

# Orbis Terrarum

A man came to the lost and found. “I’ve lost my faith,” he said. The clerk asked him, “where did you last see it?” The man pulled a map thick as a Bible out of his bag. He unfolded it once, twice, three times. He pointed to a page: “I last saw it here. I was here when I had it last.”

The clerk nodded: “Have you looked there?” The man’s frustration was obvious: “Of course I’ve looked there! I’ve looked everywhere. That’s why I came here.” The clerk smirked: “You’ve looked everywhere? This is the biggest city in the world, how could you have looked everywhere?” The man growled: “I’ve looked at all the highlights, my usual haunts, everywhere I’ve been. Don’t be absurd!”

“What if your faith is somewhere you haven’t been?” “How could I find it then? Isn’t that what your department is for?” The clerk gestured behind him: “All we have is maps. Would you like another?” A grateful nod: “Yes, give me your most detailed map.” “You’re holding it.”

“This is your most detailed map?” “Indeed, we call it ‘Orbis Terrarum.’ We’ve been filling it out for thousands of years.” “But I’ve searched every point on the map. Are you saying my faith is lost for good?” “Not at all sir! You could search using another map. We have all kinds!”

“But none more detailed?” “None sir.” “What good is a less detailed map?” “Well sir, it highlights different points. Isn’t that what you want?”

“I’m not sure. I was really hoping to find it using my map, or at least a more complete version of my map.” “What difference does the map make?” “Without the map, how will I know where I am?” “You are where you are sir. I don’t understand you.”

“I mean where I am in relation to the map.” “What does that matter?” “I live my whole life following this map!” “I see sir, you can’t bear to search without the map.”

“I’m not an automaton. I’ll try another map if you have one, but you said you have nothing but rough sketches.” “Only the finest sketches, sir! Only the finest.” “If they’re so scanty, how can they compare with the ‘Orbis

Terrarum’?” “It’s a matter of taste I suppose. For me, I like to fill in the map as I go. That is, all the detail bothers me.”

“Don’t you feel lost?” “I do, I do. That’s the fun of it!” “What fun is being lost?” “What fun is being found?” “Who put you in charge? I’ve only become more confused since I came in here.” “I would hardly say I’m in charge. It’s my shift, that’s why I’m here.” “Well, I’ll speak to your manager then.”

The clerk cleared his throat: “I’m afraid he’s not taking visitors.” “You’re all I have then?” “You can speak to one of the old clerks. Well, not speak to them exactly. But they all made their own maps, you can have a look.” “Let me see your map.” “It isn’t done.” “I don’t care. Let me see it!”

“No, I can’t allow it sir. I’ll give you directions, but you can’t see my map.” “What harm is there in showing me your map?” “You might draw on it!” The man laughed: “That’s ridiculous! Do I look like a graffiti artist?” The clerk bowed: “What I mean is, you might relate it to your map.” “How is that drawing on the map?” “Most of the map is in my mind, that’s how.”

“Am I drawing on it now?” “Yes and no.” “Care to elaborate?” The clerk frowned. A moment passed.

“I don’t believe you have a map at all!” “We all have maps. You’re being ridiculous.” “I’m being ridiculous! You’re the most absurd person I’ve ever met.” “I feel I’ve been most helpful.” “How? Are you mad? Where is my faith then, if you’ve been so helpful?” “Precisely sir, my point is you must find it yourself.” “Damn you! I have found it, it was on this map!” “But it’s not there, you told me yourself.” “It’s not there now! But it was there, I had it.”

“Perhaps your map is out of date.” “Do you have an updated version?” “No, we don’t make maps like that anymore.” “What do you make?” “I work on my own map. But I did some work on the Encyclopedia. Most people work on that.”

“How is an Encyclopedia a map?” “It’s an anthology of maps, a collection. If you tear them out, you can assemble them into a giant map. The largest in the world!” “Can you assemble it then?” “I’m afraid not. Only an expert can sow the maps together.” “An expert in the Encyclopedia?” “Hardly! No one knows the whole Encyclopedia. I meant an expert in the two maps that you’re combining.”

“Has anyone ever assembled it then?” “No sir. I’ll tell you a secret. Promise you won’t repeat it?” “At this point, I hardly care if I live or die.” “I don’t like that attitude.” “I’ll keep your secret. I can guess it I bet. The maps don’t actually fit together?”

“There are gaps, lots of gaps. And depending on how you start to combine things, you get gaps in different places. Most disconcerting!” “You’re against

size. You're against detail. What are you for?" "Beauty! And concision." "I've never heard of a mapmaker valuing concision."

"Here's my perspective. The map can't cover everything. It can't even include every detail of the areas it does cover. So everyone must be his own mapmaker. And what better training for mapmaking than to start with the smallest possible map?" "You mean instructions for how to fill out the map?" "Not at all! I include the city highlights, but leave out the details in each case. That way every description offers an exercise in mapmaking, while also teaching people about the city."

"'Every description'? The map is in writing?" "Yes, just so!" "A written map? A tiny, written map?" "I suppose sir." "Surely an illustration would be helpful?" "I don't see why. Using my map, people can recognize a landmark when they come across it, no matter how much the landmark or its surroundings have changed." "They recognize it by its description?" "Exactly! The description reveals the essence. A picture would be superficial."

"I believe the essence of something is revealed by making a detailed map of it." "Isn't the thing itself more detailed than any map?" "Right, you're pulling out the essence." "But why would the essence be detailed?" "What's the essence of the city then? Can you explain that without detail?" "The essence of the city is to befuddle the mapmaker."

The man lay on the floor, as tired as a marathon runner: "Maybe my faith will find me here." Minutes passed. He stood up. The clerk had left. He found a note on the counter:

Dear Sir,

When you first asked me to help you find your faith, I thought you meant faith in God. But I've come to understand your faith is really in maps. In that case, you should continue to search using the 'Orbis Terrarum.' It's the only map for one who loves maps. It's a pity that you can only see God in a map, but the ways of the Lord are mysterious, particularly to those who believe they are not mysterious. Since you always had what you asked me to find, I consider my duty discharged.

Respectfully,

The Finder of Lost Things