

Family Legacies: Identifying the Traces of William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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In this essay, I begin by relating Pynchon's fictional character William Slothrop to his real-life counterpart, Thomas Pynchon's colonial ancestor William Pynchon. By pointing out the similarities and the differences between the historical Pynchon and the literary creation of his eleventh-generation descendant, I am able to highlight recurring themes and images in the text of *Gravity's Rainbow* and to suggest how these inherited points of interest have been developed in *Mason & Dixon*. These themes and images highlight the novel's concern with a cluster of issues comprising colonialism, empire and the historical construction of nation states. American literature, including modern classics like *Gravity's Rainbow*, is excluded from the contemporary discourse of post/colonialism on the grounds that America achieved independence from Britain long before those nations that came to constitute the British Commonwealth (and produced the literature subsequently described as postcolonial). However, I argue that *Gravity's Rainbow* places America at the very heart of the imperial enterprise—from the seventeenth century to the present. And the figure of William Pynchon provides an access to this important subtext of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I begin, then, with a brief chronological account of the life of William Pynchon. Aspects of his life, such as his heretical ideas expressed in *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650), signal his status as model for the dissenting Puritan William Slothrop. However, William Slothrop is a very partial representation of William Pynchon, whose activities as a statesman, entrepreneur, frontiersman and politician illuminate elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* not usually associated with that character.

These elements include the family as empire, the critique of capitalism, the politics of colonialism, the construction of nation states and the determination of political boundaries, the psychology of power and the suppression of dissent. These are the elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* I wish to highlight as bearing the traces of Thomas Pynchon's family legacy. *Gravity's Rainbow* is one place where Thomas Pynchon explores many of the implications of his ancestor's colonial adventure: in his representation of relations between colonizers and their colonized;

in his investigations into the psychology of imperialism; in his depiction of Them and the political manipulations of sovereign nation-states achieved by Them to further their own imperial ambitions; and most obviously in his portrayal of the Slothrop family, which bears so many key similarities to the historical Pynchon family.

1: William Pynchon

William Pynchon was born in 1590, to a family of minor gentry, near Springfield in Essex. Little is known of his early years before he became one of the twenty-six patentees of the Massachusetts Bay Company. In April 1629, he was sworn in as one of eighteen assistants named in the Massachusetts Bay Charter, and in August of that year he became one of the twelve signatories to the Cambridge Agreement. Pynchon and his family sailed with the Winthrop fleet, aboard the *Jewell*; Pynchon did not attend the Court of Assistants on board the *Arbella* (23 March 1630), but he did receive a mid-voyage invitation to dine with Governor Winthrop. This auspicious beginning was followed by his founding of Roxbury in the fall of 1630 and his establishment of a successful fur-trading enterprise. Pynchon was chosen as an Assistant to the General Court in Boston and the magistrate of Roxbury every year until 1636; during the years 1632–1634, he served as the colonial treasurer; and he was colonial advisor on ordnance.

1.1: William Pynchon: Colonist, Pioneer and Founder

In the capacity of advisor on ordnance, he encountered trouble when, in 1634, he promoted the idea of arming local Indians to facilitate their fur trapping. Pynchon obtained permission for this unusual step from the Court of Assistants, but the General Court overturned the decision and fined Pynchon and Thomas Mayhew £10 each. This is the earliest recorded instance of Pynchon's uneasy relations with the colonial authorities; although he was of the colonial elite—entering into a trading consortium with Governor Winthrop and his son in 1634—Pynchon chafed at the restrictions placed on his activities, and conflicts became more frequent in the course of his illustrious New World career.

In the spring of 1635, William Pynchon led a small group into western Massachusetts to negotiate with local Indians and to explore the region with a view to establishing a permanent settlement on the Connecticut River. The location chosen, at the junction of the Connecticut and Agawam rivers, was well placed, above the falls at Enfield and below the overland trail frequented by natives travelling

westward from the Bay, the trail linking Narragansett and Pequot territory in the southeast with Mohawk country in the Hudson Valley. Consequently, the location of the new plantation linked the northern wilderness with Long Island Sound. Pynchon intended to settle on the west bank of the Connecticut River but found, as he wrote to John Winthrop, Jr., “the best ground at Agawam” (later Springfield) so “encumbered with Indians that I shall loose halfe the benefit thereby; and am compelled to plant on the opposite side to avoid trespassing of them” (Winthrop, WP 3.267). This sensitivity to the presence of native peoples contributed materially to Pynchon’s subsequent success as a fur trader in the region. His mastery of native languages and his consciousness of the political relations and tensions among the native tribes of the region soon gained Pynchon a reputation as a reliable mediator and advisor on matters relating to Native Americans. For example, he advised Governor Winthrop about the Pequot War of 1636; initially he advised caution in dealing with native tribes, but later he appears to have cooperated in the war because the Pequots represented a menace to the peaceful Connecticut River tribes with whom he traded. Later, in June 1648, Pynchon refused to take into custody natives suspected of murdering another Indian, on the grounds that such action would violate native sovereignty; Winthrop wrote in his journal: “Mr. Pincheon offered his assistance, but wrote to the governor, that the Indians murdered, nor yet the murderers, were not our subjects, and withal that it would endanger a war” (WJ 2.344). In July 1636, Pynchon purchased the land that would be Springfield from the native sachems, and a deed was signed in a ceremony even now memorialised in bas-relief tableaux on the main doors of the Springfield court building.

1.2: William Pynchon: Politician and Magistrate

The General Court granted permission for residents of Roxbury to remove to another settlement, with the proviso that they remain subject to the government at Boston, and William Pynchon together with seven others was granted authority to govern the people of Connecticut (referring specifically to the towns of Windsor, Hartford, Wethersfield and Springfield). In some respects, this decision on the part of the General Court, which was acting outside its jurisdiction, marked the beginning of Pynchon’s conflict with the Hartford authorities as well as those at Boston. In September 1636, Hartford proposed distributing Indian trade to approved agents; this threat to his own thriving monopoly, which extended beyond the region around Agawam that Hartford intended to grant to him, motivated Pynchon’s strong

opposition to the idea of granting monopolies to individuals. This initial disagreement with the Hartford authorities developed into a major controversy in 1638, a year of very poor harvests, later described by Pynchon as "the starving time."

Pynchon was contracted by the commissioners at Hartford to purchase on behalf of all the river towns five hundred bushels of corn from local natives, at a price of five shillings per bushel. Pynchon doubted then that he could fulfil the contract because of the high price of scarce corn, so the commission was transferred to Roger Ludlow and Captain John Mason, a man notorious among natives for committing atrocities during the Pequot War. Not surprisingly, then, Indians refused to deal with Mason and Ludlow, and insisted on dealing with Pynchon, a man they knew and trusted. Mason responded by disputing Pynchon's handling of the pricing of corn and questioned his manner of dealing with Indians; the Connecticut General Court extended Mason's allegations of misdealing by accusing Pynchon of fraudulent dealing and brought him to trial accused of betraying his magistrate's oath. Specifically, he was charged with raising corn prices for private gain, keeping local Indians in fear of him so they would trade with no one else, and various minor misdemeanours which Pynchon easily disproved. He denied engaging in price speculation and pointed as evidence to his own shortage of corn. Thomas Hooker, on behalf of Connecticut, then offered a moral rather than legal condemnation of Pynchon's conduct: he argued that Pynchon had broken his magistrate's oath by neglecting the common good he was bound to uphold. By widening the scope of the controversy in this way, Hooker involved the churches at Agawam and Hartford and indeed several of the river towns.

Pynchon took these allegations and the entire matter of the Corn Controversy very hard. Certainly his own good relations with local Indians, his knowledge of native affairs and his perspicacity in dealing with natives betrayed him in this respect. His unusual position as an influential member of the Massachusetts General Court, friend and associate of Governor Winthrop, and sympathetic mediator in native affairs led him into a position of great vulnerability. He sought immediately to rectify this weakness by petitioning the Boston General Court to have Agawam declared within the Massachusetts jurisdiction. The relation of the Connecticut River settlements was ambiguous in the early years; Massachusetts always regarded Agawam as a frontier outpost of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but the legal status of the settlement was not clear, and Pynchon determined to clarify this ambiguity by placing his town beyond the authority of Hooker and the

Hartford Court. Hooker took the withdrawal of Agawam personally and accused Pynchon of engineering this redistribution of colonial authority.

Agawam, and William Pynchon, did well out of this redrawing of colonial boundaries. As Massachusetts's westernmost outpost and sole representative in the Connecticut Valley, Agawam acquired importance and autonomy—advantages shared by the town's founder and magistrate. John Winthrop wrote to Hooker in June 1638, pointing out that Pynchon's fellow commissioners on the Connecticut River had given him "small encouragement to be under them" (WP 5.36–37). But Hooker accused Pynchon personally of demonstrating a lack of respect for covenanted agreements, claiming that Pynchon had entered a civil covenant and simply left or entered it as suited him. This charge perhaps accounts in part for Pynchon's later interest in the whole concept of covenants and covenant theology, explored most fully in his heretical *Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*.

1.3: William Pynchon: Merchant and Entrepreneur

William Pynchon's conflict with government arose from a desire for autonomy and independence, and this desire was expressed repeatedly by his unwillingness to pay taxes. Shortly before his departure from Roxbury for the new settlement of Agawam, Pynchon was fined £5 by the General Court at Newe Towne for failing to pay his part of the Roxbury assessment, complaining that the town had not been assessed fairly because adequate allowance had not been made for the poor quality of the soil (Recs. Mass. Bay 1.136). Pynchon developed a record of resisting taxation: he was reluctant to pay the Connecticut assessment of his debt for prosecuting the war against the Pequots because he had fortified his own settlement of Agawam.

In a much more serious dispute, in 1641, Pynchon refused to pay excise duty on goods passing through the Connecticut port of Fort Saybrook: Hartford argued that since he had the advantage of the fortifications at Saybrook, he must pay the requisite duty; Pynchon argued that the imposition of intra-colonial taxes was an unnecessary burden. The matter was debated by the legislatures of both colonies and by commissioners of the United Colonies (Hazard 1.82–84). The matter was eventually resolved, in 1649, only when Massachusetts threatened to impose a counter-tax on all goods passing through the port of Boston (using Hartford's argument about the value of fortification but now in relation to the Castle); then the Hartford authorities backed down and allowed Pynchon to have his own way (Hazard 1.142). Pynchon never shrank from using his powerful allies in

Boston to prosecute his own causes, and in this way had a significant impact on the developing shape (literally) of colonial relations.

The image of William Pynchon that emerges from his colonial activities—as patentee, pioneer, founder and entrepreneur—is of a rather maverick figure, restless in his pursuit of profit, energetic in the development of Springfield and the entire Connecticut Valley region, and something of a thorn in the side of colonial authorities among whose numbers he was counted.

1.4: William Pynchon: Judge and Heretic

In 1645, one of the first incidents of witchcraft occurred in Springfield. Edward Johnson reports in *Wonder-Working Providence*:

There hath of late been more then one or two in this Town greatly suspected of witchcraft, yet have they used much diligence, both for the finding them out, and for the Lords assisting them against their witchery, yet have they, as is supposed, bewitched not a few persons, among whom two of the reverend Elders children. (237)

Pynchon was the presiding magistrate, having been granted power to hold Court at Springfield together with the commissioners of the United Colonies (Recs. Mass. Bay 2.109). In 1649, he brought to trial Hugh Parsons, who had been accused of witchcraft by his wife, Mary, who herself had earlier been chastised for spreading false rumours of witchcraft. Pynchon heard the testimony and, finding a case to answer, referred the case to Boston, as he was bound to do in such cases of capital crime. Pynchon expressed no opinion that has survived about this case or witchcraft in general (Mary Parsons herself subsequently confessed to murdering her child and died in prison awaiting execution; her husband left Springfield and died in Watertown in 1675). However, he performed his duty as set out for a magistrate in such circumstances.

In 1650, while Mary Parsons was awaiting execution, the magistrate who had sent her to Boston was himself the subject of a court order to account for a heretical work published under his name, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*. Copies of the book were ceremonially burned on Boston Common, and Pynchon was summoned to answer the heretical arguments put forward. He claimed in that work that Christ had not suffered man's guilt incurred at the Fall; rather, Christ's perfect obedience answered Adam's act of disobedience and atoned for it. Pynchon's book was especially controversial for two main reasons. First, it flew in the face of a law passed in 1646 condemning

to fine and exile anyone who should entertain such heresies as “denying that Christ gave himself as ransome for our sins” (Recs. Mass. Bay 2.177). Second, Pynchon was a prominent and influential member of the colonial government, and so an eminent divine—John Norton—was commissioned to debate with him, persuade him to acknowledge his error and publicly recant. Instead, Pynchon gave ambiguous signs that he would cooperate and meanwhile arranged to transfer all his business interests to his son John so he and his wife could return to England.

2: Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Colonial Past

A knowledge of William Pynchon underlines the view, expressed by the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, that America's relation with Europe has always been essentially a colonial one. From the explicitly colonial period to the mid-twentieth century, America has participated in a discourse of empire that has changed in its dynamics but not in its structure over the course of nearly four centuries. The historical experience of William Pynchon inflects the novel primarily through the character William Slothrop, who exhibits significant similarities (and also dissimilarities) with Thomas Pynchon's ancestor. William Slothrop appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* only sporadically. However, this character creates a complex relation between the historical and the fictional which is mediated by the historical positioning of the author himself.

The link is forged between the fictional Slothrop family and the historical Pynchon family early in *Gravity's Rainbow*. William, “the first transatlantic Slothrop,” is introduced on page 21 in a casual, metaphorical connection. The connection is loose, but it establishes the relevance of Tyrone Slothrop's Puritan inheritance to his peculiar sensitivity to signs revealed in the sky. Thomas Pynchon uses the New England past to establish the difference between the American Tyrone Slothrop and his English counterpart, Tantivy Mucker-Maffick (metaphorical “Atlantics” separate them); but juxtaposed with this reference comes the narrator's quotation from Thomas Hooker (that great enemy of William Pynchon): “‘I know there is wilde love and joy enough in the world,’ preached Thomas Hooker, ‘as there are wilde Thyme, and other herbes; but we would have garden love, and garden joy, of Gods owne planting’” (22). Like Thomas Pynchon's ancestor, and the fictional Puritan William Slothrop, Tyrone Slothrop does not heed Hooker's advice; his garden of love “teems.”

William Slothrop's story is not told in detail until more than five hundred pages later (554–56). At this later point, thinking about William reminds his descendant Tyrone of his own earlier encounter

with the Argentine anarchist Squalidozzi. While speculating whether William Slothrop might have represented an alternative destiny for America, Slothrop recalls Squalidozzi's description of the Zone as temporarily freed from customary restrictions and open for a time to alternative possibilities, alternative destinies (556). The link between William Slothrop and anarchism is reinforced by the connection made later in the narrative between anarchists and the Founding Fathers through the institution of Masonry, when the narrator suggests it is no coincidence that so many nineteenth-century European anarchists were Masons and that several of the American Founding Fathers were Masons. "There is a theory going around that the U.S.A. was and still is a gigantic Masonic plot (587). The Masons, themselves lovers of global conspiracies, should attract fellow paranoids like anarchists, according to the narrator; but the connection made with the Founding Fathers has the effect of discrediting both Squalidozzi and, by extension, William Slothrop.

Of the early colonial leaders only Governor Winthrop, William Pynchon's powerful ally and business associate, is mentioned in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and then dismissively. William Slothrop is characterized by his rejection of the Puritan orthodoxy of the Bay Colony and what the narrator calls the "Winthrop machine" (554-55). But, *Meritorious Price* notwithstanding, William Pynchon did nothing like reject the Puritanism of Massachusetts Bay, and he most certainly never rejected Winthrop or the power base Winthrop built. The parallel between William Slothrop and William Pynchon is sufficiently close to establish a relation between fictional character and historical person, but William Slothrop, a peculiar mix of historical truth and fictional construction, is characterized as resisting the privilege William Pynchon enjoyed. The first colonial Slothrop is described as having been "a mess cook or something" on the *Arbella* (204), which is a romantic underrepresentation of Pynchon's status as patentee and member of the Massachusetts Bay elite. As far as we know, William Pynchon boarded the *Arbella* only once during the voyage, and that was to dine with the Governor's party. (A similar underrepresentation of the authority held by the colonial Pynchons is the Salem Slothrop who, according to the narrator, was executed as a witch [329]; of course, as a magistrate, William Pynchon *tried* cases of witchcraft, as opposed to practising it himself.)

Like William Slothrop, William Pynchon did head "west in true Imperial style, in 1634 or -5" (554), though he moved for financial rather than ideological reasons. Where William Slothrop was reportedly "one of the very first Europeans in [Berkshire]" (555), so too William Pynchon was among the first Europeans to settle the Connecticut

Valley, though his pioneering was a planned and approved expansion of the colony rather than a lone adventure, as William Slothrop's removal west is represented.

William Slothrop alone of the American Slothrops is not buried in Massachusetts, where his descendants become a part of the land, in "assimilation with the earth" (27). According to the narrator, the later Slothrops were "clasped [. . .] to the country's fate" through their family paper mill and by their dedication to "the three American truths": "Shit, money, and the Word" (28). But such assimilation was not the case for William Pynchon—who transferred all his business and property interests to his son and left Massachusetts, never to return—or for his fictional counterpart—who returned to England to die amid romanticized memories of "the blue hills, green maizefields, get-togethers over hemp and tobacco with the Indians [. . .] the rain on the Connecticut River, the snuffing good-nights of a hundred pigs among the new stars and long grass still warm from the sun, settling down to sleep" (556). The historical parallel between the two figures is sustained, but the representation of William Slothrop's death is couched in nostalgic and romantic terms. Despite the differences, then, there are significant similarities between the Pynchon and Slothrop families. The historical Pynchons, like the fictional Slothrops, did begin the colonial venture as very successful and wealthy fur traders. With the rapid trapping out of the beaver and other commodity furs, however, the family's fortunes ebbed, and the Pynchons, like the Slothrops, persisted rather than prospered.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* little mention is made of the devastation of the land—such as the disappearance of wildlife species—by colonial commercial exploitation, which was precisely the kind of enterprise William Pynchon and his son John were involved with. Only in the context of Tyrone Slothrop's unconscious fantasy of the western pioneer Crouchfield, who attempts sexual congress with every species he encounters, is the issue of American expansionism explored. Even then, the sadomasochistic Crouchfield and his "little pard," Whappo, resemble a parodic counterpart to Blicero and Enzian, or Blicero and Gottfried, as Whappo tries to provoke his master "in hopes of getting a leather-keen stripe or two across those dusky Afro-Scandinavian buttocks" (69). In this way the colonial expansion of the United States is subsumed into and becomes part of the pathology of western colonialism in general. But if the activities of individual characters can be represented as symptomatic of the practice of colonialism, so too the lives of characters can be seen to reveal colonialism in practice. Thus Tyrone Slothrop discovers he has been, in effect, colonized, coopted, sold like a slave to Them, in token of which They still control

his deepest unconscious responses. The narrator then uses the vocabulary of colonialism to describe Slothrop's experience: "His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost here in our raw and clamorous world, another office representing Their white Metropolis far away" (285). Consequently, Slothrop's code name, "Schwarzknabe," the black child, takes on additional symbolic meaning as the child who is controlled, made subject to Them, colonized in mind and body.

The character William Slothrop, contextualized in terms of the historical William Pynchon, directs our attention to the intersection of a set of themes within the narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In what follows, I sketch the narrative representation of these themes: the pathology of colonialism and western expansionism, the psychosexual control of the individual, and the legacy of this belief system and pattern of ideological reflexes within the history of families especially, but personal and national histories as well.

The very setting of *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasises the narrative interest in empire and colonialism. The "Anglo-American Empire" is described by the narrator as coterminous with the War (1939-1945), and later the two are explicitly equated (129). The War is presented as a process of restructuring, of shifting the configurations of power within the Empire, as America brings her lessons learned back home to the metropolis. More than on the imperial relations among supposedly sovereign states, the narrative focusses on the relations among individuals that make the colonial dynamic possible—the relation between colonizers and colonized. The narrative repeatedly presents instances of the violent subjection of colonized nature: Frans Van der Groov and his hogs kill indiscriminately the dodos that to him appear to have no place within the Christian scheme of salvation; the massacre of the dodo is described by the narrator as identical in its motivation to the massacre of the Kirghiz by Russian colonialists and to the massacre of the Herero by German settlers. In each case, the killing appears to the victims to be without cause because the violence, the genocide, is motivated by European fears, paranoias and schemes of belief.

The final victory of the colonial enterprise comes when the colonized adopt the perspective of the colonizer. So Enzian is vulnerable to the influence of Weissmann after being "long tormented by missionaries into a fear of Christian sins." Enzian tries to make his lover a gift of his own tribal gods, to "snare them in words, give them away, savage, paralyzed, to this scholarly white who seemed so in love with language" (99). But Enzian is already Europeanized in thought; he takes the name Weissmann offers, "after Rilke's mountainside gentian of Nordic colors," although he first tries in vain to have Weissmann see

him as he is, as black. “‘In Germany you would be yellow and blue,’” Weissmann, with his “mirror-metaphysics,” tells Enzian (101). This European point of view obscures all traces of Enzian as a subaltern subject. Later Enzian describes the young Blicero to Katje as “‘in love with empire’” (660). It is the subject Enzian, controlled and manipulated by imperial authority, that Weissmann desires. If he is to speak at all, Enzian must speak in European terms. This is true not just of the individual; the Hereros as a subaltern people come to be spoken by Europe. In token of this, the Hereros wear a device adapted from insignia worn by German troops in South-West Africa in 1904.

The Zone Hereros find themselves in a cultural and geographical position that is symptomatic of the operations of colonialism, like the Jamaican corporal Mexico and Jessica encounter in a small English country church at Evensong. “From palmy Kingston, the intricate needs of the Anglo-American Empire (1939–1945) had brought him to this cold fieldmouse church.” In this church he sings music written by Thomas Tallis, Henry Purcell, the German Heinrich Suso; and the narrator clearly notes the irony:

These are not heresies so much as imperial outcomes, necessary as the black man’s presence, from acts of minor surrealism—which, taken in the mass, are an act of suicide, but which in its pathology, in its dreamless version of the real, the Empire commits by the thousands every day, completely unaware of what it’s doing. . . . (129)

Such arrangements and relations are brought into being as a consequence of Empire, and the outcome is always death. Tchitcherine and Enzian’s having the same father makes Tchitcherine want to annihilate his half-brother. Enzian, “Otyikondo, the Half-Breed” (316), is discredited by his European blood; the entire tribe is diluted by foreign, European, blood. A faction of the Erdschweinhöhlens, corrupted by Christian missionaries, is committed to tribal extinction. These Empty Ones take to its extreme the colonial project of abjection: in the absence of the colonizer, they colonize, subject and deny or erase themselves:

They call themselves Otukungurua. [. . .] *Otu-* is for the inanimate and the rising, and this is how they imagine themselves. Revolutionaries of the Zero, they mean to carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed. They want a negative birth rate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904. (316)

Even Enzian, who does not adhere to this program, admits that his people “‘have learned to stand outside our history and watch it, without feeling too much’” (362).

It is this psychology of power underpinning colonialism that engages Pointsman’s interest in Pierre Janet and the entire psychology of power relations. Pointsman and Mexico argue over Janet’s central insight that power is a relation. Pointsman rages:

“‘The act of injuring and the act of being injured are joined in the behavior of the whole injury.’ Speaker and spoken-of, master and slave, virgin and seducer, each pair most conveniently coupled and inseparable—The last refuge of the incorrigibly lazy, Mexico, is just this sort of yang-yin rubbish.” (88)

But the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* carefully plots the mechanisms by which colonizer and colonized meet in the complex relation that is colonialism, including Pudding’s sadomasochistic fantasy that the shit he takes into his mouth is a negro’s penis: “a brute African who will make him behave” (235). The association of death with shit and with the colonized is here complicated by the inversion of power relations, with black brutality dominating white civilization.

Early in the novel, Pirate Prentice experiences a Kipling-style encounter with the colonial unconscious: “beastly Fuzzy-Wuzzies far as eye could see, dracunculiasis and Oriental sore rampant among the troops, no beer for a month, wireless jammed by other Powers who would be masters of these horrid blacks, God knows why” (13). Prentice’s primary contribution to the narrative is precisely his ability to project in real terms the nightmare visions that Europeans entertain of their colonial subjects. The narrator sets out, in the course of the novel, psychological mechanisms like these by which They manage and maintain the colonial relation. For example, the discovery that in Germany there are “real Africans, Hereros, ex-colonials” (74), excites European fears of death, abjection and surrender. Propagandist Myron Grunton describes the Zone Hereros as Europe’s “‘dark, secret children’” (75), whose thoughts are beyond European knowledge and who are feared in nightmares and dream paranoias. The Allies use these fears to undermine the morale of the Germans by preying on their unconscious fears of blackness, abjection and death.

Not only the Germans but even Tyrone Slothrop is prey to these fears and paranoias. Under the influence of sodium amytal, Slothrop reveals his fears of blacks, who are associated in his unconscious with death, defeat and defecation. His nightmare encounter with Malcolm X in the men’s room of the Roseland Ballroom brings together the

concepts of inheritance and the inherited fear of blackness. As Slothrop silently debates whether to follow his harmonica down the toilet, the band begins to play “Cherokee,” “All those long, long notes . . . what’re they up to, all that time to do something inside of? is it an Indian spirit plot?” (63). It is no accident that Pynchon evokes at this point that most accommodating, and yet most betrayed, of Native American peoples. And he does so within the context of white fears of what the colonized might do in revenge. Slothrop finally descends into the sewer when he decides that is preferable to the “sound of a whole dark gang of awful Negroes come yelling happily into the white men’s room” (64). Tchitcherine is fascinated by Slothrop’s obsession with blackness; he makes a causal connection between Slothrop’s driving “Blackphenomenon” and Major Marvy’s hostile “reflexes about blackness” (391) and, by implication, those of all white Americans.

Colonialism is represented as the response of Them to precisely this fear of irrationality, uncontrollability and death, which They counter with all Their means of control. The colonized, the preterite, the subject peoples of Empire, represent all that is beyond European rationality and so come to symbolise within the European subconscious sexual excess, intuitive accesses to truth, primitive or even primal relations with the land. But these symbolic associations with life exist in a contradictory dynamic with European valuations of death. Connections are made repeatedly in the narrative between Europe, blackness and death, like Gavin Trefoil’s insight “that their feelings about blackness were tied to feelings about shit, and feelings about shit to feelings about putrefaction and death” (276). But Their method of resisting death is, ironically, to serve the interests of death, and so the narrative also repeats a pattern of connections between the North, whiteness and death. This network of symbolic associations, with its link to America, is finally made explicit by Weissmann/Blicero:

“Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe.” (722)

In Blicero’s perception, shared by the narrator, the American empire of death finally brings its pernicious harvest to Europe.

The disease that is colonialism is also described as spreading from Buenos Aires to infect all of Argentina; Squalidozzi explains to Slothrop:

“All the neuroses about property gathered strength, and began to infect the countryside. Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us.” (264)

Slothrop unthinkingly associates fencing with progress, with settlement and the expansion of civilization. This is the worldview of the colonized; colonizers, like William Pynchon, understand the significance of fencing, of drawing geographical boundaries. William Pynchon benefited enormously by his manipulation of the boundary between the Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies; and in his descendant’s later work *Mason & Dixon*, those who draw the boundaries come to understand too late the profound political significance of their efforts. It is important that Thomas Pynchon includes South American anarchists in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The border separating North and South America—the First and the Third Worlds—represents a critical site in terms of American imperialism and a paradigmatic relation in terms of the American re-colonization of Europe. The control of change and the subjection of wilderness, both natural and human, are represented in the fencing of the countryside, the manipulation of government and control of the economy. One of the motifs that carries the theme of imperial economic control is the image of bananas that appears infrequently but significantly in the narrative.

In the episode where the Floundering Four seek to rescue the Radiant Hour from Pernicious Pop, imagery of those subjected to imperial or colonial domination—the dodo, negroes, zootsters—includes the figure of Chiquita Banana. She conforms to the stereotype, promoted in the cinema by Carmen Miranda, of the wildly passionate Hispanic, which gives rise to the masturbatory fantasies of Hogan Slothrop: “fantasies of nailing this cute but older Latin lady *while she’s wearing her hat*, gigantic fruit-market hat and a big saucy smile ¡Ay, ay, how passionate you Yankees are!” (678). But the real message conveyed by Chiquita Banana is not even United Fruit’s warning that bananas must not be kept in the refrigerator; it is that United Fruit has the power to issue these demands, and to manipulate these fantasies. South America and North America alike are subject to the manipulations of United Fruit, whose control reaches all aspects of individual lives.

The sinister influence wielded by the controllers of bananas in that scene contrasts ironically with the comedy of the novel’s early episode of Prentice’s Banana Breakfast. In the earlier scene Prentice’s bananas represent the earth’s resistance to death and dying, growing as they do in the unlikely rooftop glasshouse of Prentice’s Chelsea maisonette. The

fecundity of the banana crop is a defiant statement against death, against Their manipulation of life; yet the very presence of these bananas in war-torn London is powerful evidence of the workings of a complex global market controlled by Them. Prentice obtained the banana plants from “a friend who flew the Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run” in exchange for a German camera (5). The bananas may be innocent (like Chiquita, who symbolizes their exotic attraction), but the uses to which they are put within the confines of Their colonial culture are far from innocent. It was just such a culture that produced William Pynchon and made him wealthy through his exploitation of the New World’s natural resources and the Old World’s desire for fur. The transformation of nature into commodity is a fundamental reflex of colonialism, together with the control of the colonized peoples who must cooperate in this process of transformation. William Pynchon, on the available evidence, was a benevolent colonialist; but the colonialist culture represented by his most famous descendant has moved well beyond benevolence.

3: Classic Interpretations of *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Many of the themes commonly identified by critics of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—system building, creation of meaning systems, exercise of power through language, paranoia—are given a historical analogue and a political motivation when viewed from the postcolonial perspective evoked by Pynchon’s own colonialist ancestor. In particular, the deservedly influential commentaries on Pynchon’s use of the past by John Krafft, Scott Sanders and Steven Weisenburger can be enriched by a complementary account of Pynchon’s use of his own family’s colonial past.

Sanders published the first account of Pynchon’s historical vision in 1975. “Pynchon’s Paranoid History” sets out a reading of Pynchon’s fiction that highlights the notion of history as a grand apocalyptic conspiracy. Sanders points out, correctly, that Pynchon is interested not so much in depicting historical conspiracies as in exploring the idea of history as a plot. And protagonists Tyrone Slothrop, Oedipa Maas and Herbert Stencil are placed in a position akin to that of the reader in relation to the text or that of the Puritan seeking signs of God’s grace. All are held at the edge of revelation, seeking to distinguish authentic signs of truth from illusion and falsehood. Some characters are genuinely the victims of control and manipulation, just as Pynchon carefully controls the responses of his readers. Slothrop, Oedipa and Stencil also all uncover evidence of real historical conspiracies, just as Pynchon uses accurate historical sources to construct those

conspiracies. And for Pynchon's characters, as for his readers and for his Puritan ancestors, the only thing worse than the discovery of a conspiracy is the discovery that there is no conspiracy at all. The absence of control or the lack of intention reduces the world, history, narrative to meaningless, unmotivated fragments. And this fragmented condition is unacceptable. So Pynchon's characters, readers and ancestors seek the connection of self with the world that comes from naming, mapping and reading the world.

Krafft develops Sanders's interpretation of *Gravity's Rainbow* by emphasizing the specific context of New England Puritanism that Pynchon mobilizes. Krafft lists three strategies by which Pynchon incorporates elements of Puritanism into the narrative: the use of a conceptual vocabulary of election versus preterition; the representation of a particular relation between spiritual and material orders of being; and a vision of the nature of history itself which informs Pynchon's commentaries on the course of Western and particularly American history. Krafft shows how *Gravity's Rainbow* charts the rise of a secular worldview in which the trappings of the old order remain (and are described by the old vocabulary), but it is a new corporate elect that controls the course of a now secular history and wields not divine power but comprehensive control that can be mistaken for omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Theological sanctions are now used for secular ends, and the question becomes whether a man-made apocalypse can be averted.

Weisenburger's 1979 essay, "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past," describes the ways Pynchon's characters adopt distinct historical perspectives. The construction of history as narrative is represented as itself historically and culturally relative. History as nostalgia, as the accumulation of detritus, as racial annihilation, as apocalypse, as chaotic disruption and discontinuity—these are some of the constructions Pynchon's characters place on historical experience as they attempt to find a way to live in the postwar world.

These interpretations focus on the techniques and primary metaphors of Pynchon's work without explicitly making the link between the postcolonial condition of the postwar world Pynchon describes and his own family origins in the activity of colonization. The constructions of history represented by Pynchon's fictional characters are determined in large part by the experience of colonialism those characters undergo. The linear construction of history by the Empty Ones, to take one example highlighted by Weisenburger, is profoundly conditioned by their experience of the colonizing efforts of Christian missionaries. It is from the experience of cultural and racial genocide in

South-West Africa that their vision of history as a linear process of destruction arises. In fact, the history of postwar Europe represented in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be seen as an account of the shifting balance of power within the colonized world, as Europe's colonial power base shrinks and America's expands, as America in effect begins to colonize western Europe—and not only through the establishment of the American sector in Berlin, but more significantly through the impact of military personnel like Slothrop stationed in Europe and all the cultural baggage they left behind. The seventeenth-century Puritan aspiration to create a model society, a "city upon a hill," that would be brought back to Europe and would provide for the salvation of western Christendom is ironically realized in Pynchon's representation of postwar Europe. William Pynchon was among those who brought to the New World the practice of colonial politics; eleven generations later, his descendant Thomas Pynchon brings the American colonization of the Old World to fictional life. The narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* reaches its culmination with Blicero's meditation on the relation between the Old and New Worlds. He describes the American colony as perfecting colonialism's obsession with control and destruction:

"In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis." (722)

Blicero's is not the authoritative voice in the novel, yet the insight he articulates here is enacted in the structure of the progressing narrative. As has been remarked so frequently, the structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* is described by the narrative's own phrase as a "progressive *knotting into*" (3). And what is revealed as the narrative knots become more complex is the complicated network of power relations, relations of domination and submission, that are acted out on the historical, political, personal and subconscious levels depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The voice of the narrator expresses the cumulative understanding of the significance of these relations as constituting the global condition we know as colonialism. The part played by the character William Slothrop, and his historical counterpart William Pynchon, in the articulation of this understanding is small but important. For the Puritan ancestor provides a point of departure for historical understanding and for textual interpretation equally.

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