

Annie Halseth

Essay Title Goes Here: The Intentionality of Occupying Negative Capability in *Gravity's*

Rainbow

Opus Pynchon: Gravity's Rainbow

Thomas Pynchon's epic novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, is structured with an increasingly unstable narrative that is comprised of rapid changes in perspective, dream and drug-influenced scenes, analepsis into past events, and unreliable characters that work together to thwart the reader's search for consistency. The nontraditional approach of such a narrative, combined with a large cast of inherently flawed characters and abstractly convoluted scenes, operates to tempt the reader to search for legitimacy within a structure that exists to delegitimize itself. This destabilizing narrative structure subverts the reader's expectations of a novel by requiring an active and creative engagement that works to undermine the systemic legitimacy of the grand narratives in contemporary society.

In order to explore the methods through which Pynchon confronts, undermines, and consciously disregards conventional tenets of traditional narrative structures, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss what these tenets are and how they function to set readers' expectations. In his book, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong examines the shift from oral tradition to contemporary literacy, and on the historical importance of narrative he writes, "Narrative is everywhere a major genre of verbal art, occurring all the way from primary oral cultures into high literacy . . . In a sense narrative is paramount among all forms, often even the most abstract" (136-7). Ong continues to explain that narrative has historically been the grounding force for oral cultures and a temporally linear sequence of events was of little importance. It was not until the written novel that this linearity became increasingly conventional and readers began to expect a parallel between what was written and what they might experience. This expectation gave rise to the classically pyramidal structured story that rose to prominence in the late 18th and early 19th century. This expectation was such to the extent that when written narratives abandon or distort the chronological order in the world to which the discourse refers "the effect is clearly self-

conscious: one is aware of the absence of the normally expected parallelism” (Ong 144). From this brief history of narrative structure, it can be concluded that Pynchon’s deliberate abandonment of the traditional narrative structure was a conscious decision made with the full awareness of the expectations of his audience and with the purpose of actively engaging the reader.

In his essay, "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of *Gravity's Rainbow*," Brian McHale writes, "The received verdict on Post-Modern fiction is that it constitutes an affront to the whole prior history of literature, that it is directed against narration and the principles of narrativity in general" (108). Indeed, the narrative structure of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or perhaps the lack thereof, serves to undermine conventional tenets of traditional narrative structures to the extent that it requires the creative and active engagement of the reader. Perhaps it is best stated that "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” (Pynchon 582). The dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, and drug-epistemologies that are inherent in *Gravity's Rainbow* work together to create not only a non-traditional narrative, but to destabilize the narrative by calling the legitimacy of the narrative into question.

Perhaps one of the strongest examples of this narrative instability involves the map Slothrop creates that mark the locations of his past romantic trysts. The map is introduced very early in the novel as Teddy Bloat, working for The White Visitation, sneaks into Slothrop’s office to take a picture of the map. It is revealed later that in each location Slothrop has been was subsequently bombed two-ten days later. In an experiment directed by Pointsman, Slothrop is unknowingly observed as he visits Mrs. Quoad and has relations with Darlene. This particular

scene has a deceptively straightforward narrative full of innocuous but memorable detail as Slothrop is coerced into taking part of “The Disgusting English Candy Drill,” by Mrs. Quoad who is constantly suffering from some strange ailment (Pynchon 118). Yet it is not revealed until much later when Pointsman sends Speed and Perdoo to investigate Slothrop’s map of conquests and they visit Mrs. Quoad, that Darlene does not exist. Furthermore, Mrs. Quoad is a not an old, sickly widow living in a must apartment, as was described on Slothrop’s visit, but is a “flashy young divorcee” living in “a rather pedicured Mayfair address” (Pynchon 271).

This startling revelation destabilizes what Pynchon has thus allowed the reader to understand about the text so far. Not only was the scene between Slothrop, Darlene, and Mrs. Quoad a fabrication, dream, or drug-induced hallucination (or perhaps something else entirely), but the reasoning for The White Visitation’s interest in Slothrop, stemming from their hypothesis of his sexual relations being linked to bombing sites, has now been disproved. However, Pynchon further complicates matters with the characters of Speed and Perdoo, whose characterization suggests that they, too, are under the influence of some “mindless pleasure,” most likely in the form of a hallucination inducing drug (Pynchon 270). Pynchon has thus left the reader without a clear answer to what had been, up to this point, a reliable plot point. With such ambiguity, the reader is left without a clear resolution with skepticism as to the reliability of the text. Therefore, the reader is asked to simultaneously speculate on the perceived reality of every moment without becoming overwhelmed and rendered immobile by the plausibility of never finding one true resolution. As stated by Linda Westervelt in her essay “The Reader as System Builder in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” “the difficulty involves finding the interface between making enough connections to make sense of the work while remaining open to ‘mindless pleasures,’ or to the experience of reading without imposing a priori analytic criteria of order and unity” (73).

The constant skepticism and questioning that Pynchon demands from the reader translates into a questioning of the motives of the characters and consequently of the circumstances the characters find themselves in. As *Gravity's Rainbow* is set during and immediately after World War II, these circumstances are often full of violence, perversion, and such extreme moral deviancy that the reader is forced to question the motivating factors and, therefore, the grand narrative of the war as a whole. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard writes, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (37). The loss of credibility that Lyotard mentions is due in part to the proliferation of narratives that contradict, undermine, and perhaps offer insight into the questionable motivations behind severe action. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Enzian speculates on the devastation that the war has wrought:

"there floods on Enzian what seems to him an extraordinary understanding . . . [the refinery is] modified, precisely, *deliberately* by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both sides – "*sides?*" – had always agreed on . . . It means this war was never political at all, the politics was all theater, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology" (Pynchon 520).

Enzian's revelation into the motivation behind WWII is an example of the questioning of grand narratives that Pynchon has been conditioning his readers to remain open to by creating a "process of delegitimization fueled by the demand for legitimation itself" (Lyotard 39). This process is evident in the multitudes of the convoluted narrative tracks that are woven into *Gravity's Rainbow*, and that are constantly questioning the role that "the different Technologies,

Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite” have in the brutality and debauchery inflicted by war (Pynchon 521).

While it remains important to recognize that Pynchon actively crafted the complex instability of the narrative in *Gravity's Rainbow* in order to subvert his readers' expectations and condition them to remain skeptical of the narrative itself, it is also necessary to note the role of the reader within the text. Roland Barthes, in his essay “Death of the Author,” writes, “Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not... the author” (6). Perhaps in no novel is this better exemplified than in *Gravity's Rainbow* as its multitude of unreliable characters bring with them their own flaws and perspectives that often mask, convolute, or feign any semblance of meaning. For example, the character of Katje is first introduced as a spy brought in by Pirate Prentice. From her current location at Pirate's maisonette the scene fades into an analepsis that depicts her relationship with the infamous Blicero and the submissive Gottfried. The transition into the analepsis is rapidly subtle, “inside herself, enclosed in the *soigné* surface of dear fabric and dead cells, she is corruption and ashes, she belongs in a way none of them can guess cruelly to the Oven . . .” yet it offers a unique and momentary glimpse into her own psyche (Pynchon 94). Her reasons for leaving Blicero and placing herself in Pirate's care are never defined on her own terms, the only speculation is offered by Gottfried who concludes “that she secretly fears the Change” (Pynchon 97). Katje's personal stake in the novel is never revealed and yet she appears throughout the novel, aloof and yet involved, carrying with her a secretive façade that invites the reader to question her motives and the identity hidden underneath the many roles she plays.

The episode in which Slothrop is interrogated by PISCES under the influence of an injection of sodium amytal also exemplifies the reader's role within the text. The imagery in this episode is abstract and visceral as Slothrop experiences a hallucinatory journey back to 1939 and down a toilet. This scene meanders in a stream of consciousness narrative, interspersed with the pastiche of song, one of which is sung to the tune of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird," and is concluded in a circular manner, ending as it began with the mention of the mysterious Kenosha Kid (Weisenburger 52). The explicit imagery, "He has toilet paper in his hair and a fuzzy thick dingleberry lodged up inside his right nostril. Ugh, ugh," is juxtaposed with overt racism that creates an undeniably uncomfortable reading experience (Pynchon 62). However, within this discomfort is the undeniable intrigue of the Kenosha Kid and the possibility of uncovering PISCES's interest in Slothrop that tempts the reader into continuing the attempt to discern the kernel of truth that would legitimize the perversion that is so blatant in the scene.

Yet whatever truth is in this episode must be derived by the reader since Pynchon is certainly not giving the narrative the omniscience that is crucial for the explicit resolution that traditional conventions necessitate. As John Barth states in *The Literature of Exhaustion*, "not only the "omniscient" author of older fiction, but the very idea of the controlling artist, has been condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist" (65). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon gleefully gives up the role of the "controlling artist" as he asks his readers to simultaneously question the text while remaining open to the questioning of the grand narratives that is inherent throughout the novel.

The final element that will be discussed in this paper is the concept of negative capability as it applies to a reader's understanding of *Gravity's Rainbow*. As previously discussed, Pynchon conditions the reader to remain receptive to the questioning of grand narratives throughout the

novel by constructing a narrative that requires creative and active engagement. However, no matter how creatively and actively engaged the reader is, *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel that lacks a clear resolution to many of its narrative arcs. Negative capability is a term credited to the Romantic poet John Keats that explains the state “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,” (“Negative Capability”). The unstable narrative and unreliable characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* thwart and subvert the classical approach to literature that many readers have come to expect from a novel. In encountering the nontraditional narrative that Pynchon has crafted, the temptation to become frustrated with the persistent uncertainty of the reality, character motives, and the characters themselves is inescapable.

However, Pynchon demands that the reader occupy the space of negative capability in order to remain receptive to the novel. The narrative is unrelenting in its barrage of trivial and, more often than not, meaningless details that threaten to lead the reader down an ultimately futile path. For example, the character of Wimpe is first introduced as having a probable connection to Tchitcherine, though it is suggested that their connection is “not so easy to believe . . . if it were literally true, Tchitcherine wouldn't be here,” as Wimpe's is a salesman for a subsidiary of IG and “it is common knowledge that IG representatives abroad are actually German spies,” (Pynchon 344). The connection between Wimpe and Tchitcherine is held in tantalizing ambiguity that offers a resolution nearly 300 pages later when Tchitcherine experiences an analepsis that details Wimpe introducing Tchitcherine to the drug Oneirine thiophosphate (Pynchon 702). Yet despite the explicit wording of the interaction, it must be held with suspicion since Tchitcherine is “remembering” it while experiencing the drug. It is never clarified if Wimpe and Tchitcherine ever had a concrete relationship, and a resolution to this question is

never reached. Therefore, it is imperative that the reader occupies the space of negative capability and to simply accept the interaction as it is understood by Tchitcherine, who experiences it, not as a human interaction with Wimpe, but as his “first taste – his initiation into the bodyhood of steel . . . no way to separate this from the thiophosphate, to separate vessels of steel from the ungodly insane rush” (Pynchon 702).

In “Death of the Author,” Barthes writes: “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination,” (6). In this epic novel, Pynchon has created a vast and complexly woven web of narrative that not only challenges the reader and the traditional conventions of narrative, but also relies on the reader to remain open to the crucial questions that are intertwined within the unstable narrative. The difficulty of *Gravity’s Rainbow* lies in the reader’s willingness to occupy the space of negative capability while simultaneously remaining creatively and actively engaged with the text in order to experience the novel on Pynchon’s terms. In doing so, the unstable narrative reveals its inherent questioning of the systemic legitimacy of the grand narratives in contemporary society.

Works Cited

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. London: John Hopkins UP, 1984. 62-76. Print.

Barthes, Roland. "Death of the Author." Handout.

Lotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 9th ed. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 1993. Print.

McHale, Brian. "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of Gravity's Rainbow." *Poetics Today*, vol. 1, no. 1/2, 1979, pp. 85–110., www.jstor.org/stable/1772042.

Negative Capability." *Oxford Reference*. N.p., 15 Jan. 2017. Web. 8 Mar. 2017.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. Print.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.

Westervelt, Linda A. "'A Place Dependent on Ourselves': The Reader as System-Builder in Gravity's Rainbow." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1980, pp. 69–90., www.jstor.org/stable/40754596.