

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* – A Critical Review

J. Jaya Parveen M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor in English, VV College of Engineering, Tisaiyanvilai (Via)
Tuticorin District, Tamilnadu

jayaparveen@gmail.com

V. Rajesh M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor in English, VV College of Engineering, Tisaiyanvilai (Via)
Tuticorin District, Tamilnadu

ABSTRACT

Postmodernism is a term applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature, and culture. It is generally characterized as either emerging from, in reaction to or superseding modernism. Defining postmodernism would violate its premise that no definite terms, boundaries, or absolute truths exist. However, critics have identified a few elements as postmodern. This paper tries to understand those postmodern elements and locate them in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. It uses interpretation as methodology and direct quotations from the novel as evidence.

KEYWORDS

Gravity's Rainbow; Postmodern Interpretation; Thomas Pynchon.

Gravity's Rainbow is a popular postmodern novel written by Thomas Pynchon. It was first published on February 28, 1973. This book was a joint winner of the 1974 National Book Award for Fiction. In the same year, the fiction jury recommended *Gravity's Rainbow* for Pulitzer Prize. However, the Pulitzer board proscribed the jury's recommendation, describing the novel as "unreadable", "turgid", "overwritten", and "obscene", and no prize was awarded (Kihss, 1974). In 1975, Pynchon declined the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Gravity's Rainbow is a book suffused with engineering information. Pynchon wrote the first draft of *Gravity's*

Rainbow as a "neat, tiny script on engineer's quadrille paper" (Steven, 1988). Pynchon worked on the novel throughout the 1960s and early 1970s while he was living in California and Mexico City. He was evidently making changes and additions to the manuscript right up to the date of printing.

The narrative is set primarily in Europe at the end of World War II. It centres on the design, production, and dispatch of V-2 rockets by the German military. In particular, it discusses the quest undertaken by several characters to uncover the secret of a mysterious device named the "Schwarzgerät", which will be installed in a rocket with the serial number "00000".

Frequently digressive, the novel subverts many of the traditional elements of plot and character development. It traverses detailed, specialist knowledge drawn from a wide range of disciplines and has earned the reputation as a "difficult" book. Since its publication, *Gravity's Rainbow* has spawned an enormous amount of literary criticism and commentary and is widely regarded as Pynchon's magnum opus (Moore, 1987).

The novel's title is a reference to the parabolic trajectory of a V-2 rocket (the 'rainbow-shaped' path described by the missile as it moves under the influence of gravity, subsequent to its engine's deactivation). It also refers to the 'shape' of the plot which is cyclical like the true shape of a rainbow which is often believed to be just an arc (Steven, 1988).

Gravity's Rainbow is composed of four parts, each of which comprises a number of episodes whose divisions are marked by a graphical depiction of a series of squares. It has been suggested that these represent sprocket holes as in a reel of film, although they may also bear some relation to the engineer's graph paper on which the first draft of the novel was written (Steven, 1988). The aforementioned squares relate to censored correspondence sent between soldiers and their loved ones during the war.

When family and friends received edited letters, the removed sections would be cut out into a square or rectangular sections. The squares that start each of the four parts would therefore be indicative of what is not written or what is removed by an external editor or censor (Gerald, 2005). The number of episodes in each part carries with it a numerological significance. It keeps with the use of numerology and Tarot symbolism throughout the novel (Steven, 1988).

"Part 1: Beyond the Zero" consists of 21 episodes which match the number of cards in the Major Arcana of a Tarot deck

if the Fool card is not counted or assigned a null value. "Part 2: Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering" (French for "A Furlough at the Hermann Goering Casino") contains 8 episodes, a number which is related to the mathematical symbol of infinity and makes repeated appearances throughout the narrative.

"Part 3: In the Zone" comprises 32 episodes, a number related to the gravitational acceleration of 32 feet per second and also bearing significance to the Kabbalistic tradition. "Part 4: The Counterforce" is made up of 12 episodes, this number is most commonly associated with the 12 Apostles and the total number of zodiacal signs.

The initial pages of the novel follow Pirate Prentice, first in his dreams and later around his house in Wartime London. Pirate then goes to work at ACHTUNG, a top-secret military branch, with Roger Mexico and Pointsman who worked there at the time. Tyrone Slothrop is a possibly promiscuous US Army lieutenant whose erratic story becomes the main plot throughout most of the novel.

Each of Slothrop's sexual encounters in London precedes, by several days, a V-2 rocket hitting the same place. Both Slothrop's encounters and the rocket sites match the Poisson Distributions calculated by Roger Mexico, leading to reflections on topics as broad as Determinism, the reverse flow of time, and the sexuality of the rocket itself.

In the flashbacks, the maniacal Captain Blicero prepares to assemble and fire the 00000. He asks Gottfried to sacrifice himself inside the rocket. He launches it in a pseudosexual act of sacrifice with his bound sex slave Gottfried captive within its S-Gerät. At the end of the final episode, the rocket descends upon Britain. The text halts, in the middle of a song composed by Slothrop's ancestor, with complete

obliteration of narrative as the 00000 lands on a cinema (Wikipedia, 2008).

The plot of the novel is complex, containing over 400 characters and involving many different threads of narrative which intersect and weave around one another (Tanner, 1982). Pirate makes a "Banana Breakfast" for his troops and goes to receive a message from his superiors in Greenwich. In episode 3, Teddy Bloat photographs the desk of American Tyrone Slothrop in ACHTUNG headquarters (the special operations unit of the British military), interested in a map of London with stars marking Slothrop's sexual escapades. Episode 4 describes Slothrop's girl-chasing in London, his childhood, and his Puritan ancestry. This kind of plot displays discontinuity which is a postmodern feature.

Achtfaden is an aerodynamics man who worked on the Schwarzgerät. Enzian and Schwarzkommando capture him and interrogate him in part 3, episode 13. Slothrop's uncle Bland participates in the scheme to sell Slothrop for use in Laszlo Jamf's experiments. Dominus Blicero is the code name of Lieutenant Weissmann, the controller of Rocket 00000 and a Nazi arch-villain. He is a sadomasochist who keeps a boy named Gottfried along with Katje Borgesius as sexual slaves, and by the end of the novel, the reader learns that Blicero has launched Gottfried in the Schwarzgerät section of Rocket 00000. Many of the characters in the novel show fragmentation of ideas (Turier, 1992).

Frustration is another postmodern aspect this novel emphasizes:

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a

system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity — most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to being with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (Gravity's Rainbow, 52).

The search for death and its causes is a key theme in the novel, and it is focused on the myriad efforts to discover and understand German V-2 rockets. In charge of the ultimate V-2 rocket is "Dominus Blicero," whose name is intended to mean 'lord of death'. Blicero fires Rocket 00000 from the region of northern Germany.

Pynchon addresses a kaleidoscope of themes in Gravity's Rainbow, but he continually returns to ideas related to metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that studies fundamental questions of reality and existence (Turier, 1992). The novel questions what is real, how one is able to discern reality, and whether there actually is any reality at all. Its complex plot can be seen as a search for causes of death and a quest to discover who or what it is (if anything) that controls the world.

The recurring themes throughout the plot are the V-2 rocket, the interplay

between free will and Calvinistic predestination, breaking the cycle of nature, behavioural psychology, sexuality and conspiracy theories such as the Phoebus cartel and the Illuminati, etc. Gravity's Rainbow also draws heavily on themes that Pynchon had probably encountered during his work as a technical writer for Boeing, where he edited a support newsletter for the Bomarc Missile Program support unit. The shift in theme is a postmodern feature evident in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Pynchon's novel is full of historical and cultural allusions from all over the world, and many of them are historically accurate details. Characters such as Walter Rathenau, numerous World War II episodes, corporate references to Shell, General Electric, and the German chemical company IG Farben, and stories from colonial Germany, Holland, and Russia are all based on thorough historical research.

However, Pynchon often mixes these elements of historical fact with fiction, so it is difficult to tell what has been invented and what has been taken from factual historical accounts. Pynchon's allusions to history provide an interpretation of the events themselves, and they place his thematic and philosophical ideas into historical context. The Boeing archives are known to house a vast library of historical V-2 rocket documents, which were probably accessible to Pynchon.

'Personal density,' Kurt Mondaugen in his Peenemünde office not too many steps away from here, enunciating the Law which will one day bear his name, 'is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth.' 'Temporal bandwidth,' is the width of your present, your now. It is the familiar 'Δ t' considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your

persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. (Gravity's Rainbow, 33).

The novel is narrated by many distinct voices. The style and tone of the voices vary widely. Some narrate the plot in a highly informal tone and some are more self-referential, at times breaking the fourth wall (Wikipedia, 2008). Some voices even narrate in drastically different formats, ranging from movie-script format to stream-of-consciousness prose. This is called short circuit in postmodernism.

To showcase both the erudite and the naughty, the narrative contains numerous descriptions of illicit sexual encounters and drug use:

Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit. Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels like, and guzzle her blood with open joy. Eh? Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair on his own forbidden genitals. (Gravity's Rainbow, 22)

The main characters and supporting cast are sandwiched between dense dialogues or reveries on historic, artistic, scientific, or philosophical subjects, interspersed with whimsical nonsense poems and allusions to obscure facets of 1940s pop culture (Fowler, 1980).

Homosexuality in high places is just a carnal afterthought now, and the real and only fucking is done on paper... Death has come in the pantry door: stands watching them, iron and patient, with a look that says try to tickle me... Tap my head and mic my brain / stick that needle in my vein... pronouncing asshole with a certain sphinctering of the

*lips so it comes out ehisshehwle.
(Gravity's Rainbow, 47).*

Gravity's Rainbow includes the singing of silly songs, indecent dialogues, recurring appearances of kazoos, and extensive discussion of paranoia, an increasingly central motivator for the novel's many main characters. This showcases postmodern play and pastiche throughout the novel.

Many facts in the novel are based on technical documents relating to the V-2 rockets. The equations featured in the text are correct. References to the works of Pavlov, Ouspensky, and Jung are based on Pynchon's actual research. The firing command sequence in German that is recited at the end of the novel is also correct and is probably copied in verbatim from the technical report produced by Operation Backfire (Wikipedia, 2008).

In reality, a V-2 rocket hit the Rex Cinema in Antwerp, where some 1200 people were watching the movie "The Plainsman" on December 16, 1944, killing 567 people, the most killed by a single rocket during the entire war. The secret military organizations practising occult warfare have a historical backdrop in the Ahnenerbe and other Nazi mysticism, whereas the allied counterparts are Pynchon's invention.

It's been a prevalent notion. Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the Creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the

Kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home — only the millions of last moments... nothing more. Our history is an aggregate of last moments. (Gravity's Rainbow, 38)

The novel uses many actual events and locations as backdrops to establish chronological order and setting within the complex structure of the book. Examples include the appearance of a photograph of Wernher Von Braun in which his arm is in a cast. Historical documents indicate the time and place of an accident which broke Von Braun's arm, thereby providing crucial structural details around which the reader can reconstruct Slothrop's journey.

Another example is the inclusion of a BBC Radio broadcast of a Benny Goodman performance, the contents of which, according to the historical record, were broadcast only once during the period of the novel and by which the events immediately surrounding its mention are fixed.

Further historical events such as Allied bombing raids on Peenemünde and the city of Nordhausen (close to the V-2 producing concentration camp Mittelbau-Dora) also appear in the novel and help to establish the relation of the work's events to each other (Wikipedia, 2008). All these historical references help us bring out the historiographic metafiction, a popular postmodern element in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

WORKS CITED

- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. London & New York: Penguin, 2000.
- Brown, Richard Harvey. *Postmodern Representations*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Fowler, Douglas. *A Reader's Guide to 'Gravity's Rainbow'*. New York: Ardis Press, 1980.
- Hasan, Ihab. "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." *The Disemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature*. Princeton, 1982.
- Howard, Gerald (2005). "Pynchon from A to V". *Bookforum* (Summer 2005). Retrieved on 30.09.10 from <http://www.bookforum.com//pynchon.html>
- Kihss, Peter. "Pulitzer Jurors; His Third Novel". *The New York Times*, 8, 1974.

Moore, Thomas. *The Style of Connectedness: 'Gravity's Rainbow' and Thomas Pynchon*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987.

Tanner, Tony. "Gravity's Rainbow". *Thomas Pynchon*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1982.

Turier, Christine. "Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," *Explicator*, Vol. 50 (4), 1992.

Weisenburger, Steven. *A 'Gravity's Rainbow' Companion*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Wikipedia (2008). Gravity's Rainbow. Retrieved on 03.05.10 from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravity's_Rainbow#Plot_summary