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# Alexandros Massavetas's "Going Back to Constantinople-Istanbul: A City of Absences": Mapping the Past and the Present through Literature

*Summary:* All groups of persons possess historical experiences that are engraved deep inside the group's so-called "cultural unconscious" that acts like a net holding together the group's beliefs. This element must be exploited so as any map to create a sentimental reaction by its reader. Interestingly enough literary texts can act as maps and this is the case of Alexandros Massavetas's book which combines a "memory map" with a "cognitive map" embellished by historical and sociological facts.

## Setting the frawork: "Cultural memory", the echo of the past, the reality of today

This presentation mainly tries to argue that personal experience is shaped by cultural history and tradition and that the expression of such an experience is made by symbols.[1]

The use of the term "experience" means the generation, by a central archetype that plays the role of a "core", of emotions and images that take precise forms and which are shaped with the help of a given culture and more precisely with the help of its history and tradition.[2] According to clinical psychologist S. L. Kimbles: "Within an organization the particular culture that evolves and develops is a product of the accumulation of shared experiences that can be looked at from both an individual and group viewpoint."[3]

All the above establish the basis upon which I will examine certain aspects of the book. And it is interesting to note that this book can be characterized as a "memory map" under which a "cognitive map" can be found. "Memory maps" are "spatial articulations of individual or collective knowing of what has been, a visualization of cultural heritage (…) In this way the map becomes (…) a holder of history".[4] Whereas the "cognitive mapping deals with the underlying psychological structure of the environment as well as the distance between places".[5]

Some examples that prove my argument can be found in pages 4-9 where one can see that the writer's cultural unconscious – as portrayed through his way of narration - took a symbolic dimension that has been shaped by his personal experience that, for its part, was 'sculpted' by human interactions, narratives and images that are preserved and transferred through a centripetal-like dynamics.[6] And this dynamics originates from what is called "cultural memory".[7]

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[1] Roy, Manisha. "When a religious archetype becomes a cultural complex: Puritanism in America" Thomas Singer and Samuel L. Kimbles (ed.) *The cultural complex: contemporary Jungian perspectives on psyche and society*, Brunner-Routledge, 2004, p. 68.

[2] Op. cit., p. 68.

[3] As stated in Feldman, Brian. "Towards a theory of organizational culture **-** Integrating the "other" from a post-Jungian perspective" in *The cultural complex…*, p. 251.

[4] Kriz, K., Cartwright, W. and Hurni, L. (eds.) *Mapping Different Geographies*, Springer 2010, p. 95.

[5] *Mapping different…*, p. 70.

[6] Cambray, Joseph and Carter, Linda (ed.) *Analytical psychology-A Jungian Perspective*, Brunner-Routledge

Since the maps "appeal to the heart as well as the mind",[8] the statements made by Arthur J. Klinghoffer "Our views are shaded by subjectivity, with observations thus becoming expressions of ourselves. Prior convictions may therefore mistakenly validate what we think we see" and "A related problem is that people tend to seek out the familiar, or assess quite unusual images in such a context",[9] validate more our argument but at the same time offer a very fascinating dimension to Massavetas's book.

Another interesting aspect of the book relies on what Harriet Edquist is saying for the books of the Australian writer Eleanor Dark: "She shows us (Eleanor Dark) how to read a city in history, how to interrogate a map and most importantly how to imagine ourselves in the past and, in engaging with its issues, achieve a more considered insight into the present".[10]

How true! Massavetas is merging skillfully the past with the present and enables us to interrogate the maps, the "memory" and "cognitive" ones alike, that emerge simultaneously from the pictures and the narration offered to us.

The originality in this book is this: **the writer not only <u>constructs</u> a world –which is the result of him being an intermediate between his own (internal) world and the physical world surrounding him- but also <u>present</u> to us the "cultural unconscious" of another group, i.e. of Constantinople's inhabitants**.

This presentation does not intend to answer the "why" and "how" this cultural unconscious is coming to the surface of any person's psyche or to investigate the very subtle and complex connections between persons and their culture but to show that cultural memory constitutes "a living, dynamic field" between the past and the present.[11]

And the moment that my presentation is portraying this "living, dynamic field" of a person's cultural memory, it is then that we enter the territory of "geo-literature", a term introduced by I. Wallerstein, or in his own words: "[geo-literature is] a category [of literary geography] which integrates and is the expression of the dialectic interrelation of territory, cultural spaces, and multiculturalisms. Geoliterature springs from geopolitical foundations which attempt, in their spatial analysis of political phenomena «to respond to why human beings create places in space and how they imbue them with importance. … When we create places, when "we live" in these places, we create identities»".[12]

The successful imprint on a map of the merging of the images produced by a person's cultural unconscious with the explanations given by geo-literature, as to why human beings create spaces, both will make easier the representation and comprehension of today's rapidly changing world affairs for cartographers and map readers alike.

2004, p. 184.

[7] *Analytical psychology…*, p. 184.

[8] Klinghofferh, A.J. *The power of projections: How Maps reflect Global Politics and History*, Praeger 2006, p. 1.

[9] *The power of projections…* p. 3.

[10] *Mapping different…*, p. 254.

[11] See Kimbles, S.L., "The cultural unconscious" in *Analytical Psychology*, op.cit., pp. 180-185.

[12] Domínguez, C. "Literary Geography and Comparative Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.5 (2011): <htt://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1902>, p. 3.

**The book as a link between the Past and the Present, the humans and the environment**

*The book of Alexandros Massavetas as a "memory map"*

Beginning with chapter 1 and the sub-chapters "The Seven Hills" and "The Church of Aghia Sofia" one can see that the writer already begins from page 33,[13] the delimitation of Constantinople (or the *Poly*, "Πόλη" in Greek = "City") by saying: "The topography of Poly is complicated…" And he defines the expansion of the city with the use of geographical landmarks: "Poly is extended on three tongues of land – two on European soil, the Seven Hills area and the Perea area, and one on Asian soil – divided by three seas." And while setting the topographical frame with sentences such as "The peninsula of the Seven Hills area forms a big triangle that used to encircle the endless ribbon of the byzantine walls" he gives us geographical details, so that to determine each landmark, decorated with interesting historical facts which, for their part, function as elements of the underlying "cognitive map".



Figure 1: Constantinople, as depicted on a mid-19th century map.

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[13] All page numbers refer to the text in Greek language. Any translation presented here, concerning titles or excerpts from the book, were made by the author of this paper who bears responsibility for any mistakes. http://www.biblionet.gr/book/119954/Μασσαβέτας,_Αλέξανδρος/Going_Back_to_Constantinople:_Istanbul:_A _City_of_Absences
http://www.todayszaman.com/expat-zone_i-stanbul-a-city-defined-by-absences-for-greek-author_149625.html

At this level the reader is informed that the renowned "Seven Hills" topography not only had been altered because of thousands-old alluvium and centuries-old urban planning interventions but also that this topography contained more than seven hills (p. 34). In the following pages, pp. 34-36, the writer is trying to present to the reader some from the contradictory information relating to the exact location of each hill and to the landmarks, be it buildings or monuments, that distinguished each hill from the other.

And then Massavetas turns his attention to the church of Aghia Sofia, "the most distinguishable symbol of the Poly" (p. 37). The description of Aghia Sofia concerns its external and more importantly its internal characteristics - one can find words such as "gawky exterior and the heavenly-made interior…" (p. 38) – which cover, the internal characteristics, a very detailed description of the church's architectural, aesthetic and philosophical dimensions mixed with relevant historical facts (pp. 36-48). Massavetas, at the end of this chapter and from page 49 to 51, sets the "cognitive" background of his narration concerning the church of Aghia Sofia when he examines its symbolic, see "national", meaning for the Greeks and the Turks: "For the Greeks it [Aghia Sofia] constitutes a crucial point of collective reference that epitomizes the concept of Romany[14] and the longing for it as well as the symbol of a national mourning… for the Turkish nationalism, the conversion of the Great Church into a mosque amounts to the ultimate symbolic action for the 'Conquest of Istanbul', that still plays an important role for the Turkish collective identity and popular historical literature…" (p. 49).

The topographical orientation of the Poly's, i.e. Constantinople's, landmarks carries on with the narration acting as a 'vehicle', and always full of historical and cultural notes. At this point the well-known "Coastal Walls"[15] are portrayed (pp. 79-89): "The Coastal Walls followed the coastal line of Propontis from Saray Burnu to the Marble Tower where they joined the Theodosian Walls, a total length of 8,260 m." The "Theodosian Walls", another well-known historical and social-cultural pole of attraction for today's Constantinople, is presented through pages 193-200 where it is identified as "the most impressive secular remain of Romany" (p. 193). And the writer uses the narration regarding the "Theodosian Walls" to guide us to a short journey by the sea of Marmaras: "Built in 413 A.D. by the emperor Theodosius B' [the Walls] cover a distance of almost seven kilometers between the Gulf of Keratius and the Sea of Marmaras cutting off the historical peninsula of Constantinople from the Thracian valleys… while I would go around the seven kilometers of a distance full of going up and down many hill sides" (pp.194, 197).[16]

"From the Karaköy Square, one is going up the Yűksek Kaldırım to reach the Galata Tower and the district of Peran". This brief sentence sets very well the orientation landmarks that outline, step by step, Constantinople's "memory map". And more, this sentence acquires its "cognitive" parts that comprise firstly, an excerpt from Georgios Theotokas's novel Leonis (p. 327) and one from Haris Spatharis's Of Constantinople and alike (p. 328), secondly, sentences like "When going uphill and turn right, instead of turning left to the square and the Tower, one can reach the Serdar-ı Ekrem street that is full of impressive buildings from all the styles of Belle Epoque" (p. 329) and finally many photos.[17]

Upon completion of the "memory map" section I would like to add to small 'trips' that the author offer to us: one to the Asian side of Constantinople and one short sea-trip to the Sea of Bosporus.

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[14] A term referring to the Byzantine Empire.
[15] See http://mykonstantinoupoli.blogspot.gr/2013/12/blog-post_2.html
[16] The writer refers to his walking all over the outer walls of Constantinople.
[17] A special mention should be made to the choice of photos presented by the author because they not only "stick" to the text but also "awake" the memory and cognitive part of his narration.

On the Asian side one can find a historical landmark called "The Tower of Leandros" or the "Maiden's Tower" according to its Turkish name. This landmark is of topographical but also of symbolic and sentimental value because it rises on a rock where the Sea of Marmaras meets the Sea of Bosporus. Along with the legends surrounding the Tower and the historical facts related to the area, Massavetas presents us his view for the district of Űskűdar, where the "The Tower of Leandros" is situated: "The hills of Űskűdar rise over the harbor and the amphitheatric ordering of its houses create a rather pleasant sight, that does not reveal the sad state that has been created because of the regression of the morals". (p. 566)
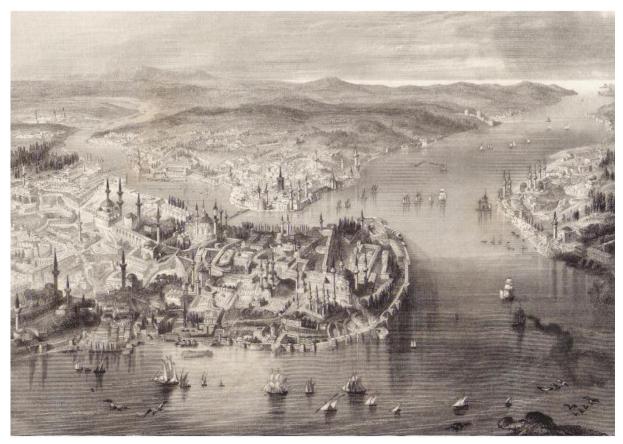


Figure 2: An overview of Constantinople from the south (1850).

The short sea-trip to the Sea of Bosporus acts as a final link between the "memory" and the "cognitive" maps set up by the writer. This is achieved in pages 585-611 where a mixture of historical, cultural, psychological and topographical maps are unfolded in front of us dealing with the following subjects: the origin of the name "Bosporus" and the myths associated to it as well as the history of the byzantine castles that still exist on strategic locations, the strategic and economic importance of Bosporus for three millennia now, the impact that issues such as the environmental pollution have on people, the beauty of the sea color combined to the beauty of the landscapes – that have been severely damaged because of rapid urbanization – and finally, the individual character of attractions such as the "mansions by the sea" or *yalı* in Turkish, and the quiet fishermen's village of the past that have become tourist attractions of today.

Let' see some examples of the above: "It was called a sea serpent, a blue ribbon, the crown of an imperial capital; it has inspired poets, writers and painters through the centuries. Bosporus, a narrow sea corridor connecting Propontis to the Black Sea and separating Europe from Asia, follows a winding route that, when seeing from the space, resembles to a Latin S. Its coasts

spangled with palaces, castles, churches and mansions by the sea." (pp. 585-586) "Since three millennia, the competition for the control of this sea-highway brought every power up against other powers" (p. 588). "Bosporus paid a high price because of the importance it carried for the international commerce, something that acted as the murder weapon for ecology" (p. 590) and "However, the pollution killed not only the 'culture of taking a sea-bath', a bygone integral part of the bourgeois life in Poly. In the past, the Muslims were taking lessons on modernization and adaptation to the new morals, on the beaches. (…) Today, the dark ages returned to this gigantic city and, more precisely, they returned through the way of thinking of the millions of settlers. For populations of this kind the association with 'almost naked' women is something inconceivable" (p. 591). As far as the beauties along the Sea of Bosporus are concerned let's see some examples: "What drives me frequently to its shores it is the quiet beauty of its blue waters and of the verdurous hills, that fill your soul with romantic feelings, peace of mind and positive energy" (p. 593), "The yalı[18] is a wooden, traditionally built house exactly on the shore, having its flower-beds, and -most of the time- its roofed balconies, projected above the water" (p. 598), "The color of the waters in Bosporus change according to the seasons, the weather and the color of the sky. From turquoise turns into deep blue, from the color of emerald to the one of lapis lazuli, from grey to ashy" (p. 600), "From the square, located near the shore, in Ortaköy one can see the elegant and lanky minarets of the mosque to raise and at the background the rigorous shape of the bridge, a beautiful contrast of époques and aesthetics" (p. 602-603).

*The book of Alexandros Massavetas as a "cognitive map"*

The importance of maps of this kind relies on their very nature, or better because they give the underlying psychological structure of the environment as well as the distance between places (see, above p.1). In other words, they transmit the "vibrations" of each place.

And since the landscape under examination is Constantinople or the Poly, I will focus on elements that transmit to the reader of Massavetas's book the "vibrations" of Constantinople when at the same time the book fulfils its aim as a multilayered map.

"The city of Constantinople was situated on the route of commerce, of travelers and of fortune hunters. From the moment that Jerusalem passed to the Muslim sovereignty Poly turned, for many Christians, into a pilgrimage place equivalent to the Holy Land (p. 150) … Only few traces remain to remind us the city that was brighter than the sun (p. 153) … The death of Constantinople was slow and painful, a decadence that lasted for two and half centuries (p. 154)".

In chapter 4 the sub-chapter under the title "Six churches, six neighborhoods" (pages 173-191) constitutes the most obvious evidence that landmarks bearing cultural, historical and psychological weight, i.e. the churches, can form the centre of gravity for the demarcation of spatial articulations such as the neighborhoods. The "cognitive map" acts supplementary to the "memory map".

Something that is also shown clearly in chapter 7, and in sub-chapter under the title "Social decay and urban reformation". Let's see some illustrative examples: "The exodus of the Romios[19] resulted from a policy of continual persecution manifested not only in 'the incidents of

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[18] That is, the mansions by the sea.
[19] "Romios" is the paraphrase of "Romaios" (Roman) that denoted, during the ottoman times all Orthodox Christians and later only the Greeks. In a broader sense the term means all those who share the Byzantine heritage that is Orthodox Christian religion and the ecumenical spirit of this heritage. The text here refers to the times after the 1960s.

September'[20] and in the deportations of 1964. The ravaged houses it's like echoing the despair of the Greeks that owned them and who were forced to abandon them. It is a heart-breaking sight… The discrepancy between the world that is created by the buildings and the world that is created by the humans manifests the dramatic change in demographics and in urban identity. The schools, the churches and the architectural style reveal an urban Greek past. But, the population living there today is completely cut-off from this material world that surrounds them." (p. 288). "So, the historical buildings face the danger of acquiring vulgar aesthetics created by the new-money islamists." (p. 370). Moving on the same pattern, in the sense that a 'cognitive' message must be conveyed, the title given to Part C: "A kind of medley: The non Muslims, then and now". (p. 439 and on) is more than enough so as to make the reader 'feel' the atmosphere of a past that typified a busy and cosmopolitan city like Constantinople. The same can be said for the sub-chapter named "A city of two continents" (p. 561), in Chapter 16, just because the mentioning of a city that belongs to two continents conveys the image of something split into two, the image of separation, of segregation, of dualism and why not, of rupture (or ruptures).

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, what is called "cultural factors", be it images, symbols or beliefs, they all play more and more a significant role in the shaping of tomorrow's world. On the other part, cartographers try to visualize the ways persons give 'meaning' to places and subsequently, create 'identities' in order for the cartographers to be able to present the so called "cultural unconscious" of a group of persons and therefore to facilitate more  the work of cartographic representations as instruments of analysis.

And exactly the same is valid for the relation between literature and cartography. Literary texts can be a great storage area of information that portrays a writer's world view for a specific place. In other words, the way he/she perceives real facts. And by bringing together such perceptions cartographers can combine "memory maps" with "cognitive maps" and create relatively accurate representations of 'placescapes'.[21] And for this reason I consider of vital importance the collaboration of the cartographers with those treating the academic fields of comparative literature and of sociolinguistics. The concept of and the target behind this collaboration occupies a central part of our reasoning in the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting when we just created a research Laboratory focusing on the relation between Language and Politics because we believe that culture -and everything related to it- is, and will be, more dominant in the creation of tomorrow's world than anything else.

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[20] A reference to the violent actions against the Greeks of Constantinople in 5 and 6 of September 1955.
[21] For an elaboration on this see Vaughan, L. "Mapping the Imagined" in *Mapping Different Geographies…*, op. cit., p. 98 and on.