

# Entropy and the Fantastic: Chaos and Disorder in the Crying of Lot 49 of Thomas Pynchon

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**Abstract:** Thomas Pynchon is an American postmodernism novelist who scrapped the 19<sup>th</sup> century view of optimism and turned to science and technology to explore the causes and symptoms the modern malaise afflicting the contemporary Americans. His novels depict the postmodernist techniques of ironies, paradox, and the self-conscious style expressing relation to a world in which unity is replaced by a baffling multiplicity. Thomas Pynchon was influenced by Henry Adams's *Education* (1905) which describes the lack of certainties in the modern world. Pynchon deals with a deterministic order; he talks of spontaneity in which contradictory possibilities co-exist. Norbert Wiener published his book *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1967) in which he propounded the theory of decline, death and disorder operating in the universe. Pynchon was greatly impacted by the theory of entropy and decline as Weiner observes: "the universe is running downhill" (58). Entropy is a measuring rod of that decline and in all his major novels such as *V*, (1961), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) Pynchon depicts the process of death, decline and disorder of the universe and man's confrontation with the chaos. Pynchon turned to science and philosophy and used the metaphor of entropy to depict the process of the end of human civilization.

**Index Terms:** Chaos, Entropy, Confrontation, Disorder, Deterministic, Postmodernism, Multiplicity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pynchon's use of the concept of entropy shows that Pynchon is concerned with the ways his characters respond to the threat of death and decline. Pynchon wrote the story *Entropy* and gave the evidence of his blackness: "We must get into the step, a lockstep toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change"[6]. This paper explores the world order depicted in the major novels of Thomas Pynchon who brought a revolution in the American fiction introducing new stylistic techniques to articulate his metaphysical vision. Harold Bloom (2003)[1] observes in his book *Thomas Pynchon* that "Pynchon surpasses every American writer since Faulkner at invention; Pynchon's greatest talent is his vast control, a preternatural ability to order so immense an exuberance at invention. Pynchon's

supreme aesthetic quality is what Hazlitt called *gusto*, or what Blake intended in his famous proverb: "Exuberance is Beauty" [11] Werner Von Braun was a great German astronaut who later joined American Space Missions. Braun wrote *Destination Man* expressing his dream of a future world.

The plots of the novels of Pynchon depict reality in his novels from a different perspective. He was a good student of mathematics so he used the Second Law of Thermodynamic system to investigate the order and disorder operating in the universe. It is important to mention Rudolf Arnheim's *Entropy and Art: Essays on Disorder and Order* (1971) deals with the influence of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on arts. Arnheim argues that the novels of Thomas Pynchon depict the theme of entropy and he defines the entropy principle thus:

It follows that the entropy principle defines order simply as an improbable arrangement of elements, regardless of whether the macro shape of this arrangement is beautifully structured or most arbitrarily deformed; and it calls disorder the dissolution of such an improbable arrangement. (Arnheim [13])

In this sense, Arnheim's definition and perception of entropy implies an order indistinct. According to Arnheim order is an improbable arrangement of element and entropy inevitably creates a new order which is more natural than the old one. Thus maximum entropy cannot be understood as a measure of disorder since even chaos has its implicit organization. This understanding of a disordered system as a more natural order is crucial to the understanding of Pynchon's narrative. For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the system. His famous novel *Gravity's Rainbow* begins with "screaming" as he writes: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it now" (Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* ). [3] Pynchon is warning to humanity of the possibility of a V-2 rocket falling at any time and destroying human civilization. The rocket V-2 symbolizes a nightmare for the humanity. The similar warning was given by Herman Melville in his novel *Moby Dick* (1850) with his signature sentence; "Call me Ishmael" His contemporaries Hemingway, Norman Mailer and Faulkner had put faith in the "Divine Sublime" as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Sound and Fury* of Faulkner end with a note of affirmation but Pynchon's celebrated novels *V* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) [18], *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) deal with the themes of "Negative Sublime". Pynchon explicitly uses the concept of entropy and notions

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from information theory for his own purposes, creating a narrative aesthetic that is subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Pynchon's vision is panoramic as he exhaustively borrows from history, politics, anthropology, science and technology. Thus, entropy in Thomas Pynchon's novels is not limited to a mere reference, a curiosity in the plot. But it serves as a higher organizing element of the narrative. This theory provides a narrative order in otherwise very disordered fiction. Steven Weisenburger (2006) in *Modern Medea* (1998) and *Fables of Subversion* (1995) observes that "It is impossible to conceive of postmodernism in literature without reference to Pynchon's fiction." Pynchon's work is subject to a lot of criticism. Gore Vidal in his essay *American Plastic: the Matter of Fiction* discusses the state of the then contemporary American fiction in his sensational way. Vidal compares Pynchon with John Barth observing that his novels are too academic. Vidal analyzed all the important characters of his novels *Crying of Lot 49* and the epic *Gravity's Rainbow* and criticizes the inconsistency of Pynchon's characters. Hanjo Berressem observes that the novels of Pynchon are organized and consistent precisely in their non-linear chaos and apparent inconsistency. In this way, Pynchon's narrative forms a body of writing that correlates with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a "rhizome"

Molly Hite (1983) in *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* [15,17] explores the various notions of order and disorder and all his characters are made to confront the deterministic and callous destiny that crushes them. Hite's observations are crucial to an understanding of Pynchon's narrative in that they describe the various ways to comprehend the forces that bulldoze his characters. Norbert Wiener in *Human Use of Human Beings* explores the technical

references used by Pynchon in his fiction and the seriousness of the message conveyed by him. Marshall McLuhan (1995) in *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* observes that Pynchon had mathematical mind as his fiction shows an extensive background in philosophy and literature and draws from this knowledge a vision of future. Being aware of the dangers the modern age posits to the humanity, he creates an apologetics of automatization. David Seed in his essay *Order in Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy"* argues that the application of entropy on the social sphere is a very romantic notion connected to progressive moments of history. Norbert Wiener (1950) in his book *The Human Use of Human Beings* describes the tendency in history as that of a Darwinian progress. Ludwig Wittgenstein explores the basic concepts of his philosophy. His essay discusses in detail the elements of modernism as Pynchon. Pynchon is a postmodernism novelist who examined and investigated the concepts of Cartesian ego, and Freudian ego in his novels. Wittgenstein observes that the style of Pynchon is artificial and superfluous as it baffles the readers. His novels are complex in plot construction as his stories are in the nature of meta-historical retellings. He has introduced more than 400 characters to baffle the readers. There are multiple narrators in each novel. Mark Currie in his book *Postmodern Narrative Theory* observes that Pynchon has evolved his unique style to analyze the self and identity of the individuals in his novels. He observes that in the novels of Pynchon three main elements of postmodern literature are

found; namely diversification, deconstruction and politicization. Pynchon presents the domination of paradox and the characters the victims of paradox.

## II. PESSIMISM OF THOMAS PYNCHON

Pynchon's vision of life and the universe is pessimistic as his novels deal with the "immanence of death and the decline of civilization." In his *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon observes that the novel is a "salad of despair" [5] The plot of the novels gives a ray of hope in the disguised form to baffle the readers but in reality the mood of death and despair structure the plot of the novel. The main characters of the novel are caught between the pole of hope and despair and experience the alienation of ambiguity. The characters experience in their lives "the excluded middle" (136). Stencil Sr. of the novel *V.* experiences the process of decay and the disintegration of American culture. Wiener argues thus: "The fundamental part of physics, in other words, cannot escape considering uncertainty and the contingency of events" (Weiner [13] 13). The fictional situations created by Pynchon throw challenges to the characters to cope up with the "contingency" but all these situations are inimical to the growth of the individuality.

## III. CAUSE AND EFFECT AS STRUCTURING PATTERN OF THE NOVELS

The novels of Pynchon don't yield to a deterministic analysis and there is no coherent design integrating the cause and effect pattern in the plots. It doesn't mean that Pynchon disregards cause and effect completely. He follows the laws of physics and states that cause and effect is a limited model to narrate how things work. Following Einstein's theory of relativity, Pynchon narrates the influence of the events on the life of the characters differently and in different occasions. The protagonist Stencil in the novel *V.* gives a detailed analysis of the theory of relativity. In his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon rejects the smooth relationship between cause and effect: "You will want cause and effect. All right" (663). Pynchon does not follow the traditional view of cause and effect theory but rejects the relation and depicts the larger processes of the universe. Events in his novels do not happen, they are just there, and the readers come across them.

## IV. DEPICTION OF THREE DIMENSIONAL REALITY: CROSS PURPOSES AS THEMES OF NOVELS OF PYNCHON

The characters of Pynchon live in the present past and future; they live in a three dimensional world and in most of their life they confront the chaos and disorder as Stencil observes in *V.*: "The inert universe may have a quality we can call logic. But logic is a human attribute after all; so even at that it's a misnomer. What are real are the cross purposes" (455). Pynchon has created cross-purposes in his

novels and the characters are caught in the gulf of cross purposes; the ironies and paradox dominate the plots. He doesn't give an adequate picture of the whole but each of the plots of his novels is disintegrated as parts are scattered. There is no coherence between the past and the present; historical events are scattered creating confusion in the minds of the characters. The situations of Pynchon establish continuity between the material universe and social reality. This continuity is a part of the thermodynamic metaphor. Stencil feels that "any Situation takes shape from vents much lower than the merely human" (455). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Walter Rathenau expresses his parlor wisdom, and Bodine tells Tyrone that "Everything is some kind of plot man" (603). The magnitude of confusion is created by the evens of cross-purposes by Pynchon: "this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom" (603).

## V. DISSONANCE AND FRAGMENTATION

Thomas Pynchon realized that in life and universe reality is fluid and decay and fragmentation of the values is inevitable. The collapse of American Dream reflects the disintegration of the values upheld by the pioneers and this social reality is depicted by dissonance. Each episode in the novels of Pynchon is presented in time-bound world of three dimensions: past, present and future. The world of Pynchon is distinct from the external world and the only reality visible is decay and disintegration. There is non-linear development of the plot; past and future become relative terms. Oedipa Maas is relevant in the plot only as an "alien" Pynchon borrows the concept of dissonance from Machiavelli's *Prince* believing that "duplicity" and "virtue" are two aspects of social reality, Stencil in *V.* observes thus: "The Situation is always bigger than you, Sidney. It has like God its own logic and its own justification for being and the best you can do is cope" (455). The real present remains in the novels of Pynchon as "impasse" as in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Sidney Stencil views the street as theatre where the events of life are enacted. The plot of the novel *V.* is structured around non-serial events; there is timelessness in the events and there is no story line; no traditional plot structure and the communication breakdown are common.[22] The characters live in abstract situations facing the imminent disorder and chaos and the tendencies of decay. Entropy and chaos is depicted to highlight the alienation of the characters. Uncertainty is the main cause of alienation of the characters. As in Physics motion is explained through degrees of probability. Pynchon develops the meaninglessness of human existence; the characters are seen struggling with the abstract reality and bewildering uncertainty. His characters are trapped in the dissonance between the literal and the abstract; real and imaginary; between truth and duplicity and between cause and effect. When Herbert arrives at last in Valletta, he feels *V* everywhere in the city. He says: "No time in Valletta, No history, all history at once" (456). Events are disconnected in time and space in the novels of Pynchon and dissonance, fragmentation, decay are the social realities.

## VI. WHAT IS ENTROPY?

Webster defines entropy as "The ultimate state reached in the degradation of the matter and energy of the universe: state of inert uniformity of component elements; absence of form, pattern, and hierarchy." Thomas Pynchon wrote his first story *Entropy* (1960) giving an insight into the nature of the universe and the mysterious game of order and disorder and a journey into the mind of Pynchon.

Thomas Pynchon's second novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is set in San Narciso, a fictional city that Pynchon towards the end of the novel describes as "a city of true continuity and as having no Boundaries" (Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 147), thus indicating its locus in a fictional world. The plot has a more or less linear narrative structure, and is free from obscure words or information. Oedipa Maas is the chief protagonist who is depicted as an innocent woman. She leaves behind a comfortable existence in order to seek out the origins of a mysterious Tristero. Pynchon has used the concepts borrowed from science and philosophy. The main themes are paranoia and entropy. Paranoia can be defined as "a psychotic disorder characterized by delusions". In the plot Oedipa gets away from reality in her enthusiasm to uncover the true nature of the Tristero's existence. She comes in contact with many insane individuals who are still living in the world of 1960s. In the opening scene Oedipa is introduced as a simple woman lost in the hostile modern world.

Oedipa lives in a "hyperbolically banalized world" (Hite 73). By presenting Oedipa as a painfully average modern individual, Pynchon is setting the stage for what Patricia Bergh calls her later "redefinition" [4] to be all the more dramatic. Oedipa is married to a "thin-skinned" (Pynchon 4) used car dealer turned radio DJ Mucho Maas. She had developed relation with Pierce Inverarity. After his death she is called upon to execute his estate. Oedipa's quest is connected to the concept of entropy in that it stresses the lack of a decisive ending. Her quest for meaning is destined to fail due to the second law of thermodynamics; meaning behind reality ceases to have value at the same time as she discovers it. Since in both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* there is a close connection between the concept of entropy and the lack of meaning. Oedipa is leading a peaceful life with her husband Mucho Maas, but the news of Pierce Inverarity's death and of her new role causes a great disturbance in her peaceful life. Her role of an executrix is challenging for her.

There are several encounters with entropy in text of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Most notably, the notion of Maxwell's Demon, a thought experiment created by James Clerk Maxwell in the 19th century supposedly able to decrease the level of entropy of an isolated system. The Demon is manifested as an entity sorting out the differing particles in a system in order to make the system more organized. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Maxwell's Demon plays a hugely important role, both in the plot and in the narrative form of the novella. The final part of this chapter explores the specific ways *The Crying of Lot 49* incorporates the concept of entropy and Maxwell's Demon into the narrative structure in the form of proliferation and multiplication of meaning.

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