

Thomas Pynchon's Techniques of Time Dislocation in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Byun Jong-min *

Thomas Pynchon has written three novels: *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's latest and biggest (760 pages) and greatest novel, represents Pynchon's accumulated literary worlds. As Charles Clerc points out that "*Gravity's Rainbow* is destined to become a classic of literature,"¹⁾ the novel made a literary event of great moment in the contemporary literary world. However, the novel is one of the most difficult works to apprehend, probably because of its complicated and delicate techniques rather than its abundant and profound actions. Anyone who reads this novel becomes immediately aware of an overwhelming confusion as to just what is going on. It seems that Thomas Pynchon's superfluous details, multitude of characters, and endless quick-shifts leave the reader's mind whirling. But perhaps the most boggling feature of all is the effect of time dislocation. This is accomplished by a number of temporal devices—resounding symbols and mythological frameworks and a host of cinematic devices. The purpose of this paper is to discuss Pynchon's techniques of time dislocation in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

If it is true that in a way "our age has been the conquest of space by time,"²⁾ then *Gravity's Rainbow* is that conquest's champion. As a result of the conquest, most readers of

1) Charles Clerc, ed., *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1983), p.3.

2) A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), p.10.

* 師範大學 助教授

the novel will have a singular frame of consciousness, "no serial time over there: events are all there in the same eternal moment."³⁾

To begin with, the reader's consciousness of eternal moment in *Gravity's Rainbow* is compounded by the problem of its plot. Conventionally speaking, there is no plot, only a plenitude of possibilities. Though fiction must unfold linearly by the very nature of language, *Gravity's Rainbow* makes every attempt to circumvent this reality. Random events surface and disappear, and scenes are thrown in for comic effect alone. That is to say, Pynchon has created the entropic plot, one in which the strands of paranoia invisibly link the episodes together. In a conventional sense, this entropic plot may not be a plot. Therefore, some critics, notably Douglas Fowler, have refused to consider *Gravity's Rainbow* as fiction at all and instead treat it as a gigantic poem. Grant Overton has claimed that the "history of fiction is simply the history of decay of the plot."⁴⁾ and Pynchon is not very far from the total realization of that.

All of this is not to say that *Gravity's Rainbow* doesn't have a climax. In fact, the entire plot of the novel, though entropic, can be seen as a countdown narration, of which the readers are not immediately aware, but which manifests itself continually as the readers realize that the rocket is descending on them while they are reading. Each turn of the page can be seen as a thin slice of time along the rocket's trajectory. The countdown effect is dramatized graphically in the last episode, where headings are used for short sections within the episode, enhancing the pace. In this countdown narrative, Pynchon's plot and time work together and against each other, and to consider one without the other is to leave the reader with a mass of fragmented data. *Gravity's Rainbow* can work as any sort of entity in the reader's mind only through inter-relation between plot and time.

The sense of time dislocation is also made acute through point of view. Pynchon uses all three kinds of standpoints in the novel: first, second, and third person. Each voice is different in tone, texture, and outlook. The readers see the devastating world from characters' drugged states, from inside their dreams, from outside time. Besides the over 400 characters in the novel, the readers witness the birth of Jesus Christ through the eyes of cock-roaches, the revels of laboratory rats in a maze late at night, and are coaxed into believing in the consciousness of a rock, which is similar to that of plants and animals except for its time scale, which is "a lot more stretched out" (P.612).

For one example of Pynchon's incredibly meandering point of view, the four pages in

3) Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p.624. Henceforward, all references to the novel will be designated in parentheses with pagination following.

4) Mendilow, p.48.

Gravity's Rainbow, 410 through 413, can be taken. The readers start with Herr Franz Pökler's conversation with his daughter Ilse about the rocket which may go to the Moon someday. From there Pökler introspects of his job, and then the readers are given an explanation of Friedrich Kekulé's dream of a snake swallowing its tail, with an aside on Jung. From here the readers digress to James Clerk Maxwell, the inventor of Maxwell's demon, and are given Mrs. Maxwell's infamous statement at a party: "It is time to go home. James, you are beginning to enjoy yourself" (p. 411). Kekulé's dream is then likened to a surrealistic bus driven by a suicidal driver. In response to the old refrain "I lost my heart in Heidelberg," the driver says, "well I have a friend who lost both his ears here" (p. 412). The readers go back to the dream which helps solve the mystery of the benzene ring, which is patiently explained by the narrator, who seems to be posing as the teacher of a class: "Come--who knows? You." And then, "Tell me Pökler--" (p. 413), from whence, the readers are back to Pökler and Ilse. Now, whose point of view is that? In a whirland of fantasy or fact, the readers have gone from third to first to second to third person again, and all in a few short pages. It's somewhat difficult to keep track of where the readers are and certainly of when they are. This example is one of many possible sections of the novel in which this time dislocation through point of view presents itself.

By traditional lights the readers might be tempted to assign the above all to Pökler's daydream, and indeed certainly some of it is, but not all of it. In a way, the way of description is by the narrative voice. This voice is the most insistent one throughout the novel, and, though incredibly malleable, is still immediately recognizable. Pynchon's voice betrays different moods; he may be pedantic, sly, back-slapping, come-hither, courteous, almost moralizing, show-off, and absurd, but he is always playful. Considering the authorial voice, if one were forced to assign an overall point of view to *Gravity's Rainbow*, its effect is as much second person as anything else. Fowler points out that "like a poem, *Gravity's Rainbow* has been written with procedures which involve writer and reader more fully than they involve writer and character."⁵⁾ The authorial intervention is high-handed, self-conscious, and playful. Mendilow decries such tactics that jolt the reader from the "Relative Now" of the characters to the author's own "Absolute Now,"⁶⁾ and this is just the point. Pynchon wishes to jolt the reader's time-sense and to guide the reader bumping and lurching through to his timeless Zone. This is more than the standard technique of time-shift; it's a deliberate temporal chaos. Insofar as point of view shift implies a time shift, the readers are left reeling and clockless in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

5) Douglas Fowler, *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980), p.75.

6) Mendilow, p. 99.

A discussion of the quest and mythological frames and the symbloic frameworks will serve to enlighten some of Pynchon's time concepts. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a quest story, or a mystery or detective story, all of which have in common "the pleasures of the pursuit itself by which time may be ransomed."⁷⁾ Everyone in the novel is trying to get something: information, family, drugs, love, penance, themselves, harmonicas, light, dogs, or death. In the major quests the readers are given more information than they can handle, the essential "experience of ambiguity"⁸⁾ which turns a search paranoid. As the readers try to sort out all the clues with the characters, the act of reading itself "becomes a paranoid activity which is, however, constantly breaking down under the feeling that we shall never arrive at a unity reading."⁹⁾ Therefore, Fowler points out, much of *Gravity's Rainbow* is "all excursion and no journey, motion without arrival."¹⁰⁾

The nature of the quest itself is severely time-linked, moving forward in a vector. But the quest also dictates a sort of suspension of time as the object becomes more real than the time needed to apprehend it, becoming an entity itself, a sort of constant nowness in relation to the object. In this way, as the object is not in sight, the endeavor becomes delineated solely by time, giving us the quest as encapsulated eternity. But in *Gravity's Rainbow* the eternity is an open-ended one.

In relation to the quest frames, Pynchon uses ancient mythical magic and cult. Like the experiencing of time flowing in a dream, through mythology the linear nature of time can be undermined. For though the myth must be told in directionally successive words and phrases, the non-rational time orientation it evokes tends toward heresy against the empirical world we usually tend to believe in.

Pynchon applies the Grimm fairy tale to his characters of Katje, Gottfried and Blicero as Gretel, Hansel, and the Witch (pp. 93-94) with a more horrible turnaround than the tale itself: in *Gravity's Rainbow* the "Witch" shoves Hansel into the Rocket-Oven. For the purposes of the novel then, the tale reveals at least three time matrices: that of the reader's childhood, that of the "Relative Now" of Katje, Gottfried and Blicero, and the timeless aspect of the myth itself.

A stranger turnaround, perhaps, occurs with the use of popular heroes such as Philip Marlowe, The Lone Ranger, and Superman whom Pynchon imagines as good guys trying to

7) Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p.71.

8) Thomas Schaub, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), ix.

9) Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p.82.

10) Fowler, p.64.

stop the blast-off of the rocket. But time turns around, and their magic is not enough to save the day:

"Too late" was never in their programming. They find instead a moment's suspending of their sanity--but then it's over with, whew, and it's back to the trail, back to the Daily Planet. *Yes Jimmy, it must've been the day I ran into that singularity, those few seconds of absolute mystery... you know Jimmy, time is a funny thing...* There'll be a thousand ways to forget. The heroes will go on, kicked upstairs to oversee the development of bright new middle-line personnel, and they will watch their system falling apart, watch those singularities begin to come more and more often, proclaiming another dispensation out of the tissue of old-fashioned time, and they'll call it cancer, and just won't know what things are coming to, or what's the meaning of it all. Jimmy... (p.752)

Unlike the tale of Hansel and Gretel, however, the Superman myth finds its impact in its own collapse. In a modern-day way it shakes the reader's faith; that Superman might not triumph over the forces of evil is almost equal to running the film backwards; it's unsettling to the reader's time-sense to have his adolescent heroes presented in this way.

The framework of symbols in the novel is a vast network of recurring images. First of all, Pynchon uses conventional time symbols, but uses them almost against themselves. For example, when Slothrop and Tantivy are drinking, "the clock over the bar only clicks once, then presently again, ratcheting time minutewise into their past" (p. 193). The clock is an obvious representation of the passage of time, but it shows up repeatedly and usually against another conventional symbol for time, as for instance in the complicated imagery below:

I recall the time Christian found an old alarm clock, and we salvaged the radium, to coat our plumb-bob strings with. They shone in the twilight. You've seen them holding bobs, hands characteristically gathered near the crotch. A dark figure with a stream of luminescent piss fall falling to the ground fifty meters away... (pp. 738-39)

Here the readers have the guts of an alarm clock coating the line which dips into the water of the marshes. The marsh, the ocean, and especially the river have all been used to represent the flow of existence as defined by time. This imagery makes an odd temporal dislocation: a clock time plunged into an endless time. Thus in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon uses a number of conventional symbols: clock, water, music, Pointsman's hearing, etc. These conventional flow-symbols are used against each other by their strange interaction to become time-disintegrating affectors. Therefore, it is important to note that the conventional symbols

serve merely as images if taken by themselves. They are metaphors worked into images. Only when considered in the context of the novel's plethora of other images, they become symbols.

Pynchon's most spectacular effects arise from his nonconventional symbols, most notably from the realm of science. Science and math pervade the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The readers find several types of temporal graphs in the novel, including the Poisson distribution which has to do with randomness, maps of Don Giovanni's conquests, and Roger Mexico's statistical charts which correlate V-2 rocket hits with Slothrop's erections. However, the two most provocative examples from science are that of the double integral and that of delta-time.

The double integral, taken from calculus, mathematically calculates a rocket's flight. It is the "method by which the rocket's parabola can be divided into time-frames"¹¹⁾ and operates "on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled" (p. 301). This is apt enough to express Pynchon's view of time as a metaphor, but it is a symbol in its repetition: the double integral resurfaces as the Nazi SS emblem, as the ancient rune for the yew tree, which implies death, as the tunnels at Nordhausen, and as two lovers curled in sleep. As one critic says, the "effect provides an almost subliminal continuity and one that achieves a sense of déjà vu for the the reader."¹²⁾

The delta-time, written as d-t or $\Delta-t$, is likewise borrowed from calculus. The use of delta-time is important in calculating a rocket's trajectory, in which the parabola is divided into slices of time to calculate each quantity as d-t approaches zero, a process which "might seem like magic to the uninitiated."¹³⁾ Indeed, Pynchon uses the concept of d-t as a kind of magic to penetrate the moment. Delta-time is the "wedding with randomness"¹⁴⁾ as well as the point at which there is the "clash of logic and nature,"¹⁵⁾ but perhaps most of all it is the known but unbelievable immanency of death, as the slices of our lives approach zero. As d-t appears again and again in the novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* "can be said to always be taking place in the last moment before the last moment."¹⁶⁾

Futhermore, Pynchon makes d-t universal in that it is nor relative to only one character's subjective experience, but to the subjectivity and uncertainty of an ectire universe.

11) Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (Long Island University: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), p.218.

12) Alan J. Friedman, "Science and Technology," in Charles Clerc, ed., *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, p.96. I am indebted to this article for an introduction to relativity and many other scientific concepts, including the double integral and delta-time.

13) Friedman, p.74.

14) George Levine and David Leverenz, eds., *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1976), p.133.

15) Fowler, p.52.

16) Fowler, p.169.

Delta-time is used by Leni Pökler, but also to describe Ilse. Delta-time is used to predict the rocket's trajectory, but also to represent Tyrone Slothrop's strange condition of disintegration.

As Slothrop's dissolution progresses and his d-t approaches zero, so does the Rocket's. Fowler says, "the rocket can be said to fall all through the novel, and to be only one last thin slice of delta-time above us in the novel's last, unfinished line."¹⁷⁾ This mega-symbol achieves resonance throughout the book, in the form of the Empire State Building, the Tarot Tower, bananas, the phallus, New England steeples, and Rilke's angel, to name a few. It is a symbol so grand and with so many expanding meanings that by the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* it can be said to mean almost everything. Pökler's reminiscence of Fähring's description of the essence of aerodynamics needs to be considered:

It was necessary in some way to become one with Rocket, trajectory, and target--"not to will it, but to surrender, to step out of the role of firer. The act is undivided. You are both aggressor and victim, rocket and parabolic path and..." (p. 403).

Rocket, trajectory and target; Mendilow's creator, creation and recreator;¹⁸⁾ the corresponding author, work of art and reader--all these are taken in by the transcendent symbol. The rocket is Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and every reader. Accordingly, the above passage seems to spell it out: the reader must internalize the rocket in order for the Relative Now of the work to have any meaning in the reader's own time-frame. And the temporal passage of the rocket, its evernearing endingness, is a meaning for our times.

Time, says Heidegger, is "the basic category of existence." The reason for temporal fear is the same reason that makes the rocket fearful--that is--because time progressing, to the rational world, means death. As Meyerhoff says, "insofar as man has any nature at all, it is that of being a time-haunted animal."²⁰⁾ Pynchon is certainly haunted too, but in a radically distinct manner. To the author Death, "the true clitoris" (p. 751), has nothing to do with Cause and Effect; it doesn't lie at the end of a succession of events; it's almost irrelevant to linearity. Death's impendingness has to do with proximity, but not necessarily a proximity that comes down the end of the line. Pynchon makes it clear that the "real movement is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death-transfigured." (p. 166.).

17) Fowler, p.213.

18) Mendilow, p.237.

19) Meyerhoff, p.27.

20) Meyerhoff, p.67.

The rocket, the double integral, delta-time, conventional images used in juxtaposition: *Gravity's Rainbow's* profusion of symbols creates an almost hallucinatory effect in the reader's mind. This paper has only touched the tip of all the interrelations. Nothing in the novel is actually connected directly but by the slimmest bonds, so that the connections are half imagined in light of repetition. Eventually, everything in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems connected, and this is the essence of paranoia, but also of Thomas Pynchon's temporal craft.

In conclusion, through Pynchon's mythological and quest frameworks, through his symbols of film, d-t, and especially through the manifestation of the rocket, the readers sense a breathtaking entry into the moment, the now of Slothrop's Zone. In his narrative and his point of view, the glimpse is both momentary and sustained. From this complicated time craft, some readers could make a case that the entire novel is one big dream or one big nightmare. Time is present as a thematic current as well as a fictional craft in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In order to understand what Pynchon presents through his time craft in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the readers may have to keep in mind the impact of "psychological duration of the reading."²¹⁾

21) Mendilow, p.121.

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〈국문초록〉

Thomas Pynchon의 *Gravity's Rainbow*에 나타난 時間轉位 技法

卞 鍾 民

현대 미국 작가중 가장 난해하고 심오한 소설가로 일컬어지고 있는 Thomas Pynchon의 문학 세계는 다양하기 이룰데 없는 小說技法의 실험장이라는 데서 Henry James와 James Joyce의 그것에 필적할만 하다. 특히 Pynchon의 대표작이라고 할 수 있는 *Gravity's Rainbow*(1973)는 Pynchon의 작가적 力量이 총 집대성된 大作으로서 많은 비평가들로 부터 Joyce의 *Ulysses*와 James의 *The Ambassadors*에 버금가는 古典作品으로 환대를 받고 있다.

*Gravity's Rainbow*에서 Pynchon이 실험하는 小說技法중 가장 중요하고도 난해한 것은 바로 時間轉位の 방법이다. 이 소설이 그토록 읽기 어려운 것은, 작가의 지나칠 정도로 세세한 묘사력과 수많은 등장인물 이외에도, 바로 이 복잡한 時間轉位の 技巧 때문일 것이다. 이 소설에서 Pynchon은 전통적인 시간질서 개념을 완전히 무시하므로써 독자를 당황케 하고 있다. 이 時間轉位の 技巧는 주로 반복되는 상징수법, 신화적 구조, 一群의 영상처리 방법등에 의해 그 목표를 달성하고 있지만, 소설이해의 기본요소인 構成(plot)과 觀點(point of view)에 까지 어김없이 적용되어 독자를 더욱 혼란시키고 있다. 전통적 의미에서 構成(plot)의 개념이 시간적 질서에 기초를 둔다고 볼때 Pynchon이 사용하는 entropic plot은 소설의 plot이 될 수 없다. 觀點에 있어서도 가능한 방법을 모두 時間轉位에 따라 이동시키고 혼용시키므로써 독자로 하여금 이야기의 핵심조차 파악하기 어렵게 만든다.

內容的 構造 또한 신화적이고 상징적인 수법을 통해 일종의 탐정소설화 시키므로써 독자는 시간의 무질서 속에서 추적의 방향을 하게 되며 현존하는 시간적 개념마저 박탈당하게 된다. 특히 時間轉位 방법의 효과를 위해 Pynchon이 동원하는 온갖 종류의 상징물들은 시간적 질서에 기초를 둔 現存世界의 의미를 전면 거부하고 있다. 이토록 혼란된 시간의 小說世界를 통해 독자는 자연히 自己存在의 위기의식을 절감하게 된다. 지구를 향해 落下하고 있는 作中の 로키트는 언제, 누구에게 명중될 지 모른다. 그 로키트는 작가인 Pynchon을 향할 수도 있고, 제조한 과학자를 향할 수도 있고, 독자 개개인을 향할 수도 있다. 그 落下時間은 고도의 컴퓨터 계산으로도, 어떤 수학공식으로도 정확히 계산될 수 없다. 그렇기 때문에 로키트로 인한 파멸의 위기의식은 시간의 흐름에 따라 가중되기만 한다.

결론적으로 말하자면, Pynchon은 중횡무진하는 時間轉位の 技法을 통해 현대의 고도과학문명 시대가 지니고 있는 파멸의 위기 감각을 우리에게 환기시키고 있다. 아울러 순간 순간을 소중히 살아가도록 충실한 삶의 방법을 현대인에게 깨우쳐 주고 있는 듯 싶다. 心理的으로 여유있는 음미를 하며 독서하지 않으면 760페이지에 달하는 이 大作은 진정 독자를 백일몽의 세계에서 방황하게 만들 것이다.