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Paranoia vs. Anti-paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Abstract

Gravity's Rainbow is among the "most widely celebrated, unread novels" of American literature and already "a piece of minor folklore." Pynchon's genius manifests itself in his uniquely wide range of subject matter and literary techniques of presentation, narration, and interpretation. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel based on various sets of parallels, oppositions and double structures. These parallel patterns are abundant both in the structure of the novel, and in the content, characterization, and themes. In this paper two of these binaries, paranoia and anti-paranoia, are discussed to show how Pynchon enjoys involving his characters and his readers in a cosmos in which no absolute truth and no singular concept can survive on its own; a universe in which certainty is a luxury that no one can reach.

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1. Introduction

Thomas Pynchon (1937-) wrote *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973 creating a novel which according to Moore (1987: 1) is among the "most widely celebrated, unread novels" of American literature and already "a piece of minor folklore." This novel has caused extreme reactions by being praised and berated. Similar to his novel, Thomas Pynchon, the contemporary novelist, has been the target of controversial criticisms and judgments by various critics. He is "universally perceived as a writer of the first magnitude" (Cowart, 1980: 6), one who, according to Mendelson, "is the greatest living writer in the English-speaking world" (qtd. in Cowart 6). He has, "in Housman's phrase, shouldered the sky, set himself the task of

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responding to *everything* in the experience of modern man" (qtd. in Cowart 4). Harold Bloom regards him as the one and the only novelist who has "surpassed every American writer since Faulkner" and draws attention to Pynchon's unparalleled "invention." This is the invention that Dr. Samuel Johnson, "greatest of Western literary critics," considered to be "the essence of poetry or fiction." Bloom maintains that Pynchon's greatest talent is "his vast control, a preternatural ability to order so immense an exuberance at invention." His "supreme quality is what Hazlitt called *gusto*, or what Blake intended in his infernal proverbs, 'Exuberance is Beauty' " (Bloom, 1986: 2).

Gravity's Rainbow is, according to Richard Poirier, an eccentric mixture of "the esoteric and insanely learned with the popular or supposedly popular" (qtd. in Bloom 3). Pynchon's genius manifests itself in his uniquely wide range of subject matter and literary techniques of presentation, narration, and interpretation. Though extremely serious in content and concern, this book presents a continuous hilarity that underlies even the gloomiest scenes. Pynchon indulges himself in playing with the readers' feelings and sense of comprehension, yet his ultimate end is by far different. *Gravity's Rainbow* "bombards us with data, tempts us with a surfeit of clues." Yet, "the data never entails a sure conclusion," and the clues do not lead us to "solutions." They just expose "further problems" (Mackey, 1986: 60). In Pynchon's own words, "this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973: 3).

Pynchon's treatment of his major themes, his method of narration and his unique pattern of characterization are in accordance with his doctrine of parallelism and plurality. With the unraveling of the novel his narrative voice and narrative strategy alter and adjust themselves to the demands of the content. His characters constantly map into each other and are either paralleled by others in their lifestyles or common destinies or stand at the end of a spectrum of dichotomy, and thus their characteristic features are highlighted. The major themes are also presented in binary patterns. The list of binaries is endless in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In fact, the novel is a universe of parallels, binaries and dichotomies.

Gravity's Rainbow, as T. Tanner (1986) says, is a work of "such vastness and range that defies--with a determination unusual even in the age of 'difficult' books-- any summary" (69). It offers an unparalleled vastness of scope and an unprecedented variety of themes and content. Pynchon represents the "intricate networking of contemporary technological, political, and cultural systems," and "in the style and its rapid transitions," he attempts to adjust the "dizzying tempos, the accelerated shifts from one mode of experience to another" (Poirier, 1986: 12). *Gravity's Rainbow* is shaped by the memories of the Second World War, its end and "its

immediate aftermath" (Fussell, 1986: 22). As E. Mendelson (1986) points out, it is a book of "recall[ed] origins" and "foresee[n] endings" that highlights the relentless continuation of the "responsibility of those who live in present that lies between" (46). As Kathryn Hume (1987) puts it in her book, Pynchon's "pyrotechnics—explosive, surreal, and violent" have introduced a completely different and "new form of fiction" (xi).

Embodying such a vast scope and content by means of so many varied structures and techniques, it is of no surprise that the book has motivated the appearance of as many different, and at times contradictory, criticisms as there are critics. Criticisms concerning *Gravity's Rainbow* are multiple and colorful.

Many condemn the work as "committed to the easy myth of apocalyptic nihilism" (Siegel, 1987: 3). Some readers find it "essentially nihilistic, ultimately downbeat in the way it regards human experience" (Moore, 2: 1987). Others, like Joseph Hendin, describe the book as "the sign of 'Death's hate, Death's grimace, the tragic mask of heaven's pulled down forever in one inviolable affirmation of depression" (qtd. in Moore 2). Tony Tanner, sadly describes Pynchon as "a genuine poet of decay and decline . . . of a world succumbing to an irreversible twilight of no-love, no human contact" (qtd. in Cowart, 1980: 7). However, such simplistic nihilistic interpretations leave "much of the novel unaccounted for" (Siegel, 1987: 73). Nevertheless, as Siegel suggests, this controversial claim is not that surprising, for "important novels almost always offend the sensibilities of some readers and create problems of comprehension for others"(3).

Apter believes that "paranoia consistently emerges as a preeminent topos in major works of the post-World War II American canon" (2006: 366). As fragmentation, discontinuity, and intentional complexity are major features of postmodern literature, many critics believe this work to be a true postmodern masterpiece, since, as Charles Russel puts it, Pynchon's novel presents a "massive system of analogies of decay and destruction, of repression and fragmentation, analogies that may only fall apart as does the book in its final section." He refers to Pynchon's "art of fragments" and wonders whether these fragmentary pieces promise "death or revitalization." He believes that this is the "final art of Pynchon. It is an anarchic vision that promises freedom or impotence, creation or mindless pleasures" (qtd. in Hume, 1987: 3-4).

In arguing about the nostalgic aspects of the novel, Attewell (2004) states, "it is paranoia, the inability to accept discontinuity that turns the mechanics of a supersonic explosion into a conscious mockery of the abstraction "return" (29).

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds (2000) believes:

Often, Pynchon's paranoia is merely grim, producing characters in the last stages of entropy, passively and randomly acting through, not upon, the vast and inhuman systems they inhabit. Indeed, even these characters' names suggest they are less than free-willed humans - Stanley Koteks, Mike Fallopian, Manny DiPresso, and Oedipa herself are less of characters than labels or brand names. (24)

On the other hand, D. C. Dougherty (1995), in discussing paranoia as a focal metaphor in Stanley Elkin, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon, states,

For these writers paranoia is an especially effective metaphor for their characters' sense of powerlessness and for the consequent notion that in an apparently random universe one way individual human beings can assert their own meaning or significance is to identify a nemesis, thereby justifying the assumptions that one's life seems to be a "plot" and that whatever happens is the result of a definable cause. (70)

Scot Sanders (1975) believes that "conspiratorial view of history structures Pynchon's fiction ... that it is rooted in a theology from which God has been withdrawn" (178).

In this paper two of the binaries, paranoia and anti-paranoia, are discussed to show how Pynchon enjoys involving his characters and his readers in a cosmos in which no absolute truth and no singular concept can survive on its own; a universe in which certainty is a luxury that no one can reach.

2. Discussion

According to the *Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders* Paranoia is defined as "a symptom in which an individual feels as if the world is 'out to get' him or her. When people are paranoid, they feel as if others are always talking about them behind their backs. Paranoia causes intense feelings of distrust, and can sometimes lead to overt or covert hostility." In *Gravity's Rainbow* characters go through such emotions throughout the duration of the novel.

Discussing paranoia is definitely a challenging ordeal, one that demands awareness of the fact that once again Pynchon avoids treating this issue one-dimensionally. Pynchon is the prophet of paranoid fiction. Mackey (1986) goes so far as to believe that an entity called Pynchon is a paranoid subject, who, through avoiding interviews and social encounters and maintaining a low profile manages to "escape into and through his texts." He is, in other words, the fabricator of the "ultimate paranoid

fantasy" (62).

Pynchon himself states:

About paranoia There is nothing remarkable. . . . 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 . . . who are held at the edge (*Gravity's Rainbow* 820)

Paranoia is often attributed to the psychological and mental disorders and Freud relates it to a homosexual phobia. In his *Totem and Taboo*, he states that the desire to demand interconnection from events of life in general is a natural and "intellectual" function of an individual's mind. If for some reasons, or as a result of certain circumstances, a "true connection" cannot be traced and established, this intellectual function constructs an arbitrary one, either in the form of "dreams," "phobias," or "delusions." If such process of fabrication moves beyond the logical extremes, it changes into what is normally defined as paranoia (qtd. in Moore, 76: 1987). Paranoia, as such, is in fact a common phenomenon shared by virtually everyone. It is an effort to spot an invisible order behind the visible pattern of events. So the paranoid often undergoes a condition of delusional "grandeur" or may suffer from the feeling of being persecuted, or both.

In contrast to the master critics of the age, like Ihab Hassan who considers paranoia as a corollary to modernism and schizophrenia to postmodernism, or Brian McHale who sees postmodernism as approaching an "anti-paranoid ideal" (Nicol, 1999: 51), this study makes an attempt to state that Pynchon considers paranoia as an inevitable response to the postmodern crisis of interpretation. It is, in fact, a prevalent feature of postmodern fiction, as Barry Lewis states, which is in essence the feeling of being threatened by others' system. It is, in other words, "an indirect mimetic representation of the climate of fear and suspicion that prevailed throughout the Cold War" (Lewis, 2001: 129). Pynchon presents a rampant paranoia throughout the whole story of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Such concern should be discussed both in terms of paranoia as an unpleasant and epidemic consequence of worldwide conspiracy and at the same time a form of natural and inevitable and still epidemic compensatory reaction to a world burst into fragments and loosened of its conventional order, connection, and intention.

There is the suspicion in the novel that the whole world might be a make belief. In fact, a series of "subterranean operations" (Packard, qtd. in Melley, 2000: 1) manipulates the individual's life and way of thinking. This leads to the sense that major events in one's life are planned and controlled

by agencies, often evil and sinister ones, conspiring together in order to ruin the life of the individuals and lead to the demise of originality and individuality. As a result, a pervasive anxiety runs through the whole novel nourished by the authority of technologies and corporations such as IG Farben, Siemens, General Electrics, Shell Oil, *etc.*, that manipulate characters' lives and reduce the human agency. Timothy Melley (2000) asserts that paranoia stems from "the idea of social control" coming as a "profound revelation" and as a result "conjures up an empire of conspiracy, a vision of the world in which the individuals are forever manipulated by secret agents, hidden persuaders, and malevolent organization" (6). Living in such unappealing circumstances, the individual feels a kind of alienation deteriorated by the sense of persecution by an unknown other, "an all-seeing eye" (Nicol, 1999: 45). Paranoia, in *Gravity's Rainbow* is, in effect, the edge of awareness that all the elements in the universe conspire together to bring about the individual's ultimate doom. There is always the fear of *Them* controlling, monitoring, and orchestrating the characters and these characters feel this presence everywhere:

Jessica notes a coal-black Packard up a side street, filled with dark-suited civilians. Their white collars rigid in the shadows.
"who're they?"
He [Mexico] shrugs: "they" is good enough. "Not a friendly lot".
(*Gravity's Rainbow* 40)

What leads to paranoia in this novel arises from the dilemma that every single movement, every attempt to escape, or untie the complexities is in fact a step forward into entanglement. It deepens the chasm, and proves that "reality is such that it can never be disentangled" (Bové, 2004, 659):

They have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts . . . Is this the way out? Faces turn to windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into* (*Gravity's Rainbow* 3)

The fragmentary and "carnavalesque" context of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its numerous plots and subplots that are mostly left unresolved, its "peripheral excursions" and myriads of characters who are all entrapped in a "pattern of conditioned behavior" (Lynd, 2004, 64), leads to the paranoid feeling which is a reflection of the disparity between the world and its multiple representations. This ever-present paranoia is the potential of finding hidden intentions beyond the apparent order of events.

Slothrop, as the central character of the novel, is the prime victim of

paranoia to the extent that he starts devising his notorious "Proverbs for Paranoids" which are found on different pages of the novel:

Proverbs for Paranoids, 1: You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 276)

Proverbs for Paranoids, 2: The innocence of the creature is in inverse proportion to the immortality of the Master. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 281)

Proverbs for Paranoids, 3: If they can get you asking the wrong question they don't have to worry about answers. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 293)

Proverbs for Paranoids, 4: *You* hide, they seek. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 304)

Paranoia, in Slothrop's case, is rooted in an infancy of conditioned existence which was planned to aim at certain moments displayed in reflexes which are conditioned and reflected in his conditioned reactions to the V-2 rockets' falling on London. His paranoia is strengthened through his sojourn at the Casino Herman Goering and various suspicious events that occur there. He feels the presence of an order more vividly:

But Slothrop isn't to be left off so easy. Shortly, unpleasantly so, it will come to him that everything in this room is really being used for something different. Meaning things to Them it has never meant to us. Never. Two orders of being, looking identical . . . but . . .
Oh, The World Over There, it's
So hard to explain! (*Gravity's Rainbow* 236)

Slothrop's desperate attempts to find information regarding his mysterious past and his enigmatic connection to the rockets and his strong urge, though not a self-acknowledged one initially, to protect and defend his own integrity are the results of his apprehension of conspiracy as a master plan set to abuse him. His paranoia resembles what a character in Don DeLillo's *Running Dog* defines as the threat of technological dominance:

When technology reaches a certain level, people begin to feel like Criminals Someone is after you, the computers may be, the machine-police. You can't escape investigation. The facts about you and your whole existence have been collected or are being collected . . .
. . . Devices make us pliant. If *they* issue a print-out saying we're guilty, then we're guilty. (Melley 31)

This, in DeLillo's words, is sadly the "age of conspiracy... the age of connection, links, secret relationships" (Melley 7). Thus, in Freudian

terminology, Slothrop, as a victim of Them, becomes obsessed in order to comprehend what surrounds him through his quest for the knowledge that mystifies his bizarre association to German rockets. His paranoia extends itself to his reading hidden patterns and shapes in the sky and is best exemplified here:

Worried, all right. By the jaws and teeth of some Presence so large that nobody else can see it—There! That's that monster that I was telling you about—That's no monster, stupid, that's *clouds!*—No, can't you see? It's his *feet*—Well, Slothrop can feel this beast in the sky: its visible claws and scales are being mistaken for clouds and other possibilities ... or else everyone has agreed to *call them other names* when Slothrop is listening ... (*Gravity's Rainbow* 281)

Characters within the novel feel the presence of a parallel order of beings, another system, Them, that runs along the lines of their lives secretly but relentlessly, orchestrating their life patterns toward Their own needs. They are all involved in this unwanted play; the game is "Theirs". Once the characters are aware of this other pattern, they are made to act in a way different from their own initial intentions. The game is being played on a level too high for them to comprehend. Put this way, paranoia as such is "the end of character as a category in possession of agency, interiority, *essence* – in short, in possession of itself" (Howe, qtd. in Rosenfeld, 2004: 339).

Therefore, in a world in which the individual self is not a value anymore, paranoia, as a relatively positive trait is a peculiar and anxiety-based means of responding to fabricated and arbitrary paradigm of value. It is, in fact, a counteraction to defend the self threatened by dangers found at large. In other words, paranoia represents the individual's capacity and talent in relating events together. Therefore, paranoia is a source of comfort since it accounts for the inexplicable and tries to bring some sense into the mysteriously-complicated incidents. It is a natural reaction to an age in which "grand explanatory schemes and master narratives" (Melley, 2000: 8) have totally vanished.

Slothrop's paranoia, as a result is rather a justifiable and at times involuntary response to his social environment; it is the result of a gloomy sense of "diminished human agency" (Melley, 11). Such a feeling stems from the situation in which an individual, like Slothrop, is not even in control of his own behavior. His is a political and social paranoia. Such feelings are symptoms of an anxiety nourished by acknowledging the fact that the universe in which people reside is an unknowable entity. It is the route to awareness and is as inevitable as breathing since we inhabit a world

shaped by the "currents of reciprocity" (Buber, qtd. in Siegel, 1987: 108). Pynchon himself portrays the universe of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a "reified paranoia" in which all characters are victims of "improbable, but quite real" (Moore, 1987: 64) schemes that govern the whole life.

On the other hand, Pynchon presents anti-paranoia, though with disapproval, as the other end of this chaotic world:

If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is, and only pasteboard images now of the Listening Enemy left between him and the wet sky. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 506)

To the surprise of the readers, Pynchon does not so much approve of anti-paranoia, the state in which nothing is in connection to other things. Such a state, in fact, unveils the threat of "the random event" which consequently leads to "sudden death, a looming void, pain and loss" (Lynd, 2004: 69). The characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* are not certain whether to trace the consecutive events as loosely related with no reasonable connection (happening casually), or to follow them as the result of some hidden conspiracy, administrated and monitored by Them (happening causally). The first alternative leads to anti-paranoia and the second to paranoia. Neither is Pynchon's favorite.

What leads to both Slothrop's anti-paranoia and that of other characters and also the readers' strong disillusion is rooted in what the "world renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry – Wuxtry" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 861) tells us and thus discredits all our presuppositions:

There never was a Dr. Jamf . . . Jamf was only a fiction, to help him [Slothrop] explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in hi[m] . . . for those rockets each time exploding in the sky . . . to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he was in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's death. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 861)

Thus speaking the reader's and Slothrop's all presuppositions and beliefs are shattered down to their roots. This is not definitely an easy thing to handle. What the spokesman of the Counterforce admits in his interview with the *Wall Street Journal* is the last blow, one out of which survival is not a plausible conclusion. For over eight hundred and sixty pages we feel certain that paranoia is the true response, yet when there are only about

twenty pages of the book left, we are told that: "We were never concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop," and the interviewer says: "You mean, then, that he was more a rallying point?" and the spokesperson replies, "No, not even that. Opinion even at the start was divided. It was one of our fatal weaknesses ... Some called him a 'pretext'. Others felt that he was a genuine, point-for-point microcosm" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 861).

Yet, the readers are still not sure whether to believe such statements or not. Anti-paranoia is the result of seeing the works of chance, casualty and coincidence in the events, which is not a particularly pleasant situation to withstand. There is a natural "desire to find intentionality" (Rosenfeld, 2004: 347) in the sequence of incidents. This desire has its roots deep in the "anxiety about the condition" (347) of one's existential being. Acknowledging the mere existence of intention behind whatever befalls upon man is a source of solace and comfort in a fragmentary universe, since a universe which is "randomly, [and] coldly indifferent" (348) denies such comfort.

3. Conclusion

In *Gravity's Rainbow* paranoia might be regarded as a positive trait, a rationalized tendency that propagates the desire for order that enables us not to yield to "the chaos that always threatens us" (Slethaug, 1993: 64) since characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* and its readers are stranded helpless in a state of radical uncertainty concerning their status. Consequently in the postmodern period, paranoia should not be treated as a clinical delusion, that is, the delusive mentality of an individual in projecting his own personal mentality upon the world, as Lacan describes it (Nicol, 1999: 45). Paranoia is instead, a justified response originating from an intelligent apprehension of the surrounding world. Though paranoia is typically the result of an individual's serious problem in the act of interpreting and making sense of the world, in a postmodern context, similar to that of the novel in discussion, in which individuals are almost always obliged to search for meaning all their lives and finally reach the conclusion that meaning is inevitably something relative, unapproachable and transient, it can be a sign of acute comprehension, not of "*as if it were the case*," but of "*it is indeed, the case*" (Nicol 45).

In short, paranoia is a promise of relief. The disconnection and randomness that lead to anti-paranoia are indicative of the "presence of absence" (Rosenfeld 348) that not everybody can manage to handle. In spite of being an unpleasant remedy, paranoia produces a compensatory illusion of returning the paranoid to the center of attention and significance. It is an alternative, a means of compromise for the paranoid to face the music that is

being played loud and harsh. Thus anti-paranoia seems disagreeable in contrast to paranoia in the fictional world Pynchon has created. Through reading the world as a pre-planned book, "a bad book" (Rosenfeld 341), the paranoids restore their lost centrality; they will be those for whom the book has been written:

When something real is about to happen to you, you go toward it with a transparent surface parallel to your own front that hums and bisects your ears, making eyes very alert. The light bends toward chalky blue. Your skin aches. *At last: something real* [emphasis added]. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 880)

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