

The Uncharted: Playing with Maps in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract: This paper presents the thesis that character interaction with maps in post-modern texts is analogous to the act of reading on the part of the reader; and that in these novels the two are linked by a causal mechanism whereby readers of maps (or texts) are in fact implicated into the act of reading – and are then somehow also interpreted – by the map itself. A note of warning; the first part of the paper, which focuses on *Gravity's Rainbow*, does not purport to prove anything radically different than what can be found throughout Pynchon scholarship (and some may wish to skim through it) – but because of this I took the liberty to re-frame the arguments a little more abstractly and with some added observations that I found surprising had not already occurred elsewhere. What I did attempt was to expand on Duyfhuizen's analysis of maps in *Gravity's Rainbow* to demonstrate that the maps and the text are organised along genealogical criteria. I have also added a discussion on uncharted space. The second half looks at the game of Eschaton in *Infinite Jest*, relies on a close reading of the passage and on the deployment of techniques I hope to have made visible and useful through this wider analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow*. My hope is to have shown how interaction with the game's board forces the characters to re-examine their present predicament in the same way interaction with a text forces the reader to re-evaluate their own experience of reality.

Keywords: Maps, Metafiction, Gödel, Infinity, Remembering Self vs. Experiencing Self, Unmapped Space.

Gravity's Rainbow (1973) and *Infinite Jest* (1996) are written with awareness of the disjunction between the future as a construct of “anticipated memories” and the present as a fragile state of experience (Kahneman). In this respect, both texts and their authors openly recognise the relevance of nineteenth and twentieth century mathematical philosophy to their operation as post-modern works, including at the far end Kurt Gödel's work on the principles of undecidability, independent axioms and contingent set theories. Accordingly, the texts rely on the cohesion and non-cohesion of multiple independent or contingent unities as a mode of outlining the post-modern predicament of living in the present. In creating a survey of this condition over time the texts deploy a genealogical sequencing in the mode of Nietzsche and Foucault to distil the real into a discursive history of meaning as opposed to a plain narrative. Furthermore, the texts replicate this genealogical structure, for it becomes clear that facing the infinite complexity of immediate reality through the perceptive limits of

straight narrative demonstrates that the real cannot be reduced into a finite fully cohesive rule or law. At least a genealogical construction can spread an ever moving grout between the fragments of reality, creating the possibility of meaning in specific conditions. The map, which is here analysed as the post-modern motif that makes space for the development of true metafiction, adds the elegant complexity of a system with infinite density (i.e. a contingent and fully authored structure). It also adds the benefit of isomorphism to the text's stylistic scaffolding, creating a triangle of text-map-genealogy. The map's field becomes a text for the characters in the same way the novels are the reader's infinite semantic fields. And as the maps in the two texts come to step-by-step appropriate themselves of their readers, the novels begin to operate along the same lines and assume an autonomy and independence that calls back to Gödel (37-45). Furthermore, the metaphor of the map creates an excellent analogue to the encyclopedic structure of these post-modern novels, for the movement of information through these semantic networks is entirely non-linear and non-chronological (like in reading a painting), making its information sequencing less mimetic and more genealogical. The question of moral progression is answered by the impulse to determine a correct reading of the map, whereby the characters are forced to assess the map's fictional *quality* in order to make their choices.

Roger Mexico exists between the maps and reality, entering the space between the 0 and the 1 which Pointsman cannot entertain. Pointsman's example that "[they] are concerned, at PISCES, with a rather strictly defined, clinical version of truth. [They] seek no wider agency in this," denotes that each contingent group or agent establishes their own set of moral orders by virtue of their specific real-world correlative – such that truth of any kind can only exist in the socially defined boundaries of a discourse (Pynchon 276). Transcendence ceases to be a potential objective because absolute truths – by definition not sensitive to the conditions in which they operate – cannot exist in contingent everyday reality. Mexico's attempts to demythologise the laws of probability for his colleagues represents an effort to demonstrate the infinite complexity within their world, by banishing instead the infinity of transcendence; it follows then that he would be unable to connect with those characters that confuse a sense of faith with their conception of hope. For them Mexico's pragmatism is of no use because in these conditions of fear and desperation they (making a counter-rational decision) appear to prefer the illusory state to experience of reality. A great part of the novel involves characters dealing with this kind of fallacy – all while the reader is forced to evaluate for himself the effect on the everyday cause by this kind of thinking. However, it is only when Jessica displays unwillingness to accept the theories of Poisson distribution, that Mexico realises he must look beyond the map. For by understanding but not wanting to believe she spells out for Mexico that both his fate and the fate of those he loves is not only out of his hands mathematically, but also because the complexity of the everyday makes it impossible for people truly co-exist on the same

level – the trick is to metabolise the crisis as unresolved and move on.

The map's 'textual image' or hypertext assumes its own narrative insofar as memories of past events are retained but become fragmented (the reader will note that unlike Slothrop, Mexico does not date all his marks). He is mapping these 'events' not in sequence but on the continuum – i.e. the discursive time-line which registers the components of a genealogical event (or better yet 'forces'); such as (to name two) context and allegorical meaning. As a result comes the collapse of the quest-tradition's more arbitrary step-by-step development,¹ the abandonment of patterns of mimetic style that are not at least related to heteroglossia, and a host of other literary conventions that refuse the contingency of dealing with history as a collection of complex and forever connected presents. All techniques and stylistic tools the texts abandon or revolutionise in order to support the thesis of irreconcilable fragmentation of history but also the sense of permanent movements and interaction within the non-transcendental particular of the everyday present moment. So the maps and by extension texts (as hierarchic systems) begin to to function as genealogical maps, useful now that history needs to be understood through experience of the present and not through (to name only one alternative) a Victorian 'aerial view'. If the object of discovery has shifted within the self; the map must become analogical in structure to memory. Through this memory-like sequencing location and event can appropriate purely thematic and dream-like associations under the influence of the force of thought, that allow an emphasis to be placed on the manner in which the map treats events as a narrative (or a by-function) of meaning and not time.

Another "event" for Roger Mexico, a round-headed pin to be stuck in his map, a square graduating from two up to three hits, helping fill out the threes prediction, which lately's being lagged behind...

A pin? not even that, a pinhole in paper that someday will be taken down, when the rockets have stopped their falling, or when the young statistician chooses to end his count, paper to be hauled away by the charwomen, torn up, burned... Pointsman alone, [...] shaking his head *no* ...inside me, in my memory ...more than an "event" ...our common mortality ...these tragic days. (Pynchon 141)

Pointsman correctly notices the new historicity of the map as a threat to dialectic (or more specifically for him, binary) systems of thought. With the entrance of discourse theory into the realm of historiography, the something "more" can become contained in the wider understanding of event as the Nietzschean force which dismisses the discrete in favour of the continuum. And therefore when Pointsman notes with, "[h]ow quickly history passes these days," that the effects of this war are outrunning the war's very historical limit (which are made to look insignificant), he notices that chronology has lost out to causality (Pynchon 603). Tracking the remembering self allows for an exploration of the point of intersection between causality and chronology. What results is a no-space that is at once removed from the map (it is the uncharted) and a part of it (it is inferred as a result of the map's limits).

The no-space is not only represented by the Zone but by the unconscious too, whereby it becomes apparent that the objective is to explore the extra-conscious in order to “develop a consciousness capable of restoring the individual and his world to productive harmony” (Siegel 5). Slothrop realises that coming into consciousness can only rise from an exploration of the self as foreign territory, and by transposing himself (as part of London's maps) into the Zone he is able to review himself entirely, often in a style reminiscent of Emmanuel Lévinas (e.g. more than once Slothrop describes himself as giant covered in natural terrain or as a map) (11-37). As mentioned, however, “[t]hose like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, [that] were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity,”² are able to succeed because they learn to develop internal fictions that though they do not own a final unity they have a unity of genesis, a genealogical construction (Pynchon 592). Pynchon may be hinting that his own texts are constructed in this way, and it would explain the Hysterical Realism of the text to look at it under the lenses of *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche notes that in dreams and less conscious states we are suspended from the myriad filters of consciousness and experience and are therefore in fact closer to that intangible ‘reality’; the same reasoning will by extension allow him to define truth, precisely as Slothrop posits, as a fiction we have forgotten had been authored.

So that when Slothrop abandons the determined quest to follow his personal objectives he is a) jumping Schopenhauer's boundary between objective and natural orders of necessity by embracing the indeterminacy of subjectivity over the natural determinism and b) he letting go of the idea that the text (or map) is non-contingent enough to provide all the information necessary for his journey.³ At this stage Slothrop is making the map even more into a text than it is naturally, in the same way the reader is making the text more and more into a map. And on a practical level, his new aim to become detached from “the Firm” and from the Imipolex-G's mysterious hold on his sexuality, allows him to abandon the body politic for the self. As Slothrop's body disappears towards the end of the novel we are given the feeling that this charting of territory was futile because the force of nature as represented by mortality always subsumes the self (again, there are many echoes of Lévinas). If *Gravity's Rainbow* is a mapping of how the natural power of the text subsumes the character but still grants fiction authority, it follows that the text would attempt to subsume the reader on the same plane. The exhortation to determine, “where, keepers of maps, specialists at surveillance, would you say the next one will fall?” seems launched at the reader (as Duyfhuizen also concludes) in order to open discussion around the level of misreadings and the lack of complex enough perceptive limits that would allow a comprehensive reading (Pynchon 122). It is only one example of the rhetorical invectives, that make the text become “The Door That Opens You!” (Pynchon 263). Whereby it controls the move from the pre-critical

stage (i.e. the coming into consciousness from the distillation of experience) into critical (intellectualising) state-of-mind, just like the maps delineate the journey from Mexico's state of analysis to acceptance – even though for the reader the object is (primarily) a question of the novel's style.

The implicating power of the map in *Infinite Jest's* Eschaton scene does not appeal directly to the reader in this way, though the parallels in character, circumstance and (as will become clear) philosophy, are too many to list. But, the game does draw and collapses distinctions between author-like and character-like figures within the text.⁴ The entire scene is constructed as an exposé of map-systems; and we start from the affirmations that Eschaton is pre-set as “a complete disassociation from the realities of the present,” and that the “Slightly Rectangular” map used is an acknowledged distortion of the world (Wallace 322). Basically, there is absolutely no inherent expectation that the treatment of natural and non-natural causality should be represented realistically. Yet, the “the game master and statistician of record,” Otis P. Lord is busy throughout calculating the most realistic and and exhaustive game-conditions possible, “having to dramatize manually the effortless dictates of real logic and necessity” (Wallace 328). While, this may be both a parody of certain conflicting naturalist and positivist tendencies, Lord's attempt to exhaust the inexhaustible complexities of reality through logic (decision trees, etc.) is symptomatic of a wish to generate a fiction as complete and complex as reality. In fact, the game is played by children on the verge of puberty who have developed the “allergy to the confining realities of the present,” and that feel as “weird kind of nostalgia for stuff [they] never even knew” (Wallace 321-322). The game generates an anachronistic space similar to that navigated by Slothrop in his dreams, for the players become

on court, almost parodically adult- [...] judicious twelve-year-old world leaders, trying their best not to let the awesome weight of their responsibilities-responsibilities to nation, globe, rationality, ideology, conscience and history, to both the living and the unborn – not to let the terrible agony they feel at the arrival of this day-this dark day the leaders've prayed would never come and have taken every conceivable measure rationally consistent with national strategic interest to avoid, to prevent-not to let the agonizing weight of responsibility compromise their resolve to do what they must to preserve their people's way of life. So they play, logically, cautiously, so earnest and deliberate in their calculations they appear thoroughly and queerly adult, almost Talmudic, from a distance. (Wallace 327)

The anachronism is not only based on the prematurely endowed responsibilities of the game but also on the spinning forward of time such that the moment of the end of the world can enter all the players' present, experiencing self. This sort of genealogical transposition of meaning over time is one of the few parts of the game's set-up that is not in any way mimetic, and which as a result will withstand the game's limits to becomes literally embodied by the chaos at the end of the chapter-section. The

structure of the game in general though is of a group simulation where not only is the anticipated future played out – but it is played out to its logical and physical limit – i.e with the knowledge that the effect for each cause the appropriate reaction will be enacted within the game's limits. The comparison to Talmudic scholars is more than a comic quip because it stresses the deep interest in maintaining a line of reasoning between the opening state of the game and the causes that lead to Eschaton, and it demonstrates a possible disassociation from the forms of Kabbalistic knowledge (invoked profusely in Wallace's work on infinite systems) which rely on transcendent and by definition *a priori* acausal doctrines.

Due to the elegant complexity of the game's construction Eschaton veteran (and in a way formal author) Michael Pemulis suggests that “[q]uaint chance is no longer required,” and the ETA students' tennis proficiency makes accuracy even less an issue of probability (Wallace 323). In Eschaton “it is not a matter of the principle,” the entire game is constructed from the ground up without any assumptions such that the players have full control and random events cannot occur (Wallace 328). Except that built into the laws of population statistics and complex probability there needs to be room for a margin of error, or rather a space for the unlikely to occur. In *Gravity's Rainbow* it is carefully noted that, “there is Murphy's Law to consider, that brash Irish proletarian restatement of Gödel's Theorem-when everything has been taken care of, when nothing can go wrong, or even surprise us. . . something will” (Pynchon 279). So Lord's lapse in omniscience not only undoes the 'perfection' of the game's mimesis by demonstrating Gödel's theorem but also raises the question of the map (or the board's) symbolic failure. For “a dispute such as this would never occur in the real God's real world, since the truth would be manifest” (Wallace 333). In real life, the narrator claims, cause and effect are visibly related at least enough to be able to assert (without any Tayloresque worry) that a vaporized city suggests a previously occurred direct hit, whereas a slightly vaporized city instead suggests only an indirect hit. The collapse of the symbolic interaction between even one tennis-ball and target jeopardizes the significance of any in-game 'event' which relies on all previous calculations as rule-by-rule precedents but also as part of a causal chain. The same problem exists in fiction where the cause and effect rules are bound by scripted assumptions instead of actual natural consequence. In this sense the playing-out of this match of Eschaton is analogous not only to the reader's broader experience of reading *Infinite Jest* but also of Wallace's stage-by-stage learning process as its author.

However, it is not just an arbiter's oversight that threatens the game, but the arbiter (and his error) must now be contained by the game if the game is to survive. The fact Lord becomes an explicit part of the game's apparatus is not the greatest surprise – but incorporating him into the fabric of the game forces the concept of judgment to become inherent to the game and not the rules. This is in itself a Nietzschean demonstration that affirmation needs to act upon existence and not on interpretations of

existence. An original justice is given to the game, whereby it begins to act like a proper complex system by making its own 'choices' (more like 'consequences', technically speaking). It's useful to note that this new impulse is not unlike the much-discussed autonomy of fiction. When "[a] few hesitant flakes appear [...] and melt into the dark stars the moment they hit the court," Schopenhauer's objective causal chain of nature appears to complicate the question of what does and does not constitute the game's apparatus, as well as the relation between the symbolic map and the actual territory (Wallace 332). Does the map suffer the effect felt on the imagined territory or vice versa? It turns out that this very game of Eschaton, assuming a Nietzschean prerogative, evolves from the former to an incorporation of both, gaining a reflexivity (through constrictions of what it means to imitate) that has also been described in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The mimetic aspect of the debacle is once more challenged when the "real-world chill descends over the [...] landscape of the nuclear theater", for the language of the narrator seems organized around the erasing of distinction between map and territory, even though the word theater is deployed – suggesting it is a location of imitation and interpretation where the pre-critical general agreement between all parties is that a fiction is being represented (Wallace 337). This evolutionary trend in the game's structure (like the trend in literary history) is opposed by the like of Pemulis who shout (from the sidelines, having grown out of the game) that "[r]eal-world snow isn't a factor if it's falling on the fucking map" (Wallace 334). The inevitable problem is that it is too difficult to constantly be "delimiting boundaries that are Eschaton's very life-blood", because that very life-blood is the power of the game's fiction once it has gained autonomy – i.e. when it is no longer being authored but is authored – when it is no longer attached to the limiting power of its creator (Wallace 335). The critical debate is that (to use handy terms) in realist or classical Eschaton, "[p]layers aren't inside the goddamn game," and that no mechanism needed to be created to defend such a thesis because it appears axiomatic (Wallace 338). However, the new Eschaton seems interested precisely on the question of this axiom's independence – because through the experience of the game it appears counter-intuitive. The evolution of the game into spaces which are not fully formalized but only assumed as formalized is an operation similar to creative development in the mode of literary history and the reader's history of reading (which is always genealogical).

The transformation's second stage deals precisely with the paradox of the precision of the map against the uncertainty in all that's beyond its textual surface, "the snowfall makes everything gauzy and terribly clear at the same time, eliminating all the visual background so that the map's actions seems stark and surreal" (Wallace 341). Wallace is describing a predicament of living paradox not unlike what we see around Mexico and Slothrop's maps too – where the focus on the map's chosen region reveals the stark difference between what is known and what remains unknown in absence of a broader picture. Such that by the end of the passage the "no-

sound of falling snow” will even paradoxically muffle out the background noises which come from off the courts (on which the map is represented), and also from out of the reader's experience of the text (from beyond the interaction with the book as an object) (Wallace 342). The snowfall is for the reader what it is for Hal, an act of concentration, of drawing the blind on the outside world. And it is so that Hal, who's lack of vested interest makes him – unlike Pemulis – the ideal observer (or ideal reader) of the game, makes it explicit that “he finds the real-snow/unreal-snow snag in the Eschaton extremely abstract but somehow way more interesting than Eschaton itself” (Wallace 335). In an experiment to create a new world it is cardinally important to note the discrepancies because they demonstrate that (much in line with Gödel's theories) certain elements of reality are independent and cannot be emulated. So when the game falls apart and Hal finds himself riveted at something about the degenerating game that seems so terribly abstract and fraught with implications and consequences that even thinking about how to articulate it seems so complexly stressful that being almost incapacitated with absorption is almost the only way out of the complex stress, his attention is fixed on Eschaton's accelerated natural order – which is a didactic tool to discover more about the self (Wallace 340). Except that only when it's realism fails and things are set back to normal, does the teaching actually occur. In this specific game though, Eschaton is played out to the logical limit where it can be confused with reality, and a sort of Eschaton literally descends in the end-of-section madness. As a reading experience, Eschaton teaches the boundary between sets of rules as a concept (methods), and theories of application (methodologies), and how the two are related by the necessity of logic. In deploying these very mathematical arguments Wallace is able to portray the fall of realism in non-literary terms with great effect, moving the attention of the reader constantly back towards his own broadly stylistic choices as instructively counter-realist, fully aware of contingencies in both the written and fictionalized worlds. In doing so the reader is becoming a part of the 'event' that this game of Eschaton represents. The game of reading is suffering, as a result of *Infinite Jest* the same 'event'. The reader has entered the non-chronological causal chain between these two events whereby Wallace can make the comment that, “there is an ending [to *Infinite Jest*] as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an "end" can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you.”⁵

In establishing the wider genealogical sequences the authors are able to really tie the act of reading within the text with the act of reading the text. Fundamentally, it is also a question of fiction that can sustain further fictions (and both texts involve 'fake' books and movies). For the texts cannot concede to different ontological plains – there is no absolute and there is no fictional per se – only the real and unreal, both of which could be fictions. The only concession Wallace makes is to natural determinism,

as Lord's flight-path is tied to the law which states that what goes up must come down. The final deference to natural necessity as determined is somewhat charged with a hope that there at the limits of logic the improbable will occur, and that even schemes that seem to remain final after such a scrupulous philosophical analysis can maybe be challenged in the future. Without surprise, *Gravity's Rainbow* purports that the same will occur on the fringes of its logical necessity, for statistically, "when laws of heredity are laid down, mutants will be born" (Pynchon 279). And not outside the limits of chance, but decidedly – in fact determinedly – within them.

End Notes:

1. For more see Pynchon Notes 3 and 4; articles by Mark Siegel, Khachig Tololyan and Bernard Duyfhuizen.
2. The drug-epistemology quirk is not incidental – Pynchon inserts a scene where cocaine is analysed under the microscope with chemicals that transform the powder into a target-like shape, where the pure cocaine (i.e. the objective) is forced to the outer ring. He terms it the anti-target because the truth/utility is described as an outer-limit concept, in line with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Gödel's work on undecidability.
3. The mathematician reading will note that not-contingent and transfinite should be considered analogous terms.
4. This kind of construction is signature David Foster Wallace, probably because it is so much easier in terms of empathetic leaps to see transformations in someone else and then model yourself against them than to be aware of a direct transformation within yourself as it happens.
5. Live Online with David Foster Wallace, May 17, 1996

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