

Robby Wouters

3401154

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Proverbs for Paranoids

In the landscape of modern American literature one man stands out from the rest in a peculiar way. His literary presence is marked by absence. Thomas Pynchon (1937) has become the most elusive and enigmatic of all American authors, through his constant refusal to make public appearances or give interviews to the press. Not only does he rarely let his voice be heard outside of his novels, he also refuses to let his appearance be known. He has become the absolute master in avoiding photographers, having not one confirmed photograph taken of him to date since his first novel *V.* was published in 1963. To maintain this high level of anonymity, Pynchon reportedly goes to great lengths; he is said to have gone around dressed in drag to avoid being recognized in bookstores, and one urban myth tells the story of Pynchon letting himself be boxed in in a wooden crate to avoid paparazzi when attending folksinger Joan Baez's wedding. These are drastic measures, and some might think of him as being a nutcase when hearing about his antics. But not all these stories show a neurotic paranoiac; some of them show a great degree of humor, as he seems to mock his own attitude towards publicity and the media. For example, he sent a comedian to the National Book Awards to impersonate him and accept an award on his behalf. Instead

of taking himself and his paranoid tendencies seriously, he seems to enjoy playing the role of the paranoid recluse. Just as he plays around with the concept of paranoia in his real life, he likes to manipulate the idea of paranoia in his novels, not in the least place in his 1973 magnum opus *Gravity's Rainbow*. His characters are far from your typical clinic patient suffering from personality disorders, as they see their paranoia justified by a slew of secret agents actually keeping an eye on them. In Pynchon's world, which is a parody of our own world, suffering from paranoia is not by definition a curse; it can be a blessing.

In the Zone

Since its publication in the 1960's *Gravity's Rainbow* has become notorious for being a fiendishly difficult work of literature. Its' world is inhabited by over a hundred peculiar characters, all with their own personal dysfunctions and deviations, whose actions reach across centuries and continents - even across dimensions and death - covering numerous subjects; science, sex and sexual depravity, statistics, psychiatry, death, linguistics, colonialism, the movie-industry, drugs and kabala. All of this is written down in a dense eclectic style, full of different slangs and jargons, which defies genre and narrative structure. Throughout this labyrinth of language paranoia is a recurrent phenomenon, affecting many of the novel's characters.

Even the novel's protagonist, if we can speak in such terms when it comes to Pynchon's fiction, suffers from unhealthy suspicions. Tyrone Slothrop, an American soldier stationed in England during the last year of the Second World-War, notices a pattern developing between the places where

he has his sexual conquests and the sites of German air raids. A rocket seems to hit every place he has had sexual intercourse within two weeks from the deed. Due to the growing suspicion that he is being watched by government agents who start to direct every move of the world around him, he flees his cozy environment to embark on a quest to find out what the connection is between his sexual behavior and the newly developed V-2 rockets, wandering deep into the occupied remnants of the failed Third Reich, nicknamed "The Zone". Here he discovers that as a child he was conditioned by a Pavlovian-scientist, Dr. Laszlo Jamf. The scientific method of Pavlovian conditioning serves to alter a person's (or animal's) response-pattern. Two stimuli are presented to the subject: one neutral stimulus and one stimulus that causes a particular response in the subject. By exposing the subject to the two stimuli, the response to the non-neutral stimulus would occur. Through repeated exposure to both stimuli, over time the neutral stimulus and the actual stimulus would become inseparable to the subject. The neutral stimulus would adopt the response that belongs to the other stimulus, which is now no longer needed to evoke the response. Slothrop's conditioned response is to get erections when faced with an unusual and mysterious stimulus. The clues lead to a special rocket, one with the serial number 00000, which contains a one-of-a-kind device, the Schwarzgerat, which is fashioned out of a polymer developed by Dr. Jamf called Imipolex G. Slothrop believes this Imipolex G may be the stimulus in his Pavlovian conditioning and makes the rocket the Holy Grail of his quest. In finding the rocket he hopes to find out which purpose he may serve to the different institutions and/or governments who are now violently persecuting him. The quest never comes

to a real conclusion as we find out the 00000 has already been launched months earlier, denying Slothrop his truth. He loses his identity as he literally dissolves into different parts, which wander of separately into the Zone.

But calling Slothrop's story the main storyline would be a stretch. It is merely one of many allegories, parodies and theories Pynchon launches at us in his book. This is partly because of the multiplicity of voices and intertwining storylines in the novel, and not in the last place because a consistent plot is not what Pynchon is trying to achieve with his writing. There are tons of other characters, and all of them seem to have a personal quest, a goal they try to reach. The thing they have in common is that this goal would complete their level of understanding of the world around them, and allow them to transcend this world. In the novel a variety of systems are introduced, all of which serve as a possible means of transcendence; there's science, religion, art and governmental systems such as democracy and communism. There is a firm belief in these characters that by adhering to these ideological systems, the system will eventually allow them a way out, and make them transcend the world altogether. But these system always seem to miss something, as they always fail to be all encompassing, they fail to supply their followers with the true answer. This leaves the characters being stuck in the secular world, while they are aiming for a higher, providential goal. Some of the characters believe that paranoia offers them a way to transcendence; that it will show them another way out. Paranoia allows them to see that the possibility of transcendence is indeed there, but the more important question is: how does paranoia offer them a way to transcend the world around them?

Amongst all these hopeless characters Slothrop is the only one who reaches a transcendence of sorts. This makes Slothrop's story the most conclusive one, and as it illustrates the different stages of a person developing paranoia and the consequences of this condition very well, this makes him an extremely interesting subject for analysis of paranoia. Another well-rounded story is that of Franz Pökler, a tragic tale of a German rocket scientist who has paranoid tendencies and symptoms, but fails to put his paranoia to use. These two characters represent the two ends of the paranoid spectrum in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Since it would be impossible to take all of the novel's characters in account when exploring the novel's use of paranoia, and since they seem to all share a similar mindset, the analysis will be limited to these two extremes.

A novel as complex and confusing as *Gravity's Rainbow* almost begs to be made comprehensible, picked apart and put back together again like a puzzle. But *Gravity's Rainbow* is not at all a puzzle with parts that fit perfectly. It defies total comprehension as it mirrors its subject matter in its narrative structure; it is a novel about the human inability to connect all the dots and come to a conclusion, a final truth. Giving a conclusive reading of the novel would mean we surpass its real meaning, resulting in us not grasping the novel's essence at all. To try and understand the novel means we would make the same mistake as Pynchon's characters, which hopelessly keep aiming for goals they can never reach.

One-Dimensional Society

Pynchon does not supply his reader with conclusive stories, as his novels are more concerned with ideas than they are with narratives. The various ideas in his novel stem from the way in which his characters interact with, and interpret the world around them. Pynchon's world is akin to our real world, yet he often approaches it in a satirical way and is mainly concerned with marginal figures. He is known for writing meta-historical novels, in which historical events and facts are creatively reinterpreted to create an alternate view on our history. Though Pynchon surely uses historical facts to create his stories, he doesn't choose to retell big stories in a different way, he rather uses significant historical events to validate the marginal story he's telling. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the Second World War forms the background to Pynchon's story. However, instead of using obvious themes and events such as the Holocaust and the inhumanity of the Nazi-Reich, Pynchon focuses on more persistent issues. Proof of this is the fact that Hitler is barely mentioned in the entire novel, and though the concentration camps are present, the characters show no knowledge of what has really been going on there. Instead of reconfiguring history, Pynchon merely gives a side note to historical events. Yet with his marginal story, Pynchon creates a world that can coexist with the true historical world of the Second World War.

The world Pynchon imagines in *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of corrupt governments, big corporations and war-based industry. It is a novel that is not as much concerned with the tribulations of everyday life, but rather with the systems that govern the society in which we live. It gives a look behind the scenes of these governmental institutions and allows us a glimpse of its

secretive workings, which are closely tied in with the technological and scientific advancement at the novel's core. The unseen enemy that is trying to apprehend Slothrop and many other characters in the book seems to have technological advancement as its highest goal. In his 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* German philosopher Herbert Marcuse sets out to analyze the forces at play in our modern societies, who have been significantly altered by the drive for technology and science. Marcuse discusses the way in which our highly developed western capitalist societies claim to be democratic, giving us a sense of freedom, which is false.

Ever since the industrial revolution in the 19th century, society has come to rely more and more heavily on technological advancement. Through mechanization and the rise of the social institution of the factory our society has been radically altered. Before the machines and factories, historical processes such as the Enlightenment had advocated the idea of becoming an individual as being the greatest good. Individuality depends on one important thing; the possibility to develop a personal rationality. What the individual asks from the society in which he lives is freedom to develop this rationality without any interference from the institutions that govern the society. Then technology came along and seemingly made our lives easier. It made hard labor redundant and created a high standard of living and wellbeing. But on the other hand the technological advancement of factories and machines demanded a different social structure. No longer was the individual the highest cause, but the societal advancement through technology became the ultimate goal. The individual is expected to accept his being inferior to the masses. In this way technological advancement and the dynamics of the

machine damage the individuality of the people as it necessitates a shift from individual rationality to a broader, shared technological rationality. By changing the social situation around it, the technological rationality expands beyond the realm of industry.

Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe (Marcuse 31).

Through this rationality, the technological society becomes totalitarian as it influences and dictates all parts of the lives of its inhabitants. The system's main goal is furthering itself and keeping the system intact. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the scientific advancement is represented by the rising technology of the rocket-industry. The government asks their public to support their technological advancement through rocketry, even though it can be used for destructive purposes.

But how can a system that clearly asks for a degree of submission from the public maintain itself? By making them think the good outweighs the bad and keeping them ignorant of the degree to which they are being enslaved to the system. They are kept happy and satisfied with the rich and wealthy lives they are able to lead through technological advancement and the increasing overall wealth. They can afford comfortable housing, choose from a wide variety of goods and spent their free time as they wish. But to Marcuse, this idyllic existence is just a ruse.

Free choice amongst a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social control over a life of toil and fear [...] (23).

The public believes that the new social institutions and the government enable them to choose their own individual form of life. Indeed government and industry can supply them with a multitude of products but it's the suppliers of these products who make them seem necessary and beneficial. They create a need in the public's consciousness, needs Marcuse calls false needs, as industrial societies themselves create them for its inhabitants. Through the fulfillment of these false needs, which can be easily met, the illusion of wealth and wellbeing can be sustained. The illusion is being created that the workers are fulfilling their personal basic needs, while in fact they are fulfilling needs those in charge of the institutions and companies have forced on them. This is the way in which, through the devices of media and consumerism, the workers are kept in check and forced to work harder to fulfill needs that will not actually raise their level of wellbeing. The democratic society turns out to be an authoritarian one, with large corporations and governments telling the people what they need in order to lead a happy life. This false feeling of wealth and equality distracts from the inequality in the fulfillment of more basic needs, such as the lack of health insurance for the lower classes, a privilege that the factory bosses and members of governmental institutions do enjoy. The freedom they so proudly present to their citizens is in fact a limited freedom, as it is impossible to think outside the discourse of the community. This turns the freedom into an unfreedom, which the masses gladly accept. Not only are the lower classes captured by this system, it enslaves all social ranks. In *Gravity's Rainbow* even the persons who are working for the enslaving institution are being held in its grasp and are unable to escape.

But why is there little or no rebellion against a repressive system that supplies its inhabitants with false ideals? The technological rationality of these societies is all encompassing and totalitarian. Everything within its power is aimed at furthering its own reign. According to Marcuse, this also gives the technological society its power to denounce subversive elements.

The technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests – to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible (25).

All thoughts outside the discourse of technological rationality seems irrational to the inhabitants enslaved to this system. The society neutralizes its own enemies, by making thought outside their own system seem irrational by default. This in turn makes the development of subversive elements within its own confines nearly impossible. Through these mechanisms, society creates the “one-dimensional man” of the title. The idea of the one-dimensional society is a society in which every thought outside the societal discourse is made impossible by the closed system of discourse the government imposes on its inhabitants. They are stuck in the dimension of the repressive technological society.

Both these books were written in the era we call the Cold War. This period was characterized by distrust between the capitalist West, mainly presented by America, and the communist Soviet Union. Interestingly, both these books invalidate the idea of difference between these factions. Even though Pynchon’s novel is set in a period before the emergence of this hostility, it already negates the idea of capitalism and communism being total opposites. Marcuse states that both forms of government lead to a repressive

system, in which no opposing, harmful thoughts are allowed to exist. These repressive systems claim to be the best forms of government, and use the alternative of communism or capitalism to emphasize how good their society is. The idea of antagonism is beneficial for both sides, as it reassures the public that the enemy is out there, not amidst their own people. War or peace, communist or capitalist; the goal of the industrialist society remains the same: repression. Pynchon's novel sees these two nations both trying to apprehend Slothrop for their own advancement, confirming their likeminded goals. Though this concept is very characteristic of the Cold War mentality, Pynchon already saw its mechanisms at work in the period his book takes place, the Second World War.

All this points to Pynchon's acknowledgement of larger forces at work, forces transcending national governments. A large part of the characters are tied in with the institutions controlling society, working as scientists for the big rocket-corporations, or as government officials. These characters are either responsible for instating the system or they believe the merits of a technological society outweigh its downsides. But the majority of the novel's characters, whether they serve the government and corporations or are persecuted by them, have come to a realization about the repressive nature of their society. They may live in a one-dimensional society yet they seem to have become aware of a possibility for rebellion as they start having subversive thoughts. The inhabitants of the novel's world do not simply adhere to the one-dimensional thought that comes with their repressive society. There is a resistance taking shape as a lot of its members have come

to a higher level of understanding, some of them by employing the processes of paranoia.

Paranoids

One of the tools the characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* employ to reach this level of understanding and search for alternatives seems to be paranoia. The word 'paranoia' is often on the lips of many different characters, most of which are self-proclaimed paranoiacs/paranoids. The suspicions of the characters range from small; such as Roger Mexico's belief his girlfriend is being unfaithful to him, to extremely large and all encompassing, for example the rebellion of the Schwarzcommando, a renegade group of Africans, once trained by the Germans to serve as rocket troops. They even dip into the realm of the surreal with the story an anthropomorphic immortal light bulb that feels he is being hunted down by a light bulb-cartel that wants him executed. It is obvious that paranoia plays a major role in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but what does it exactly mean to be paranoid in Pynchon's world? And how does Pynchon's idea of paranoia differ from the psychological disorder as recognized by psychoanalysts?

From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, paranoia is a tough nut to crack. Even the founding father of the trade, Sigmund Freud, had trouble finding a conclusive definition of paranoid phenomena. Part of the problem was that paranoid behavior is often seen in patients suffering from schizophrenia, making it hard to draw a line between the two afflictions. It is even suggested that the two conditions often coexisted in a patient, with one having the upper hand over the other (Kheshgi-Genovese 49). Freud also acknowledges the

use of paranoid thought as a defense mechanism for otherwise perfectly healthy people. This paranoid defense stems from a repression of guilt or blame for one's own actions, doubts or negative ideas. This leads to self-reproach, which is then projected outside of the person's sphere of power, making the person himself blameless for his failure or misfortune (Kheshgi-Genovese 50-51). But it is possible for the use of this defense to become pathological, making the patient unable to affirm he/she is using the paranoid reaction as a defense. The person can either recognize the use of a paranoid defense mechanism in his unfair projection of his own fault on others, or he can remain unable to reincorporate the projected self-reproach into his own character. In the latter case, the person creates a force outside of his own power, which has control over him; this is the beginning of a paranoid delusion.

The biggest difficulty is in pointing out what exactly leads to the excessive use of these paranoid thoughts, and what in effect causes a paranoid disorder. Both Freud and William W. Meissner, the writer of *The Paranoid Process*, the most extensive study of the subject of paranoia to date, ascribe the root of this constant use of externalizing one's own guilt to a heightened sense of self-importance or narcissism. Narcissism makes the internalizing of the repressed self-reproach almost impossible, as the negative ideas do not fit into the positive self-image of the narcissistic patient. The externalization is more persistent, and this externalized force may cause a delusion that seems to exist totally outside the person.

Both Freud and Meissner attribute the development of narcissistic tendencies to childhood. The former even seeks the cause in a reversal of the

Oedipus complex (e.g. a daughter clinging to her mother). Because the patient shows more affection to the parent of his/her own sex, he/she will later be more attracted to his/her own genitalia, which will spark homosexual tendencies (Freud 265). If we would try to relate these ideas to the paranoid populace of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we immediately reach an insurmountable obstacle; the general absence of information about the character's youth. Most of the novel's characters don't get a detailed backstory, and even Slothrop's youth remains for the larger part unknown, as this is where the secret to his Pavlovian conditioning lies. It is impossible to view each case separate and look at the roots of their narcissism and paranoia. There is however most certainly a sense of self-importance, of being different from the rest, which would justify the idea that some of these characters are narcissistic. But to speak of *self*-importance would only be a half-truth. For example, Slothrop has the idea that he must be different as he notices the connection between his erections and the bombings. But it is only when different institutions start showing interest in his endeavors that he sees this suspicion of uniqueness confirmed. Not only are his suspicions confirmed, they are enlarged with the idea that this unique feature gives him a special importance to other people. It is not only he himself who sees himself as being different and unique, but it's also his unknown persecutors who enforce this feeling in him. The narcissistic tendencies in Slothrop's psyche are not purely narcissistic; they are justified by outside sources, or even entirely created by them. This makes the narcissistic grounds for paranoia questionable and shaky.

But how can this sort of semi-narcissism turn into paranoia? First we should look at how paranoia is defined in the psychoanalytical community. Though hard to pinpoint its causes, the symptoms of paranoia are extensively researched and well documented. For an overview of these symptoms we can turn to the reference book published by the American Psychiatric Association: *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. It defines Paranoid Personality Disorders as follows:

The pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by four(or more) of the following:

- (1) suspects, without sufficient basis, that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving him or her
- (2) is preoccupied with unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends and associates
- (3) is reluctant to confide in others because of unwarranted fear that the information will be used maliciously against him or her
- (4) reads hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events
- (5) persistently bears grudges, i.e., is unforgiving of insults, injuries or slights
- (6) perceives attacks on his or her character or reputation that are not apparent to others and is quick to react angrily or to counterattack
- (7) has recurrent suspicions, without justification, regarding fidelity of spouse or sexual partner (694)

One of the key elements of all these symptoms is the unjustifiability of the patient's delusion. The distrust is "without sufficient basis", "without justification" or "unwarranted". But, just as Slothrop's narcissism has been

justified by external sources, the paranoia is triggered by forces outside of his own power. His prosecutors use violent manners to imprison Slothrop, to possibly harm him psychically or mentally. The distrust and suspicions this causes in Slothrop towards others is not unreasonable, as he is merely trying to save his own skin. But what the outside forces do not try to harm is Slothrop's self-image; they rather perpetuate it, decreasing his need to externalize any reproach. So in *Gravity's Rainbow*, narcissism follows a different path to paranoia as the one Freud suggested. Rather than stemming from an injured narcissism, Slothrop's paranoia is partly justified, and its incompleteness is what perpetuates it. Slothrop does not know why he is being watched by these institutions, as they only affirm something is special about him, without clarifying his uniqueness and their use for it. These blind spots cause Slothrop to hypothesize about their real motives, and this is where his own imagination starts to run wild. He is not creating a fantasy from scratch, but rather filling in the blanks with his own ideas. Just as with his narcissism, his paranoia has both external and internal causes. Yet Slothrop does not suffer from delusions per se; he rather suffers from uncertainty pertaining the truth of his own nature, and the reasons for his prosecution.

In the *DSM-IV*-definition, paranoia is described as a suspicion of one single or a small group of individuals' motives. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, paranoia is not an externalized negative idea; paranoia is the product of an external force. The process of externalization would call for a subject to project the externalized idea on. In this case, choosing a single person to project the idea on is an easy way to objectify this externalized idea. But for Slothrop there is no externalization, instead there is the uncertainty about who is persecuting

him. This makes it impossible to clearly point out a person or group of persons who are to blame. It is a collaborative effort between agents of various institutes, who form a conspiracy to capture Slothrop. Slothrop uses a linguistic construct, the capitalized "They", to define them, but this concept remains vague. The frustration is voiced in his self-created proverb: "You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures" (Pynchon 237). Slothrop acknowledges the existence of a hierarchy in the system, and while the large network of minor players in the conspiracy can be easily exposed, those higher up the ladder manage to remain anonymous. Everyone can be in on the conspiracy, yet Slothrop is unable to pinpoint the one force that is masterminding the operation. Without an externalization and obvious enemy a suspicion is born, which is unfocused and all encompassing. Once again it is uncertainty that keeps Slothrop guessing, not only as to what is going on, but also as to who is keeping an eye on him. And most importantly, who he can trust and who is out to harm him.

This leaves Slothrop in a rather hopeless position, as it is him against an unknown enemy, whose size and power he can only guess at. But the paranoia he experiences is not just Slothrop's paranoia. As he gets to know more and more about his condition and his persecutors he meets various other characters, who seem to suffer from a similar kind of distrust. These fellow paranoids have not all had the same experiences Slothrop went through. Somehow however, they have reached the same level of understanding as him. While Slothrop needs the reassuring conformation of his ideas by outside sources clearly validating his suspicions, these other paranoids may have reached this level by different means. The other

paranoids may not have government agents chasing them, they are aware of the existence of these hidden organizations. What these characters have in common is the knowledge that there are forces at work which are hidden from the masses, and which surpass even the power of national governments. They are able to take a peek behind the curtain, see the true machinations of the world. They are skeptical of the society around them, knowing that there are indeed forces out there that are constantly repressing subversive elements in their society. This realization leads to the recognition of the false freedom that these institutions pass for real freedom, the repressive system of the one-dimensional society, and in most cases this fuels the desire to escape this system of illusions and attain real freedom. The paranoids may each have their own interpretation of this goal, a personal object embodying this unfreedom for them, but they recognize a common enemy in the institutions governing the society around them.

In our real world, someone suffering from paranoia would be hesitant to admit this, as it would acknowledge the presence of a narcissistic persona under attack by negative ideas. The affirming of the paranoia would mean acknowledging another weakness, and this is just what paranoia is suppressing. The idea that the suspicions are actually the effect of paranoia, and thus stem from the person's own mind is hard to grasp for the patient, as they feel there is an outside force at work. So it wouldn't be very likely for a patient suffering from paranoia to label himself as being paranoid. In fact, the realization of one's paranoia would mean the recognition of the unjustified suspicions as being unjustified, and ridiculous. By recognizing paranoia for what it is, the paranoiac would be cured. So if the characters in *Gravity's*

Rainbow were actual paranoiacs, they wouldn't be able to proudly state this as a fact.

Pynchon extracts paranoia from the consciousness of the individual to a larger shared consciousness. Instead of viewing it as a psychological personality disorder they see it as a stance towards reality, a skeptical distrust of the society they live in. They seem to willingly and gladly call themselves paranoids, as it sets them apart from the blind masses, and gives them a feeling of opposition to the repressing forces of our society. The paranoids form an elite club, as they are the ones in on a secret that most people don't know. This creates a bonding element, making the different characters stick together through their trials and tribulations. All of them might in a way have been wronged by the system, or have simply come to see their way to redemption or enlightenment; they all try to escape or transcend the system in order to attain true freedom instead of the Marcusean unfreedom society gives them. The methods that lead to the realization of this possible transcendence, and the motives as to why one would want to reach this transcendence might differ from man to man; they have a common enemy, which consists of the government agents and the representatives of corporations that help sustain the industrial society as it is, and according to them, as it should be.

On the edge

All characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* aim at reaching transcendence; to escape the inescapable system society has build around us. But a lot of the characters fail to reach this goal, as their rebellion proves futile. One of these failed paranoids is the German rocket-scientist Franz Pökler. His story, largely

told in one of the most lengthy sequences of the book (page 397 to 433), is one of the more tragic tales in *Gravity's Rainbow*, demonstrating the recognition of the hidden powers at work, and the inability to rebel against them.

Pökler works as a rocket-engineer designing new forms of rockets for the German army. He knows that this technological device will be used to wage wars and destroy lives, yet he also sees the positive aspects of technological advancement.

“They’re using you to kill people,” Leni told him, as clearly as she could.

“That’s their only job and you’re helping them.”

“We’ll all use *it* someday, to leave the earth. To transcend.” (Pynchon 400)

Pökler believes that science can become a system through which we will one day be able to transcend secular history and reach a higher goal. This justifies his efforts to further technological developments. He looks beyond the present, towards a possible future society that might stem from the existing society. This is a peculiar stance, as it is just the mindset Marcuse advocates in the last part of *One-Dimensional Man*, “The Chance of the Alternatives”. Pökler sees the current societies wrongdoings as justifiable by this greater cause, and this allows him to work for the war-machine.

After Pökler is deserted by his wife Leni, who takes their infant daughter Ilse with her, he moves in to the research facility in Peenemunde, which is led by SS-Captain Dominus “Blicero” Weissmann. Here Pökler continues knowingly developing destructive weaponry for years, until one day his daughter shows up in his cubicle. Ilse tells him Weissmann has brought her there. His initial reaction is to become mad at Weissmann for snooping around in his past and interfering with his life. Through Weissmann’s actions, Pökler professional life is invading his personal life, and he wants to keep the

two separate. But he also learns that Ilse and Leni are being held in a camp “surrounded by barbed wire and bright hooded lights that burned all night long” (408). A colleague of his tells him these are SS-run re-education camps, and Pökler concludes Weissmann is either responsible for the imprisonment of his wife and child or he is granting him a favor by letting him see his daughter. Just as suddenly as she appeared, Ilse disappears again, and Pökler is furious, realizing Weissmann and his fellow SS-men are using their power to keep him under their spell.

In this period he starts working closely together with Weissmann on problems of temperature and combustion in the new rocket. Instead of mentioning Weissmann’s involvement in his daughter and wife’s imprisonment, he just obeys his rules. He feels that the life of his wife and child depend on the efficiency of his performance. They’ve got him in a grip, and he can only follow their directions.

He was expected to behave a certain way – not just to play a role, but to live it. Any deviations into jealousy, metaphysics, vagueness would be picked up immediately: he would either be corrected back on course, or allowed to fall.

(Pynchon 417)

He is being captured in the discourse of science, anything that doesn’t correspond with it, the human feeling of jealousy, or the unscientific ideas of metaphysics, are dismissed. He truly becomes a cog in the machine, as he realizes he is being used as a natural resource rather than a human being, as his individuality is not allowed to interfere with the task at hand. But he must carry on like this, for they hold to power to keep his daughter safe and in his reach.

But all this changes with his next discovery. Eventually, Ilse shows up again, as a reward for his good work for Weissmann. But, this time Ilse looks different. Pökler is suspicious of Weissmann and his co-conspirators, thinking that they are merely offering him a surrogate daughter. They have found a need Pökler has, and they are fulfilling this need in order to keep him happy, to distract him from the needs they can't fulfill while he is working hard in their enclosed factory. But the fulfillment of the need for a family is unsatisfactory, as they cannot supply him with the true gratification he longs for. They've turned this true need into a repressive need, and because of this it leads not to freedom, but unfreedom. Also, the fulfillment is forced on him and involuntary. He recognizes that the society is forcing needs on him that he doesn't actually require, and even though their fulfillment of these needs is far from perfect he recognizes the feeling of happiness it supplies him with, however fake it might be. Pökler comes to see the mechanism of the one-dimensional society he is caught in, but he doesn't know how to deal with it.

The paranoia that began when he found out about Weissmann's knowledge of his private life is given a new jolt and set into motion again. Pökler's imagination runs wild as he starts guessing at the means and motives of his repressors' actions. He imagines they have been watching his every move, know him through and through, even psychically. He starts thinking they deliberately send him different "Ilse's" every year, in order for him to live out some depraved sexual fantasy in which he would want to have intercourse with his own "daughter". These suspicions stem from knowing that Weissmann has information about his past, and the uncertainty to what extent this knowledge reaches. Maybe they even know more about him than

he himself will ever know. Pökler sees there is a system at work here, and because he cannot see the scope of this system it frightens him. The possibility that they are behind everything, know everything and control everything is frightening, and he can never be sure just how far their reach is. Combined with the satisfaction he gets from the visits from his daughter, this disable Pökler to rebel against the system, which has become his captor.

So Pökler decides to accept the situation he is in and keep going on like this, getting to see his "daughter" every year and take her on a furlough to the child themed vacation park on the German shore named Zwölfkinder. But one year he arrives back at Peenemunde to find the place has suffered an air raid, and many of his colleagues have died. This is when he realizes the system of false needs is used not only as a repressive tool to keep him in check, but also as a way to secretly keep him safe from harm. He realizes "Weissmann was saving him for something: some unique destiny" (423). This is when Pökler gets an idea of self-importance, narcissism. This is only after the paranoia has already firmly taken root in his mind. Before this, the systems of control and repression his employers use to enslave workers was a system that appeared to be used on every and any worker. Now, Pökler is being singled out from the crowd.

The last time Pökler goes to Zwölfkinder, he is again accompanied by a version of Ilse he now knows almost certainly is not his daughter. She confirms all of his suspicions when she simply answers the question whether it will be truly her, who will be back next year.

"I'll come back," she said very quietly.

"You?"

“Yes. Really.” (430)

This acknowledgement changes something in Pökler. Before, he was skeptical of his own need for these weeks of vacation with his “daughter”, but now he accepts the need, even though he knows it to be false. He turns the needs ascribed to him by society, a need that is false by default, into a true need because it gives him a sense of happiness and wealth he does not want to miss. He conforms to the system of repression, and he does so knowingly.

At the end of the chapter, after Pökler has performed the tasks for which Weissmann needed him, Pökler is faced with the atrocities of the death camps. He goes looking for his daughter in the re-education camp, which of course turns out to be a concentration camp riddled with disease, death and misery. He doesn't find any incarnation of his daughter, but he does find a feeling of guilt in seeing the casualties the system he has worked for, and he himself, allow in the name of technological advancement. The absurdity of a machine that will allow people to kill each other at great quantities, and at the same time allows a way “to transcend” is made visible to Pökler.

Pökler has just the same insights and suspicions as other paranoids in the book, yet he fails to rebel against the repressive forces around him. He becomes paranoid, yet instead of standing up against the system, he chooses to dwell in the happy existence they have modeled for him. Pökler differs from most paranoid, in that he has no strong will of his own. He follows orders of his employers and he even believes in the system of technological advancement. Pökler is far from a narcissistic character, so when his importance to the larger society is revealed to him by Weissmann, he get this awareness of self-importance from an outside source. The idea that he is of

importance to his employers, that he has something unique to offer, empowers Pökler as it gives him something he can deny the ones who are in need for it. But Pökler has already accepted the fabricated world they have offered them, with the love and comfort of his fake daughter. His narcissism comes too late, and all he is left with is regret when he is let go by the factory and no longer depends on them for the fulfillment of these needs. He could have denounced the system, but he did not have the guts to do so, as this would mean he would have had to live without the fulfillment of his false need, and start building a new system of happiness and wealth from scratch. He sees the system, recognizes it as repressive and bad, but doesn't rebel against it. Recognition of the system is a prerequisite to transcending it, yet most of the paranoids remain stuck at this level. The problem with these paranoids is that they are unable to take the final step they need to take in order to transcend the one-dimensional society they live. Or as Pynchon calls it, they only reach a state of secondary illumination:

Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in 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...

(703, Pynchon's italics)

Pökler is one of those held at the edge, yet he did not dare to take the jump, just as these so many other paranoids. They recognize the system they are captured in and that is trying to repress them, but they fail at totally denounce this system for what it is.

Making an American lieutenant disappear

While Pökler does not manage to escape the repressive system he became aware of, and eventually came to loathe, there are some characters in the universe of Gravity's Rainbow that get more out of their paranoia. The most developed example of this is the novel's protagonist Tyrone Slothrop. His story can be seen as an opposite to Pökler's story, which turns out to be a rather tragic tale of inability to act. But it is not a correct assumption that Slothrop's story does get a happy ending. Though clearly striving for transcendence, it rather emphasizes the difficulties or even impossibilities in attaining it.

Compared to Pökler, Slothrop does have a strong will of his own and is not one to blindly follow orders. His narcissism is firmly installed when he first shows up in the novel's first part, "Beyond the Zero". He is working in London at ACHTUNG, an acronym for Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany. Oddly, we never really get to know the exact purpose of this unit, as Slothrop and his colleague Tantivy Mucker-Maffick with whom he shares an office seem to have chosen their own field of interest, wandering around London and studying the crash sites of German rockets. This is due to Slothrop's belief that these rockets are somehow connected to his own person.

He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it – if they're really set on getting him ("They" embracing possibilities far far beyond Nazi Germany) that's the surest way, doesn't cost them a thing to paint his name *on every one, right?* (Pynchon 25, Pynchon's italics)

When Slothrop begins seeing a connection between his sexual conquests - more particularly (and egotistically) his erections - we are not sure whether these suspicions are caused by his own narcissistic personality or by his

awareness of outside forces showing interest in his person. We do however know these forces are both at work, but which one came first is unclear. Pynchon begins his novel at an ambiguous point in Slothrop's life, where it is impossible to tell whether his narcissistic paranoia is mainly caused by internal or external sources. He is however constantly aware of a hostile presence, the vaguely defined "They", who are keeping a close eye on him through secret agents. These wild assumptions would make Slothrop a highly dysfunctional and paranoid character, if it weren't for the fact that his suspicions are perfectly understandable and validated by the fact that he is indeed being watched.

Even before Slothrop himself is introduced in the novel we get to see some of the persons working for "Them", which validates Slothrop's paranoia for the readers. A British soldier, Teddy Bloat, sneaks into Slothrop's office to photograph the map on which he is keeping track of his sexual conquests. Bloat is merely following orders, and he too is oblivious to "whoever's funding this little caper" (18). As I've stated before, it is not the fact that there is a conspiracy against Slothrop that triggers his paranoid delusions; it's the uncertainty about the scope of the conspiracy that causes him to be constantly on his guard with everyone he meets. The fact that one of the agents working for "Them" has no idea who he is working for makes the conspiracy even more absurd. Also, the reader shares the same uncertainty as the characters; how big is this conspiracy and who's in on it? Because of this doubt of their own the reader is able to sympathize with Slothrop and the other paranoids, as they will not immediately deem them to be completely deranged and delusional.

Slothrop is ordered by his army superiors to visit Veronica's hospital, where he is drugged and presumably questioned about his past. The revelations these experiments offer are unknown to the reader, as we see this experience from Slothrop's point of view, which results in a drugged out incomprehensible episode which involves travelling down a toilet in his old hometown of Boston. The situation however is typical for the way technological society uses its workers as a resource. The exploitation of workers by their employers is driven to an extreme; even their subconsciousness isn't safe from Them.

Another one of the key players in the conspiracy against Slothrop is introduced in the first part, which is the aforementioned Dr. Edward Pointsman. He is working at a mental hospital, The White Visitation, where he does research in Pavlovian conditioning. His superiors, who in their anonymity seem to belong to the elusive "They", have assigned him to review Slothrop's case on a psychological level. His interest in Slothrop is related to his expertise in the peculiar school of physiology that is Pavlovian conditioning. He believes Slothrop's erections point to a conditioned response to the rocket bombings, an idea that Slothrop will later find to be true when he gathers information on his own past as Laszlo Jamf's testing subject. He develops a plan to (re-)gain control over Slothrop.

The novel's second part, "Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering" is where Slothrop's paranoia really kicks in. He is on a furlough to the aforementioned casino on the French Riviera with his colleague Tantivy and Teddy Bloat, who happens to be a friend of Tantivy's. The episode starts with the elaborate

scheme Pointsman has concocted, which goal is to get Slothrop involved with Dutch temptress and undercover agent Katje Borgesius, by using a Pavlovian conditioned octopus, named Grigori. While Slothrop and his fellow vacationers are on the beach, the octopus will emerge from the sea to attack Katje, and Teddy, who is in on the scheme, will force Slothrop to save the damsel in distress from the tentacles of the beast. When Slothrop sees Katje being snatched by Grigori, he immediately rushes in to help her and starts attacking the octopus with a champagne bottle he has handy. In the heat of the battle Teddy produces a live crab out of nowhere, and gives it to Slothrop in order to lure the creature away from Katje. This small detail is what triggers Slothrop's suspicions: why would Teddy go around carrying a live crab with him? Though farfetched and ridiculous, this scene sparks Slothrop's idea that everything around him might be prearranged, with those who have taken an interest in him pulling the strings in order to get him where they want him.

He does however fall in love with Katje, but it is with the utmost suspicion. He really loves Katje, yet he knows they have arranged for this love affair to happen. In a way "They" have fulfilled his need, and in doing so are controlling him. They saw a need in Slothrop they knew how to fulfill, and through this fulfillment they hope to keep him happy enough to make him blind for the way they are being exploited. In a way, Katje's role is similar to Ilse's role in Pökler's story. They are the gratifying presence the paranoids can't deny and it takes a strong man to refuse this forced fulfillment of their needs. Even Slothrop accepts it, but remains skeptical and on his guard.

During their time together at the Riviera, Katje performs an important act, which is symbolic for what "They" are really trying to do to Slothrop. While

messing around in their hotel room, Katje pull the sheets over Slothrop's like a magician would do when letting his assistant disappear.

“Magic!” she cries, and tosses the tablecloth over him, precisely wrinkling folds propagating swift as crystal faults, redly through the air.

“Watch closely, while I make one American lieutenant disappear”. (198)

In a way Katje contributes to Slothrop's real disappearance, as she is there to distract Slothrop while an unseen agent enters their hotel room and steals Slothrop's clothing and documents, leaving him without identification, and essentially without identity. This should of course cripple Slothrop's narcissistic tendencies, as they seem to deny him any worth. But Slothrop sees what they are trying to do, and remains virtually unharmed by it.

During his stay at the casino Slothrop composes his own so-called “Proverbs for Paranoids”, a series of sayings which affirm Slothrop's consciousness of his paranoid symptoms, invalidating the idea of true psychic disorder, and give us an insight in his view of his “enemy”. One of the proverbs states: “The innocence of the creatures is in inverse proportion to the immorality of the Master.” This corresponds with Bloat's and the other agents' cluelessness to the identity of those who are giving them their commands. Slothrop realizes that these agents are merely being used by his true enemies, who are the ones that are responsible for perpetuating the reign of the repressive societal system. After all, Slothrop once worked for the same governmental institutions they may belong to. He either did so being unaware of the real goals of his employer, or consenting with their views (which is unlikely, since he now so fervently contends them). Anyway, he does know how hard it is to see this system for what it really is. Where Pökler's enemy was represented by one government agent, who was most likely aware of the

system's goals, Slothrop's real enemy remains unseen as it is represented by a network of innocent stooges. He realizes he can never escape Their grasp by battling Their minions, so he merely becomes defensive to these innocents and looks for another way out of the system. Also, since They are after the same thing as Slothrop is, the truth about his conditioning and the rocket, he finds that the agents they send after him tend to help him along on this quest. So the situation he is in is, although artificial, beneficial to his own goals.

Even when Katje disappears as sudden as she came into his life, Slothrop remains calm and awaits Their next move. But when he reads his friend Tantivy's obituary in the newspaper, he decides to break free from the system that is manipulating the world around him anyway. He believes his friend's death was Their doing and sees it as the confirmation that the system does not care about the wellbeing of the individual if it stands in the way of the greater good; advancement of the society at large. Slothrop flees the casino and starts his lonesome journey towards his Holy Grail and salvation; the rocket.

The third part of the novel, "In the Zone", sees Slothrop escaping into the remnants of the conquered German Reich. On his trip through the Zone, he meets a variety of fellow paranoids, who are on the same level of understanding the world around them as he is. There is Gerhardt Von Göll, a former film director turned black-market salesman under the alias "Der Springer", and the mother-and-son duo of smugglers, Frau Gnahn and Otto Gnahn, who all speak the same language of paranoia as Slothrop and know about the mysterious rocket he is after. They feed his suspicions as they fill in

the blind spots in his story with their knowledge of the unseen systems at work. They also create a growing sense of antagonism between the paranoids and “Them”. Although they’re all reaching for a personal enlightenment, they decide to stick together against their common enemy.

Having his identity taken from him by Them back at the casino, Slothrop is forced to take on different disguises and aliases. He starts out as British reporter Ian Scuffling, until a bunch of stoners turn him into made-up superhero “der Raketemensch” or “Rocketman”, dressed in a cape and a pointed rocket-shaped cap, a ridiculous getup he loses to become Russian soldier Max Schlepzig, until his final transformation into pagan pig-god Plechazunga in order to take part in the village festival of a small German town. During this process Slothrop becomes a true master of disguise, leaving behind his former identities completely. As his identity has been “stolen” at the casino, he tries to fully identify with his new roles, and he is very successful at doing so. In an encounter late in the novel between Slothrop and one of his main persecutors, Major Duane Marvy of the American army, he is disguised as Russian soldier Max Schlepzig. Oddly enough, Marvy, who has seen Slothrop before, fails to look past his disguise and actually believes him to be a Russian soldier.

In a way Slothrop has reached a state that is rare in the one-dimensional universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*. He is able to take on any role, without being pushed into that role by a superior force. Where Pökler was being corrected and forced back into his role whenever he left his scientific discourse, Slothrop refuses to be forced into a role they have created for him. When they took his identity and let him escape from the simulated world of the

casino, he became an undefined human being, a blank slate. He himself gained the power to choose the roles he needs to play, and the society around him recognizes these roles as being authentic and real, just as they acknowledge the roles society forces on us. This is the key to the peculiar transcendence Slothrop manages to reach near the end of the novel.

The last part of the novel, "The Counterforce", sees Slothrop slowly fading from the world, and from the novel's pages. When he finds out the rocket he has been looking for has been launched months earlier his quest becomes impossible. He no longer has any benefits in playing the cat and mouse game with Them, as They can no longer further him to a goal they both try to reach. Slothrop decides to do away with Them and Their society altogether. His identity fragments, creating different parts of Slothrop that wander around the Zone separately. Marcuse speaks of a refusal that can set the individual free from the society around them. By fragmenting Slothrop achieves a state of complete refusal, but its effects are drastic. By denouncing the totalitarian system around him, he refuses to take part in its social system. Instead of choosing a role for himself to play, Slothrop refuses to do so, or rather chooses to play no role. This enables him to escape the one-dimensional society around him, and makes him belong to another "dimension". As this dimension lies completely outside of the discourse of his former society, the persons belonging to this society are unable to place him. Even the other paranoid characters in the novel fail to identify Slothrop, as they too remain caught in the one-dimensional discourse. Like a subversive element, Slothrop becomes unable to exist in the one-dimensional society, as

it will not allow his presence. This form of transcendence gives Slothrop total freedom, maybe even freedom to abundance. With Slothrop's disappearance Pynchon seems to mock our very desire for transcendence, asking us if we really want to escape our repressive society if this leads to a state of non-existence?

Conclusion

Pynchon uses the idea of paranoia in such a way that it allows his characters to see beyond the system that governs our everyday life. Marginal characters which we would normally dismiss as being nutcases, seriously in need of psychiatric help, are turned into anti-heroes striving for a possible higher state of being they have become aware of. Their suspicions of a larger system at work are verified by the presence of their persecutors, the secret agents working for the untouchable "They", who are trying to repress their subversive behavior. In the world of *Gravity's Rainbow* paranoia is not a personality disorder that leads the patient to suffer from delusions; it is an enlightened state of skepticism, which allows a person to look beyond the constructs of the society he lives in, and to expose the delusion that is modern everyday life. Pynchon employs ideas similar to those of Marcuse to develop the societal background these characters try to transcend. The one-dimensional society of the novel uses technological rationality to create a totalitarian system that allows itself to keep its workers in check and haphazardly use human life as just another resource. Paranoia enables the paranoids in *Gravity's Rainbow* to look past the façade of freedom and wealth the

governments and corporations use to keep the public ignorant, and makes them long to be freed from this repressive society.

Contrary to Marcuse's writings, Pynchon's book is not a subversive work of literature. It doesn't force its readers to rebel against the wrongdoings it addresses. Not only are the situations he puts his characters in absurd, but so is the message he conveys in showing a hyperbolic parody of the society we live in. When we recognize our freedom as being false we still cannot escape the system that gives us this unfreedom. He offers no solutions to this problem but merely shows the hopelessness of our situation, as all characters fail to reach their goals. Yet Pynchon manages to write a funny novel about these serious matters. The absurd antics of his characters mimic the futility of our own actions and beliefs with which we try to transcend our world around us. In the end, Pynchon forces us to take a long hard look at ourselves and all we can do is laugh at the efforts we put in our ideological systems, believing we can reach a higher state of being. Because no matter how hard we try, we are stuck in the secular world of governments and corporations.

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