housekeeper's room, I approached that island, in my fancy, from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spyglass, and from the top enjoyed the most wonderful and changing prospects. Sometimes the isle was thick with savages with whom we fought; sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us.

There are doubtless a number of ways to understand how a map turns into a story. The novelist John Gardner, for example, observed that literature really has only two basic plots: someone goes on a journey, or (the other point of view) a stranger comes to town. In either case a map, seen or unseen, underlies the plot: the dotted lines over the ocean that lead Robinson Crusoe to his island, the labyrinthian tangles of London streets into which a wide-eyed young David Copperfield enters. In our mind's eye, a map is a static space across which a story—my trip, your arrival—moves in time.

To put it another way, even more than nature itself, human nature abhors a vacuum. When we see a blank space, we give it a name such as Spyglass Hill or Victoria or Lake of Indifference, and the name suggests associations and meanings—that is why allegory and landscape have an affinity—and one way or another, we start writing a list of chapters. It may be a map of a real place or an imaginary one. What matters is that we cannot explain a map by a map. Almost at once, like Stevenson standing back from his drawing, we transform its spaces into something human, and everything human has a story.

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer suggested that the categories by which we first organize our knowledge of the world are spatial—that is, whether things are close together or far apart, above or below each other. To this insight Jean Piaget and other students of psychology add that children in their development follow a clear progression in their early lives from spatial ideas such as proximity and distance to ideas of separation—one's self separate from other shapes—then to mental images in which space is organized, visualized, represented.

It may be, however, that even in these theories the visual element in imaginative literature is still not sufficiently recognized. The very word "imagination" has at its core the idea of image. To imagine something is to compose a picture in one's mind. Ford Madox Ford used to advise the novice to write as if the action of the novel were taking place directly in front of him or her, on a brightly lit stage. But most readers will recognize that this is also precisely what happens to us when we pick up a story. We see it take place before us, as if on a stage—or on a map.

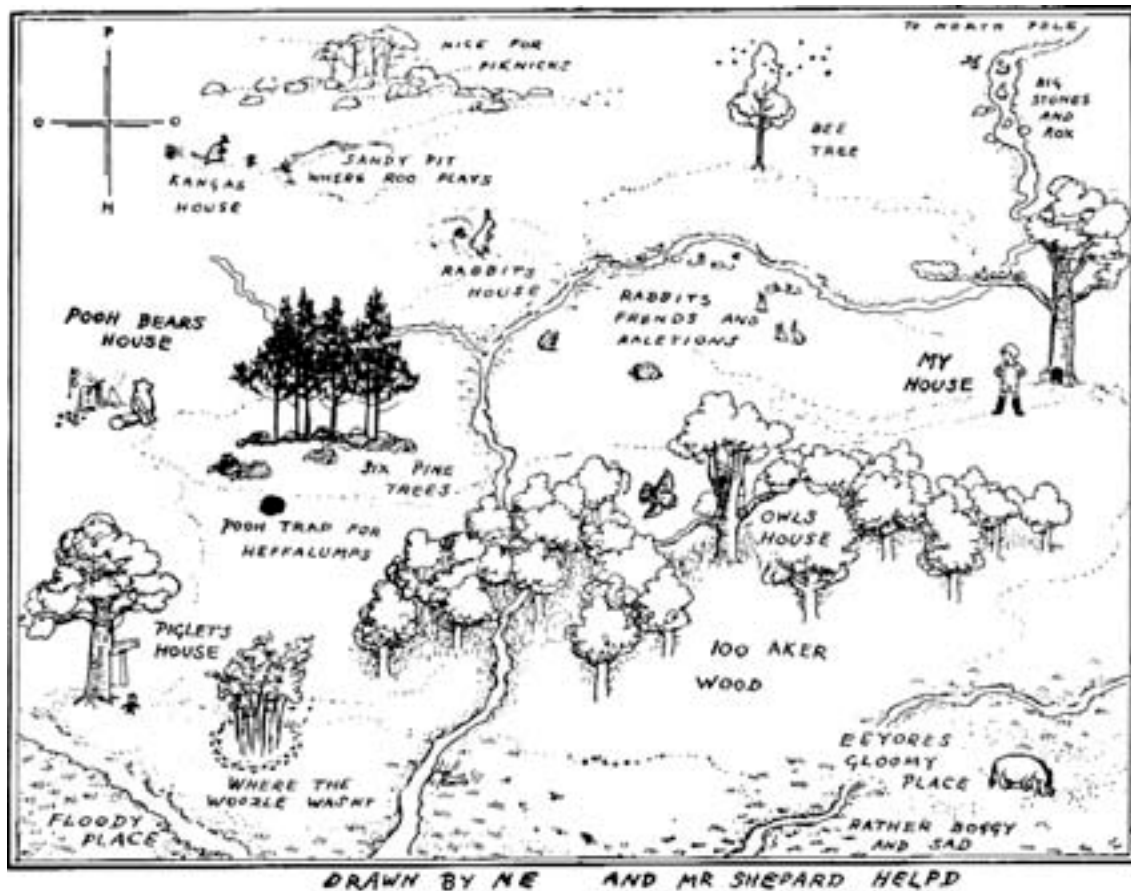
The narrator Marlowe describes the effect in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth." I very much doubt that so careful a writer as Conrad was unaware of the irony of "losing oneself" in a map. (We also "lose ourselves" in a book.) Nor was he careless in dating the storyteller Mar-

## STORYTELLERS KNOW there is a powerful connection between a child's imagination and the blank spaces of the earth.

lowe's passion for maps from childhood, for though children have no monopoly on making maps—or stories—there is surely a deep and powerful connection between a child's imagination and the blank spaces of the earth.

We may think, for example, of *islands*—the remarkable frequency with which children draw them or take pleasure in seeing them. The fascinating *Atlas of Fantasy* (1973), by J. B. Post, a compilation of maps of imaginary places, gives perhaps a third of its pages over to island maps that appear in children's books, a category that includes *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* as well as Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (1930) and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1874). Nor is this at all surprising. What a map of an island shows is really an entire world, set apart and comprehensible, reduced in size like the child's world, but complete. We can take it in at a glance, from above, like a god. A child's eye and imagination can control it.

This sense of control is all the more striking when we consider how the islands children draw and read about are linked to other microcosms they play with—model trains, miniature towns, dollhouses. A child's sense of weakness and helplessness is overcome, for a moment at least, when he or she can maneuver powerful engines with one small hand or lift up a toy roof and rearrange the tiny world beneath it. Perhaps the most poignant of all maps of imaginary places was drawn by William Blake to illustrate the land of "Allestone," an amazingly complete and com-



Generations of children and adults have threaded their imaginations through the 100 Aker Wood, hoping for a glimpse of Piglet and Pooh.

plex world invented by a friend's son named Thomas Williams Malkin, who died at the age of seven after a long and difficult illness and whose imagined country must have been an alternative and a compensation for the painful one he lived in. Surely he lost himself in it.

With that sad word "painful" we are back with Stevenson in the cold, wet Scottish Highlands, and my final question: Where did that map of *Treasure Island* come from in the first place? To answer, we need only remember that Stevenson was 31 years old, but forced by poverty to live again with his parents, like a child. That he was ill. And that he was spending his melancholy days inside, with a schoolboy, drawing pictures. His map came from the same deep source as Thomas Malkin's *Allestone*—it represented an escape from that gray, dreary Scotland where he had regressed; it showed a world over which his imagination, at least, had power.

I cannot leave him there on that steep Freudian decline,

however. The *Atlas of Fantasy* lies open on my desk to pages 66 and 67, which show one of the luminous and abiding images from my own childhood—the great map of Christopher Robin's neighborhood that accompanies the episode "In Which Pooh and Piglet Go Hunting and Nearly Catch a Woozle." It is a map of a world, complete and satisfactory as an island. It locates Christopher Robin's House and Pooh Bear's House, the "100 Aker Wood," and even Eeyore grazing in his "Gloomy Place." The feeling it gives is not one of control or escape or verisimilitude. The feeling it gives is joy—the same feeling that leaps off the page as Stevenson describes, not his retreat to childhood weakness and dependence, but his delight at having, so unexpectedly and freely, produced from his own mind a living place. Mimesis and creation are really only different sides of the same bright coin. I should not be at all surprised if, before beginning his six days' work, the great Artist himself had first stood before his easel, smiling, and made a map. ■