

**No. 10: THE TWO STREET MAPS**

*Commentary*

Both poet Moira Roth and artist Peter Sís appreciate maps' power to spark curiosity about places we see—and places we can only imagine. This year's broadsheet juxtaposes a poem in which "no maps could be made / Before the streets were named" and a nameless street map. Together, they lead us to reflect on the roles that naming and mapping play in the realm of imagination.

Although Roth and Sís share a common delight in maps, they have charted very different paths. Roth, our featured poet, was born in London, England, in 1933 and is the Trefethen Professor of Art History at Mills College, Oakland, California. She is interested in Duchamp, multicultural and feminist art history, and multimedia performance art. Her books include *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*; *Rachel Rosenthal*; and *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980*. Her poem "The Two Street Maps"<sup>1</sup> is the eleventh of twenty-two poems in her ongoing multimedia project "The Library of Maps: An Opera in Many Parts," a collaboration with composer Pauline Oliveros. Their new project involves helping children use computers to create and exchange their own maps.

The beautiful illustrations of Peter Sís have captured the imaginations of children and adults alike. Born in 1949 in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Sís began his career as a filmmaker. Now based in New York City, he is recognized internationally for his varied artistic work. Themes of exploration feature prominently in Sís's books, including *Madlenka*; *Starry Messenger*; *Tibet: Through the Red Box*; *Small Tall Tale from the Far Far North*; *Komodo!*; and *The Three Golden Keys*. First published as a frontispiece for *Madlenka*, this abstracted map locates Madlenka's block in lower Manhattan. Madlenka circles her block to show a loose tooth to her neighborhood friends: the French baker, the Indian news vendor, the Latin American grocer, and the Italian ice cream man. She experiences this expedition as a journey around the world.<sup>2</sup> Such images encourage our geographical imaginations to explore places as familiar and unfamiliar as our own streets.

A good map provides facts about a place but also illuminates its possibilities. Like naming, mapping establishes conventional meanings. While conventions enable us to communicate, to agree to meet "where the mauve-purple crosses the dark red," they may also confine our conceptions of a place. If names were to crowd every corner of a map, little blank space would remain for our imaginations to fill. "The Two Street Maps" reminds us that maps can be more than authoritative plots of data. One "unnamed" street, full of meanings and memories, may, in fact, fill a map of its own. Of course, memories are much more difficult to map than streets; but often where a conventional map fails, a smell, sound, or color can restore a sense of orientation. It is this experience that Sís's illustrations depict in such captivating detail and this process of learning the "criss-cross patterns" that Roth's poetry evokes. Roth's poem and Sís's illustration are themselves two different kinds of street maps. But for each, knowing a place by heart is much more than learning the names of its streets—the "unnamed" map tells a story of colors, fragrances, patterns, and the people that one meets.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of Moira Roth's poem "The Two Street Maps," dedicated to Jonathan Katz and Andre Dombrowski, was published in *Performance Research* 6 (Summer 2001): 99.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sís, *Madlenka* (New York: Frances Foster Books, 2000). Image used by permission of the author.

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