

Secrets

Vesalius to Mercator, Basel, 16 June 1543

Anatomist and cosmographer, we are explorers, Gerard. In mapping the microcosm, what have I learned to see that I can share with you? Anatomy is an unveiling, parting the skin to view muscles, veins and nerves ranged in order, and the skeleton supporting them. So I imagine a map that names formations of rocks sleeping beneath our landscapes, one that explains the eruption of minerals in one place or another, the bony processes and muscles of the land's body.

In mapmaking, the skin is made to be measured, rising and descending hill and valley, goitre and wrinkle. But physicians feel for the blood pulse under the skin, Paracelsus taught us to know the well-tempered body so our hands could sense unusual outcrops, hiatuses. Bones are the fixed stars of such a navigation. Early in teaching I began to use skeletons. Before, professors read the text of Galen, while a barber-surgeon pointed. Where text and body differed, it was the text that won.

Where did I obtain my skeletons? Here are two stories, one recent, one from my hot youth. Last month in Basel a scoundrel, already exiled from the city in reward for previous crimes, leaving his wife to make her way by taking in washing, returned here with a second wife and was found in a wine-shop. Challenged, he first disowned his mistress, who angrily proclaimed aloud the place and time of their marriage. Then the villain ambushed his first wife as she made her journey home.