

Victims of Cosmic Construction: A Study of John Barth's Floating Opera and Thomas Pynchon's V

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Abstract

This paper explicates the Protean Wo/man's frail struggle to constitute identity resulting in psychological disintegration. Most of the characters of Pynchon and Barth suffer from peculiar afflictions which can be categorized under the labels 'Cosmopsis' (Barth) and 'Entropy' (Pynchon). Cosmopsis intimates a cosmic manipulation in extremity that as a result numbs the mind and the body. Entropy indicates the declivity of energy or the measure of disorder actualized by it. The paper attempts a scientific clarification of these terms in order to apply them to the study of the demented personalities of these novelists. This paper concludes with the observation that entropy/cosmopsis above all elucidate the tension between order and disorder in reality and that the approach of both Barth and Pynchon to this problem is dualistic. That to retain an identity by sustaining the tension in an ambilectic world of order/disorder, the entropic/cosmoptic protean wo/men need control.

Keywords: *Cosmopsis, entropy, postmodern self, language game, epistemology, ontology, disintegration.*

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In postmodern discourse, self is displaced as a central presence in experience and re-appropriated as yet another personal signifier. The self has come on extraordinarily hard times. Challenges are abstract and ontological; whose leading theme is the postmodern denial of self as a central presence in experience. The sharp turn follows decades of more grounded critique that presented the self's trials as stemming from moral uncertainty, inequality and domination, organizations and the technical rationalization of everyday life, The most recent and serious challenge—the postmodern is less concerned with conditions of social organization, conveying instead the liquid, imaged 'self' of electronic media and consumerism. However In this process of fabrication in a disintegrated milieu, Barth and Pynchon concur with the view that the human becomes a dismembered figure. Concurrent with the breakdown of the firm outlines of his physiological and genetic shape in an indeterminate world, the contemporary characters face a redefinition of their own psychic conditions as well.

In this light, the cosmoptic/entropic hang over the protean populaces of the characters of respective writers selected, suffer from one disease or the other. To cite a few cases, Todd Andrews, in *The Floating Opera*, suffers from subacute bacteriological endocarditis with a tendency to myocardial infraction. That is, he suffers from a heart disease and always exists in an imminent danger of death. Further, he has got a chronic infection of the prostate gland and tonsillitis. Remarkably, David Morrell observes that the character on whom Todd is modelled—Tristram—also suffered from consumption (1976, 3). Most of the other characters in the same novel are also sick. Captain Osborn Jones is crippled by arthritis and bears with acute sinusitis. Clara Mulloy endures laryngitis. Haecker suffers from tuberculosis. The senior Harrison Mack's physical well being deteriorates through arthritis to leukemia and his final stages he was known for marked eccentricity to gibbering idiosyncrasy. Stencil in *V* in his sleepless but obsessive quest after the mysterious V, is unaware of the insomnia he suffers from. However, the authors under study do not show their concern for these physical ailments as such but for their para-psychological and philosophical implications. They consider them as particular symptoms of the universal maladies. 'Entropy' and 'Cosmopsis.'

The word 'entropy' was first used by Rudolf Clausius, taken from Greek word *tropee* meaning 'transformation.' He used the word in relation to the transformation of energy in his study of thermodynamics. Thermodynamics is the science which deals with the relations between heat and work and those properties of systems that bear relation to heat and work. A system in thermodynamics is defined as a definite quantity of matter of fixed mass and identity which is bounded

by a closed surface. A closed system is a system that is completely isolated and is not connected in any way with any other system.

The first law of thermodynamics states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed but can be transformed from one form to another. This implies that while carrying out a process, heat and work are mutually convertible. And leads to the assumption that processes are reversible; that every change of thermodynamic state can proceed in any direction. But such events do not take place in nature. All spontaneous process in nature occurs only in one direction from a higher to a lower potential. The second law of thermodynamics indicates the direction in which a process takes place. As stated by Clausius: "It is impossible for the heat energy to flow spontaneously from a body at lower temperature to a body at a higher temperature" (qtd. Ballanay 1993, 112).

Lot of conclusions follow from this statement. For instance, it can be stated that any system which tries to convert energy into useful work will inevitably lose or waste some energy in doing so, and so will gradually run down and eventually stop. Entropy refers to this irreversible tendency of a system toward increasing disorder and inertness. Precisely, it means the measure of disorder in a closed system. The closed system can be a heat engine, a human being, a culture, galaxy or anything. In L. Rastrigin's opinion, ". . . all closed systems gradually become disorganized, decay, and die In engineering practice this process is often called depreciation; in biology—aging; in chemistry—decomposition; in sociology—decay; in history—decline" (1984, 43).

'Cosmopsis' is Barth's ludicrous version of entropy; a portmanteau word coined from 'cosmopolitan' and 'psychosis,' the term indicates a psychological malady. A cosmopolitan belongs to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants. And psychosis is a severely disordered or diseased state of mind. In this manner, the person who suffers from cosmopsis grapples with a cosmic awareness; that is all things are possible and equally tenable, so, he does not find himself on a rational ground to choose one particular idea and act. Because he sees the possibilities of everything, he feels nothing for anything as if he is what might be called "anything goes" entity (Gergen 1991, p. 7). Cosmopsis is a disease of too much imagination, too much consciousness, and it paralyses the mind as well as the body. It is in the state of immobility, the cosmoptic individual becomes entropic or. Using the Wittgensteinian terminology that Lyotard favors, the self is a language game whose leading constitutive rule specifies a central location in experience for itself. Another version of the rule might specify multiple locations, but nonetheless

locations in experience.

Tony Tanner opines that 'entropy' has lot of implications in contemporary literature. Especially, it seems to have pervaded into the whole of contemporary American sensibility. She lists John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, along with Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, John Updike, Walker Percy, Stanley Elkin, Donald Barthelme, as writers who have actually used the word. She goes on to trace further those writers who are apprehensive about the term without using the word in their works. This includes William Burroughs, Susan Sontag and even Charles Dickens and Alexander Pope (1971, 141-142). Since the focus of this study pertains to the writers selected, the following pages contain an analysis of their works in accordance with the implications of entropy as stated by Tanner.

The approach these writers have towards the second law of thermodynamics is sometimes optimistic but most of the times, pessimistic. Entropy, above all, is about the fate of energy; its running down and its final decline in the Universe. And the fact that while energy cannot be created but entropy can be created and that the entropy of the Universe always tends to a maximum, situates the contemporary writers in a gloomy atmosphere. "In a very real sense," Norbert Wiener observes, "We are shipwrecked passengers of a doomed planet"(1954, 40). Thus, taken in this broadest apocalyptic sense, Tanner states that, ". . . entropy could be appropriately applied to those works . . . which foretell the doom of a present civilization or society" (1971, 142). And as Speer Morgan vividly pictures it, Entropy is more elaborate than the concept of ' simple death, since it implies not just the dead end of morality but a wearing away and increasing disorganization bough loss of heat. Entropy may be more fearlitl than death in certain ways, since it applies to all that we know, from the suns down to the living creatures, the molecules, and very atoms. It is universal sentence to extended death which through its very absoluteness carries greater horror than the Biblical curse of mortality (1977, 204).

Many critics till date consider Pynchon and Barth the apostles of the apocalypse. Not that they forebode the decline of energy in their works but it is the approach they have for their profession that spurs critics into activity. They are categorized under 'the black humorist' and 'the death of the author' group. And they are apprehensive of a sense of ending. Barth's titles as "The Literature of exhaustion" and *The End of the Road* are to this effect. Like T. S. Eliot and others, the early Pynchon was sandwiched between the second world war and the depression period Tanner conjectures that Pynchon started with the depression and he never got over with it (1982, 18). The despondency of the writers permeates the whole atmosphere of their works and sets the decorum. And the sharing of this noxious mood is individual

as well as universal.

The apocalypse is prophetic about ‘the end’ but not an end in itself. Brilliantly, John Barth’s first novel, *The Floating Opera* is not about death but about almost-death. The novel gets written by the writer-narrator-protagonist as he commences his enquiry on his father’s suicide while he himself premeditates the same since he is on the verge of death. But before we get to know all the details, he sets our perspective:

Todd Andrews is my name. You can spell it with one or two d’s; I get letters addressed either way. I almost warned you against the single-d spelling, for fear you’d say, “Tod is German for death; perhaps the name is symbolic “ I myself use two ds, partly in order to avoid that symbolism But you see, I ended by no warning you at all, and that’s because it just occurred to me that the double-d Todd is symbolic, too and accurately so, Tod is death, and this book hasn’t much to do with death, Todd is almost Tod—that is, almost death— and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost-death (FO 3)

The novel is about two suicides one of the protagonist’s father, and the other of the protagonist himself—one that has happened and the other to happen, or about why one has happened and why the other do not happen The father’s happened on Ground Hog Day, 1930, in the basement of the family home The ostensible motive for the suicide was that the person had gone bankrupt in the crash of 1929 and could not face his creditors But Todd did not accept that as the actual reason, and so he began preparing to write an enquiry into the death of his father He wrote another self-enquiry, *The Floating Opera* is part of it, composing it in 1954 in his room in the Dorset Hotel, Cambridge, Maryland, and his topic is a June day in 1937 when he decided to kill himself and then changed his mind. He decided to kill himself because of the fatal heart disease he suffers from.

Todd explains his motive behind his going to John Hopkins and enrolment in the pre-law curriculum and joining fraternity “It seemed to me,” he says, “that nearly all of my fraternity brothers expected, like myself, to fall dead any moment, for they lived each day as though it were to be their last. Their way of life suited my feelings exactly” (FO 129) Similarly, Holiday Hopkinson, his ninety-year-old- neighbor, “sleeps filly dressed, her arms folded upon her chest, so as to cause, by her the least possible trouble for anybody”(FO 50). She awaits death at any moment like Todd’s fraternity. We also hear about the death of senior Harrison Mack and Haecker; the latter, actually commits suicide by taking sleeping pills. Thus almost all in the novel share

One of the possible interpretations of Pynchon's 'V' is that it represents 'violence' and that Pynchon has conceived V, as an entropic agent of death. The activities of Victoria Wren as spy contribute to the wars that destroy man. In fact, it is the mysterious death of Herbert Stencil at Malta while he was in his quest after V., provokes Sidney Stencil for the search on which the main plot revolves. Like Pynchon's V. Barth had originally conceived Todd Andrews as an agent of Death. Morrell says:

In 1955, when Barth was working on the novel, he arranged for Todd to try to kill himself in a dramatic and grisly fashion. He had him board a showboat where during a minstrel show Todd slipped backstage, switched on some gas jets, and then returned to watch the players and to wait for the explosion that would blast apart himself and 699 fellow townspeople, many of them his friends (1976, 6-7).

All these agents plan such mass deaths. Not satisfied with his agents of death, Pynchon further adds a list of "Disasters" from an Almanac. He reports:

Fifteen were killed in a train wreck near Kanara, Mexico, on 1 July. The next day fifteen people died when an apartment house collapsed in Madrid. July 4 a bus fell into a river in Karachi and thirty-one passengers drowned. Thirty-nine more were drowned two days later in a tropical storm in the central Philippines. 9 July the Aegean islands were hit by an earth quake and tidal waves, which killed forty-three . . . (V 290).

And so on. The list ends on 27 August including different Catastrophes that consumed about five thousand lives.

Images of decaying flesh fill *The Floating Opera* too. As Charles Harris points out, they become obsessively linked in Todd Andrews's imagination (1977, 35). When Todd discovers his father hanged in the basement, his father's physical condition obsesses him. He notes almost compulsively the "black and ruptured flesh" (FO 183). His father's ravaged flesh recalls one of Todd's earliest memories, the "cold, hard, dirty, stringy, scaly, dead yellow feet" (FO 184) of a chicken his father had killed when Todd was five. Again, as Harris puts it, "Todd focuses intently on the feel of the dead flesh, the string of adjectives used to describe that flesh reflecting the compulsive nature of a memory that, fifty years later, still makes him ill" (35)

In Pynchon, the preoccupation with death is often expressed as a grim sardonic premonition of its final assertion. Be it when Da Conho, in V, wonders, "how

American Jews could sit vainglorious in that dining room meal after meal while only halfway round the world the desert shifted over WQW of their own” (V 23); or when Father Fairing in the same novel foresees “nothing but a city of starved corpses, covering the sidewalks and the grass of the parks, lying belly up in the fountains, hanging wry necked from the street camps” (V 118), Pynchon would not spare a moment when he can emphasis the ominous presence of death. Even when the New York Sewer Department discovers the journal of Father Fairing, the author describes that “It lay on the top of a brick, stone and stick cairn [he does not stop here but continues to say] large enough to cover a human corpse . . .” (V 120) The addition of the corpse image may appear an unwarranted intrusion, yet it only proves the author’s obsessive vision of the apocalypse.

To sum up, the Protean Wo/Man in her/his struggle to establish a fluid identity becomes fragile, immobile and pathological. Most of the characters of Pynchon and Barth suffer from strange maladies labeled ‘entropy’ and ‘cosmopsis,’ respectively. Entropy indicates the decline of energy or the amount of disorder created by it. Cosmopsis implies a cosmic awareness in extremity that could paralyze the mind and the body. Those who suffer from these diseases, firstly; have a sense of the apocalypse—of the individual as well as the universal death; hence they are nihilistic in their attitudes and act agents of death. Secondly, they lose desire for even the basic and instinctual activities Thirdly, they identify their innate stillness with the inanimate and slowly attempt integration with it Conversely, the inanimate offers a perfect substitute/surrogate for the disintegrated animate which in turn helps the former to gain supremacy over the latter Fourthly, they involve themselves with various kinds of movement without any progress. In contrast to them are the homeostatic group who resist any motion sheerly by upholding relative values of human existence. But they are unaware that entropy imposes a servitude of all energies; active or passive, physical or mental. This final predicament that everything leads to decay/waste has contributed to the excessive scatological/excremental vision of the authors. Lastly, entropy/cosmopsis above all exemplifies the tension between order and disorder in reality and that the approach of both Barth and Pynchon to this problem is dualistic. Battling to actualize identity in a binary world of order/disorder the cosmoptic /entropic protean wo/men are in need of control.

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