CHAPTER - III
LOGIC OF DELIRIUM: A STUDY OF THOMAS PYNCHON'S

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

Thomas Pynchon's novels confront us with every degree of paranoia from the private to the cosmic. Many characters in Gravity's Rainbow are brushed by the dark wings of paranoia. Pirate Prentice, whose speciality is suffering other people's fantasies, regards himself as dwelling within the pervasive influence of "the Firm". In his surrogate fantasies he imagines a gigantic rampaging Adenoid which impresses upon England its "master plan" – a parody reminding us that the true home of the paranoid style is Science fiction. Richard Hofstadter has identified in politics, a mentality which assumes "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character". The Crying of Lot 49, V., and Gravity's Rainbow all exhibit the habits of language and the view of history which Hofstadter has named the paranoid style:

The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power... The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.

Tyrone Slothrop, the American whose hapless peregrinations form the bulk of Gravity's Rainbow, is beset at every turn by suspicions which
he himself describes as paranoid. From infancy onward he has in fact been manipulated by external forces, first by the scientist Laszlo Jamf, subsequently by the Pavlovian pointsman, and finally, in an anarchic Germany at the close of World War II, by a host of operators ranging from expatriate Africans to Soviet agents to blackmarketeers. Like Benny Profane in V, he is a Schlemihl, perpetual victim of others' plots.

Having been the butt of real conspiracies, Slothrop finds it easy, in fact necessary, to project imaginary ones. Thus when he discovers himself alone in a games’ room, surrounded by betting tables and money rakes, he cannot let the furnishings remain what they are, mere idle objects:

These are no longer quite outward and visible signs of a game of chance. There is another enterprise here, more real than that, less merciful, and systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop. Who sits in the taller chairs? Do they have names?....

For a minute here, Slothrop ... is alone with the paraphernalia of an order whose presence among the ordinary debris of waking he has only lately begin to suspect.4

A few pages later, the games imagery undergoes paranoid transformation to describe Slothrop’s sense of being subject to external control:

Oh, the hand of a terrible croupier is that touch on the sleeves of his dreams: all in his life of what has looked free
or random, is discovered to 've been under some control, all the time, the same as a fixed roulette wheel...

These passages reveal the key features of Slothrop’s thought throughout the novel: the perception of reality as either governed by chance, and therefore meaningless, or else governed by some hidden powers at once “more real” than chance and more ruthless; and the belief that this order, which is felt to lurk behind the debris of the world, is not merely secret, not just passively mysterious like a remote deity, but “systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop”.

One of Pynchon’s most distinctive and at times maddening stylistic features follows directly from this deliberate veiling of the conspiracy. All of his central figures – Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49, Stencil and Profane in V, Slothrop and Tchitcherine and Pirate Prentice in Gravity’s Rainbow – are, in a phrase as described by Tchitcherine, “held at the edge”. They are situated as far from the centers of their respective conspiracies, real or imagined, as the Puritan from his God, and consequently must piece together the most obscure hints and petty revelations to make any sense of the plot at all.

Those like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity. (p. 582)

Pynchon’s reader dances on the same ground. Like Oedipa, Stencil and Slothrop, we are forced at every turn to distinguish genuine glimpses of
the conspiratorial order from sheer static. We are also “held at the edge”, we rarely know more than the characters themselves, and they do not know much; and the narrator, if he knows more, rarely tells.

Slothrop’s paranoia appears in various guises, ranging from his suspicion that the rocket bombs falling on London have his name written on them to his fantasy that he is the intended victim of a Father conspiracy. Freudian readers will discover in the latter episode grounds for interpreting his paranoia in Oedipal terms: wishing to kill the father, the child denies this wish, projecting it onto the father himself, so that the father is believed to desire the death of the son, and therefore becomes a fit object for the son’s hatred. Thus Slothrop’s fantasy of the Father conspiracy:

[T]here is a villain here, serious as death. It is this typical American teenager’s own Father, trying episode after episode to kill his son. And the kid knows it. Imagine that. So far he’s managed to escape his father’s daily little death-plots – but nobody has said he has to keep escaping.8 (p. 674)

There are two difficulties in the way of regarding the Freudian account as sufficient. The first is that Slothrop actually has been the victim of a father conspiracy: his father volunteered him as an infant subject for psychological experiments conducted by Laszlo Jamf – a trauma from which Slothrop has never fully recovered, and a manipulative enterprise from which he has never escaped. Pointsman, the English pavlovian, subsequently takes the place of the father, once again subjecting him to
experimentation. Having finished with Slothrop, Pointsman sends two doctors to castrate him. Although they fail in their mission, castrating Major Marvy by mistake, they have in fact been sent. Thus Pynchon explains to us that Slothrop fears a father conspiracy because he has been the victim of one; he fears castration because his experimental controllers wish to castrate him. In this instance, Slothrop is not so much paranoid as perceptive. The other difficulty in the way of a Freudian explanation is that Pynchon connects Slothrop's paranoia, and therefore by implication his Oedipal terrors, to an inherited religious cast of mind.

Pynchon himself ventures the claim that paranoia is a secular form of the Puritan consciousness, telling us that Slothrop is possessed by "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia" (p. 188). In *Gravity's Rainbow* descriptions of the truth accessible through paranoia similarly evoke the religious notion of revelation:

> [P]aranoia ... is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the creation, a secondary illumination – not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In for those like Tchitcherine who are held at the edge. 10 (p. 703)

No matter how many connections he suspects or perceives, however, the paranoid must still posit some governing agency at the Center, to replace the numinous God. At various moments Slothrop imagines the
conspiracy to be directed by Industrialists, secret agents, the Rocket, the Earth, or simply by an unspecified Them.

Part of the difficulty in reading Gravity's Rainbow derives from the fact that we are presented not with a plot of interwoven fates, but with overlapping case histories of private manias, each character locked within his or her own conspiratorial fantasy. Clinical paranoia is zealously self-referential: the paranoid asserts that there is an order to events, a unifying purpose, however sinister, behind the seeming chaos; and this purpose is focused upon the self, the star and victim. Thus the paranoid individual becomes a hero once again, he stands at the center of the plot; but it is an incurably private one, into which others can enter only as threat.¹¹

This irreversible process lies at the heart of Gravity's Rainbow. All human action in the novel takes place within the context of war, which Roger Mexico thinks of as the "culture of death". According to Pynchon's entropic view of history, war is not an aberration but a spell of candor, when the deepest historical impulses are nakedly revealed:

The real War is always there. The dying tapers off now and then, but the War is still killing lots and lots of people. Only right now it is killing them in more subtle ways. Often in ways that are too complicated, even for us, at this level, to trace. But the right people are dying, just as they do when armies fight.¹²

Although couched once again in conspiratorial language, and inserted into an American colonel's fantasy, the passage suggests what the entire
movement of the novel makes clear, that Pynchon regards war as a synecdoche of history itself, the drift towards death.

The entire novel takes place under the Rocket’s parabolic arch, Gravity’s Rainbow, because the Rocket whose crossing is announced in the opening sentence actually plummets down at the close, annihilating both speaker and reader as narrative comes to an end.

By his choice of period and setting, Pynchon identifies one crucial historical influence. All of Gravity’s Rainbow takes place during the latter months and immediate aftermath of World War II, with extensive flashbacks to the thirties and to the earlier years of the war. This was an era in which paranoia was erected into state policy: the Nazi campaign against the Jews, Stalin’s purges, the American incarceration of Orientals, the early salvos of the Cold war. It was the era in which means of controlling public opinion and of spying on private lives were brought to an early blossoming: propaganda became a Science, and not only in Germany; intelligence agencies proliferated, espionage became common place.

Pynchon’s intimidating mastery of nonliterary languages is self-explicated within the text. His is the vanguard of the anti-identity novel, the multinational novel, the novel of post-industrial plots and systems that overwhelm all characters. Gravity’s Rainbow is actually a dualistic melodrama, one side tending toward order, transcendence, and evil, the other tending toward disorder, death, and redemptive human feeling.
Slothrop, too accommodating at the beginning of his life as at the end, becomes the victim of whichever side he happens to be passing through.

The war takes on larger sexual meanings as well. From the beginning, the Argentinian anarchists are free of the European passion for manhood and dominance. We see them first in a political cartoon that shows “a line of middle-aged men wearing dresses and wigs, inside the police station where a cop is holding a loaf of white”. Their image of “the infant revolution” is explicitly described as a virgin birth, “free from the stain of Original sin” that White Poppa has induced world wide. Though Buenos Aires, or the Firm, has gathered people into its “neuroses about property”, the Argentinian heart still longs for “that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky”. Much later, Graciela Imago Portales is able to reach a perspective beyond manhood. Though her man “will stake everything on this anarchist experiment”, “dealt him by something he calls chance and Graciela calls God”, she can break the European fantasy of God-power down even further “to see really how much she needs the others, how little use, unsupported, she could ever be”. While men are calling for anarchy and fearing Chance, women consistently perceive the possibilities for oneness and rebirth in natural processes.

The war takes on national overtones too, as America and fascist Europe stand against the exploited colonies. “American voices, country voices, high-pitched and without mercy”, Slothrop thinks as MPs knock on his door; “What surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the rightness of what they planned to do...”
America itself had been given to Europe "when the land was still free and the eye innocent... a purity begging to be polluted". So "of course Empire took its way Westward, what other way was there but into those Virgin sunsets to penetrate and to foul?" The German extermination of the H燃烧os and Jews, the American war on Indians, the Dutch massacre of the Dodos, are Pynchon's historical metaphors for white consciousness, that "order of Analayis and Death", the closed system that stands in fear of its "dark, secret children".

Other polarities expand these contexts: perverted sex against natural love, machinery against animal life, Beethoven against Rossini, form against change, bureaucratic work against childhood, abstraction against detail, city against country, shit, money, and the word against Love and Silence. In all of them, Pynchon's allegiances are clear. He opposes any "fiction and lie" that would "subvert love in favor of work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death". There are love values and there are war values, with no interface and much co-optation, as his last two adjectives imply. Roger Mexico, whose name itself indicates the border he tries to straddle, sees clearly that Jessica's other lover, the Beaver,

is the war, he is every assertion the fucking war has ever made – that we are meant for work and government, for austerity: and these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses and the other second class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day.

Just to put the polarities in such dualistic form, in fact, shows the system-making bent. "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his
corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit”. In such a world, Pynchon continues, what can we be but children, pets, or dead?

Within these wars, the emotional theme of the book is betrayal, especially of children by parents. Children, who have those simple human urges toward love and kindness, are unremittingly bought, used, co-opted, fucked, corrupted by various aspects of the Firm.

Pynchon’s narratives are about order, about its presence or absence; about order as object of desire, dread, fantasy, or hallucination; about what order means, how it is apprehended, and what it entails. His works thus tend to comment on themselves. His characters look for the hidden structures of their experience that will reveal how events are connected, how everything adds up, what it all means; and these structures reduplicate, oppose, or stand in some other relation to the overall structure of the narrative. Armed with the knowledge that the narrative itself is ordered and that this order is intentional and important, readers enter the quest at a somewhat higher level, but they too are looking for an ultimate pattern or structure, an order that will constitute a reading; and consequently their activity parallels the activities of the characters, with all the possibilities for irony attendant on this situation.

McHale points out that Gravity’s Rainbow challenges two expectations we have internalized from literary modernism: that a “real story” lies beneath the frequently convoluted surface of the narrative.
discourse, and that with some deciphering a stable chronology will be revealed that will naturalize transitions from one character's mind to another's. In both of these instances Pynchon is flouting conventions that require an explicable coherence from the work of art precisely because the work of art must stand in ironic contrast to the "chaos" of reality. Indeed, it is a central tenet of the modernist ontology that artistic creations are ordered whereas the universe is not. But this tenet depends on a restricted definition of order. It admits, finally, only one idea — which becomes The Idea of order. In all his novels to date, Pynchon has parodied this restricted understanding of what order is and implies by taking it to its logical conclusions. It is the mind that discerns order and the mind that produces it, a solipsism. "Shall I project a world?" Pynchon's Oedipa Maas asks herself, wondering if she can be "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang"; for it seems to her that this is the only way in which "world", or meaningful order, can come into being. But order need not mean anything as vast or as subjective as Oedipa's hypothesized "projection".

Within the theocentric tradition, God is often viewed as an artist as well as an artificer, or even an author who plots the course of world history. As long as the existence of God as the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent is taken for granted, creation can be presumed to be an order, in which particular events, however painful and gratuitous they may seem, can be accepted as aspects of an ultimately just divine plan. Something quite different happens, however, when the argument is
turned around, so that observed order in the physical world becomes evidence that an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God exists. In the Post-Enlightenment arguments "from design" for the existence of God, we can see the beginnings of a Pynchonesque universe, in which the possibility that someone or something is in charge of The Way Things Are is at least as frightening as the possibility that order is unreal because no one and nothing is in charge of anything.

"Who or what is responsible" presumes that order is one, not multiple, and that it is the work of some power or being, not simply there. It results from the same kind of thinking that tries to elevate science into cosmology and then sees chaos when science cannot link up its various systems. By confronting his characters with the choice between an outside power imposing order on the world or an inside power (either the shaping imagination, or paranoia, or both) imposing order on the world, Pynchon parodies a post-religious attitude that takes these extremes as exhaustive. His own fictional worlds, however, are pluralistic – governed not by a rigid, absolute, and universal Idea of Order but by multiple partial, overlapping, and often conflicting ideas of Order. And these worlds are familiar, even when they are most bizarre and surreal, because they invoke a multi-layered reality in which multiple means of putting things together manage to coexist without resolving into a single, definitive system of organization.

No ordering principle can govern all aspects of reality because reality is not a single system, and Pynchon betrays his own apparent
gravity — the high seriousness of his apparently nihilistic vision — by allowing the action of the novel to proliferate, thereby evading the control of the ostensible metaphor that controls the structure of the novel.

*Gravity's Rainbow* has 887 pages, at least 300 individualized characters, and a tangle of plots so thoroughly contaminated by the naturalizing conventions of dream, hallucination, fantasy, film, theater, and interpolated texts that it is nearly impossible to say even in a provisional way what happens in it. The novel celebrates diversity, multiplying situations, interrelationships, characters, voices, and attitudes with such abandon that they perplex understanding. Each of Pynchon's novels presents a fictional universe comprised of overlapping networks of codes and inhabited by at least one hermeneuticist who attempts to break these codes in order to reach a culminating revelation. Each arrives at a reading of the evidence that is at once structurally elegant and thematically despairing: either “everything is connected” — in a cosmic conspiracy that reduces individual agency to a pathetic delusion — or “nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long”.29

Pynchon's questing characters begin with the assumption that, as the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* narrator puts it, “everything is connected”, and that consequently their discoveries constitute aspects of a single truth about the shape and direction of cosmic history. At some point, however, they are forced to reflect on the status of such connections. The question is always whether inferred relations are
somehow inherent in reality or whether they are imposed by a consciousness that cannot "bear for long" a condition in which "nothing is connected to anything". Real and imagined relations turn out to have equally ominous implications. If the relations are real, they constitute an ironic argument from design testifying to the existence of a malign or at least antihuman designer -- known as Them in Gravity's Rainbow, the Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49, and V in V. In this case, if the quest does get at the truth about the way things are, the truth is that human beings are completely under the control of outside forces.

Knowledge is not power but proof of impotence, and under the circumstances it may be just as well not to know. If the relations are imaginary, on the other hand, the quest reveals nothing but a desire to discern connections among a random assembly of wholly unrelated details. If there is pathos in this recognition, there is also despair, for inquiry is perpetually deprived of its object and locked in its own sterile cogitations. The questing hero becomes the paranoid, intuiting connections out of his own need for order and unable even to share his delusory experiences.

The protagonists of all three books confront these alternatives. Tyrone Slothrop in Gravity's Rainbow vacillates between paranoia and antiparanoia until he begins to disintegrate. Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49 waits "for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew" and make room for some "middle" between the absolute reality and the absolute unreality of her totalizing principle. Herbert Stencil in V. weighs
his evidence, finds that it points either to a plot that engulfs him or to the fact that he has tried to "exhume an hallucination", and begins to repeat obsessively, "Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic". As the persistent opposition is extremely ominous, Pynchon keeps returning to it to ring new changes on the Sophoclean theme of knowledge as tragedy.

One of Pynchon's central insights is that people tend to "read" experience the same way that they read books. A novel is traditionally a totalizing structure that derives much of its energy from its promise to reveal the intrinsic connections uniting apparently contingent elements. Terms like "plot" and "development" suggest the ways in which the action is teleological, directed toward attaining an end, whereas terms like "resolution" and "conclusion" indicate that the end of a narrative has affinities with the terminus of an argument. A conventional narrative is a process of putting things together, and the satisfaction of closure involves the sense that everything has been definitively wrapped up. The process of bringing events to a climax merges with the process of discovering the essential truth about reality, so that the lure of closure is clearly identified with the lure of totality. As a disembodied spirit summoned to a séance in Gravity's Rainbow reports, "Here it's possible to see the whole shape at once". In anticipating such a conclusion, the questing characters look forward to occupying a vantage outside their experience, a vantage that will give them an authorized perspective on the "whole shape at once."

Slothrop assesses his position in the plot and decides that either a malevolent quasi-authorial presence is directing him toward an unknown
but probably fatal "end", or that his wanderings have no direction at all:
"Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't
sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that reason..."\(^3^4\) Such
incidents contrive to suggest that any "order" in reality will necessarily
be the kind of narrative form in which events accrete toward a revelatory,
"conclusive" conclusion. But if life has this kind of narrative form, it will
reveal its significance only when it concludes, and this fact can provide
little comfort to characters who by definition cannot get outside the text
of their experience. And if life does not have such a narrative form, not
building to a climactic insight, it is meaningless. Or so it seems, once
"order" becomes synonymous with narrative order - or "plot".

In constructing his novels, Pynchon seems especially concerned to
parody, if tacit assumption that meaning is the culmination of an
exhaustive series of discoveries, that truth is what everything adds up to.
His characters soon learn that they cannot separate the personal from the
public significance, so that in looking for the meaning of their
discoveries, they find themselves involved with heady metaphysical
problems: the meaning of life, of history, of humanity. Their own lives
become elements in a larger continuum; in "plotting" experience they
find themselves tracing the curve of historical development, a curve that
follows a classical pattern of plot construction in rising only to fall.\(^3^5\) By
making their own experiences the consequence of a long historical build
up, they effectively locate the "rising action" in the past. Both \(V\) and
\textit{Gravity's Rainbow} play explicitly on the notion that the climax has
already occurred, and that at some retrospective point on the time-line, history took an irreversible downward turn.

Pynchon's narrative strategy is based on a tension essential to the novel as a genre; not coincidentally, he finds this tension essential to a modernist mode of being in the world. On the one hand, everything seems oriented toward a future synthesis that will comprehend all apparent contingencies. The narrative present appears to be a condition of lack or need, and thus reaching forward for its destined fulfillment. This teleological thrust generates energy out of the sense of purposiveness. One of Pynchon's most evocative expressions for this tendency comes from Gravity's Rainbow, where he calls it "Holy-Centre-Approaching". On the other hand, no promise of synthetic resolution seems adequate to the proliferating implications that the present offers. Precisely because the present lacks unity, it leaves room for unanticipated developments. As long as burgeoning meanings do not converge at a Holy Center, further meanings are possible. The absence of a definitive synthetic unity is finally a condition for freedom, and Pynchon plays on a further conclusion. Such an absence is also an enabling condition for language, and especially for the language of his novels.

Holy-Center-Approaching is soon to be the number one zonal past time. Its balmy heyday is nearly on it. Soon more champions,

Adepts, magicians of all ranks and orders will be in the field than ever before in the history of the game. The Sun will rule all enterprise, if it be honest and sporting. The Gauss
curve will herniate toward the excellent. And tankers the likes of Narrisch and Slothrop here will have already been weeded out. 36

In the phrase "Holy-Center-Approaching", the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* encapsulates the formula of the quest romance. The Holy Center is the terminus of the quest, the epiphanic point in both time and space where the questing hero realizes the full meaning of his search, life, and world. It is thus the conclusion toward which the narrative ends. In Pynchon's works no major character reaches this Holy Center. The pattern of the quest is an infinite approach, one that brings the seeker closer and closer to a terminal revelation without allowing him to reach it. In the passage quoted above Slothrop, the quintessential bumbler, and Narrisch, the victimized technician (whose name translates as "foolish"), are two Parsifal types in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Both have experiences in which (the narrator strongly suggests) they ought to arrive at a full understanding of what everything adds up to. Both, however, remain unenlightened. Failure to achieve revelation is a hallmark of Pynchon's questing heroes. This failure seems to doom such characters to a sort of tragic schlemielhood—Tchitcherine in the same novel "will miss the Light, but not the Finger". 37

This asymptotic approach toward an unavailable center, or central insight, is common to all three novels and helps give Pynchon's writing its peculiarly enigmatic quality. Because no narrator intervenes to explain just what, exactly, a character has missed seeing, the reader finds himself
in the company of the schlemiels, inexplicably removed from the knowledge that should explain how everything fits together. The novels all capitalize on a sense of insufficiency. By creating this sense of insufficiency, Pynchon has effectively created a gap that appears to require filling.

Another way of reading Pynchon's novels also begins from the sense of insufficiency and failed revelation: such a reading concludes that the gaps are unavoidable because Pynchon's central insight is intrinsically inexpressible. Language, in this view, is simply inadequate to the truth, although the truth is thinkable: one can know something without being able to speak or write it. It follows that the novels are attempts to create conditions favourable to revelation, i.e. in some manner to signify that which cannot be signified, although because they are linguistic structures they fall short of revelation themselves.38

This way of reading has the advantage of respecting Pynchon's absences and silences, but presuming at the outset that language and meaning are independent and that the most essential kinds of meaning exist apart from, and out of the reach of language – a thesis currently arousing intense controversy among philosophers, linguists, and literary theorists. Pynchon himself subscribes to a theory that dichotomizes language and meaning. Certainly his novels engage in a rhetoric of absence and loss, and his narrators regularly mourn their inability to express precisely what is most important.
Gravity's Rainbow provides the clearest illustration of the use Pynchon makes of the trope of the absent insight, but the trope is common to all three novels and provides the context within which all three novels take place. The premise that the center is missing, and that the novels insistently and incessantly "point toward" because the ultimate object of reference is denied, creates a space in which Pynchon can realize multiple possibilities simultaneously. Because the Holy Centre, the ultimate guarantor of meaning, is unavailable in the novels, the novels occupy a context in which any number of local systems of meaning can coexist. Language cannot signify originating unity: words are always delta-t from the fictional worlds, to signify only each other and to run the risk inherent in the "only connect", the risk of connecting so completely that human freedom becomes an illusion. But total connectedness of this sort is only one possibility for a language that is deprived of - or freed from - the necessity of referring to a single, ultimate source. It is one of an infinite number of possibilities. The absence of the center opens up a space in which freedom creates and explores its own prospects, and by postulating an unavailable referent, Pynchon can allow the resulting play of language to generate multiple versions of meaning and value. His novels, like his characters, are obsessed with connections, but none of the novels adds up to a single idea of order. Each subverts oversimplification by dramatizing multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory ideas of order that express the human effort to find intelligibility in experiences.
The trope of the absent center supplies the motive for making patterns out of language. The promise of meaning, even a meaning endlessly deferred, compels Pynchon's characters (and his readers) to look for possible connections between the objects and events that comprise their experience. In Pynchon's novels human beings try to construct meanings because the premise that the center did not hold constitutes an original loss. The particles of experience to be connected thus become fragments of an original unity. The search for meaning is the consequence of the failure of revelation. Although Pynchon's novels depend on the premise of centerlessness, they use this premise in an original way. Centerlessness is not so much a theme, finally, as a condition, the given in Pynchon's fictional worlds that makes action, and writing, possible:

About the paranoia often noted under the drug, there is nothing remarkable. Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the creation, a secondary illumination — not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In for those like Tchitcherine who are held at the edge ... 39

*Gravity's Rainbow* itself seems held at the edge of discovery. In its encyclopedic scope, the novel appears dedicated to the proposition that everything is connected; there are insinuated links synthetic polymerization and the evolution of the earth; between astrophysics and psychic phenomena; between African dialects and Rilkean poetics; between international cartels and freemasonry; between comic books an...
covenant theology; between Orphism, Parsifalism, Tannhäuserism, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; between German idealism, Pavlovian psychology, and the American cult of the good-guy loner. Just as these links could be extended, so the connections reach out in all directions, associating disparate bodies of knowledge in such intricate configurations that the universe seems on the point of cohering like a giant molecule dreamed by some macrocosmic Ke Kulé. But the novel remains at the level of secondary illumination and leading edges. The synthetic dream never occurs. The text refuses to yield a culminating vision of the universe as “blindingly One”.

The totalizing tendency of the thematic connections is so pronounced that this refusal might appear simply perverse. Scott Simmon has speculated that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a novel in which things are more important than people and ideas are more important than things.40 *Gravity’s Rainbow* introduces a panorama of characters and an unstable narrative voice in its opening pages, thwarting expectations of conventional narrative continuity. The unity of this novel accordingly should derive from its controlling vision – from what one critic has termed the Big Idea.41 But although it cannot be denied that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a novel of ideas, it is far less clear what these ideas add up to.

The problem is not simply that the novel is fiendishly complex, or that it frequently takes a parodic attitude toward the multiple theories it purveys. Both of these characteristics are common to the encyclopedic narrative, a genre that Ronald T. Swigger has defined in terms of “the
drive toward comprehensive knowledge and schematization”. This drive to contain and schematize is one of the salient features of Gravity's Rainbow. But at the same time, an opposed, centrifugal tendency seems to be sending information flying outward like the alternative zones of the novel’s postwar reconstruction, speeding “away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red shifting, fleeing the center” (p. 519). This decentralizing tendency is especially apparent in the closing chapter, where even the discrete sections of an already convoluted action begin to fragment into shorter and less obviously related segments with titles like “LISTENING TO THE TOILET”, “WITTY REPARTEE”, “HEART-TO-HEART, MAN-TO-MAN”, and “SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF IMIPOLEX G”. This marked diffusion of the narrative energy so near the conclusion suggests that the text is thematically committed to incompleteness. The fact that ostensibly central concerns fail to achieve any sort of resolution reinforces this suggestion. Fundamental enigmas – the nature of Slothrop's relation to the Mystery Stimulus, the direction and target of Blicero's Last Firing, the purpose of the Hereros' rocket – are either left ambiguous or dropped entirely. Problematic knots in the plot refuse to unravel, and thus no denouement – literally, an “untying” – can occur. As the narrator declares on the first page, “this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into.”

Yet Gravity's Rainbow dictates the terms on which totalization should be possible, even as it resists totalization. It appears to place itself within modernist tradition by offering itself as a metaphoric novel, which
derives its ultimate coherence from a governing structural metaphor (the commonplace comparison is with *Ulysses*). The "gravity’s rainbow" of the title is the arc of the V-2 rocket, which with its sharply defined origin and terminus could claim to be the twentieth century’s model of linearity: according to the general theory of relativity, the Euclidean straight line is warped into a curve by the presence of a gravitational field. In many ways this curve shapes the novel. The opening sentence, “A screaming”, “A screaming comes across the sky”, describes the birth-cry of the supersonic missile heralding the first V-2 offensive on London during September of 1944. On the closing page the final rocket is poised above the heads of “us”, and the switch to direct address implies that this rocket’s menace is universal. These two events become the extremes of a historical trajectory, containing the labyrinthine plot while acting as exaggerated external pointers to a “rising action” and a “falling action”. The structural metaphor is therefore linear, teleological, and deterministic. The parabolic path of the rocket is “that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return.” To the extent that it controls and structures the novel, this parabola encodes a unified vision of a world hurtling toward annihilation and signifies what Josephine Hendin has called the message of the book, “the death at the heart of all experience”.

Although *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes a pessimistic view of the twentieth century’s flight into totalizing systems, it also insists that such systems do not have intrinsic authority; they are not imposed on
humanity from "outside". The arc of the rocket is the emblem of a paranoid vision of reality in which "everything is connected" in a way that contains history in a preordained pattern. At one point, Tyrone Slothrop considers an alternative to this model of inflexible and eternal relations, "anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long." In *Gravity’s Rainbow* any world view that spatializes history implicitly invokes some version of the providential schema and denies real possibility. The alternative to a revisionist interpretation of the providential plan is secular history, which acknowledges the presence of multiple patterns in human affairs but recognizes the impossibility of reconciling these patterns in a single Authorized Version of reality. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is in many ways a historical novel, but it is a novel about secular history.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon gives a spatial form to this implicitly apocalyptic construction of history and in this way exposes the embedded myth that history is a delusive veil over the external. The rainbow of the title is a historical trajectory, but it is also already present, "hanging there in the sky for everybody." Time is transmuted into space; like the path of the rocket as conceptualized by the Peenemunde engineers, processes "become architecture, and timeless."

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* man is presented as the spoiler of nature, looting the bowels of the earth for fuels and minerals which can be converted into means of political domination. As Slothrop penetrates deeper and deeper into the zone he encounters more and more traces of
Teutonic nature – rituals which, although only available in the present as memory or masquerade (like his pig-costume), represents the signs of a culture where man was related to Nature in a magical oneness.

Unlike *V.*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers no impression of orderliness through titled chapters. In Pynchon’s first novel, the mock-picaresque chapter-headings – also used by Richard Farina, the dedicatee of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, among other American novelists – comically distance the reader from the absurd sequences which they introduce. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is constructed on the basis of a worldview that even the most diverse cultural and natural phenomena are interconnected. The repeated metaphors of its own assembly are the lattice and the mosaic. Fictional plots shade into historical and scientific ones, and thereby raise a staggering critical problem. Richard Poirier expresses this problem in the following way: “... he [Pynchon] proposes that any effort to sort out these plots must itself depend on an analytical method which, both in its derivations and in its execution, is probably part of some systematic plot against free forms of life”. In other words, critical analysis will by its very nature work against the values implicit in *Gravity’s Rainbow* whose rhetoric and associational method are peculiarly resistant to discussion. The critical reader is thus forced to choose between the unacceptable option of silence and the inevitably distorting effects of separating out different aspects of the novel for examination.

The repeated linking of Slothrop to his ancestors in a strategy which Pynchon follows with other characters is this novel. The past
exerts a constant and oppressive pressure throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, a pressure which Pynchon demonstrates through flashbacks. In chapter 14 Katje Borgesius has arrived in London and the sight of an oven triggers off memories of pornographic rituals she used to perform in Nazi-occupied Holland. Her memory slides into the consciousness of her then master Captain Blicero (also known as Lieutenant Weissmann) and later, this time via the notion of commerce, into the experiences of one of her ancestors on Mauritius who helped to exterminate the dodo. The sequence can only be justified in non-realistic terms. Captain Blicero dominates her whole self and so as it were appropriates her consciousness while the ‘flashback’ to the 17th century clearly demonstrates Pynchon’s conviction that no character exists apart from his ancestral past. This is demonstrated repeatedly through Slothrop who represents the last of his line, possessing only tenuous Puritan reflexes. In Chapter 40 Pynchon refers to Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious in connection with the fluidity of one character’s dreams. The individual consciousness, Jung states, “is in the highest degree influenced by inherited presuppositions…. The collective unconscious comprises in itself the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings.”

Where Jung demonstrates the relevance of mythic patterns to dream-symbolism, Pynchon applies the concept of the collective unconscious to a pathological interpretation of the rise of Nazism. The latter emerges as a collective yearning for the primitive and irrational
which leads ultimately to death. Once again Jung is probably an influence. Pynchon’s playfulness alerts us to one of the strangest features of *Gravity's Rainbow* – the fluidity of the text itself. The impulse to make connections forms part of a predisposition towards paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a notion which Pynchon uses in a non-pathological sense to mean the conspiratorial organization of events around the self. Paranoia is thus a kind of total ordering and forms the central preoccupation. Far from being simply ‘the last retreat of the Puritan imagination’ as Scott Sanders asserts, paranoia proves to be empirically justified in the case of Slothrop and experientially useful to other characters in coping with their fears. As Hendrick Hertzberg and D.C.K. McClelland write, “paranoia substitutes a rigorous (though false) order for chaos, and at the same time dispels the sense of individual insignificance by making the paranoid the focus of all he sees going on around him – a natural response to the confusion of modern life”."51 It is an even more natural response to the terrors of war and the melodrama of competing intelligence agencies.52

Pynchon’s series of proverbs for paranoids (perhaps based on Pudd’n-head Wilson’s calendar), periodically (and jokingly), remind the reader of a possibility which seems to affront common sense but also opens up a hidden order of history. Moments of discovery are crucial in *Gravity's Rainbow* because they appear to be the epiphanous confirmation of these paranoid fears, whether the moments revolve around apparently trivial details like a strange hair (which Roger Mexico finds in his mouth),53 or a glimpse of a perfectly working oil refinery.54 Thus, there is a logic of delirium in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon mockingly sign-posts such
realization (to Tchitcherine) at the end of chapter 56 with a pointing hand in the text, a secularized sign of God which now only points towards unverified possibilities.\textsuperscript{55} The repeated references to paranoia sensitize the reader to textual signs and induce in him an urgency comparable to the novel’s characters to strain after certainty.

Knowing is an ambition or desire rather than an attainable achievement for the characters of \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} since they are so deeply embedded in the circumstances of their own plot-lines. The reader gradually becomes aware of a lattice of intersections between these plots which does not grant an overview but does at least remind him of the inadequacy of any one means of explanation. The notion of ‘beyond’ denies the novel’s text any closure. On the contrary, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} is a work which is constantly referring outside itself. Pynchon quotes actual texts (Pavlov, A.E. Waite, etc.) and fictitious ones. Like \textit{Ulysses}, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} also contains allusions to its author’s own earlier writings, particularly to ‘Mondaugen’s Story’ from \textit{V.} and to ‘The Secret Integration’. To a certain extent these allusions can be explained in quasi-realistic terms as a means of building up a past for Blicero and Slothrop, but when the South-West African materials are being introduced through radio propaganda the broadcaster asks his audience “Remember?”\textsuperscript{56} This is an appeal to textual memory which complicates the reader’s sense of a clear distinction between the fictional and the real, in this specific case paving the way for the introduction of the Schwarz Kommando. Pynchon
uses allusion and quotation to blur the boundaries of his text just as he uses historical reference to jolt the reader's sense of possibility.

By refusing to close his text, not only in the obviously unresolving ending but throughout the novel, Pynchon places his fiction within its cultural environment. Even within Gravity’s Rainbow it makes more sense to talk of multiple texts than any singular one partly because Pynchon has taken 1944-45 as a watershed in the beginning of the cold war which revolves essentially around information rather than combat. Pynchon refuses to allow his text too categorical an existence because this would imply a more stable reality than his characters glimpse. Instead we get a series of fragments, of partial and distorted views.

Pynchon is far too historically intelligent to suggest, however, that the schizophrenic paranoia of his own time is unique to it. Slothrop can trace his ancestry to a member of Governor Winthrop's crew on the Arbella, the flagship of the great puritan flotilla of 1630, and to a William Slothrop who wrote a nearly heretical book on the relations between the elect and the Preterite, those who have been passed over, those not elected to salvation. Puritanism is evoked as an early version of the paranoia conditioning us to look for signs of election and rendering the rest of mankind and its evidences invisible, merely so much waste. Paranoia allows plot – as plot. But to carry the pun very far is to turn narrative into madness. This was part of the game in V., but here the parody of the plotted novel is already old hat and rather too comforting, since parody gives us the old form to hang on to.
The choice between paranoia and chaos, between Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane of *V.*, is further complicated here. Slothrop, the novel's rough equivalent to Profane, shares without understanding it an obsession like Stencil's. But his paranoia is justified by the facts — or almost. He struggles with the Stencil-Profane qualities in himself, and as he simultaneously recognizes and resists paranoia, he becomes less and less a self to be contended with.

The teases at the beginning reoccur as the incomplete projections at the end. The book begins, for instance, with a line implicitly picked up at the end: "A screaming comes across the sky". On the last pages, a Los Angeles theater manager named Zhlubb hears a terrifying noise: "I don't think that's a police siren". Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the AM radio. "I don't think ...." The noise, we have to assume, is the noise of a rocket (as it was on page one), except that you can't hear this kind of rocket until after it hits. And this is probably the rocket for which most of the major characters in the novel have been searching or living. Inside it is the lover (screaming?) of the rocket master — our old friend Weissman, by the way, code named Blicero. The rocket is about to hit a movie theater where we are apparently sitting watching a film which might well be called *Gravity's Rainbow*. We have, in good old literary style, come full circle, the narrative resolved, except that we are now participating in an ultimate, shaping paranoid vision into which Pynchon has been inducing us — destroyed if we accept it, dissolved if we don't.
The shape seems to be there, but the more seriously we look for it, the less convincing it is.

The surfaces which occupy so much space in *Gravity's Rainbow* accumulate, puzzlingly, discontinuously, as here, sometimes comically, sometimes grotesquely, sometimes with a technically dispassionate precision which can be terrifying. Nothing disappears from this world, but everything is transformed. like the cigarette in ashes, the eraser in curls, the ribbon in flecks. The presiding power is energy itself, gradually leveling human experience and feeling into geological strata. We're warned that physics will become metaphysics in the epigraph to the first book, which would be unequivocally serious if it weren't from a real rocket master, Wernher Von Braun. “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death”.”59 But how, in the midst of these wonderfully recorded objects undergoing their inexplicable transformation can one be, as one of Pynchon’s characters explicitly wishes, “simply here, simply alive”.60

The energies of transformation affect everyone, even the apparently evil spirits whose capacity to feel anything but the need to feel has died and has led them to drain the life from all around them. Katje Borgesius, the witch, shares the pain of her victims; Weissman-Blicero loses all of his last three lovers: pointman is disgraced and cannot even catch his most interesting experiment, Slothrop. Webley Silvernail - a “guest star”
wandering among the Pavlovian cages, speculates: “All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled everyday, to preserve an elite few, who are the loudest to theorize on freedom, but the least free of all.”*61 Here is the Dracula metaphor again, though with a new consciousness that Dracula, too, is a slave. What is there left to worship, or fear? Father Rapier has noted that the “critical man” is too great, and Franz Pokler finally speaks, “In the name of the cathode, the anode, and the holy grid.”*62 The objects, the released energy, are out of control. Once the zero point is crossed, there is no return, and the rocket submits to gravity: “All the rest will happen according to the laws of ballistics. The rocket is helpless in it. Something else has taken over. Something beyond what has been designed in.”*63 And that is true of Pynchon’s book, as Pynchon knows. We cannot redeem it for order or assimilate it to our conventional modes of control.

The essential subverting strategy in Gravity’s Rainbow effectively hatches plots against the book’s own characters. Pynchon deliberately confuses the literary meaning of plot – that is, a connected progress of events – with its psychological meaning – that is, the paranoid’s schema of a world conspiring around him. Satiric plots envelop and depersonalize. They impede narrative action in an orgy of contingencies where individuals are inseparable from the “plots” that control them. Late in Gravity’s Rainbow, the hopelessly confused Tyrone Slothrope asks, “This is some kind of plot, right?” and Seaman Bodine responds:
“Everything is some kind of plot, man.” Paranoia here is, by its nature, proliferating.

When Slothrop loses his character in the multiple plots of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, he, as an aggregate of cells, is made into an aggregate of last moments. After an especially intense episode in part Two consisting of a Mediterranean night of love and a morning sunrise with Katje, Slothrop’s clothes are stolen from his front room. A first fragment of him is gone. Stark naked, he pursues the thieves, covering himself with a purple satin sheet as he descends the stairs. From the floor below he leaps out of a terrace window, falling into a fortunately placed thickly branched tree. His fall from the treetop is a satiric fall, a speeded up version of the descent of man. His losses are always satire’s gains. As Pynchon takes the ground from beneath his hero’s feet, Slothrop finds himself pulled away from Katje, from himself, from love. Finally, at the end of the narrative, he has and is nothing.

Pynchon calls his scene of Christmas Vespers the war’s evensong. The ritual, witnessed by Roger and Jessica, celebrates the human scale of worship and love. The birth of Christ is a charismatic event, repeated and represented as a cyclic event. The representation is whole, and Pynchon contrasts it with a war that is, by its nature, fragmentary, that “wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity” (p. 131). Roger and Jessica effectively “cause” the Christmas Vespers scene in the narrative – they go to it, in all senses, as lovers. After the interlude in Kent the intensity of their love is diminished. The paranoia-producing
war intervenes. Mexico is the only figure in *Gravity's Rainbow* fully to recognize the "great swamp of paranoia" that exercises an almost permanent control during the war. And he also recognizes that despite his desires, he is somehow part of a system he detests. He, as much as Slothrop, is defined genetically by the events of the twentieth century. "The war is my mother", says Mexico, and he is part of its "intelligence".

While the novel is diffuse, baffling, and profoundly disturbing, these are not due to fallacies of composition but to calculated aims. Rather than attempting to justify the ways of God to men, Pynchon's epic steps outside of received cultural assumptions in exposing justification to be no cause, but only an effect of potentially devastating proportions. *Gravity's Rainbow* is arguably the most important novel to emerge during the postmodern period, and contains the self-consciousness that characterizes much of the fiction produced during this time. Discontinuous events are run into one another, and the reader leaps across space and time with few transitions. The narrator will occasionally disengage himself from the narrative and address the reader, reminding him of the fictional construct with which he is dealing. All plots are fictions, imaginative constructs to order a world that tends toward disorder. Pynchon sets *Gravity's Rainbow* during the last nine months of World War II and the immediate postwar period in order to examine the gestation and birth of postmodern culture.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


32. *GR*, p. 165.


34. Thomas Pynchon, “Whodonut”, “Literature High and Low”, in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, p. 211.

35. *GR*, p. 508.

36. *GR*, p. 566.


38. *GR*, p. 703.

40. Speer Morgan, "Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?" The Big Idea is that entropy governs human life; Morgan disagrees.


42. GR., p. 3.

43. GR, p. 209. The rocket's trajectory is identified with fate several times in the novel. The constellation of images that Pynchon draws on here – rocket, flight, fate, parabola, rainbow – seems to constitute a fairly widespread postwar topos.

44. Joseph Hendin, "What is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?", p. 90.

45. GR., p. 434.

46. Ibid., p. 490.

47. Ibid., p. 301.


52. GR, p. 124.

53. GR., p. 520.

54. The finger of God is a traditional sign of his power (cf. Exodus 8:19) but Pynchon uses it in connection with election, e.g., p. 27 in GR).

55. GR., p. 74.

56. Ibid., p. 3.

57. Ibid., p. 883.

58. Ibid., p. 2.

59. Ibid., p. 7.

60. Ibid., p. 240.

61. Ibid., p. 230.


63. Ibid., p. 603.

64. Ibid., p. 690.

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