

## NOSTALGIA AS A CULTURAL MARKER IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

STIPE GRGAS  
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru  
*Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar*

UDK: 820(73).09 PYNCHON, T.  
Izvorni znanstveni članak  
*Original scientific paper*

Primljeno: 1998-11-10  
*Received*

The author concentrates on the thematic of nostalgia in Thomas Pynchon's most famous novel which, in his view, undoubtedly enplaces *Gravity's Rainbow* into the very center of American culture. The author analyses, with particular care, the analepsis within the novel in which Pynchon describes the Puritan origins of American civilisation which function not only as the primary backdrop for delineating the main character but encompass the dynamics of a historical dilemma which profoundly influenced the later development of the US. The author shows how the nostalgia for the road not taken by the American polity permeates Pynchon's novel but also how the dystopian outcome of utopian beginnings has broader cultural implications.

In an aside he made in his reading of Pynchon's *Vineland* James R. Thompson stated that one cluster of problems in the novel is a "surprisingly traditional American theme for Pynchon".<sup>1</sup> Having always perceived the world of Pynchon's fictions as unmistakably grounded into and expressive of the American experience, Thompson's judgement prompted me to ponder over my previous intuition. Returning to *Gravity's Rainbow* with this problem on the agenda I sought out those threads in the text which reflect its place of origin and how they determine some of its prominent concerns.

As a preliminary methodological consideration one can premise that a cross-cultural appropriation of the text sheds light on certain meanings and layers of the text which might otherwise be simply taken for granted. This might even

---

<sup>1</sup> James R. Thompson, "Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and the New Social Novel, or, Who's Afraid of Tom Wolfe" in *Constructing the Eighties*, ed. Grunzweig, Maierhofer and Wimmer, Narr, Tübingen, 1992., p. 202.

provide a way to evade the danger of redundancy attendant to the hypersaturation of Pynchon criticism. To legitimate my own approach, could one not maintain that sentities as differences are more perceptible than if they are part and parcel of the framework which houses the interpretative gaze. The belief is that cognitive prowess tends to register inconsistency rather than homogeneity. I hold that the adoption of the standpoint which enabled the present reading removes the critic from the limitations of seeing, or the failings to see, which are unavoidable in the case of those naturalized to a particular system of signs. In this sense, it is hoped that the distancial perspective, synonymous here with a cross-cultural decoding, and its attendant frame of reference are able to produce insights that are less perceptible to the eye steeped in familiarity.

It might just be that to an American public Pynchon's text is simply too "exotic", that it cannot or, for some certain purposes perhaps, is unwilling to recognize its nativistic replica. To put it bluntly the more everyday and naturalized native traces are simply taken for granted. My assumption is that a non-American reader, on the other hand, because having being worked upon by the politics of American cultural dissemination but also because of his constructions of the American entity, will register, in a keener way, the American nature of these semiotic systems. The point I want to make in this reading is that, even if for the purposes of inquiry one dispenses with the allegorical encodings of American civilization which Pynchon works into his novels, there are aspects of the narratives that present a sort of miniature tale of America and its history.

### 1.

Perhaps one should start with the most obvious and stress that at least one of the language registers used in *Gravity's Rainbow* is indelibly of American provenance. One way Pynchon manages the dialogical structure of his novel is to juxtapose, in a bewildering fashion, different language registers. In this sense, *Gravity's Rainbow* is a virtuoso staging of the interfaces (a favourite word of his) between language registers. If a metaphoric significance were to be given to this aspect of the novel and if a need was felt to ascribe to it a cultural resonance, one could claim that the practice alludes to the growing polyglot nature of American society.

Pynchon makes abundant use of the icons of his culture. These derive from different orders and sectors such as politics, business, the world of entertainment, crime, legends and so forth. Some are readily identified (Cary Grant (14)<sup>2</sup>, Shirley Temple (28), Truman, Roosevelt (435)), others are more abstruse (Dennis Morgan (37), Melvin Purris (601)); the reader acquainted with Pynchon's encyclopediac manner will concede how easily it is to simply pass others over. To appreciate a portion of the cryptic signatures of Pynchon's imaginative coupling of fiction and history, one would have to be versed in idiosyncratic and, oftentimes, unrelated domains of knowledge and experience. Let me here hazard a thought on the

<sup>2</sup> Since I am here chiefly concerned with *Gravity's Rainbow* the page number of the different references will come after them in brackets. I am using the 1980 edition published by Bantam Books, New York.

problem of reception. Namely, it is conceivable that the American reader is so familiar with these icons that he does not even register them or he might feel, retrospectively, that the vast, widespread arena of the novel swamps them. On the other hand, for the reader coming from another culture and needing to make an identification these signals have a more powerful resonance and he will use them to anchor the novel in its cultural space.

On a higher level of textual organization the references to America are again not difficult to find. Its pull intrudes when Pynchon, for example, indulges in similes. There are numerous instances where American subject matter functions as a kind of metaphoric tenor. The following will suffice to illustrate what I mean by this: "Shouts go dopplering *Hey-eyyy-y-y-y* like car horns at the crossings going home at night on the Boston and Maine" (361). Constituting a similar procedure, an American event is chosen on occasion to create a synchronic parallel to a point within story time: "1904 ... was the year the American Food and Drug people took the cocaine out of Coca-Cola, which gave us an alcoholic and death-oriented generation of Yanks ideally equipped to fight WW II" (527). Notice should be made of the fact that the deictic marker (us) indicates a naratee group to whom the text is addressed and one with which the outsider can hardly identify. Restricting myself in this section to what can almost be considered asides, I draw attention to the description of a gesture: "His primal American act, paying, more deeply himself than when coming, or asleep, or maybe even dying" (705). Or another example which operates in a similar fashion: "they were counting on *that* damned American reflex all right, bad guy in a chase always heads up" (232). In the first instance, the metaphorical expression shows America to serve as a kind of source the narrator relies upon to "naturalize" unfamiliar material. The second quotation illustrates a narrative procedure in which American history functions as a slot of memories, creating a network of synchronomies, which embed the particulars of Pynchon's tale into a sweeping, layered background. Finally, Marvy's settling of accounts Monika rendered is an example of stereotyped characterization which is effectively used in the novel to create its comedy of manners mode.

If one chose to read *Gravity's Rainbow* as another tale of the American innocent abroad than the narrative lends support to my reading on the level of character and plot. The following remarks in regard to Slothrop bear this out: "yes, in one or two pairs of eyes he finds an old and European pity, a look he will get to know, well before he loses his innocence and becomes one of them" (238). If this is the case, Slothrop would turn out to be a cipher, a parodic comment on the roll call of fictional embodiments of this fictional figure in American letters. On a more superficial level, a host of Pynchon's characters derive from American stock. If there is a family resemblance between Pirate, Bodine and Marvy then it is the raw, exuberant humour they lend the novel, a sort of heartless hilarity with which they respond to the war. An interesting point in regard to character can be made using the case of Roger Mexico. In the field of structural oppositions making up the novel, his sensual eroticism (141) and anarchic putdown of "executive material" propriety (741), epitomize the Counterforce. What I would like to stress is that the full subversive and antinomic charge of his surname obtains only when conceptualized in the binary opposition to the US. To understand this the reader

must keep in mind the opposing clusters of connotations the two polities usually produce. If Mexico were to be juxtaposed with a non-American signature the resulting semantic field would be defused of these references.

Some aficionado of Pynchon's work must have calculated the number of times the term "paranoia" or its derivatives appear in the novel. Even a cursory reading convinces one that it is among the key words, if not the key word, in the text, partaking in characterization, motivating a great deal of the action and, even, providing the reader with enabling paradigms of imposing meanings on the text. Here is a succinct definition of what Pynchon means by paranoia in the novel: "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the creation, a secondary illumination" (820). The task the characters as well as the readers take upon themselves is the work of deciphering these connections. If the centrality of paranoia to the novel is established, it is as corroboration of the premises of my argument that I quote the following: "it's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in" (219). The importance of this reference to the Puritans will be dealt with below. A few pages later in the novel, Slothrop is conversing with the Englishman Tantivity who confesses a sense of apprehension similar to what he had sensed back in college: "from time to time back in Oxford, I came to sense a peculiar *structure* that no one admitted to" (225). Slothrop's reply is worth quoting: "Sure. In that America, it's the first thing they tell you. Harvard's there for other reasons. The 'educating' part of it is just sort of a front" (225). On one level of abstraction, what the reader follows in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the emergence of these "orders", "structures", "reasons". By withholding the key to the manifold conundrums Pynchon instills into his text the lure of supplemental decipherments, as though each conceptualization is strained by enticements to further exploitations.

The structures that loom up through the intricacies of the text are subsumed under the anonymity of the third person pronoun "they". One of their tangible embodiments or, put otherwise, one of their acronyms is the USA. The development of technology and the attendant enhancement of power and control (one of the central motifs of the novel) are "traceable" to the US and its corporations. One of the great technological breakthroughs alluded to in the novel took place at du Pont: "at the time and well within the System, an announcement of Plasticity's central canon: that chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of Nature" (290). Another American company, Shell, is evoked to exemplify transnational economic power, "tapping instead out of that global stratum, most deeply laid, from which all the appearances of corporate ownership really spring" (283). A corollary of the aggrandizement of power is control and one of the ways the novel portrays F. D. Roosevelt is as "an American synthesis" which opened the way to certain grand possibilities - all grouped under the term 'control' which seemed to be a private code-word (677).

Pynchon not only registers the looming presence of these structures and the effects they have had and will have but mounts a critique leveled at their ultimately self-undermining rapacity: "the System which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the world can

supply" (481). One can speculate that the warning primarily pertains to the US, an aggregate of "corporate ownership" which has been industriously "tapping out of the global stratum" (481). Such a possibility finds numerous corroborations in the novel when Pynchon makes positive identifications as is the case, for example, on p. 77: "something else has been terribly *at* this country". The metaphor of devastation hidden behind the italicized preposition implies the ravishment of the earth by systems of power and ownership. Finally, in one of the ultimate scenes of the novel, in which Blicero delivers his rhapsody to Gottfried, America is identified as the failed dream:

America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it..... American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. But now we have only the structures left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas. (842).

Blicero's estimation not only adds weight to the supposed importance of America to Pynchon's narrative, but is a good introduction to the next step of my argument. Namely, in Blicero's speech we read not only a condemnation of the flawed American facticity but also an emotional lure of the might-have-been. Put otherwise: if my reading has so far sketchily outlined the "orders" threateningly looming behind the text, indulging its paranoid enticements, the next step I will take is to show how Gravity's Rainbow embodies another, less visible, yet no less American, streak - the streak of nostalgia.

## 2.

Pointing out that the word comes from the Greeks, J. M. Fritzman explains that it "marks their discovery, simultaneously their invention, of a link between a desire to return home (*nostos*) and a sensation of pain (*algia*).<sup>3</sup> Although he goes on to say that it is not so much a place as a time, which is not entirely true as far as Pynchon is concerned, the tension between desire and pain figures conspicuously in the novel. A more elaborate definition of nostalgia can be found in the following remarks made by Christopher Lasch:

Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer attainable. Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging..... The barrier that divides the past from the present, as it appears to the nostalgic sensibility, is the experience of disillusionment, which makes it impossible to recapture the innocence of earlier days. From this point of view, the relation of past and present is defined above all by the contrast between simplicity and sophistication.<sup>4</sup>

To put it in very simple terms, we can sum up with Laurence Lerner's formulaic statement that "nostalgia posits two different times, a present and a longed-for past".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Fritzman, "The Future of Nostalgia and the Time of the Sublime", *CLIO*, Winter 1994., vol. 23, no. 2, p.168.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Lasch, "Memory and Nostalgia, Gratitude and Pathos", *Salmagundi*, Winter/Spring 1990., 86, no.85, p.19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia*, Schocken Books, New York, 1972., p.44.

Nostalgia, wherein, as Pynchon puts it, "objects have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, terminal evening", when there is only the "lateness and the absence" (353), characterizes, according to Wright Morris, American writers of genius who "face backwards while their countrymen resolutely march forward".<sup>6</sup> For the moment I will leave aside these broader considerations and register the way the nostalgic pull is inscribed in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

To a lesser extent than paranoia, nostalgia is named and staged as a mood on a number of occasions in the novel. There is the "nostalgia for life, the old peace, the Weimer decadence that kept him fed and moving" (177) or for "pipe-smoke evenings away the other side of the War" (156); there is that "nostalgia" "heavy in the snow - sky" as Jessica hears the English winds blow "through the substance of time" (149); we have Slothrop's reminiscences "of prewar Comets and Hamptons sighted from the beach at Cape Cod, among land odors, drying seaweed" (216); the Hereros also indulge in nostalgic reverie as they recall "this time of day back in Sudwest, above ground, participating in the sunset" (374); another geographical site, a "bear's corner" (*medvezhy ugolok*) is described as "a land of drunken nostalgia for the cities" (393); finally, to conclude with just one more example, there is the nostalgia of the Argentine crew which "is like seasickness: only the hope of dying from it is keeping them alive" (446). One could wager a generalization along the following lines: if the paranoid structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* enmeshes and enplots the threads which have been, for the purposes of the present paper, unraveled and separated in the above listing then it is possible to contend that the separate story lines is each grounded in its own nostalgic pull. If approached from such a perspective, the energy and momentum unleashed by *Gravity's Rainbow* would enplot what happens to these entities once they are unearthed from their foundations. However, my concerns are more localized. To be more precise, what I focus upon might provisionally be termed the streak of American nostalgia in the novel and what consequences it might have for understanding the subject of America itself.

The analepsis occurring in the third section of *Gravity's Rainbow* in which the reader is given an account of William Slothrop - who in 1634 or 1635 "sick and tired of the Winthrop machine" left Boston for Berkshire where "he and his son got a pig operation going" - is the section of the narrative of central interest to my reading. Since a body of texts exists in which some form of analysis of Puritan themes in Pynchon has been employed I feel a need to rehearse some of these arguments so to legitimate my own foray into the field.

Philip Storey, drawing a parallel between Thomas Pynchon and his historical ancestor William, the prototype for the fictional figure, has come to the conclusion that both are figures who stand at the edge of their culture.<sup>7</sup> In his investigation of elements of Puritanism in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Andrzej Kopcewicz<sup>8</sup> hesitatingly observes that the symbolic machinery of the novel "seems to derive to

<sup>6</sup> Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1958., p.xiv.

<sup>7</sup> See Philip Storey, "William Slothrop: Gentleman", *Pynchon Notes*, 13, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Andrzej Kopcewicz, "Elements of Puritanism in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*" in *Traditions in the Twentieth Century American Literature*, (editor) Marta Siemicka, Poznan, 1981., p. 133.

a considerable degree from the Calvinistic world-view of New England Protestantism". Dealing with the same topic, John Krafft came to this conclusion: As Puritanism - or any "ism", ideal, or dream - lives in history, perhaps inevitably it declines. Such declension and its consequences, the transformations which result from and which also aggravate failure, seen from Pynchon's ironic perspective on history, are central concerns in *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>9</sup>

To give one more example I will cite Scott Sanders who connects paranoia to Pynchon's Puritan background, a conclusion that could have been anticipated in Pynchon's remark, cited above, that it is "a Puritan reflex" (219). He contends that, once original beliefs had evaporated:

Paranoia offers the ideally united hypothesis that the world is organized into a conspiracy, governed by shadowy figures whose powers approach omniscience and omnipotence, and whose manipulations of history may be detected in every chance gesture of their servants. It institutes for the divine plan a demonic one. Viewed in this perspective, paranoia is the last retreat of the Puritan imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Taking this into account, the nostalgic complex in Pynchon's narrative could be perceived as a desire to break away from the paranoia induced by the grip of a demonic plan. I only note here that two of the major strands of the novel intersect when conceptualized within the Puritan problematic.

To return to the analepsis, my contention is that it stages a modal shift which deserves to be analysed and explained. However, before illustrating what is meant by this modal reversal, a few remarks about Pynchon's Massachusetts Bay schismatic will prepare the reader to appreciate the significance of the reversal and introduce him to an environmental issue of import in the story that I am here recounting. The function of the "pig operation" and the meanings that accrue to the animals in the tale of William Slothrop represent "everything Boston wasn't (646). As Pynchon writes, the animals are "possessed by innocence" and, significantly, "at home with the Earth" (647).

Putting the Berkshire pig operation against the city of Boston Pynchon stages an antithetical drama on one of the originary scenes of American history. Apparently, subsequent historical development evolved out of a matter of choice:

Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back - (647-48).

The introduction of the subjunctive mood into the account of William Slothrop's heresy marks the point where historical facticity is abandoned, within a nostalgic revery, for a hypothetical it-might-have-been. The text enacts a yearning for an irrecoverable opportunity. A remark in Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* shows that Pynchon is not alone in this cocoon of nostalgic longing. In the section I find relevant to the problem, Cavell writes of the American writer's

<sup>9</sup> John M. Krafft, "And How Far-Fallen: Puritan Themes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Critique Studies in Modern Fiction*, April, 1977., vol. xviii/3, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History", *Twentieth Century Literature*, May 1975., vol. 21/2 p. 178.

response to the knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident; and to the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and to the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever.<sup>11</sup>

Although it would be mistaken to maintain that Pynchon's elaborat novel as a whole promulgates Slothrop's naive erasure of historical facticity yet many of the traits Cavell draws attention to are there.

Recognizing this I am aware that my account may be held accountable for investing undue significance into a relatively insignificant episode in the overall text. However, I regard the analepsis the central "kernel" of the story line that is being foregrounded by my reading. If by "kernel" is meant an event that advances the action by opening an alternative,<sup>12</sup> William Slothrop's heresy and how it relates to the colonial establishment, introduces a fateful peripetia into one of the American stories periphrasable from Pynchon's novel.

The line of events whose central point would be the road-not-taken, signaled by the above shift to the subjunctive mood, is given in a rather piecemeal fashion. However, if these are reshuffled, a narrative emerges which has all the combinatory principles necessary to transform a number of events into a story. To explain what I mean by this let me quote from Gerald Prince:

A minimal story consists of three conjoined events. The first and third events are stative, the second is active. Furthermore, the third event is the inverse of the first. Finally, the three events are conjoined by three conjunctive features in such a way that (a) the first event precedes the second in time and the second precedes the third, and (b) the second event causes the third.<sup>13</sup>

With certain modifications, Prince's model can be applied to validate the work of reconstructing the nostalgic story branching out from the analepsis in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In such a subsidiary story the flashback would assume the function of the second event. Although in the strictest sense it is not active, yet William Slothrop's heresy, introducing an option, dictates the exercise of choice and human action. In a conception of historical development which ascribes to human volition an effective power, the way of William the heretic becomes an unrealized potentiality. Within Thomas Pynchon's novel it serves as a kind of reference point for the nostalgic backstepping through the detritus of historical facticity to a haven of uncontaminated innocence and uncurtailed possibilities. As such it is the central event within the story of American identity, an event whose exordium and sequel remain now to be told.

Arranging the references to Tyrone Slothrop's Puritan ancestors that are scattered throughout the novel into a chronological chain of events, the reader first glimpses William abroad Winthrop's ship, abreast the Atlantic waves, heading, during the Great migration, for the American wilderness: "William Slothrop, vomiting a good part of 1630 away over the side of that *Arabella*" (424).

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, New Point Press, San Francisvo, 1981., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> For a definition see for instance Shlonith Rimmon - Kenan, *Narrative Fiction, Contemporary Poetics*, Routledge, London, 1990., p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Prince, *A Grammar of Stories, Monton, The Hague, 1973., p. 31.*

Conceptualizing the novel as a whole, the historical backdrop of American settlement (westward) could be seen as the compositional counterpoint to Tyrone Slothrop's mapping of post-WW II Europe (eastward). His Rocketman mission could be conceived as a redemption of those who were passed over by the march of history. In a passage relevant to my reading, Tyrone feels his ancestry "avalanching back from" him back to 1630 when Governor Winthrop came over to America on the *Arabella*, flagship of a great Puritan flotilla that year..... there that *Arabella* and its whole fleet, sailing backward in formation, the wind sucking them east again, the creatures leaning from the margins of the unknown sucking in their cheeks, growing crosseyed with the effort, in to black deep hollows at the mercy of teeth no longer the milky molars of cherubs, as the old ships zoom out of Boston Harbor, back across an Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse....(237)

The movement backward depicted in this fragment enacts the very essence of the nostalgic pull. Tyrone is indulging in a reverie of (re)beginnings, a proclivity to deny "the untoward course of history" which, to localize the event, had betrayed the original enterprise of planting, as Sacvan Bercovitch writes, a "redemptive community in the wilderness".<sup>14</sup>

The novel gives numerous images of the zealous forefathers. Even though Tyrone's mnemonics, which are the vehicle of these imaginings, are overshadowed by an ironic tonality, the insistence with which *Gravity's Rainbow* gestures towards the past intimates its intransigent and bewitching spell: "He hangs at the bottom of his blood's avalanche, 300 years of western swamp-Yankees, and can't manage but some nervous truce with their Providence" (28).

Tyrone thinks of his ancestors as "word-smitten Puritans" (241), "packing Bibles around the blue hilltops as part of their gear, memorizing chapter and verse the structures of Arks, Temples, Visionary Thrones" (281). As a final snapshot from Tyrone's family album I will recall his entrance into the Zone where "ancestors will reassert themselves": "his own WASPs in buckled black, who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn" (328). Of particular importance is this evocation of landscape revealing as it does the way the Puritans conceived it as the embodiment of God. Sacvan Bercovitch has shown that similar "constructions of nature" were entertained by the historical Puritans and their heirs. At one point of his discussion, he remarks that as the project of the New World got under way geography changed into christianography. In a discussion of Emerson, Bercovitch remarks on the contribution the transcendentalists made to the "hermeneutics of landscape and selfhood": "Nature must be the vehicle of his thought; the natural fact must verify the 'issue of spirit'; and conformity to nature aligns him 'with Truth and God'" (159).<sup>15</sup> To return to Pynchon's novel, the changes that "untoward history" brought about in this relationship between man and his environment constitute at least one aspect of the betrayal of the original founding dream.

<sup>14</sup> In Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 159.

How the original dream of the forefathers went wrong is adumbrated in the following passage: Back when Shays fought the federal troops across Massachusetts, there were Slothrop Regulators patrolling Berkshire for the rebels, wearing sprigs of hemlock in their hats so you could tell them from the Government soliders. Federals stuck a tatter of white in theirs. Slothrop's in those days were not yet so much involved with paper, and the wholesale slaughtering of trees. They we still for the living green, against the dead white. Later they lost, or traded away, knowledge of which side they'd been on. (311-12)

The opposition structuring this passage signals two disparate modes of relating to nature: the way of identification and the way of technological exploitation. Needless to say, Pynchon passes judgement ("slaughtering", "living", "dead") on the merits of these modes of relating to nature and, in doing so, inscribes a sense of loss, of suggestive and lingering regret ("not yet", "still"). A later aside which goes on to fill in the background of the Slothrop saga reveals what the original enterprise had devolved into: "Slothrop' family actually made its money killing trees, amputating them from their roots, chopping them up, grinding them into pulp, bleaching that to paper and getting paid for this with more paper" (644). If Tyrone's comment on this development ("There's insanity in my family") is metonymically applicable to America as a whole - a possibility I touch upon below - than this scene of ravishment is where America lands having not taken the "fork in the road" William Slothrop's heresy had held up as an alternative.

The baneful impact of commercial rapacity on the original dream and present forebodings of imminent breakup and dissolution find expression in Mom Slothrop's letter to Ambassador Kennedy. The quotation I give is from the middle paragraph of the missive:

Poppy and I heard your wonderful speech at the GE plant over in Pittsfield the other week. You're in the groove, Mister K! How true we've *got* to modernize in Massachusetts, or it'll just keep getting worse and worse. They're supposed to be taking a strike vote *here* next week. Wasn't the WLB set up to prevent just that? It isn't starting to break down, is it, Joe? Sometimes, you know there fine Boston Sundays, when the sky over the Hill is *broken* into clouds..... You know, don't you? Golden clouds? Sometimes I think - ah, Joe, think they're pieces of the Heavenly City falling down. (795)

Of particular relevance to my line of argument is how the defamation of the present is grounded in a vision of an idealized past. Mom Slothrop's ramblings resort to an evocation of one of the defining texts of American self-identity, John Winthrop's sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity* delivered aboard the *Arabella* before the colonialists had set foot aground. Therein he exhorts them to persist in the path of righteousness "that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are uppon us". Throwing a backward look at a shining past, Mom Slothrop's castigations evince an unwillingness to accept or confront the realities of fated reality. Needless to say, in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a whole such levity and escapism are given ironic treatment but if, for instance, one goes by the evidence of Tyrone's behaviour then Pynchon has made clear how difficult it is to disengage oneself from the allaying magnetism of such attitudes.

In support of this contention I call attention to a passage where Tyrone voices a yearning to reverse the workings of historical determinancy:

Yup, still thinking there's a way to get back. He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking all the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose - but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go. She's whispered *love me* too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises. One day - he can see a day - he might be able finally to say *sorry*, sure and leave her ...but not just yet, one more try, one more change, one more deal, one more transfer to a hopeful line. (726)

The way the passage is structured pertains to my argument. Its opening expresses an unwillingness to accept facticity and, although there is a recognition of change, yet the one presence that remains intact is America and its haunting allure. The repetitive insistence of the closing sentence signal the hold reveries of innocence, of a new beginning, are able to have. On one level of abstraction, the sentence could serve as a kind of precis of the problematic at the heart of my inquiry. Justice should also be done to the hesitant qualifiers - "but not just yet" - which register an unwillingness to give up on America as a defaulted dream and a nostalgic compulsion to unwrite the constraining accrual of history and give America "one more try, one more chance".

### 3.

My reading has isolated, reshuffled and enploted a number of vistas in the novel which I believe are particularly relevant to judgements which consider *Gravity's Rainbow* the central text of contemporary American fiction. No, hasty totalizations are being proposed to make the gravitas of nostalgia the key to the novel but I do hope that enough evidence has been mustered to foreground its presence. The next step that I feel has to be taken is to relate this problematic to the broader scope of cultural relevance.

One way of proceeding would be to show Pynchon's nostalgic gravitas to be on a par with similar manifestations of American cultural traits. The stratum of *Gravity's Rainbow* isolated by my 'take' on the problematic of nostalgia bears resemblance to the "circumstantial elegy", a genre Werner Berthoff considers native to the American imagination and which consists of a "detailed narrative lament for a disappearing, though perhaps only recently and precariously established, order of life."<sup>16</sup> Structurally speaking, the relation between Berkshire and the city of Boston in Pynchon's novel can be seen as the earliest implementation of the division between settlement and the frontier with all of its attendant valorizations. In that sense, the road not taken and the consequent sense of loss can be aligned with "the essentially American note of nostalgia for the lost frontier as a missed opportunity, a forfeited Eden."<sup>17</sup> To take another example,

<sup>16</sup> Werner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1917*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1981., p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson O. Clough, *The Necessary Earth*, University of Texas, Austin, p. 180.

Richard Lehan discerns a "nostalgic quality" in a great deal of American literature. His observation sheds light on the mechanism of nostalgia and relates to my story of failed origins in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "the Rip Van Winkle-like nature of American ideals - that tendency to locate ideals in a world that cannot accommodate them".<sup>18</sup>

If we now go to Leo Marx's study *The Machine in the Garden* it can be shown how Pynchon's problematic engages themes of American culture delineated there. The subsidiary story line isolated by the reading I am offering here could easily be shown to mirror "the various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society".<sup>19</sup> Within this frame of reference *Gravity's Rainbow* enacts a dystopian outcome of utopian longings and desires. Similarly to the other texts Marx relies upon to illustrate his thesis, *Gravity's Rainbow* invokes the image of a green landscape - a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural - as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all of its meaning. Complex pastoralism, to put it another way, acknowledges the reality of history.<sup>20</sup>

Recalling the history of the Slothrop family, their zealous entrepreneurs literally strips America both as land and as ideal. Their saga embodies the encroachment of history into the garden. On one level of abstraction, the plotment of their chronicle reduplicates the acknowledgement of historical forces which saves *Gravity's Rainbow* from the pitfalls of simplistic withdrawal. However, the temptation of withdrawal, the nostalgia for (re)beginnings, is never wholly transcended but can be envisioned as a grounding of Pynchon's vision.

Another seminal text, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*, can be drawn upon to incorporate the problem of nostalgia into broader frame of significance. As a matter of fact, Bercovitch explicitly mentions Pynchon's novel and puts it among what he calls the anti-jeremiads which voice "the denunciation of all ideas, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie."<sup>21</sup> But if the nostalgic pull in *Gravity's Rainbow* is registered as a sort of anchorage, a point of departure, then Pynchon is also, in part, an American Jeremiah "simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream."<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging, as I think we must, the utopian dream gone wrong which empowers the nostalgic strain in *Gravity's Rainbow* shows it to partake of the jeremiad's refusal "to confront the present, a fear of the future, an effort to translate 'America' into a vision that works in spirit because it can never be tested in fact".<sup>23</sup>

To take another of those synthetic metaphors purporting to explain the American experience, R. W. B. Lewis's description of the American Adam has bearing on the microparable I have focused upon in these notes. The following

<sup>18</sup> Richard Lehan, "Literature and Values: The American Crusoes and the Idea of the West", Forum Series, 1988., p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964., p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>21</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1978., p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

would be an apt description of that lost opportunity so nostalgically evoked by the colonial analepsis: "the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentiality, poised at the start of a new history... this image had about it always an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility."<sup>24</sup> Commenting on mid-century America, Lewis makes a remark which takes us to the final part of the paper: he remarks on what he perceives as the "new hopelessness" which is as simple-minded as innocence; and it is opposed only by that parody of hope which consists in an appeal for 'positive thinking' - a wilful return to innocence based upon a wilful ignorance, momentarily popular in the market place of culture but with no hold at all upon the known truth of experience.<sup>25</sup>

I draw attention to these remarks not only because I hold that this is still a valid judgement but also because it introduces a topic with which I would like to round up my argument.

In a certain way, the above-quoted distinction Wright Morris made between the artists' backward glance and their countrymen's resolute march forward is too neat. The tug of nostalgia that I have focused upon in *Gravity's Rainbow* is hardly restricted to literature but permeates, at different times and in different measures, American society and culture as a whole. Perhaps this is inevitable in a society growing more complex and intractable from day to day. Neville Wakefield makes an observation which is pertinent to this train of thoughts:

Seeking moments of stability and perspective from within the chaotic and contradictory violence of the present we increasingly find ourselves seeking refuge in nostalgia - in a vision of the past from which the worst wrinkles of contradiction have been ironed out, in a past that has been domesticated to suit the desperate needs of the present.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, nostalgia would be a constituent part of the postmodern sensibility. However, on a more concrete level, one can speak of the American commodification of the nostalgic appeal. An analysis of the world of advertisement could easily unravel the nostalgic slant of its enticing messages. There are nostalgia TV networks, revealing styles of dressing, etc., while the recent Republican sweep of American politics with their "contract for America" signals the call of a simpler era. Examining the resistance to feminism within American culture, Janice, Doane and Devon Hodges have found that "nostalgia permeates American politics and mass culture. While pulpits and podiums resound with the message that we need to restore American values and the American family, movies and television return us to the happy days of yore".<sup>27</sup>

But is Pynchon then just another novelist who has written into *Gravity's Rainbow* what David Stineback has termed a "yearning for rest" which frequently takes the form of nostalgia for the past and, in particular, an insistent sense that the

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Neville Wakefield., *Postmodernism, The Twilight of the Real*, Pluto Press, London, 1990., p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> Janice, Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference*, Methuen, New York, 1987., p. 3.

present is somehow morally or spiritually inferior to an earlier period in history".<sup>28</sup> If my argument for the presence of nostalgia has been convincing it turns out that Pynchon's novel establishes a rapport with at least the utopian potential of his culture's past. In this sense, Pynchon cannot be made out to be unambiguously championing those who have been bypassed by the American polity. As Stineback puts it nostalgia is not "for those who have never had an enduring past of their own".<sup>29</sup> No matter what explanation we put on Pynchon's relationship to this past it cannot be contested that he has one. The many usages the word nostalgia can suffer would be one way of intimating the complex nature of Pynchon's relationship to his culture and society. This would go against the grain of the way most critics have worked, as Michael Berube observes, "to establish a margin for Pynchon to inhabit... For Pynchon to be marginal, he must be in some sense oppositional".<sup>30</sup> Even if one concedes Pynchon's oppositionality the thing that tends to get left out of the picture is what he is being oppositional to or, put differently, what empowers, one can even say, what grounds his oppositional stance.

As Berube puts it, Pynchon's novel "offers us a veritable miscellany of macropolitical nostalgia and fantasied national 'restoration'".<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the "nostalgic provincialism" (Stineback) of the embedded story which I have made the focus of my attention, its setting and Puritan family origins, have broader implications. The synecdochical use of the family saga can be perceived as an instance of "narrative accrual" whereby family tales become representative of a region and are subsequently promoted to becoming the cultural narrative of a particular polity. The term is taken from Jerome Bruner's article "The Narrative Construction of Reality" where we read the following:

What creates a culture, surely, must be a "local" capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure that permits a continuity into the present - in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy.<sup>32</sup>

Of course the very use of the singular form of the word culture in the citation and its reference to continuity would cause tantrums in today's contentious arena of American cultural studies. In addition, if marginality has become, in the redefinition of the canon, a criterion of literary value I am doing a disservice to Pynchon by making him out to be a distinctly American writer squarely within the tradition of great American novelists. However, the topics I have focused upon have made me aware of a strong grounding in Pynchon's narrative, a backward pull which should not be ignored.

From one perspective, the contents and the mechanism of the nostalgia complex I have focused upon could be envisioned as the enabling conditions of the

<sup>28</sup> David C. Stineback, *Shifting World, Social Change and America in the American Novel*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, 1976., p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Berube, *Marginal Forces / Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon and the Poetics of the Canon*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992., p. 291.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>32</sup> Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality", *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1991., 18/1, p. 20.

novel. One could speak of a point of departure. On another level, in having chosen to foreground them I intended to construct a frame of reference for a delineation of the American cultural identity. I do this in full consciousness that the latter entity itself is a moot category in today's acrimonious debates. I cannot but wonder whether its critics would ascribe its resilience in readings such as the present one to fanciful mirages fabricated by the very distantiating effects of cross-cultural transactions which, at the beginning of this paper, were announced as the enabling ground of its reading.

*Stipe Grgas: NOSTALGIJA KAO OZNAKA AMERIČKE KULTURE U PYNCHONOVU  
ROMANU GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

S a ž e t a k

Autor se u radu usredotočuje na tematiku nostalgije u najpoznatijem romanu Thomasa Pynchona koja, po njegovu sudu, nedvosmisleno postavlja to djelo u samo središte američke kulture. U radu se s osobitom pozornošću analizira analepsa u romanu u kojoj Pynchon opisuje puritanske početke američke civilizacije koji ne samo što funkcioniraju kao ishodišne točke ocrtavanja glavnoga lika, nego u sebi i nose dinamiku povijesne dileme koja je odredila potonji razvojni put SAD. Autor opisuje kako nostalgija za putom kojim se nije zaputilo američko društvo prožimlje Pynchonov roman, ali i kako distopijski ishod utopijskih početaka ima šire kulturološke implikacije.