

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY :

A FREUDIAN LOOK AT THE SEARCH FOR MOTHER EARTH...OR, HOW I LOVED MY MOTHER, HATED MY FATHER AND DISCOVERED AMERICA

BY JOEL GREENBERG

If only Sigmund Freud had been around when Columbus, after discovering the New World, wrote this account of the earth to the Catholic Majesties in Spain:

"... is not round as they [Ptolemy and other geographers] describe it, but is... in the shape of a pear which is round everywhere but where the stalk is, for there it is higher; or it is like a very round ball on one part of which is placed something like a woman's breast and this nipple part is the highest and closest to heaven..."

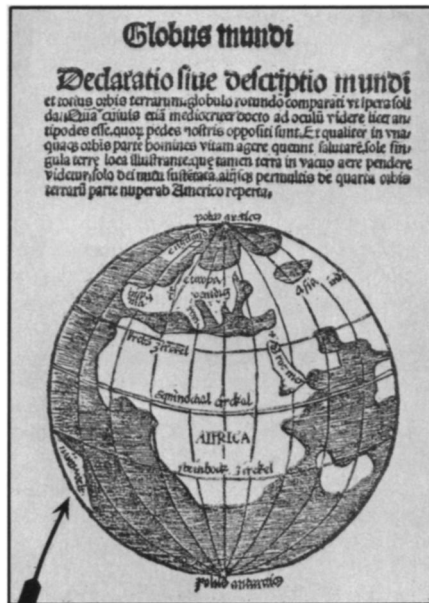
Or, when Amerigo Vespucci relayed his account of the New World paradise:

"... they take as many wives as they desire; and the son copulates with the mother, the brother with the sister... and everybody with everybody... there is no law... they live according to nature."

Perhaps most unfortunate — at least to William G. Niederland — is that these and other significant explorations and insights happened before the time of William G. Niederland. But their significance remains today and Niederland — professor of psychiatry at the State University of New York's Downstate Medical Center and a former shipboard explorer, of sorts, himself — is using these and other explorations as a springboard for proposing a "new science": *Psychogeography*.

As the name implies, psychogeography is a psychoanalytical interpretation of man's (specifically males in this case) need to explore, and his conception of geography. The idea is based largely on the Freudian cornerstones of the mother-child link and sexual gratification.

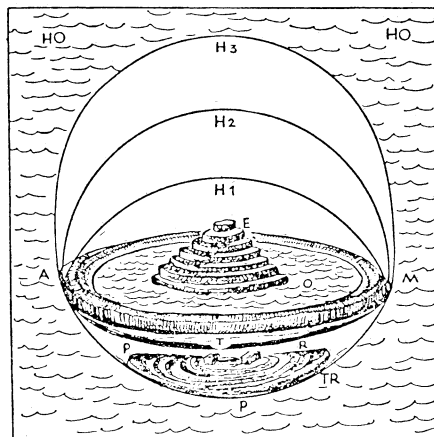
"The lure of discovery and exploration is a libidinally [connected with the 'sexual instinct'] toned lure," says Niederland, who sailed around the world as a ship's doctor on a British freighter "during the Hitler days... It's a lure for every child [to discover] their own body and their mother's body," says the psychoanalyst, who proposed the field of study at the fall



This map of the world, drawn in A.D. 1509, portrays the New World (arrow) as an isolated island, "with its unconscious connotations of bliss... mother, womb [and] birth," says Niederland.

meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association (SN: 1/14/78, p. 21).

Niederland suggests "a closer study of the manifold endeavors, fantasies and images which went into the formation of geography down the ages." Psychogeog-



A reconstruction of the Sumerian and Babylonian concept of the earth around 2,000 to 3,000 B.C. depicts the earth (E), three layers of heaven (H1, 2 and 3) and terrestrial ocean (O) surrounded by Heavenly Ocean (HO). Other areas are bottom of terrestrial ocean (T), morning, sunrise mountain (M), seven walls (TR, R) and the palace of the kingdom of the dead (P). To the analyst, the imagery portrays the earth as an island, floating like a fetus in the water of the mother's womb.

raphy, he says, has three main points:

1. "The unconscious libidinal components linked to geographic pursuits in the relation to Gaea, Mother Earth. Indeed geography... is the study of Gaea, her appearance, shape, size, regions, movements and other intriguing attributes."

2. "The ego aspects in regard to the projection of body imagery onto geographic and cosmographic image formation."

3. The "defensive, protective" aspects of geography as they appear in world imagery, geographic lore and map documentation.

Freud first initiated this type of "applied psychoanalysis" when he related analytic concepts to novels and biographies of people such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; and today Paul Ricoeur of the University of Strasbourg is applying analysis to theology, while others are attempting to do so with periods of history. Niederland, however, is the first to attempt to analyze geography.

"The idea is a sound one, and there are valid reasons for it," says David Dean Brockman of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, chairman of the APA's public information committee. "He [Niederland] has documented his hypotheses and assertions with care. I think there is a benefit in fertilization of another field with psychoanalytic concepts... and maybe it will lead to greater knowledge among those geographers who respond to it."

Some who do respond undoubtedly will be critics. "We're well aware of the criticisms that such applications are over-reductionistic," Brockman says. "And there are problems that are somewhat large in carrying over one discipline to another." The most obvious problem, he concedes, is that the "patients" in most applied analyses are long dead and buried. "The subject is not present, so you can't get the kind of data from free associations, dreams and fantasies that we get from [living] patients... you must hypothesize them [explorers] as having certain motivations."

Where academic geographers might dismiss many of the descriptions and fantasies of explorers as "weird conclusions, foolish notations or hoaxes," Niederland says, "psychoanalysts are of course interested in the very fantasies underlying such 'weird' and 'foolish' ideas. Examining them analytically, we find that they... are apt to disclose crucial components of the imagery and conceptualizations that went into the formation of geography as a science down the ages.

"One has only to consider analytically the activities aimed at the study of [ex-

ploration],” says the analyst, “that is, *exploration, intrusion, penetration, entering* new lands, *uncovering* their location and nature, *unveiling* their beauty, fertility and mysteries, etc., in order to understand the unconscious meaning of such pursuits. Freud said it in one sentence: ‘Thirst for knowledge ... (is) inseparable from sexual curiosity.’”

At the turn of the 20th century, widespread commentaries of Norwegian explorer Fritjoff Nansen’s first-ever penetration of the arctic zone closest to the North

But in most cases, it is “mother” earth who is the object of all this penetrating and thrusting. And the key image in these sought-after and discovered lands is that of an island, “with its unconscious connotations of bliss, happiness, mother, womb, birth and rebirth,” notes Niederland. “Virtually on all ancient maps of the world phantom islands of bliss and fortune appear somewhere, often in pairs, or multiples of pairs ... as maternal breasts in the unconscious,” he says.

Even after its discovery, America was

depict the “earth” as an island, floating “like an embryo or fetus within the terrestrial and heavenly ocean,” the analyst points out. “The ocean is seen as the womb of life, the ‘mother water’ and the fetus inside the ocean. In other words, the locus of the world image is the body image.” Other notions have equated the movement of water to that of blood within the body’s arteries and veins.

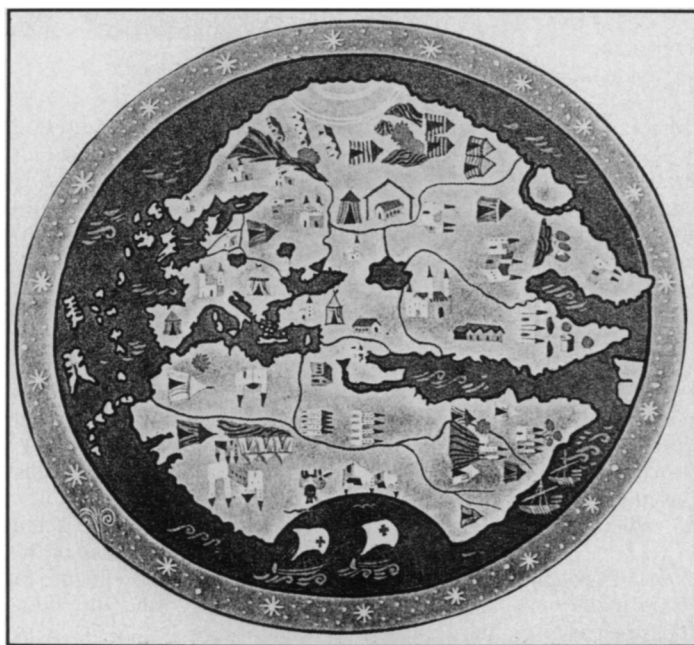
A final aspect of psychogeography deals with the “fears and pervasive anxieties to which the history of discovery and exploration is linked.” Beyond the limits of known ocean waters, sailors envisioned either falling over the edge of the earth or into boiling hot or thick, slimy masses — complete with monstrous demons with enormous jaws—from which there was no return. “As analysts,” Niederland says, “we note again the projection of the body image onto the outer world, here as a thinly disguised sexual geography that culminates in a vagina dentata and penis captivus fantasy par excellence. It does not require analytical acumen to understand this prohibition as an expression of the sexually tinged fantasy that the great water (mother) is the domain of father (God) who is sternly opposed to any filial intrusion.”

Just as virtually all maps between the 12th and 15th centuries reflected these fears by depicting far-off “seas of total darkness” and “impenetrable fog,” they also conveyed the people’s apprehension about being invaded by the unspeakable creatures that inhabited those zones. During the Middle Ages, Roger Bacon strongly recommended the study of geography so that people might repulse the dreaded invasion of the savage tribes of *Gog* and *Magog* mentioned in the Bible and living somewhere outside the known *orbis terrarum*, Niederland notes.

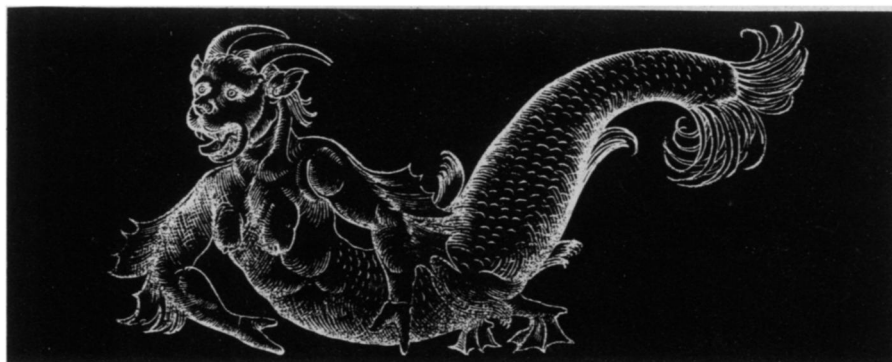
Geographic “defenses” against such invasions were provided in maps by having an outer circle (sometimes in the form of a river) “protect” the known land masses inside. “But today we have broken through the outer safety circle and gone into outer space,” says Niederland, “and we fear we will be invaded by extraterrestrial beings in UFO’s.”

Brockman suggests that psychogeography might possibly be applied to explorers of the present and future. “It’s a look at man’s unconscious motivation to search out and discover,” he says. “That’s what we’re all about. And the more we can understand, the more our motivations will be realistic.”

Niederland’s proposal to fuse two branches of science into one discipline is motivated basically by academic interest and curiosity, he says. He hopes the idea will catch on in universities throughout the United States. “Viewed in such a perspective,” the analyst says, “geography may become again the most interesting science it once was: *Geographia Incomparabilis*, the incomparable geography.” □



The world, as drawn by explorer Andrea Bianco in A.D. 1435, is “protected” by an “all-enveloping, all-encircling” river — a characteristic defense against demons of unknown territories. The Canary Islands — known then as the “islands of bliss and fortune” — are pictured to the west (left). (Also note: Southern Africa has yet to be discovered).



An ancestor of the Loch Ness monster? According to Niederland, this creature typifies the demons feared to inhabit depths of unknown ocean waters of the past.

Pole stated that Nansen was about to “enter an intact, beautiful woman,” according to Niederland. Such descriptions, he says, illustrate man’s drive “to know the inside of the mother — to intrude, explore, unveil.” The need to find father, as well as mother, shows up in the life of British explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley, Niederland says. Stanley, an illegitimate child, grew up in an orphanage and “was preoccupied with finding the origin of his life,” suggests the analyst. The search culminated with discovering the source of the Nile River, representing the mother, and with his Central Africa rescue of Scottish missionary David Livingston: “My father, I presume,” as Niederland puts it.

still pictured as an island — “a beautiful, all-feeding mother” — on maps, as well as in the blissful fantasies of Columbus, Vespucci and others. Today, centuries-old fantasy islands such as Atlantis, Isle of the Seven Cities and St. Brendan’s Isle of Fortune, are still being sought. “From an analytical point of view, it is not difficult to recognize in these persistent fantasies the image of the bountiful island-mother and the searched-for infantile bliss at her all-feeding and all-giving breast, with no pain, no restraint and the gratification of all oral and other infantile impulses and desires,” Niederland says.

In perhaps the ultimate island imagery, reconstruction of ancient Sumerian maps