



The Struggle for Control or Survival: A Study on the Theme of *Gravity's Rainbow*



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ABSTRACT

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, with sprawling, encyclopedic narrative and penetrating analysis of the impact of technology on society, is a postmodern epic. In portraying an entropic world, Pynchon reintroduces his perennial themes of Preterite and Elect, Conspiracy and Counterforce, Apocalypse and Alienation, making it an intellectual tour de force. The book picturesquely presents the resistance against the technology fetishism totalitarian societies, controlled by the elite/Elect, of the jilted imperial subaltern/Preterite who are in pursuit of self and history. The pervasive sexual intercourse descriptions and the linguistic extremes of equitation and obscenity, which voice the desires of Elect and Preterite respectively in their struggle for control or survival in the totalitarian societies. The paradoxical dichotomy of despair and hope, survival and death are closely interdependent in the novel, which is the portrayal of the plight of human beings. The stories happen around the rocket show the absurdity of human life in the modern high-tech society and people's resistance and expectation to the absurdity of life and reflects Pynchon's implied meaning and deep humanistic concern for the status quo of human society. Gravity, rocket, and rainbow as a whole signifies both an elegy and longing on humanness out of the ruins and waste land after the war.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, struggle

1 Introduction

Hailed as "one of the most important historical novels of our time and the most important literary text since *Ulysses*" (Tanner, 1982:75), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is a postmodern epic. Its sprawling, encyclopedic narrative and penetrating analysis of the impact of technology on society make it an intellectual tour de force, most referred to themes like "Quest", "Entropy", "Conspiracy", "Apocalypse" and "Alienation". In portraying an entropic world, Pynchon reintroduces his perennial themes of Preterite and Elect, Conspiracy and Counterforce (Liu, 1999: 82). The linguistic extremes of equitation and obscenity, which voice the desires of Elect and Preterite respectively in their struggle for control or survival, are two



of the many voices in this novel (Ames, 1990: 192). Indeed, the book picturesquely presents the resistance against the technology fetishism totalitarian societies, controlled by the elite, i.e., the Elect, of the jilted imperial subaltern, the Preterite who are in pursuit of self and history.

The characteristics of postmodernist texts are fragmentation, discontinuity, uncertainty, pluralism, openness, meta-narrative, heterogeneity and intertextuality, all of which can be found in *Gravity's Rainbow*; the "cybernetic fiction" inaugurated by Porush in 1980, thus in the structure, Pynchon duplicates the intricate networking of contemporary technological, political, and cultural systems (Poirier, 1973). Disguises, changes and fusions of identity, observed by him, permeate the book. Taking the Second World War as the background, Pynchon purports to connect war with science and technology, thus linking them with human desire through the symbolic object of rocket (Wang, Wei, 2017: 124). It is not surprising, then, that men who "behave like, think like, are defeated by, fatefully linked to, derived from or turning into machines" (Porush, 1980: 93), that is the mechanized man.

2 Rocket, the Elect and Control

In this "entropic work", simply stated, the rocket itself is the central character of the novel, and all kinds of other characters are involved in the pursuit of it for one reason or another, especially for the secret component called Schwarzgerät which was wrapped in Imipolex G. Slothrop, who finds himself getting a hard-on at times and places where the V-2 rocket is to fall, is compelled to pursue the rocket and flee from one place to another to evade the analysis of and the final castration by Pointsman. Longing to rescue his race by reassembling the rockets and revenge the Germans who colonized and practiced genocide upon them, Enzian is devoted himself to the rocket developing career. However, the symbol of reason and technology turns out to be more fatal annihilation rather than a final Revelation. The double agent Katje solds her body to gather intelligence, while Tchitcherine's pursuit is a pretext for finding and destroying Enzian, thus removing the humiliation of having a black half-brother. Faustian elites such as the rocket genius Captain Blicero and a Pavlovian behaviorist named Edward Pointsman, it is evident that they are "slaves to the systems they think they master" (Poirier, 1973). Pynchon projects his multi-layered searches into the text, which is apocalyptic, which suggests "a world doomed to End at a final zero-end of culture and man" (Porush, 1980: 94). The story of Franz Pökler, who has worked on the rocket partly out of fascination but also with the hope of recovering his wife and his daughter Ilse from the concentration camps, is the most valuable warmth in the search for "the system of systems, the military-industrial-way machine" (Porush, 1980: 94). "They", the real powers behind the rockets, seeks to destroy the "Schwarzkommando" with a final attempt to make the world bleached. The Rocket-Stadt, a vast, secretive war entity formed around the development and production of the V-2 Rocket, becomes the last push in the war (Wang, 2011: 120). The multiple searches gradually expose the interlocking relationships among the cultural, economic, and scientific aspects of contemporary life and its historical antecedents, argues Poirier, so Pynchon can properly refer to it as "the terrible politics of the Grail", except that the Rocket has taken possession of everyone, and Gottfried is only a physical manifestation of their collective ultimate destiny (1973).

Tracing Pynchon's works, from *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow* to *Vineland*, scholar Wang Jianping

summarizes that Pynchon is committed to describe the individual's fate in the society of control, revealing the power genealogy in late capitalism society, what is more, his characters are the marginal figures, either the innocent victim of the operation of the power or the ignored outsiders or helpless bystanders (2011:122). It is safe to say that the subaltern group, constituted by the homeless, the unemployed, the losers, the paranoia, the junker, and the perverts, resist the imposed ideology of technology fetishism, fear of war and death. Either the Elect or the Preterite, the beings themselves are "enslaved to the mechanical, determined world in which they are trapped, and have become extension of it; they every sensation and act is subject to the laws of the machine" (Porush, 1980: 95).

The Elect believes they are more elegant, superior, civilized and reasonable than the Preterite, only proves that they are incredibly filthy. Instead, part of the bureaucratic enterprise, it is the technological systems that have set history on a course which is "irreversible" (Poirier, 1973). The large-scale technology industry, represented by Rathenau and Faben represents "the secret connection between the technological system of pre-war Germany and the rise of the Nazis" (Wang, 201:123), provides technical support for modern war and becomes a powerful backing for the German war machine. The unceasing desire of the Rocket-Stadt drives the development and use of rockets leads to a chaotic world. The totalitarian regime suppresses, excludes and even physically eliminates the subaltern. Nazi concentration camps, appalling experiments of various kinds, the Jewish Holocaust and the genocide of the Herero people are the irrefutable evidence that the upper-class tread on the subaltern dehumanized as animals. The matter should not be ignored that German colonizers suppress the heterogeneity, thus deprive the right of existence of the Hereros in the name of civilization. As a result, the Third World subaltern is forced to listen to and accept the unequal condition of epistemic violence, degenerating to the silence subaltern who cannot speak for themselves and forming the compulsory identity to the hegemonic ideology. To resist the colonizers, Enzian stages a modern version of "Exodus" which successfully parodies the Bible (Qu, 2015: 183). Their only weapon is the revolutionary race suicide achieved by abortion, abstinence, homosexuality, paraphilia and other abnormal sexual behavior at first. Later, Enzian's fetish for rockets, the modern Grail, reveals, on the one hand, the power of rockets and the modern technology they represent, revealing the alienation of technology. On the other hand, Pynchon's satire of modern man's obsession with modern technology is permeated by the fact that rockets are even more devastating to mankind. It is not enough to say that Pynchon records the effects of technology on human lives or adapts the methods of technology to the investigation and dramatization of them (Poirier, 1973). Though in vain, Enzian and his people still offer an encouragement of the subalterns who dreaming about getting freedom.

3 Sex, the Preterite and Resistance

The sex acts loom large in the novel. The obscene utterance becomes the purified language of the Preterite, the most completely powerless cry of the dispossessed (Ames, 1990: 192). To be sure, the counterforces of freedom, love, human nature, self-engineered activity are also represented in Slothrop's struggle. All kinds of characters, centering on Slothrop, ignore the morality and become the symbols of Eros. In particular, the description of sex ploitation, such as a man eating a witch's excrement, Blicero sadistic in his bisexual love affair with Katje and Gottfried, Sadism and Masochism of Katje, the film star and her

daughter, the innumerable intercourses of Slothrop, the mass sex exploitation in the ship and Franz Pöckler having sex with his nominal daughter and so forth, fully proves the distortion of human nature in the expansion of sexual desire (Wang, 2008: : 83). On one hand, it perfectly fits the reality lacks reason and belief of that time, on the other hand, the author highlights the love instinct aiming at survival and reproduction in the war time. If Sade connects his urgent sexual desire with extreme emotional isolationism as an escape of the consciousness from the flesh, and the subject releases his nature in the complete sadomasochistic scene (Beauvoir, 1951), then the sexual presentation in *Gravity's Rainbow* symbolizes the attempts to freedom, pleasure, love, reproduction, eternally, happiness. To sum up, the equation epitomizes the dynamics of the privileged discourse of power, the language of the powerless takes the shape of onscene statements or profanations (Ames, 1990: 193).

Contrast with Slothrop, Roger Maxico represents the most powerful counterforce of subaltern: love and possibility. He is the only one who manifests the most original thought and human concern in the book. Pointsman's mindset is polarized, with a strong belief in binary opposition and either-or, advocating a philosophy of material/mechanical cause-and-effect, whereas Roger's mindset is pluralistic, purporting the approaching of randomness governed by the laws of probability (Friedman, Puetz, 1974: 350). In other words, Pointsman, on behalf of Determinism, will lead the technology the society depends on irrationally to going awry and the civilization going up flames, by contrast, Roger, who piously advocates the Probability Theory, questions the technology fetishism, seeks many possibilities and new hope, strives to resist the Instrumental Rationality and liberates the modern world from the inhuman state (Jing, Ye, 2016: 38).

4 Rainbow, Salvation and Hope

The essential pattern of life, from dust to order to dust, is echoed in the title image of the novel: gravity's rainbow, the parabolic path that gravity imposes on the V-2 rocket (Friedman, Puetz, 1974: 346). When seeing the rainbow, Slothrop is too athrill to burst into tears, vanishes into the air finally by some gradual dispersal of self to get rid of the control of Rocket. Along with his love for Bianca, Slothrop stands with Roger's love for Jessica. Together, they are a resistance to the indifferent and disordered world, appealing more subaltern to unite and fight. Rainbow of the Nature itself, mainly a philosophical reflection on life and death, signifies God's salvation. The rainbow, full of sacred connotations, has an appeal to Slothrop as the embodiment of human desire. Reversely, the artificial rainbow, the arch of the rocket produced by gravity, brings the terror of death to humans. The overlapping of rainbow and rocket trajectory reflects the state that "death and decay are the disorder that makes possible the endless variety and renewal of life" (Friedman and Puetz, 1974: 346). As pointed out by Marcuse, "life is the fusion of Eros and death instinct" (1974:51), thus the gravity's rainbow is a prediction as well as mockery of the naive ideal of human beings' rainbow will eventually fall to the earth under the action of Gravity, and at the same time it reflects the human's hope to break free from the bondage of Gravity and walk towards the Rainbow in the sky (Jing and Ye, 2016: 35).

In Pynchon we return to ourselves, come back to the remembered earth of our primal being, reified by the objects to which we have joined our passions, our energies, and our needs (Poirier, 1973). The narrator expresses the weak but determined hope that there is still light waiting for the way back home: pursuit of

freedom, responsibility, love shown by various kinds of the resistance of the subaltern, such as the Herero, Roger, Pöckler and vanished Slothrop. The relationship among "rocket", "sex" and "rainbow" can be replaced by the new triangular relationship among "science", "eros" and "life" implied. Eros is the origin of life and the root of human nature, while science can either develop the society or destroy civilization.

5 Conclusion

The sign of double integrals, resembling two elongated S's, the shape of the tunnels at Nordhausen, the shape of lovers side by side in bed, the symbol of entropy, constituting a kind of patterning, usually is "the object of high spoofing, a symptom of mechanical paranoia" (Poirier, 1973). The paradoxical dichotomy of despair and hope, survival and death are closely interdependent in the novel, which is the portrayal of the plight of human beings. It shows the absurdity of human life in the modern high-tech society and people's resistance and expectation to the absurdity of life and reflects Pynchon's implied meaning and deep humanistic concern for the status quo of human society (Jing, Ye, 2016: 35). In other words, *Gravity's Rainbow* signifies both an elegy and longing on humanness out of the ruins and waste land after the war.

6 Declarations

6.1 Competing Interests

The author declared that no conflict of interest exist in this publication.

6.2 Publisher's Note

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