

GRAPHS, MAPS, TREES

Abstract Models for Literary History

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VERSO

London • New York

Maps

There is a very simple question about literary maps: what exactly do they *do*? What do they do that cannot be done with words, that is; because, if it can be done with words, then maps are superfluous. Take Bakhtin's essay on the chronotope: it is the greatest study ever written on space and narrative, and it doesn't have a single map. Carlo Dionisotti's *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, the same. Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, the same. Henri Lafon's *Espaces romanesques du XVIIIe siècle . . .* Do maps *add* anything, to our knowledge of literature?

I

Village stories were a popular British genre of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, peaking with Mary Mitford's *Our Village*, published in five volumes between 1824 and 1832. The village was Three Mile Cross, in Berkshire (figure 13, overleaf), a dozen miles south of Reading, on the road to Hampshire; and the road is explicitly foregrounded in Mitford's opening sketch, where it also forms the basis for her presentation of the village as one house after another along a 'straggling, winding street'. So you think, 'Yonville',¹ and imagine

¹ 'There is nothing further to see in Yonville. The street, the only one, about a gunshot in length, with a few shops on each side . . .' (*Madame Bovary*, II.I)

FIGURE 13: *Three Mile Cross*



★ Three Mile Cross

A small neighbourhood is as good in sober waking reality as in poetry or prose; a village neighbourhood, such as this Berkshire hamlet in which I write, a long, straggling, winding street, at the bottom of a fine eminence, with a road through it, always abounding in carts, horsemen and carriages, and lately enlivened by a stage-coach from B- to S-.

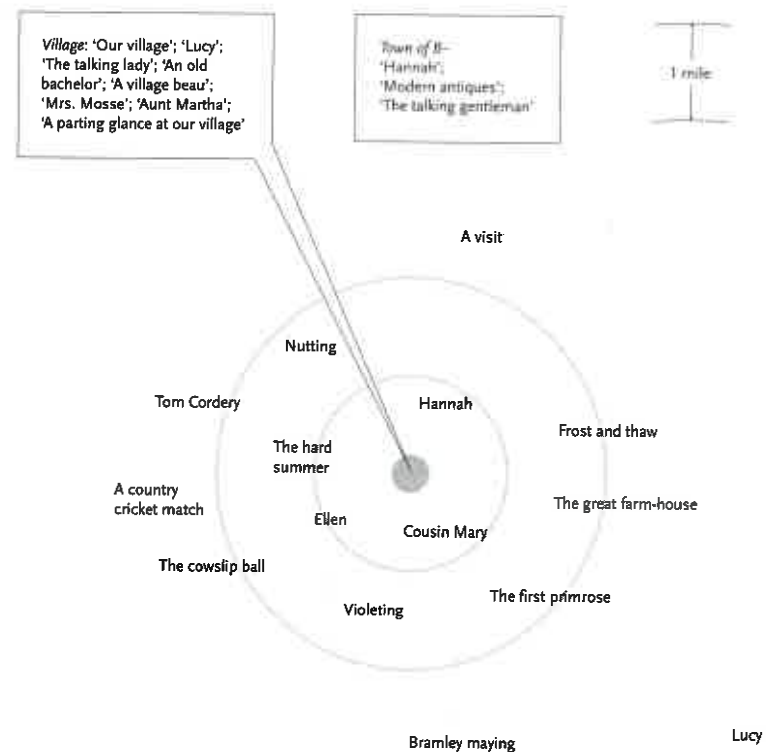
Mary Mitford, 'Our Village'

Source: Thomas Moule, *The English Counties Delineated* [1837], London 1994

this village of two or three hundred people as a mere site of transit between larger places (*Effi Brist*: 'no, the Gdansk-Berlin express does not stop here . . .'). Easy.

Then you make a map of the book, and everything changes. The twenty-four stories of Mitford's first volume, figure 14 shows, arrange themselves in a little solar system, with the village at the centre of the

FIGURE 14: *Mary Mitford, Our Village, volume I* [1824]



pattern, and two roughly concentric rings around it. The first ring is closer to the village, and focuses largely on personal relationships ('Ellen', 'Hannah', 'Cousin Mary'); the second ring, its components more numerous, is at a distance of a couple of miles, and emphasizes natural spectacles ('Frost and thaw', 'Violeting', 'The first primrose'), plus collective events like cricket and maying. But in both cases the road 'from B- to S-', so present at the beginning of the book, has disappeared: narrative space is not linear here, it is *circular*. Which

is surprising: while mapping nineteenth-century genres for the *Atlas of the European Novel* I encountered all sorts of shapes—linear trajectories, binary fields, triangulations, multi-polar stories—but never a circular pattern. Where on earth do these rings come from?

II

John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730–1840*:

There is a sense in which an open-field parish in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [which is exactly what the one in *Our Village* is like] could be said to have a different geography according to who was looking at it: thus, for those of its inhabitants who rarely went beyond the parish boundary, the parish itself was so to speak at the centre of the landscape . . . For those inhabitants accustomed to moving outside it, however, and for those travellers who passed through it, the parish was . . . defined not by some circular system of geography but by a linear one.²

A circular 'system of geography', and a linear one: behind these two perspectives lies the dramatic transformation of rural space produced by parliamentary enclosure, which Barrell has so well visualized in his two maps of Helpston, and where a perceptual (because productive) system in which the village is still largely self-sufficient, and can therefore feel at the centre of 'its own' space, is replaced by an abstract grid, within which Helpston becomes just one of the many 'beads' that the various roads will run through (figures 15–16, overleaf).

Against this background, *Our Village's* spatial pattern becomes at once clearer, and more surprising: by opening with a linear perspective, and then shifting to a circular one, Mitford reverses the direction

² John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730–1840*, Cambridge 1972, p. 95. For the sources of the two Helpston maps (figures 15–16), see pp. 225–7.

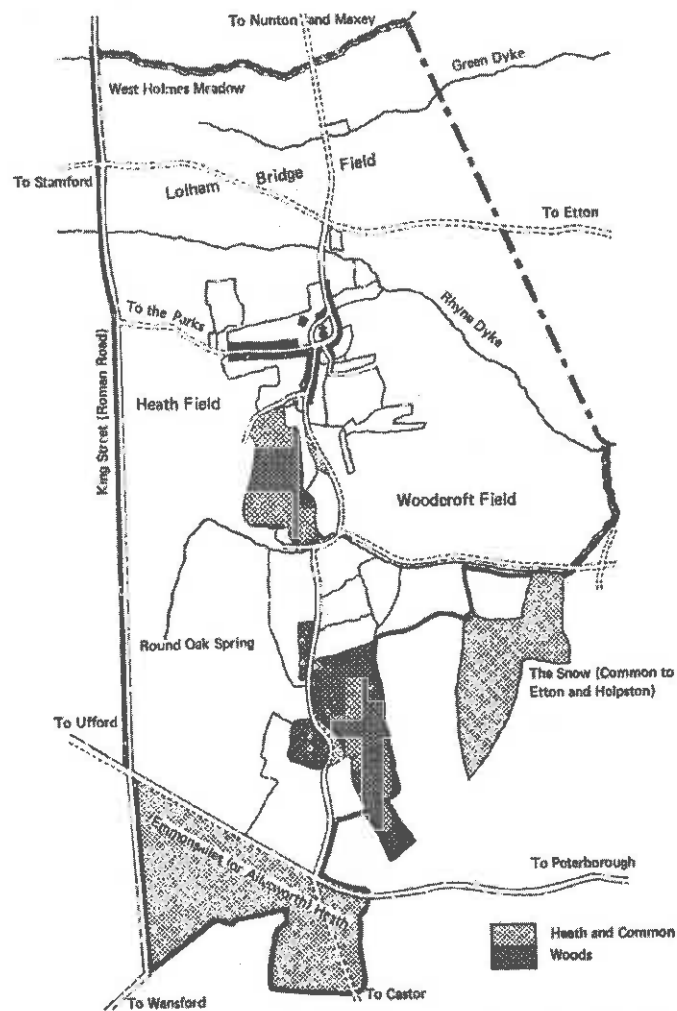
of history, making her urban readers (*Our Village* was published by Whitaker, Ave-Maria-Lane, London) look at the world according to 'the older, 'centred' viewpoint of an unenclosed village. And the key to this perceptual shift lies in Mitford's most typical episode: the country walk. In story after story, the young narrator leaves the village, each time in a different direction, reaches the destinations charted in figure 14, then turns around and goes home. 'When a system is free to spread its energy in space', writes Rudolf Arnheim, 'it sends out its vectors evenly all around, like the rays emanating from a source of light. The resulting . . . pattern is the prototype of *centric composition*.'³ Exactly: out of the free movements of *Our Village's* narrator, spread evenly all around like the petals of a daisy, a circular pattern crystallizes—as it does, we shall see, in *all* village stories, of which it constitutes the fundamental chronotope. But in order to see this pattern, we must first extract it from the narrative flow, and the only way to do so is with a map. Not, of course, that the map is already an explanation; but at least it shows us that there is something *that needs to be explained*. One step at a time.

III

A rounded pattern in Helpston before the enclosure; and a rounded pattern in *Our Village*. But with a difference: in Mitford's walks, Barrell's 'rough circle . . . in which the villagers work and move' is rewritten as a space of *leisure* rather than work. Slow easy strolls, thoughtless, happy, in the company of a greyhound called May; all around, a countryside full of picturesque natural views, but where very few people are actually doing anything. Decorative: for each page devoted to agricultural labour, there must be twenty on flowers and trees, described with meticulous precision. If urban readers are

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, new version, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1988, p. 4.

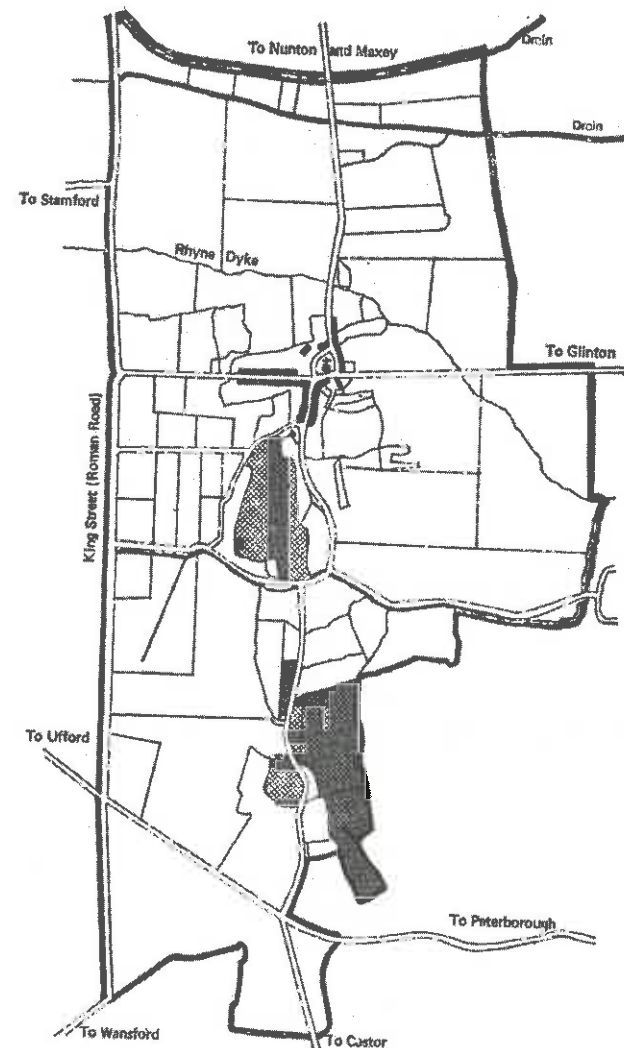
FIGURE 15: The parish of Helpston in 1809, before the enclosure



The characteristic sense of space which the topography and organization of an open-field parish created was circular, while the landscape of parliamentary enclosure expressed a more linear sense . . . the village of Helpston is at the centre of the parish, where the three fields of the parish come together: they form around the settlement a rough circle, which represents the area in which the villagers work and move.

John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840*

FIGURE 16: The parish of Helpston in 1820, after the enclosure



Priest's idea of a road is that it should be threaded through one village and another like a string through beads: he thinks of the road as in some sense prior to the villages on it, and not of the villages existing separately first.

John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840*

made to share the village's perception of space, then, it's also true that this space has been thoroughly *gentrified*; as if Mitford had travelled forward in time, and discovered what city-dwellers will want to find in the countryside during a brief weekend visit. Not surprisingly, country walks were by far the most popular part of *Our Village*, and remained long in print by themselves while the rest was forgotten.

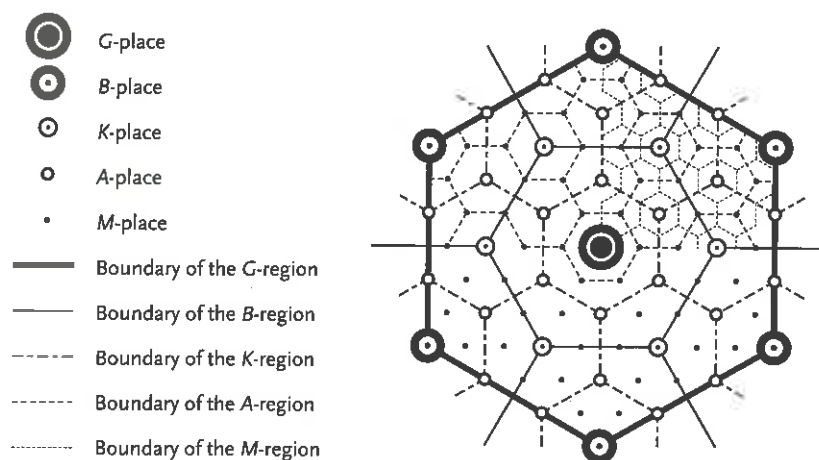
Behind the similarity of figures 14 and 15, then, lie very different experiences of social space. Barrell's 1809 'system of geography' corresponds to the omnipresent, half-submerged culture of daily routines—position of the fields, local paths, perception of distances, horizon—which historians tend to call *mentalité*, and which is often entwined with the performance of material labour. Mitford's neat stylization of rural space, however—with its alchemical transmutation of the 'rough circle' of work into a ring of pleasure—is not *mentalité*, but rather *ideology*: the world-view of a different social actor (an urban visitor), whose movements duplicate the perimeter of rural *mentalité*, but completely reverse its symbolic associations.

A map of ideology emerging from a map of *mentalité*, emerging from the material substratum of the physical territory. Granted, things are not always so neat. But when they are, it's interesting.

IV

The formula just used for Mitford—a 'stylization' of space—is even more appropriate for Walter Christaller's classic study on *Central Places in Southern Germany*. Written in the early Thirties, the book explains the geographical distribution of urban centres on the basis of the 'ordering principle, heretofore unrecognized' of the spatial division of labour: towns provide specialized services, writes Christaller ('banking, administration, cultural and spiritual offerings [church, school, theatre, professional and business organizations],

sanitation'), which in order to reach as many customers as possible are located in 'a few necessarily central points, to be consumed at many scattered points'.⁴ The more specialized a service is, the more 'central' it also is, and on this socio-geometrical principle arises the urban hierarchy synthesized by Christaller himself in figure 17. The rule here is simple: around each G-centre of the first rank there is a 'market region' which includes six B-centres of the second rank, with

FIGURE 17: *Central Places*

Source: *Central Places in Southern Germany*

⁴ Walter Christaller, *Central Places in Southern Germany* [1933], Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1966, p. 20. Christaller's model presupposes an 'isotropic' space, where movement can occur with equal ease in every direction; this is of course a theoretical abstraction, whose empirical validity is limited to homogeneous agricultural flatlands (like indeed much of Southern Germany). The assumption of an isotropic space is the common denominator between Christaller's theory and the structure of village narratives; I briefly discuss the problematic nature of this idea in footnote 12 below.

fewer and less specialized services; around each B-centre there are six K-centres of the third rank, and so on, until, at the very bottom of the hierarchy, we encounter . . . *Our Village*: the 'central region of the lowest order', as Christaller calls it, whose radius (2–3 kilometres) is exactly the same as one of the book's country walks. And figure 18, Christaller-like, visualizes the services offered by Mitford's village, and by the other urban centres mentioned in her book.

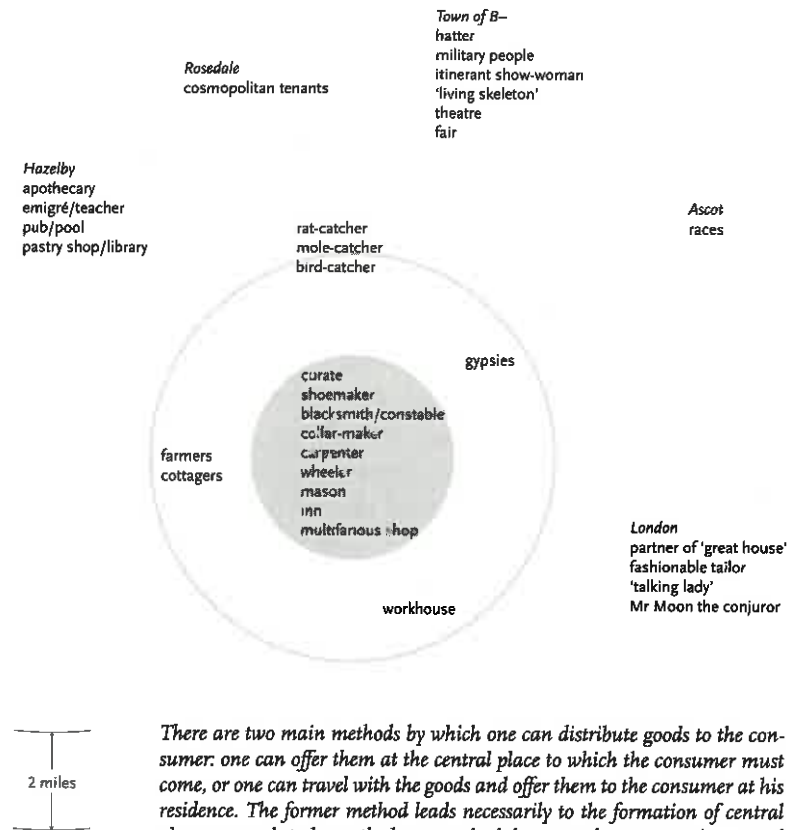
In the village: shoemaker, blacksmith, carpenter, mason; in London and the other towns: French teachers, hatters, fashionable tailors, horse races. Serious daily needs versus frivolous superfluities: this is Mitford's social geography. Its roots are in one of the most ancient, and most widespread, of narrative forms: the idyll. 'Birth, labour, love, marriage, death', wrote Bakhtin of this *longue durée* chronotope: 'only a few of life's basic realities . . . a little world . . . sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places.'⁵ Sufficient unto itself: this is why village stories organize themselves in circular patterns: a circle is a simple, 'natural' form, which maximizes the proximity of each point to the centre of the 'little world', while simultaneously sealing it off from the vast universe that lies outside its perimeter. 'Sugar and coffee and salt: we wanted nothing else from the outside world', declares proudly the protagonist of a German village story of the same period, Auerbach's *Brigitta*. But the past tense of that 'wanted' is a sign that the days of the idyll are numbered.

V

The changing geography of village narratives is particularly clear in another book of the 1820s, John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* (1821). The parish is Dalmailing, near the west coast of Scotland, and the

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 1937–38, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin 1981, p. 225.

FIGURE 18: *Mary Mitford, Our Village: spatial division of labour*



There are two main methods by which one can distribute goods to the consumer: one can offer them at the central place to which the consumer must come, or one can travel with the goods and offer them to the consumer at his residence. The former method leads necessarily to the formation of central places or market places; the latter method, however, does not require central places. In earlier times, the travelling salesman was far more prevalent than he is today. The pedlar, the knife-sharpener, the wandering minstrel of the Middle Ages, and the travelling priest all brought goods to the consumer.

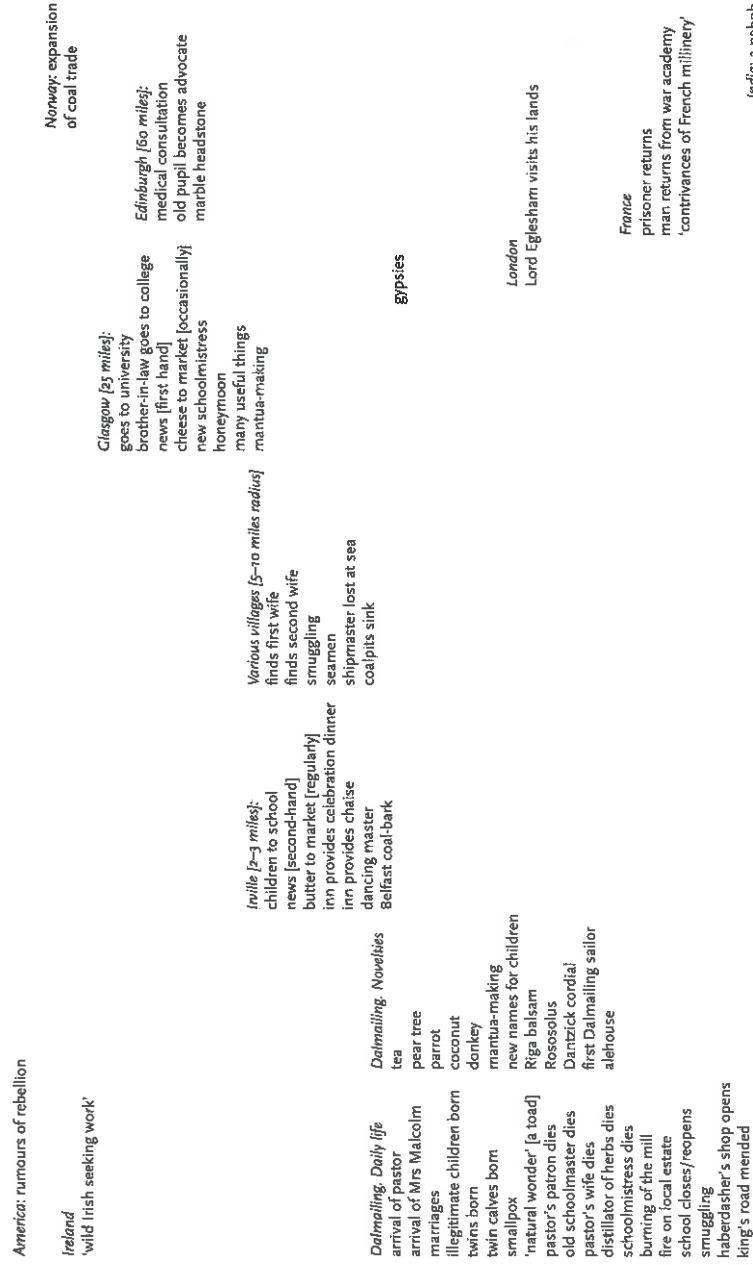
Walter Christaller, *Central Places in Southern Germany*

In *Our Village*, the curate, shoemaker, or inn are centripetal services, whereas rat-, mole- and bird-catcher—who are encountered outside of the village, and whose occupation lies, practically and symbolically, on the border between the human and the natural world—are instances of the older type, like the memorable 'reddleman' of *The Return of the Native*. The village's weak division of labour produces also many all-purpose entities like the 'multifarious bazaar' of the village shop, the blacksmith who doubles as a constable, or characters such as John Wilson, 'a handy fellow, who could do any sort of work—thatcher, carpenter, bricklayer, painter, gardener, gamekeeper . . .'

text covers the half century from 1760 to 1810: each year a chapter, where the minister Balwhidder registers the main events in the crowded and often confusing mode of annalistic writing (fires, weddings, wars, births, portents . . .), of which the first ten years of the book—charted in figure 19—offer a typical instance. Here, from the still idyllic daily life of Dalmailing, in the bottom left corner ('birth, labour, marriage, death . . .'), we can follow two possible threads through the figure's materials. The first runs through Irville (Irvine), Glasgow, and Edinburgh, and shows the system of central places at work: school in Irville, university in Glasgow, lawyers and doctors in Edinburgh; second-hand news in Irville, and first-hand news in Glasgow; celebration dinner, honeymoon, marble headstone . . . As services become more unusual, they move 'up' in the urban hierarchy, and further away from Dalmailing; but since Galt's world is still fundamentally one of simple everyday needs, such services are seldom required, and central places like Edinburgh or London remain barely visible.

Extremely visible on the other hand are the many 'novelties' listed in the second column from the left, which reach the parish from the West Indies, the Baltic, and other unspecified places. Behind them is the British empire, of course, but perhaps even more the sheer fact of *distance*: in Dalmailing, a parrot, Rososolus, or a *cocker-nut* (Balwhidder's half-Dutch spelling for coconut) are truly things from another world. Wonders. Or, more prosaically, luxuries; products of long-distance trade which shine for a moment on the horizon of the everyday, leaving behind a sense of incommensurable universes: on the one side birth, labour, marriage, and death; on the other, coconut, Riga balsam, parrot, and Danzig cordial. Home, and the World. But since the world does not really change everyday existence (its wonders are all singular: one donkey, one coconut, one bottle of this and that), the antithesis is at once radical, and totally irrelevant: wonders appear, are admired, and then vanish (except for tea, of course). The world is an astonishing place, but

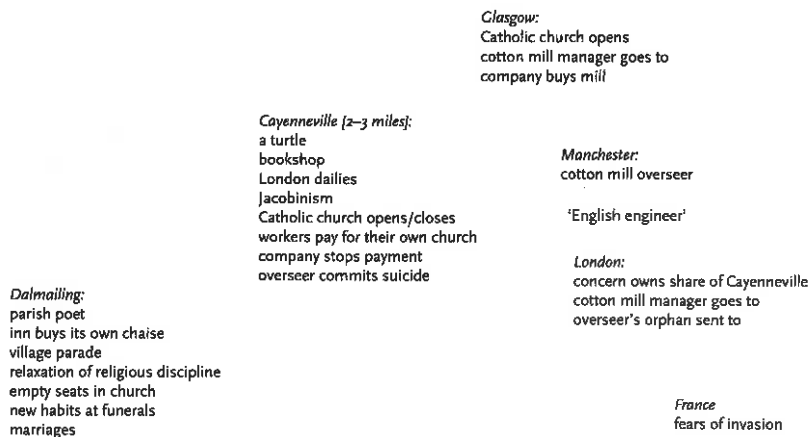
FIGURE 19: John Galt, Annals of the Parish: first decade [1760–69]



the Dalmailing idyll goes on as it always has, 'not linked in any intrinsic way to other places'.

But in 1788 a cotton-mill is built—'nothing like it had been seen before in our day and generation'—and with it the manufacturing town of Cayenneville, and the parish's spatial coordinates are forever changed. If one compares the first decade of the book with the last, charted in figure 20, it's impossible to miss the dramatic *re-centring* of social life induced by manufacture: the sense of the 'region', so strong a generation earlier—Dalmailing's daily life, the Irville where children went to school, the villages where spouses came from . . .—is gone, replaced by a 'web of commercial reciprocities' (Cayenneville—Glasgow—Manchester—London), whose 'every touch

FIGURE 20: *John Galt, Annals of the Parish: last decade [1801–10]*



Year 1801: *It is often to me very curious food for meditation, that as the parish increased in population, there should have been less cause for matter to record. Things that in former days would have occasioned great discourse and cogitation, are forgotten, with the day in which they happen . . .*

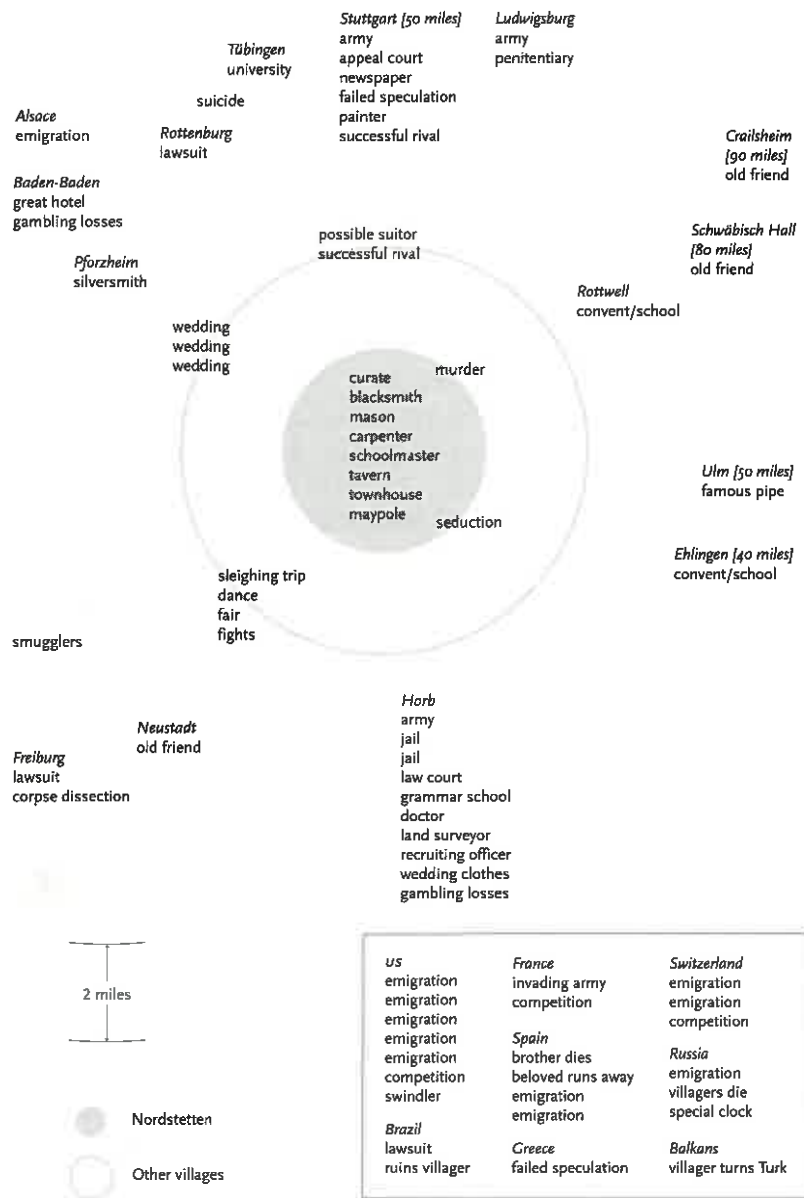
John Galt, The Annals of the Parish

or stir [is] felt in our corner' (year 1808). Between Home and the World, a new spatial reality has wedged itself, subordinating them both: the national market, whose intermediate distance is traversed every week, if not day, by those *regular novelties*—books, newspapers, politics: all plurals—which will keep multiplying throughout the industrial nineteenth century. From the old Age of Wonders, only a turtle survives.

VI

One last collection, German this time. Berthold Auerbach's *Black Forest Village Stories*, written between 1843 and 1853, were among the great bestsellers of the century, and figure 21 (overleaf) charts about one third of the *Dorfgeschichten* collected in Cotta's 1940 ten-volume edition. Here, too, three spaces interact and compete for attention. The first is composed by Nordstetten and the other Black Forest villages, and its features should by now be familiar: narrow geographic range, daily needs, basic services—all contained within the same circular pattern we have encountered in Britain. But if the spatial logic of the idyll is more or less the same everywhere (probably because of its extreme narrative simplicity), Auerbach's international space is already quite different from Mitford's or Galt's: instead of sporadic wonders, we find war memories (Germany as 'the battlefield of Europe', in Thomas Mann's words), threats of economic competition, and especially the *basso continuo* of emigration (America, first of all; then Switzerland, France, Greece, Russia, Spain . . .). Except for Switzerland, which is very close, the narrative never actually moves into these foreign countries, but the voices of those who have left echo in almost every story, as if they were a large, hidden chorus. Nostalgic, usually; but in the more optimistic moments—like the letter from 'Nordstetten on the Ohio' ('we'll send for a parson from Germany. And my fields have just the same names

FIGURE 21: *Berthold Auerbach*, Black Forest Village Stories [1843–53]



they used to have . . .)—also capable of looking at a distant land as almost a second home.

But in the meantime, just as earlier in Galt, a third, quasi-national space ('quasi', because German unity is still a generation away), is forcing its way into village life through 'central places' such as Horb, Freiburg, Rottenburg and Stuttgart. What we find there, though, is not manufacture, banks, and services, as in Britain, but law courts, jails, army barracks, and the like. The state. The state *as repression*: a grim determination to achieve the monopoly of legitimate violence that outlaws regional traditions, drafts people against their will, takes them to court, jails them if they run away . . . 'You have ordered and commanded so much that there is nothing left to be ordered or commanded', complains the representative of Nordstetten to a county judge in the story 'Good government': 'and you will end up by putting a policeman under every tree to keep it from quarrelling with the wind and drinking too much when it rains'.⁶ Here, even rivals in love—gamekeepers, soldiers, land surveyors—belong to repressive bodies.

The formation of nation-states entailed a conflict between national and local loyalties, wrote Charles Tilly, and here it is: the local loyalty towards an older, smaller homeland stubbornly resisting its integration into the Germany to come. *Heimat* against *Vaterland*; the collective rituals so dear to Auerbach (and Mitford); *our* village; *our* society (the title of the first chapter of *Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell's village collection, whose last word is *us*). 'To be authorized to say *wel*!', exclaims Mitford in 'A country cricket match'; and if one traces the

⁶ Then, more threateningly: "You want to take everything from us: now, there happens to be one thing our minds are made up to hold on to." Raising his axe and gnashing his teeth he continued: "And if I must split every door between me and the king with this very axe, I will not give it out of my hand. From time immemorial it is our right to carry axes".

diffusion of this pronoun in 19th-century culture, two forms—two rival forms of collective identity—immediately stand out from the rest: village stories, and national anthems.⁷ That the local form leans towards the more proximate and ‘inclusive’ form (we as I + you), and the national anthem towards the more martial, ‘exclusive’ one (we as I + they *versus* you: war, enemy, glory . . .), is the apt final touch to their symbolic opposition.

In their animosity towards national centralization, village stories diverge sharply from the provincial novels with which they are often confused, and are, if anything, much closer to regional novels—as is clear in Auerbach’s explicit conjunction (*Village* stories of the *Black Forest*), or later in Hardy. ‘The region is a place in itself’, writes Ian Duncan, ‘the source of its own terms of meaning and identity . . . while the province is defined by its difference from [the capital].’⁸ Exactly: village and region are alternative homelands of sorts, whereas the provinces embody the capitulation of local reality to the national centre—Emma Bovary’s idea that life is ‘*quelque chose de sublime*’ in Paris (or Madrid, or Moscow), and a desert everywhere

⁷ Of twenty-eight European anthems I have been able to check, twenty-two establish a significant semantic field around the first person plural, beginning of course with the very first word—*Allons*—of the greatest of them all. Nothing seems as essential to national anthems as this grammatical sign of collective identity; even the name of the country receives fewer mentions (20), while the semantic field of ‘glory’ has 19, ‘past’ and ‘war’ 15, ‘enemy’ and ‘nature’ 13, and ‘God’ a mere 12. Interestingly enough, the three European anthems older than the *Marseillaise*—the Dutch, English, and Danish anthems: ‘William of Nassau’, ‘God Save the Queen’, and ‘King Christian’—all foreground the figure of the sovereign, and show no interest in the first person plural (except for ‘God Save the Queen’, which however places it in the object position: ‘long to reign over us’, ‘God save us all’, ‘may she defend our laws’). The difference between a dynastic and a collective basis for national identity is beautifully captured by this grammatical detail.

⁸ Ian Duncan, ‘The Provincial or Regional Novel’, in Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing, eds, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Oxford 2002.

else.⁹ Like the *provinciae* of antiquity, subject to Rome but denied full citizenship, the provinces are ‘negative’ entities, defined by *what is not there*; which also explains, by the way, why one cannot map provincial novels—you cannot map what is not there. It happens, there are un-mappable forms (Christmas stories are another one, for different reasons), and these setbacks, disappointing at first, are actually the sign of a method still in touch with reality: geography is a useful tool, yes, but does not explain *everything*. For that, we have astrology and ‘Theory’.

VII

What do literary maps do . . . First, they are a good way to prepare a text for analysis. You choose a unit—walks, lawsuits, luxury goods, whatever—find its occurrences, place them in space . . . or in other words: you *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object like the maps that I have been discussing. And with a little luck, these maps will be *more than the sum of their parts*: they will possess ‘emerging’ qualities, which were not visible at the lower level. Everybody, from the first readers onwards, had noticed the country walks of *Our Village*; but no one had ever reflected on the circular pattern they project on the English countryside, because no one—in the absence of a map of the book—had ever managed to actually *see* it. Not that the map is itself an explanation, of course: but at least, it offers a model of the

⁹ If London does not enjoy the same mythical status as other European capitals, the reason is probably that the English provinces were more self-confident than their continental counterparts, especially after ‘their’ industrial revolution (Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield . . .). The hollow sense of unreality of Emma Bovary, or Ana de Ozores, or the three Prozorov sisters is thus hard to imagine in places like Milton or Middlemarch: full of problems, to be sure, but where life is absolutely real.

narrative universe which rearranges its components in a non-trivial way, and may bring some hidden patterns to the surface.

And patterns are indeed what I have been discussing throughout this chapter. But are they also the proper object of geographical study? In an intelligent critique of the *Atlas of the European Novel*, the Italian geographer Claudio Cerreti has questioned this assumption, pointing out how patterns entail a Cartesian reduction of space to extension, where 'objects are analysed in terms of reciprocal positions and distances . . . whether they are close or far from each other or from something else'. This however is not really geography, Cerreti goes on, but rather *geometry*; and the figures of the *Atlas*, for their part, are not really maps, but diagrams. The diagrams *look* like maps, yes, because they have been 'superimposed on a cartographic plane': but their true nature emerges unmistakably from the way I analyse them, which disregards the specificity of the various locations, to focus almost entirely on their mutual relations; which is indeed the way to read diagrams, but certainly not maps.¹⁰

Let me give you an instance of what Cerreti means. Figure 22, reproduced from the *Atlas*, is a map of young protagonists of Parisian novels, and of their objects of desire; and I remember the little epiphany I had in front of this figure, when I realized that most young men live on one side of the Seine, and their lovers on the opposite side (or in the separate world of the Faubourg St-Germain). The epiphany, in other words, was *Paris as diagram*:¹¹ a matrix of relations, not a cluster of individual locations. I could see that the young men were in the Latin Quarter, of course, and the women in the crescent from the

¹⁰ Claudio Cerreti, *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, 1998, pp. 141–8.

¹¹ Or better, again, as a succession of diagrams (figures 46abcd in the *Atlas*): first, where the young men settle; second, what they desire; third, where they indulge in their fantasies; fourth, where they end up. Each map photographed a particular stage in the plot. *Atlas of the European Novel*, London 1998, pp. 96–9.

FIGURE 22: *Protagonists of Parisian novels, and objects of their desire*



Faubourg St-Germain to the Chaussée d'Antin, and I accounted for it; but without enthusiasm. These specific positions seemed to be the premise of cartography, more than its result. Locations *as such* did not seem that significant, if compared to the *relations* that the map had revealed among them.

Relations among locations as more significant than locations as such . . . But for geography, locations as such *are* significant; geography is not just 'extension' (Cerreti again), but 'intension' too: 'the *quality* of a given space . . . the stratification of *intrinsically different qualities* and heterogeneous phenomena': the Latin Quarter *as Latin Quarter*, in other words, and not only in its opposition to the Chaussée d'Antin. And he is right, of course, and the reason I kept 'forgetting' geography for geometry was, first of all, ignorance: in order to write the

Atlas I had studied some cartography, but had learned it only up to a point, and so I made mistakes. True. But if the *Atlas* is full of diagrams—and, in fact, so is this chapter: where I decided not even to ‘superimpose’ them onto geographic maps to make the point absolutely clear—if I keep making diagrams, then, it is because for me *geometry ‘signifies’ more than geography.*¹² More, in the sense that a geometrical pattern is too orderly a shape to be the product of chance. It is a sign that something is at work here—that something has *made* the pattern the way it is.

But what?

VIII

‘The form of any portion of matter, whether it be living or dead’, writes D’Arcy Thompson in his strange wonderful book *On Growth and Form*, ‘may in all cases alike be described as due to the action of force. In short, the form of an object is a “diagram of forces” . . .’¹³

¹² Geometry signifies *more* than geography: but it seldom signifies *by itself*. Here, the choice of village stories as the basis of this theoretical sketch may have been unfortunate, as the isotropic space which is so typical of this genre tends to overemphasize the role of geometry at the expense of geography: a fact I became aware of only after long, detailed exchanges with Claudio Cerreti and Jacques Lévy (who have all my gratitude, and shouldn’t be held in the least responsible for the views I am expressing). In fact, the most common type of literary map (in the *Atlas of the European Novel*, at any rate) looks less like those of *Our Village* than like that of Parisian novels, where the geometrical pattern is distorted by the specificity of Paris’s social geography—as is particularly clear in the case of those three characters who start on the ‘wrong’ side of the Seine. (For two of them, Du Tillet and Popinot, the explanation is simple: they belong to the space of trade rather than to that of intellectual life in the Latin Quarter; for the third character, Wenceslas, I cannot find a satisfying reason.)

¹³ D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form* [1942], Mineola, NY 1992, p. 16.

Diagram: Cartesian space. But diagram *of forces*. The distribution of events between the Black Forest villages and the administrative towns is the diagram of a conflict between local forces and national ones; Mitford’s rings, the result of the village’s gravitational pull over her perambulating narrator; Balzac’s divided Paris, the battlefield between old wealth and ambitious petty bourgeois youth. Each pattern is a clue—a fingerprint of history, almost. ‘The form of an object is a “diagram of forces”, in this sense, at least, that from it we can . . . deduce the forces that . . . have acted upon it’. Deducing from the *form* of an object the *forces* that have been at work: this is the most elegant definition ever of what literary sociology should be. And for D’Arcy Thompson these forces are of two basic kinds: internal, and external. ‘The structure in its final form is, as it were, the inner nucleus molded in various ways by the characteristics of the outer element’, wrote Goethe in one of those morphological studies which D’Arcy Thompson knew very well: ‘it is precisely thus that the animal retains its viability in the outer world: it is shaped from without as well as from within.’¹⁴

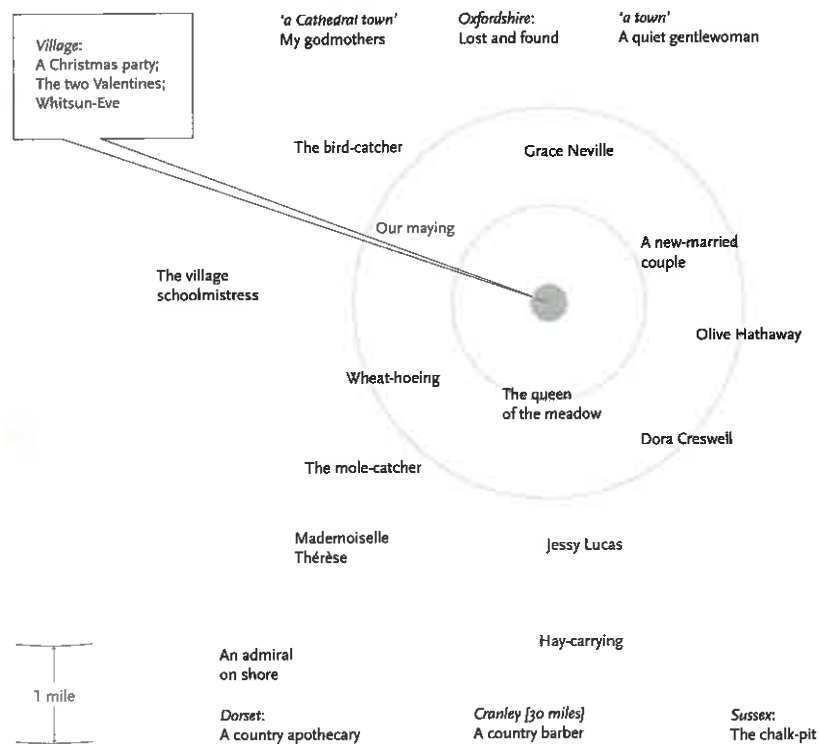
Shaped from without, as well as from within . . . But so is narrative. On this, the five volumes of *Our Village* offer a splendid test case. In the 1824 volume, remember, the village was the undisputed centre of the surrounding countryside: the centripetal effects of the force ‘from within’ were omnipresent, while the force ‘from without’ was nowhere to be seen: the narrator moved freely in every direction in her little idyllic world, and then turned back for the sheer pleasure of returning home, without ever being constrained by a contrary force (like, say, Jude Fawley at Christminster, where he’s brutally forced back into Wessex). ‘Anything that embodies itself with some freedom seeks a rounded shape’, reads another of Goethe’s aphorisms, and

¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, ‘Toward a General Comparative Theory’, 1790–94, in *Scientific Studies*, Princeton 1995, p. 55.

the rounded shape of figure 14 was indeed the embodiment of a literary form—a *mentalité*, an ideology—for which village life was still fundamentally independent of external forces.

This, in 1824. Two collections later, in 1828 (figure 23), the village's gravitational field is already weaker: the walks are less frequent, and their pattern has become wider, less regular; fewer stories take place in the village itself, while several are set outside of Berkshire, in undefined distant towns (and often in the past as well). Something is

FIGURE 23: *Mary Mitford, Our Village, volume III [1828]*



wrong with the force from within, but as no counter-force challenges it yet, the basic pattern, although somewhat unsteady, remains in place. But by 1832, it's all over (figure 24): the village's centripetal force is reduced to nothing, and the bulk of the book moves away, thirty miles, sixty, more, to play dumb parlour games in the mansions of the elite (and, again, ever more frequently in the past).

FIGURE 24: *Mary Mitford, Our Village, volume v [1832]*

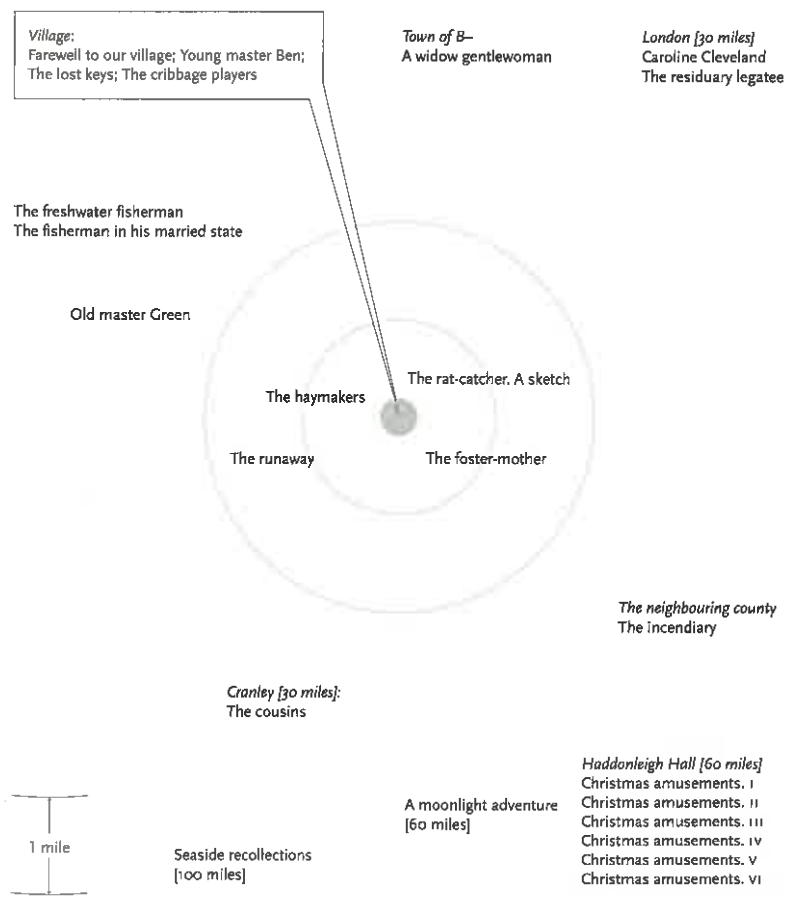
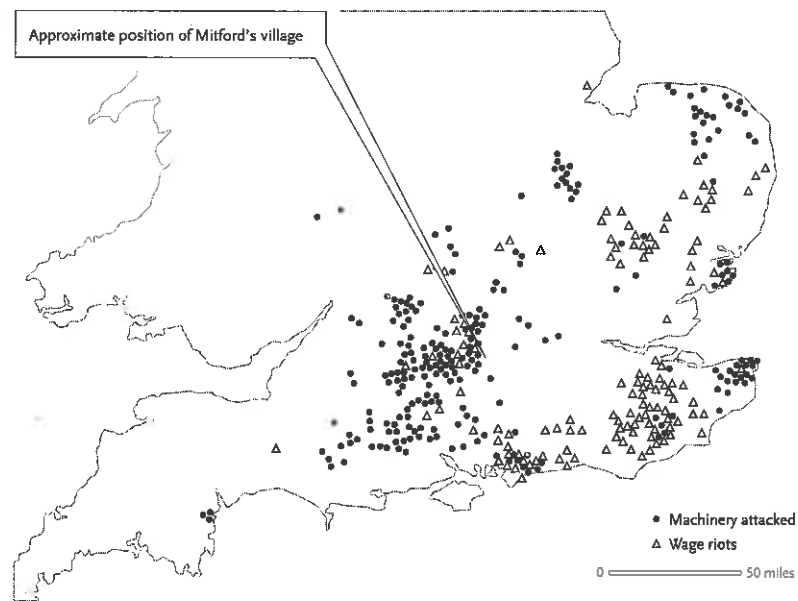
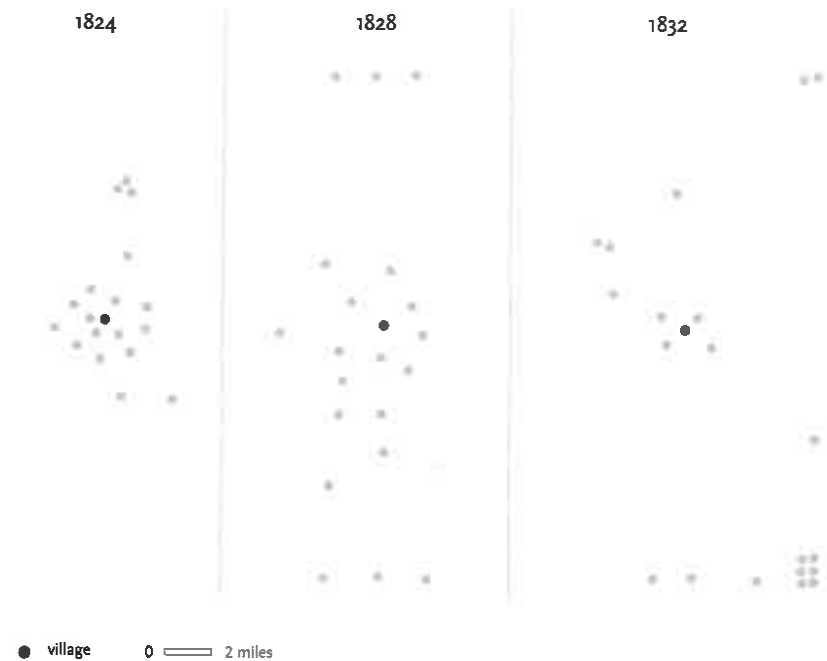


FIGURE 25: *Luddism, 1811–12, and Captain Swing disturbances, 1830*

Source: John Langton and R. J. Morris, eds, *Atlas of Industrializing Britain*

Something has happened, here, and two stories suggest what it is: rick-burning. 'Oh the horror of those fires—breaking forth night after night, sudden, yet expected . . .' reads the first narrative of the volume, 'The incendiary'; 'We lived in the midst of the disturbed districts,' adds 'Young master Ben', and 'no one who lived within reach of the armed peasantry . . . could get rid of the vague idea of danger which might arrive at any moment . . .'. The armed peasantry of the 1830 uprisings (figure 25): this is the 'force from without' which has 'acted upon' *Our Village*, altering its narrative pattern beyond recognition. Figure 26, which charts the three volumes one next to the other, summarizes the disintegration of Mitford's chronotope.

FIGURE 26: *Mary Mitford, location of stories in volumes I, III, V*

In a very large part of morphology, our essential task lies in the comparison of related forms rather than in the precise definition of each; and the deformation of a complicated figure may be a phenomenon easy of comprehension, though the figure itself have to be left unanalysed and undefined . . . The essential condition is, that the form of the entire structure under investigation should be found to vary in a more or less uniform manner.

D'Arcy Thompson,
On Growth and Form

IX

Let me conclude by briefly returning to the beginning. Thomas Moule's 1837 map of Berkshire, reproduced in figure 13, gave a good idea of the type of geography congenial to modern idyllic form: parks, rivers, country seats, low urbanization (and no railway in the

early twenties, when Mitford starts writing). Figure 27 is another of Moule's maps, Cheshire this time, and Knutsford, near the centre of the figure, is Gaskell's 'Cranford', the setting of her 1853 rewriting of *Our Village*. In this case, Moule's map precedes the novel by fifteen years, but it already casts a shadow over Gaskell's projected idyll: urbanization is higher, Manchester is just 15 miles away, and by an uncanny coincidence Mitford's typical walk would end more or less at the Grand Junction Railway, where one of the book's most sympathetic characters, distracted by the latest number of *Pickwick*—the

regular novelty which has just arrived from London—is killed by a train. Social geography does not agree with the form of the idyll here, and in order to keep the genre alive Gaskell must literally hibernate her village: Cranford is presented as a place under siege, hardly alive, where no one dares to go anywhere, and everything is painstakingly saved (candles, carpets, clothes, stories . . .) to make it last as long as possible; and even so, only the half-magic arrival of Indian wealth can prolong its artificial existence. For every genre comes a moment when its inner form can no longer represent the most significant aspects of contemporary reality, I wrote in the previous chapter: at which point, either the genre loses its form under the impact of reality, thereby disintegrating, or it betrays reality in the name of form, becoming, in Shklovsky's words, a 'dull epigone'. Mitford in 1832, and Gaskell twenty years later, are the two ends of the spectrum: *Our Village* explodes, and *Cranford* is Madame Tussaud's idea of a village story.

FIGURE 27: Cranford



Source: Moule, *The English Counties Delineated*

X

Maps, is the title of this chapter. But there are maps and maps: Moule (figures 13 and 27), Barrell (15–16), Langton and Morris (25) have all made maps of real English spaces, reproducing actual features of their material environment; I have made maps/diagrams of fictional worlds, where the real and the imaginary coexist in varying, often elusive proportions. The figures are different. But when they are collated and juxtaposed, they allow us a glimpse of what D'Arcy Thompson had in mind in his great final chapter on 'The theory of transformations':

We rise from a conception of form to an understanding of the forces which gave rise to it . . . and in the comparison of kindred forms . . . we discern the magnitude and the direction of the forces which have sufficed to convert the one form into the other.¹⁵

¹⁵ D'Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, p. 1027.

In the comparison of the kindred forms of *Our Village* in 1824, 1828, and 1832, and of the initial and final decades of *Annals of the Parish*, and of the British and German village stories, we discern indeed the various directions in which rural class struggle, the industrial take-off, and the process of state formation have 'converted' the shape of nineteenth-century idylls. As in an experiment, the force 'from without' of large national processes alters the initial narrative structure beyond recognition, and reveals the direct, almost tangible relationship between social conflict and literary form. Reveals form as a diagram of forces; or perhaps, even, as *nothing but force*.