# COGNITIVE VS. COCK-NITIVE MAPPING OF LONDON IN *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

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*Abstract*

The paper intends to reveal some interpreting strategies employed when analyzing the novel *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, with special reference to the author's ability to redesign the cognitive mapping of reality through fiction.

**Keywords: Balkans, London, World War II, cognitive mapping of a city through fiction**

Novi Pazar (Нови Пазар) is a city located in the Raška District of Serbia. Meaning "a new marketplace" (new bazaar), Novi Pazar is the main economic and cultural centre of the Sandžak region. The famous Turkish traveller and writer Evliya Celebi noted that it was one of the biggest towns in the Balkans in the 17th century. The city was the capital of the Ottoman sanjak of Novibazar that existed between the 15th and the 20th century. Its name entered the world encyclopedias in 1878, the year when the Congress of Berlin designated the entire region as "corpus separatum" (**1**).

For an academic paper to begin with such incongruous information, collected via Wikipedia, might look like a sign of disrespect. Yet, sometimes the internet is the fastest way to achieve some (minor) knowledge with regard to an issue that stirs a reader's curiosity, when quietly turning the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* and coming across a sentence mentioning a certain

> Lord Blatherard Osmo, who at the time occupied the Novi Pazar desk at the Foreign Office, an obscure penance for the previous century of British policy on the Eastern Question, for on this obscure sanjack had once hinged the entire fate of Europe (Pynchon 14)

Now, how come that such an obscure place, of which Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire took turns in occupying and administrating from 1878 to 1908, and from 1908 to 1912 respectively, made its room into the novel Brian McHale holds up as the paradigm case of postmodernist fiction? A town that was lost to Serbia in 1912, during the 1st Balkan War, and that rapidly lost its importance after World War I.

And there are, of course, other Eastern-European references that might bring at least a smile on the face of a Romanian reader, unless he or she is led into the temptation of trying to decode the textual entangling:

> No, they are making believe to be narodnik, but *I* know, they are of Iasi, of Codreanu, *his* men, men of the League, they … they kill for him – thy have *oath*! They try to kill me … Transylvanian Magyars, they know *spells* … at night they whisper … […] – might as well mention here that much of what the dossiers call Pirate Prentice is a strange talent for – well, for getting inside the



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> fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of *managing* them, in this case those of an exiled Rumanian royalist who may prove needed in the very near future. (Pynchon 11-12)

"Transylvanian Magyars who know *spells*" and "an exiled Rumanian royalist who may prove needed in the very near future" could be innocent references, although, "Rather than codification, Pynchon suggests, we need improvisation, an active and creative association of disconnected parts." (Russell 267) There is no such thing that we might call an *innocent* reference in the works of Thomas Pynchon. Instead, as the writer himself acknowledges, "this is not disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into* – (Pynchon 3) the alienated city as text.

For some theorists, the alienated city is the space in which people are not able to figure out "either their own positions or the urban totality" (**2**) in which they live and work, mainly because the traditional markers are no longer useful. And this is probably even worse in the most alienated of the cities, a city turned into a war zone, as it is the case with London, in the first part of Pynchon's novel, "Beyond the Zero". Disalienation is more painstaking, there are less and less alternative trajectories that might support the "practical reconquest of a sense of place", no monuments, no built perspectives capable of reconstructing "an articulated ensemble to be retained in memory" (Jameson 51)

> They are approaching now a lengthy brick improvisation, a Victorian paraphrase of what once, long ago, resulted in Gothic cathedrals – but which, in its own time, arose not from any need to climb through the fashioning of suitable confusions toward any apical God, but more in a derangement of aim, a doubt as to the God's actual locus (or, in some, as to its very existence), out of a cruel network of sensuous moments that could not be transcended and so bent the intentions of the builders not on any zenith, but back to fright, to simple escape, in whatever direction, from what the industrial smoke, street excrement, windowless warrens, shrugging leather forests of drive belts, flowing and patient shadow states of the rats and flies, were saying about the chances for mercy that year. (Pynchon 46)

Within such a devastated environment, the London references become an interface between constructed and deconstructed, destroyer and destroyed, the characters and their narratorial shadows. They have, and so do we, "the Chelsea Embankment" and "an acquaintance of Rossettis'", or "one proper Sherlock Holmes evening" and "the cubicle near Grosvenor Square". Yet there is a (hi)story behind almost every image or perspective they contemplate, and even the from the very first page of the novel: "He's afraid of the way the glass will fall – soon – it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace." (Pynchon 3) One cannot help but thinking of the Crystal Palace, itself a rebuilt and extended version of another building. Consumed by fire in 1936, all that was left standing were the two water towers, which had to be taken down during World War II, as the Germans could use them to navigate their way to London.

It is not only about the Germans rockets finding their way to London, it is about anybody's way into a metropolis filled with marks, signs, emblems, symbols pertaining to an entire continent for, besides Eastern-European references, we are faced with a state of chaos, the



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ruined Europe gradually becoming our text. Confined to London and its surroundings, a dozen governments in exile make the Germans curiously fade into irrelevance:

> Everyone watching over his shoulder, Free French plotting revenge on Vichy traitors, Lublin Communists drawing beads on Varsovian shadow-ministers, ELAS Greeks stalking royalists, unrepatriable dreamers of all languages hoping through will, fists, prayer to bring back kings, republics, pretenders, summer anarchisms that perished before the first crops were in … some dying wretchedly, nameless, under ice-and-snow surfaces of bomb craters out in the East End not to be found till spring, …(Pynchon 34)

Under these reconsidered circumstances, Kevin Lynch's model of *cognitive mapping* of a city may be questioned, just like Jameson does when he is asking us to project this particular model outward, as it may become extraordinarily suggestive, "onto some of the larger national and global spaces" (Jameson 51) Jameson also speaks about precartographic operations the results of which are traditionally described as itineraries rather than maps; and about diagrams which in their most developed forms can be met as sea charts for the use of navigators when trying to appropriate coastal features. In this respect, the would-be navigators in Pynchon's novel "can hear the guns in Flanders today, all the way across the Channel on the wind." (Pynchon 86) or

> They lie in bed of faded old nautical charts, maintenance manuals, burst sandbags and spilled sand, burned matchsticks and unraveled cork-tips from cigarettes long decomposed that comforted through the nights of '41 and the sudden rush of heart at any glimpse of a light at sea. (Pynchon 91)

There are other issues as well to be taken when describing the process of mapping: "the relationship to the totality, particularly as it is mediated by the stars and by new operations like that of triangulation" (Jameson 52). Writing about "Bodenplate – concrete plate laid over strips of steel", the place from which the rockets are launched, Pynchon mentions the fact that "it is set inside a space defined by the three trees, blazed so as to triangulate the exact bearing, 260 degrees, to London." (Pynchon 100) The cognitive mapping is turned upside-down as triangulation is no longer a means to establish a relationship to totality, but to mere annihilation. Another irresolvable dilemma, "well-nigh Heinsenbergian" according to Jameson, the one of the transfer of curved spaces to flat charts, is transcoded by Pynchon when he deals with the rocket coming across the sky from the continent, "Oh. Oh, yes: around the curve of the Earth, farther east, the sun over there, just risen over in Holland" (Pynchon 6)

Both outsiders and insiders are trying to find their way into totality and annihilation at the same time. The Germans are the would-be invaders, and just like any invader, they should perform the actantial role of mapping, even if that translates with the attempt of de-habitat-ing the island. As for Londoners, one can find among them at least two types of mappers, Roger Mexico, a scientist employing statistics, and an apparently womanizer lieutenant, Tyron Slothrop: "Never to rank a single one – how can he? […], and Christ they're *all* beautiful …" (Pynchon 22). Both agents of the mapping process



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have maps that, strangely enough, match certain theories in the field of probability. Slothrop's

> cover the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled "Darlene") sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys – mostly red and blue through here – a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and out to Wembley and up to hampstead Heath – in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Susans, Elizabeths. But perhaps the colors are only random, uncoded. Perhaps the girls are not even real. (Pynchon 19)

A very colorful map of a ruined, alienated and dying city. A spooky map for Slothrop's companions, as the record he's keeping through the stars placed on the map follow the Poisson distribution (**3**) Some young ladies happen to be silver stars, others are red, or blue, "The stars he pastes up are colored only to go with how he feels that day," (Pynchon 22). This is no longer a *cognitive* mapping of the city, but a rather *cock-nitive* one. And it has the same pattern as Roger Mexico's. Except that the latter's is on the V-bomb statistics: "The rockets *are* distributing about London just as Poisson's equation in the textbooks predicts. As the data keep coming in, Roger looks more and more like a prophet." (Pynchon 54) His map is a glimmering one, but "The situation, as Pavlov noted, is that of paranoia: brain cells "being excited to the level where, through reciprocal induction, all the area around becomes inhibited. One bright, burning point, surrounded by darkness."(Russell 262) Roger Mexico's map is summoning death, just like Slothrop's: "Helpfully, Slothrop has dated most of his stars. A star always comes *before* its corresponding rocket strike. The strike can come as quickly as two days, or as slowly as ten. The mean lag is about 4½ days." (Pynchon 85-86)

Unlike Slothrop, who "keeps up his map daily, boobishly coscientious", Roger Mexico is determined to understand and provide logical explanations, yet he is not able to tell "which places would be safest to go, safest from attack". Pynchon recalls, through one of the characters, a story from ancient Rome, which he parallels with Roger's diligence. After having told Roger how the "Roman priests laid a sieve in the road, and then waited to see which stalks of grass would come up through the holes.", the interlocutor enlightens him as to the nature of the experiment:

> They used the stalks that grew through the holes to cure the sick. The sieve was a very sacred item to them. What will you do with the sieve you've laid over London? How will you use the things that grow in your network of death? (Pynchon 56)

A splendid metaphor and also a rhetorical question, pairing another (haunting) one, which anticipates the ending of our paper: "And where, keepers of maps, specialists at surveillance, would you say the next one will fall?" (Pynchon 120) For on May 31, 1999, during NATO attack on Novi Pazar, the "TK Raska" building was hit, near the bus station. Eleven people died, of which eight have been identified. Twenty-three were



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wounded. In a novel published in 1973, probably the most controversial American novel since then, Thomas Pynchon was writing, in a kind of subterranean and somewhat prophetic tone

> Months passed, World War II started, years passed, nothing was heard from Novi Pazar. Pirate Prentice had saved Europe from the Balkan Armageddon (Pynchon 16)

Had he?

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**NOTES**

(**1**) In the wake of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, the Congress of Berlin (13 June - 13 July 1878) was a meeting of the European Great Powers' and the Ottoman Empire's leading statesmen. The congress formally recognized the independence of the *de facto* sovereign states of Montenegro, Serbia and Romania.

(**2**) The ideas are from *The Image of the City*, by Kevin Lynch, as developed by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

(**3**) In probability theory and statistics, the *Poisson distribution* is a discrete probability distribution. It expresses the probability of a number of events occurring in a fixed time if these events occur with a known average rate, and are independent of the time since the last event (i.e. The number of cars that pass through a certain point on a road during a given period of time. The number of spelling mistakes a secretary makes while typing a single page. The number of phone calls at a call center per minute. The number of mutations in a given stretch of DNA after a certain amount of radiation.) The distribution was discovered by Siméon-Denis Poisson (1781–1840) and published, together with his probability theory, in 1838 in his work *Recherches sur la probabilité des jugements en matières criminelles et matière civile*.



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