

“A Progressive Knotting-Into”: Complexity and Scope in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a challenging work, maximalist in most ways that fiction can conceivably be. Among countless techniques it utilizes a cast of hundreds of characters, esoteric themes both scientific and metaphysical, and a vast variety of narrative voices to deliver a sprawling and intricate literary experience. The novel even uses this panoramic scope its most atomic level: sentence structure. Although readers may wince at sentences that go on for entire pages at a time, careful examination reveals that Pynchon’s prose is not luridly complex for its own sake, but rather a careful and intricate attempt to capture the majesty and depth of human life in the midst of great upheaval. By close analysis of one of the novel’s opening paragraphs, I will demonstrate how Thomas Pynchon’s writing style in *Gravity’s Rainbow* conveys a sense of plurality and interconnectedness through its use of subjective pivoting and temporal uncertainty.

The passage in question, describing a tramcar of evacuees as they are taken *somewhere* in the midst of a city bombing, begins simply enough: “They have begun to move.” The evacuees pass “out of the main station [and] begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city.” A disconnected narrative voice asks “Is this the way out?” on the group’s behalf, since “no one dares ask, not out loud.” The same omniscient voice disjointedly answers, “No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*—”, before further description of their movements trails off into ellipses and the narration launches into a vivid and fragmentary evocation of memory. The passage reads that “trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead”, but quickly pivots into a winding list of other smells and associated memories. The collective consciousness of the evacuees is reminded of “[smells] of naphtha winters, of Sundays

when no traffic came through[...] of maturing rust, developing through those emptying days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero...”. Again, the prose trails off unresolved, mid-breath. A disconnected phrase, “...ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose *names he has never heard...*”, flits in and out, independent of any main thought. Finally, the passage returns to a semblance of structure: “The road[...] has been getting narrower, more broken [...] until all at once, much too soon, they are under the final arch.” Like the road that the tramcar follows, the prose narrows to a point and stops the action dead in its tracks.

In the passage, there is an important contrast between short simplistic sentences and long complex ones. The first aspect of this contrast is the uncertainty of subjectivity. Take for example, the first sentence, “They have begun to move.” and the sixth, “Rain comes down.” They almost as structurally simple as an English sentence can be, the former taking a general *subject - verb - object/infinite verb* form, and the latter taking a *subject - intransitive verb - adverb* form. The subject is obvious; *rain* comes down, *they* begin to move. Furthermore, they entail objective occurrences with no interpretation; simply put, they describe things that happen. Compare these to the passage’s largest sentence, a chimera beginning with “No, this is not a disentanglement from...” and not fully stopping until “the roofs get fewer and so do the chances for light”. The subject of the prose is initially the evacuation itself (*this* is not a disentanglement), then the group (“*they* go under...”), then the archways by way of a subordinate clause, the trestles of blackened wood, and then the smells. However, even though the passage sets the reader up to expect that the smells “of naphtha winters [etc]” will *do* something, once the smell of rust is mentioned the subject again pivots to the rust itself, which is “developing through those

emptying days[...] to try to bring events to Absolute Zero”. Any momentum that the sentence gains is quickly abandoned and the concept of a single point of subjective observation is eschewed. Unlike the simpler sentences, these words don’t describe something that is *occurring* in an objective frame, but rather something that is being *experienced* by an entire group of people at once, filtered through a lens of memory. In this way, Pynchon attempts to replicate the plurality of experience on a large scale. In the mind and especially in a collective thought, things don’t happen in strict *subject-object-verb* structure. The disconnected, grammatically incorrect noun phrase of “...ruinous secret cities of poor” functions impressionistically, less concerned with describing an action than evoking a feeling or a concept. Like one’s internal train of thought, the sentence is a series of tangents, following one idea until another distracts the prose away.

Returning to the example sentences mentioned earlier, one can see that they are also *temporally* simple. “Rain comes down” is unambiguously in the present active continuous tense, and “They have begun to move” is in the present perfect. Again, the objective is characterized as fixed; the rain falls *now*, they begin to move *now*. However, time itself is convoluted in the longer sentence. A cursory examination shows that it contains elements of present passive continuous (“This is not a disentanglement”) present active continuous (“they go in under archways”), passive present perfect (“trestles have moved slowly by”), past active (“when no traffic came through”), and even the suggestion of the future (“try to bring events to Absolute Zero”). By placing such short and grounded thoughts near this one, Pynchon draws attention to how tangled the concept of temporal perspective can be. With minimal action it simultaneously keeps the mind situated in the bygone past (via nostalgia), the uncertain future (via anxiety), and

the tumultuous present. Similar to its complex use of subjectivity in its sentence structure, this too reflects human experience with its eternally fluctuating sense of temporal perspective. Any single present moment can branch out in countless lines of thought leading forward or backward in one's life, and Pynchon captures that through his winding and disjointed use of verb tense. On the very first page of *Gravity's Rainbow*, he establishes the scope of his writing as not only panoramic in space, but also in time.

In the final line of the passage, Pynchon returns to grounded simplicity, in doing so providing the cold antithesis of his previously free flowing subjectivity. In characterizing the tramcar's cessation of movement as a simple fact ("It is a judgement from which there is no appeal"), Pynchon dispels the naïvely optimistic sentiment of the preceding lines. There's no uncertainty of subject, *it* is the universal situation that the evacuees find themselves in; there's no uncertainty of time, there *is* no appeal, now or ever. Although the plurality of life is complex and often hard to convey in simple thoughts, *Gravity's Rainbow* balances this uncertainty with straightforwardness and austerity. Despite how much our minds may live outside of the present, this line serves as a reminder that we are inexorably tied to the solid, inexpressive present.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon plays a delicate game of dichotomies. In one breath, he uses sprawling descriptions and winding sentence structure to evoke the complexity and plurality of human experience. In the next, he uses simplicity and compactness as a structural foil, simultaneously establishing a baseline of objectivity while emphasizing the multifacetedness of subjectivity. Because of this intricate balancing act, the style *Gravity's Rainbow* is almost impossible to classify, but is certainly one of the most unique and virtuosic examples of modern English prose.

Cited Paragraph

“They have begun to move. They pass in line out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city. Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*— they go in under archways, secret entrances of rotted concrete that only looked like loops of an underpass... certain trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead, and the smells begun of coal from days far to the past, smells of naphtha winters, of Sundays when no traffic came through, of the coral-like and mysteriously vital growth, around the blind curve and out the lonely spurs, a sour smell of rolling-stock absence, or maturing rust, developing through those emptying days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero... and it is poorer the deeper they go... ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose *names he has never heard*... the walls break down, the roofs get fewer and so do the chances for light. The road, which ought to be opening out into a broader highway, instead has been getting narrower, more broken, cornering tighter and tighter until all at once, much too soon, they are under the final arch: brakes grab and spring terribly. It is a judgement from which there is no appeal.”