

## THE PURITAN REFLEX: PARANOIA IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

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### ABSTRACT

The present article studied Thomas Pynchon's illustration of paranoid obsessions in *Gravity's Rainbow* and examined the grounds on which such obsessions are formed. The article focused on the way paranoia provides Pynchon's characters with an absurd defense mechanism against their fragmented consciousness. Drawing on Pynchon's own definition of paranoia and principles of Puritanism, the writer attempted to display the theological axis within which Pynchon plots his characters' paranoid fascination with enemy and investigated the inevitable consequences of such fascination for them. In the course of the study it was revealed that characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* resort to paranoia as the only possible means to reach a transcendence to endow their lives with meaning, and that their attempt to restore order through paranoia is futile.

**KEYWORDS:** Paranoia, Puritan Principles, Preterition, Anti-Paranoia

### INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a multi-layered black comedy set at the close of the second world war, is less concerned with character than with the effect of historical processes on individual behaviour. Within the fictional context of the narrative, his characters try to put together the apparently random events to extract what they call hidden patterns. In search of meaning and in an effort to shape up their fragmented selves, characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* opt for paranoia. This article sets out a study of the way Pynchon illustrates paranoid interpretative models of his characters and the grounds on which they are formed.

Pynchon's portrayal of paranoia takes it away from its clinical concepts, which are basically studied by means of psychopathological tools, and brings it to the realm of cultural pathology. Patrick O'Donnell uses the term "cultural paranoia" to express contemporary anxieties and fears of cultural pressures and forces (2008). Cultural paranoia indicates a crisis in recent conception of personhood and human agency. In the wake of fragmented or decentered concepts of subjectivity, paranoia, in O'Donnell's words, "manifests itself as a machine that rearranges chaos into order" (2000, 11). The interpretative drive of the paranoiac is a desire to find some kind of coherent motives lying behind what initially seems to be random, or what others believe to be chance events. For the paranoid, the visible randomness has deceitfully been prepared by the enemy to hinder him from reaching the real. Leo Bersani holds that providing such definition of the real is the "primary function of the enemy... that makes paranoia necessary" (1989, 108). The opposition between the paranoid and the enemy, creates a We/They binary opposition. According to Bersani, "the paranoid We must lose out to the enemy They, and this by virtue of the fact that it authorises, or creates, the condition of the possibility of They-ness by a primary, founding faith in the unicity of the real" (1989, 108).

Scott Sanders states that in all monotheistic beliefs, the world is "perceived as a plot, narrated by God" (1975, 177). He is the source of all plots in the universe. Among all monotheistic religions, Calvinism, or Puritanism in America, has more radical claims than other varieties of Christian monotheistic beliefs. The Puritan is thought to discern

pattern in every piece of creation and is made to believe himself to be a participant in a divine plan. When this omniscient God is removed from its position as the sole meaningful entity, the divine position needs to be filled by another hypothesis that can function as the remote control that gives the creation the legibility it once had and explains individual existences within a plot of cosmic magnitude.

It is in the Puritan polarity of elect/preterite where Sanders finds the origin of paranoia/anti-paranoia binary opposition. In God's scheme of salvation, the elect's life is full of meaning but for the preterite life is meaningless and the universe is a cluster of disjointed entities void of any connections with divinity; for him paranoia is the faith in the will of God. In *Gravity's Rainbow* we are informed that Slothrop (the protagonist whose puritan ancestry is notified) possesses a "puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible," also known as paranoia (Pynchon, 1973, 434). He neither finds the meaning of events of life nor knows what he's being used for. He just senses that certain powers have plotted against him, that everything is connected and that They do have a plan.

This article aims to have a close look at the divine structure that characters' secular paranoia takes in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and analyses the implication of an originally theological scheme of thought on the characters' secular ideologies. It starts with a summary of the story, provides a critical account of the structure of paranoia, and finally explores those structures in the protagonist of the narrative.

## DISCUSSIONS

In any paranoid structure, the paranoid polarity of 'We/They' operates dominantly. They threaten us and we know them only through our suspicions about them. The paranoid subject, O'Donnell asserts, "sees the visible as a simulated double of the real; it deceptively repeats the real. Or, more accurately, it deceitfully repeats the real: as if such doubleness would not occur if there were not an intention to deceive" (1992, 108).

Thus they become the enemy, since They provide the treacherous simulations to deceive and hinder us from reaching the 'real.' The intention to deceive lies at the heart of doubling of the real, and the assumption that simulations "belong to the other side," and that "doubles have no reason to appear or exist except to prevent us from seeing the original," is the key principal assumption on which paranoid imagination operates (O'Donnell, 1992, 108). The opposition between We (the paranoid subjects), and They (the enemy who fosters doublings to deceive) is a result of believing in a power who intends the doublings. The We/They binary opposition aggressively manifests itself in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist, imagines himself the target of a conspiracy that aims at leading him towards death, and believes all events are connected to advance a plot of cosmic magnitude. Pynchon's references to Slothrop's Puritan ancestry and his Puritan consciousness are more frequent to be considered unintended and irrelevant to Slothrop's paranoid obsessions.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is broken into four parts. Part one, *Beyond the Zero*, opens when Pirate Prentice, a British intelligence officer, is having a party, which is interrupted when a call informs him about a message he needs to receive in Greenwich. Tyrone Slothrop, an American lieutenant in London, whose quest to find out about Schwarzergerät and his childhood trauma spreads out all through the novel, is first introduced when his desk is investigated by Teddy Bloat, who is sent by Dr Pointsman, the Pavlovian psychologist, to collect information on Slothrop's sexual escapades that were marked on a map of London. Pointsman believes he can use Slothrop's map to predict V-2 rocket strikes, by uncovering his psychological conditioning. Dr Pointsman sees himself, and other Pavlovian psychologists, the target of a vast conspiracy. It is in the second part, *Un Perm Au Casino Herman Goering*, that Slothrop's paranoid suspicions start with his encounter with Katje, the former sexual slave of Blicero. As a present member of The White Visitation,

she is assigned by Pointsman to play different roles, seducing Slothrop is among the most important ones. Evidences of connections between his childhood conditioning and rocket strikes are revealed to Slothrop. The third part, In the Zone, starts with Slothrop's trip to Nordhausen, Germany, where he assumes new identities and finds new lovers. All through this part, he is chased by Major Duane Marvey, the leader of an intelligence team whose target is Slothrop. Being disguised as a Russian officer, Slothrop escapes Marvey, and later Pointsman's operative mistake Marvey for him and castrate Marvey. Through the middle of the fourth part, Slothrop finds out about the atomic bomb the United States has dropped and the Counterforce makes discoveries about the direction rocket 00000 would be fired. The novel closes with the launch of rocket while Gottfried (Blicero's sexual slave) is inside the Schwarzgerät compartment of it, and a theatre in Los Angeles awaits its strike.

Like Benny Profane in *V.*, American Slothrop of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a 'Schlemihl'. Schlemihl is the popular Yiddish term for an unfortunate person; many of Jewish anecdotes refer to schlemihl as someone who, through no fault of his own, is pursued by misfortune to the end of life and endures it without murmuring. All through *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop is the target of manipulation: first by the scientist Laszlo Jamf, subsequently by Pointsman the Pavlovian, and as the war reaches its end, by a host of agents from African to Soviet. Even when he is not the target of real conspiracies, he projects imaginary ones. In a scene of the novel, Slothrop is alone in a games room, for him the betting tables and many racks are no longer "quite outward and visible signs of a game of chance," but the indications of "another enterprise" which is "more real," "less merciful," and "systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop" (Pynchon, 1973, 202). This scene, along with many other similar ones, reflects the key aspects of Slothrop's thought. For him, the reality that is governed by chance is meaningless, and the reality that is controlled by hidden powers, "more real" (Pynchon, 1973, 202). He believes this second reality is not simply secret, or passively mysterious, but "systematically hidden" from the likes of him.

Slothrop believes the reason reality is hidden from him is his Puritan ancestors. The plan for his assembly at the Zone goes wrong; instead, he is broken down and scattered. When Slothrop's talent for phallic rocket pursuit proves useless to them, he turns inconceivable through dissolution. His pieces are divided up into ambiguous traces, from a face on the only album of an English rock group to a blood stained undershirt. By the end of the novel, no one but Seaman Pig Bodine still perceives Slothrop as an integral creature, or even imagines him; he becomes "too remote" (Pynchon, 1973, 740). Earlier in the novel, Slothrop's Tarot reading had revealed his destiny; all his hopeful cards were reversed. His Tarot read: "a long and scuffling future...mediocrity...no clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm" (Pynchon, 1973, 738).

The fact that Pynchon frequently informs the reader of Slothrop's Puritan ancestry reflects the emphasis he intends to put on the Puritan root of Slothrop's secular paranoia. Slothrop sees hints and revelations and hears voices, but unlike his ancestors he cannot call the voices "God's clamouring," since he does not know whence the hints and voices come (Pynchon, 1973, 281). As Sanders concludes, "having lost "the numinous certainty of God", he [Slothrop] hunts for conspiracies" (1975, 181). Puritan terminology and references to the history of Puritanism explicitly connect Pynchon's depiction of paranoia to this theological pattern of thought. William Slothrop, the protagonist's ancestor, wrote *On Preterition*, and defended the idea that it was the Preterite who had always enjoyed God's grace and not the Elect. The treatise was burnt because the Puritan did not want to hear about the Preterite; those whom the God passes over, and of course no Puritan ever contemplated being one of them. William Slothrop is not alone; Enzian also identifies with the Preterite, "the vast Humility sleepless, dying, in pain.. across the Zone," and loves the passed-over too (Pynchon, 1973, 731). Mexico, Prentice, and Katje are among other characters who, left out of their respective plots,

are doomed to Preterition and thus dissolution. William Slothrop's hymn, which reinforces the doctrine of Election by excluding the Preterite, closes the novel. Everybody is invited by the narrator to sing along:

There is a hand to turn the time, Though thy Glass today be run, Till the Light that hath brought the towers low, Find the last poor Pret'rite one... Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road, All through our crippl'd Zone, With a face on ev'ry mountainside, And a Soul in ev'ry stone... Now everybody (Pynchon, 1973, 760).

The Puritan principle of double predestination divides people into the Elect and the Preterite. In *Puritan and Puritanism in Europe and America: a Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, elect is defined as a term "used to refer to those whom God has selected (elected) for salvation," those whose certainty of salvation and transformation of the souls is assured by God (2006, 589). Thanks to God's grace the elect enjoys a meaningful life but for the preterite's life is devoid of meaning. In Louis Mackay's words:

The heart of Calvinism is the doctrine of double predestination. God, whose absolute sovereignty Calvinists guarded more jealously than any Christians before them, has from all eternity relentlessly elected to save a few out of the corrupt mass of fallen humanity. The rest he passes over and allows to fall into hell borne down by the weight of dam's and their own sin. All men are either Elect, the handful chosen for salvation, or Preterite, passed over and tacitly consigned to damnation (1981, 17).

Mackay also states that in the divine decrees there is one level between the Elect and the Preterite, which is the Reprobate. According to him, if we consider all men are drowning, God's reaction to drowning men determines their position in the theological hierarchy. A few of the drowning men are plucked out by God's mercy and thus survive; some are "pushed down and held under;" but the rest are allowed to drown on their own (1981, 18). This visual image of the levels of predestination best portrays the sense of being forsaken that Pynchon terms "anti-paranoia." In other words, the Reprobate's damnation is because they are predestined to be damned, but the Preterite are damned due to the fact that they are not meant to be saved. As the name implies, the Preterite's participation in the eternal decrees is determined inversely, their inclusion is achieved through omission, the majority of characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* are preterite. Each preterite is informed of his omission through a voice that speaks only to him saying: "you didn't really believe you'd be saved. Come, we all know who we are by now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save you, old fellow (Pynchon, 1973, 4).

According to Pynchon, there is a possibility which is worse than paranoia: anti-paranoia. The assumption that you are not trapped in any conspiracies at all, that you are left to stand outside plots, is even more terrifying than being their target. The binary perception manifests itself as "paranoia or anti-paranoia; that everything is connected, or nothing is connected; reality either radiates from a Centre, or it is centerless; history is either wholly determined from without, or it is wholly meaningless; the individual is either manipulated, or he is simply adrift" (Sanders, 1975, 185).

There are moments when Slothrop experiences anti-paranoia. Feeling he has slid "onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle," he senses "the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is" (Pynchon 434). A theological either/or pattern of thought is evident in paranoia/anti-paranoia binary opposition. Either there is God with absolute power, or we have a chaotic universe. According to Puritan principles, the only mode of transcendence for individuals is exerted from without, and the individual can impose no control on it. As Sanders puts, once elected and

“incorporated into God’s scheme of salvation,” the individual’s life gains meaning, and if made to stand out of God’s plan, that is to be preterite, the individual’s life becomes meaningless (1975, 186).

In fact, it is the anxiety about losing the identity that initiates the fear of being passed over and anti-paranoid in Pynchon’s characters. For Slothrop, losing historical perspective results in losing one’s track and disintegration; after assuming various guises, one does not know who he or she is or where he or she has come from. Slothrop, who is hardly perceptible from the onset of the novel, turns almost invisible through the end, as he loses the glamor he had for Them because of his talent for phallic rocket pursuit. In fact, it is his paranoia that, inversely, ends in his preterition. *Gravity’s Rainbow* suggests that paranoids are never to win, they are predestined to face dissolution or destruction: “destruction, if his paranoid faith (that is, fear) warranted, dissolution if his anti-paranoid hope (that is, anxiety) is confirmed” (Mackey, 1981, 22). Slothrop’s story does not terminate; instead, he falls out of his story, only to dissolve and scatter to pieces. He is not damned, and, undoubtedly, not saved.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, preterition is a kind of resistance to the overarching power of the Elect, and empowers members of the Counterforce. They structure reality and will not reveal themselves to Us if it is not to Their advantage. We must never forget that Their presence is constantly possible. *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers a way of responding to their system: through developing another system. As Pirate Prentice explains to Roger Mexico:

Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary- but it’s only half of the story. For every they there ought to be a we. In other words there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a we-system as a they-system... we don’t have to worry about questions of real or unreal. They only talk out of expediency. It’s the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it. Some are consistent, others fall apart (Pynchon, 1973, 638).

To avoid being overwhelmed by their paranoia, the Preterite must be able to counter their strategy by means of a we-system. Although the We-systems of *Gravity’s Rainbow* do not work on a rational basis, they try to frustrate they-systems by creating patterns that look uncharacteristic to them, as Siegel suggests, by interfering “noise in their information system” (1977, 53). Since they define our ‘reality,’ it is impossible to tell ‘real’ from ‘unreal,’ thus creative paranoia nourishes ambiguity and not determinism. After all, as far as man’s structuring and responding to the world is concerned, it is only the system, here the system of the novel, which needs to be focused on. For Siegel, the only possible way to come to a holistic understanding of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is to treat the novel as “an exercise in “creative paranoia”, a self-conscious construction of a variety of possible worlds” (1977, 53).

As *Gravity’s Rainbow* draws to a close, and as the Counterforce intensifies its resistance in the form of destruction, the narrative becomes more and more random, and in the absence of a transcendental signified to render it coherent, the connectedness is taken over by disconnectedness. This is precisely what Slothrop goes through when his anti-paranoia takes over from paranoia. Their absence guarantees the preservation of our freedom from the bandage they would cause us. As stated earlier, the Elect and the Reprobate are predestined, and thus have no choice. But the Preterite’s freedom is guaranteed by God’s indifference to them, as the readers’ liberty in responding to the questions that the narrator arouses is guaranteed by the author’s refusal to provide any firm ground for the readers’ response.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Rocket embodies quests for transcendence and meaning, itself seeking transcendence and sought by the characters. It is not a coincidence that rocket’s trajectory, the curve that its ascent and descent draws in the sky, resembles the curve of the rainbow. When the rocket is fired, it is certain that its ascent “will be betrayed to Gravity,” although “the rocket’s engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape. The victim, in

bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophesy, of Escape” (Pynchon, 1973, 758). The rainbow of Genesis, is God’s promise of escape to Noah after the flood destroyed the earth, and is a symbol of the second chances for renewal. But the rainbow of Gravity is “the trajectory of matter, from order to disorder, a process remorseless and irreversible” (Sanders, 1975, 184). Gravity is the name Pynchon puts to the magnetic source of power that is “at the center of his cosmic conspiracy, the entropic lust that drives the planet, the inimical power bent on dragging all the universe, and mankind along with it, toward death. Gravity becomes paranoid God (Sanders, 1975, 184-185).

Pynchon chooses a theological structure to portray his paranoid characters' conspiratorial outlook on history, because he believes that these characters' view of history stems from a theology that has lost its God. Having lost God's sovereignty, as the transcendental source of signification, the originally religious mind seeks refuge in the established connectedness, and rebuilds the universe around different authoritative controlling powers. His life is no more meaningless since, they have his life in Their hands, and he is at the center of Their plots. Pynchon’s characters struggle with an unending urge to discover the omnipresent reality that, they think, is intentionally hidden under the surface of misleading appearances; this urge is the source of paranoia in his novels. For Slothrop the pursuit of symbolic constructs in the hope of grasping the ‘reality’ they represent leads to fragmentation or the loss of the sense of selfhood, but they give unequivocal preference to paranoid fantasies over emptiness.

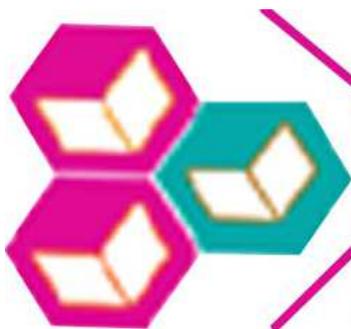
## CONCLUSIONS

The underlying dialectic of all paranoid structures, the binary opposition of we/they, is studied in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In the novel, echoes of Slothrop’s schlemihlhood are often accompanied by references to his Puritan ancestry in the novel. According to the Puritan doctrine of predestination, in the divine scheme of salvation, the Elect are chosen by God to enjoy salvation, and the Preterite are left to suffer damnation. In fact, the Preterite’s inclusion in God’s scheme is through their omission from it. Slothrop believes that he is denied the discovery of truth because he comes from a Puritan family, is preterite and thus forsaken. His obsession with his bizarre sexual behavior sends him on a quest searching the source of such behavior, which he believes is the V-2 rocket. The quest leads him through numerous sexual affairs, scenes of chasing and escaping, various guises, and final breakdown. As a result, Slothrop opts for paranoia because of his fear of anti-paranoia, which signifies his exclusion from all plots and thus implies meaninglessness and incoherence. Pynchon’s use of preterition on textual and rhetorical levels are also studied to reveal that his non-serious treatment of serious themes is an example of inclusion through omission.

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