


Łukasz Barciński

Institute of English Studies

University of Rzeszow, Rzeszow, Poland

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3810-9397>

“Orders Behind the Visible” – Puritan Elements in the Polish Translation of *Gravity’s Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon

The article discusses contemporary American writer Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, a leading representative of postmodernism in literature. The study contains an examination of possible references to Puritanism in his novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Religious motifs seem to play a crucial role in the interpretation of Pynchon’s work where the past is combined with the present and the Puritan religious doctrine merges with a paranoid approach to reading. Then, fragments from *Gravity’s Rainbow* in Polish translation are analyzed in terms of preserving the source text’s productive potential regarding the most important Puritan themes in the novel, e.g. animal symbolism and the doctrine of Preterition. Finally, the study offers conclusions related to the extent to which Puritan elements are recreated in the target text, highlighting the most considerable losses and gains in the translation process.

Key words: Thomas Pynchon, literary translation, American literature, Puritanism, paranoia

Pynchon and the Puritan

It is possible to mention many prominent authors within the postmodern literary convention, however, American writer Thomas Ruggles Pynchon is invariably mentioned as one of the leading figures who promoted the postmodern aspects on the pages of his books, i.e. irony, playfulness, intertextuality, metafictional devices, pastiche, and narrative distortion. His most important novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, revolves round the main metaphor, the V2 rocket, and Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist, who was programmed in his childhood by Jamf, a Pavlovian scientist, to determine the places where V2 rockets, launched by Nazi Germany, hit the ground. In the novel, created in the form of a literary rhizome, Pynchon simultaneously offers two modes

of reading (paranoia and anti-paranoia), but favors paranoid reading, considering anti-paranoia to be “a condition not many of us can bear for long” (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 434). The theme of paranoia has a strong relation to the theme of Puritan ancestry (the theme of Preterition) that can be described as “a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible” (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 188), i.e. the incessant drive for the symbolic interpretation of the external reality.

Religion plays an essential role in Pynchon's works (especially in *Gravity's Rainbow*) since it constitutes a form of puritan/Calvinist background to the generation of paranoid structures within the 'we/they' binary oppositions. The main character, Slothrop, in his quest for identity is constantly examined with reference to his Puritan ancestry. The doctrine of predestination stipulates that in the scheme of salvation, the Elect (gaining salvation) are chosen by God, while the Preterite are ignored (suffering eternal damnation). As Mackey describes, “the heart of Calvinism is the doctrine of double predestination. All men are either Elect, the handful chosen for salvation, or Preterite, passed over and tacitly consigned to damnation” (17). Thanks to divine grace, the Elect can enjoy a meaningful life, whereas the existence of the Preterite is bereft of meaning: by way of paradox, the Preterite are included in God's plan by being excluded. Slothrop thinks that he is unable to obtain the Truth since he is a forsaken Preterite (he comes from a Puritan family). As a consequence, he decides to choose paranoia (“seeking other orders behind the visible” – Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 434) since choosing anti-paranoia signifies meaninglessness and exclusion from all plots. Pynchon re-interprets the Puritan notion of the Preterite by applying this concept “on the positive side of [his] fairytale equation of Good versus Evil, Life versus Death. Doomed versus Saved (...)” (Fowler 93). William Slothrop, the protagonist's ancestor, was burnt by the Puritans (being the author of *On Preterition*, seen as heretical). In his treatise, he subverted the traditional notion and claimed that it was the Preterite who had always deserved (and been given) divine grace, rather than the Elect. Pynchon's puritan ancestry might be reflected in his choice of motifs and a sense of sympathy for “negligible souls” (Fowler 93), e.g. “drunks, old veterans (...), hustlers (...), derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone” (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 3). Pynchon's utilization of Preterition may be also seen on the textual level as he practices inclusion through omission, e.g. he includes serious themes in a non-serious way.

The endless sense productive potential of the paranoid reading of Pynchon's works can be traced by pinpointing the binary oppositions running through *Gravity's Rainbow*. Moore lists the “opposite-signed code terms that may be attached to the x and y axes framing this curve/flight path/life” (the code terms include: Control/Freedom, Entropy loss/Entropy gain, Ascent/Descent, Self/Selflessness, Visibility/Invisibility, History/Timelessness, Differentiation/Integration, Probability wave/Free quantum, Abstraction/Concrete experience, Routinization/Charisma, Whiteness/Greenness or blackness, Determinacy/Surprise, Grace (Puritan sense)/Preterition, Instrumentalization/Grace (Pynchon's sense), and Paranoia/Antiparanoia (216). Sanders juxtaposes Pynchon's motifs and Puritan elements to offer yet another set of parallels for the web of floating signifiers in his fiction: Paranoia/Faith, Cosmic conspiracy/God's plan, Gravity/God's will, Membership in the Firm/Election, Exclusion from conspiracy/Preterition, Multiple narrative patterns/Typology, Remote control/Grace, Binary vision/Theism or atheism, Decadence of history/

Depravity of man, Paranoid self-reference/Personal salvation and The Zero/Last Judgement (188).

Gravity's Rainbow in translation

Gravity's Rainbow was translated into Polish in 2001 by Robert Sudół and published by Prószyński i S-ka under the title *Tęcza grawitacji*. At that time, the literary convention of the novel, i.e. postmodernism, was long past its prime and its intricacies had been widely discussed both in Polish academic circles and abroad, leaving a phalanx of theoretical and critical insights as to its inherent ambiguity. However, it seems that the role of the specific convention of postmodernism with its focus on defamiliarization and experimentalism was ignored by the translator, whose attitude towards the translation of one of the most famous postmodern novels and definitely a canonical one, can be described by the term "*plaisir-asation*": a negative tendency displayed in the translation process which "makes the [target text] less defamiliarized than the [source text], which becomes excessively intelligible and devoid of the original sense productive potential by rationalization, conventionalization and servile conformance to [target language] rules" (Barciński 245). This tendency had a noticeably negative impact for the rendition of some religious motifs in Pynchon's work, which will be shown in the analysis below.

For the purpose of this article a few symptomatic excerpts from *Gravity's Rainbow* will be analyzed to provide a representative sample of the shifts of meaning that occur in the Polish translation and to determine to what extent the Puritan aspects in Pynchon's fiction have been recreated in the Polish translation.

(Example 1) 'Other sheep' from the biblical Parable of the Lost Sheep were used by William Slothrop in his heretical treatise in the form of 'second sheep'. As a consequence, the source text 'second sheep' describes the Preterite by means of Puritan intertextuality. The translation seems imprecise as the target text does not recreate the biblical reference. What is more, the positive tone in which the source text depicts the neglected Preterite (who are not, at least for Pynchon, 'black sheep') is conventionalized by the idiom ('czarne owce'), which presents the Preterite unambiguously in a negative light. Sudół fails to recreate the analogy connected with Pynchon's own ancestor, Willimam Pynchon, who also wrote a heretical work *The Meritorious Price* in 1650 dealing with "Christ's vicarious atonement" (Moore 136). It can be argued then that both William Slothrop and William Pynchon heretically claim that "election emerges dialectically from Preterition, and for the sake of it" and that "election is not ontologically *other*", infuriating the Elect, both fictional and real ones (Moore 136).

William argued holiness for these "**second Sheep**," without whom there'd be no elect (Pynchon, *Gravity's*... 555).

William twierdził, że także w „**czarnych owcach**” jest świętość, że bez nich nie byłoby wybrańców bożych (Pynchon, *Tęcza*... 438).

(...) all the others pressed in around, feeble ones, **second sheep**, all out of luck and time: drunks, old veterans still in shock from ordnance 20 years obsolete, hustlers in city clothes, derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone,

stacked about among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 3).

(...) napór innych ludzi, stłoczonych dokoła, **czarnych owiec**, miernot niemających szczęścia ani czasu: pijusy, starzy weterani w szoku po ostrzale artyleryjskim sprzed dwudziestu lat, ubrane po miejsku prostytutki, wraki ludzkie, skonane kobiety z tyloma dziećmi, aż trudno uwierzyć, że można urodzić taką rzeszę, wszyscy ścieśnieni pośród rzeczy, które chciano uchronić od zagłady (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 9).

Moreover, this shift of meaning in animal symbolism of sheep slightly disrupts the possible references to other sympathetic references to the Preterite, who, according to Fowler, were "mercilessly destroyed by Them" (93), like in the following fragment, where soldiers are presented as 'poor sheep' and precisely translated as 'biedna trzoda':

The Archies were chugging in the darkness. His men, his **poor sheep**, had taken gas that morning. He was alone (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 233).

Obrona przeciwlotnicza dudniła w mroku. Rankiem żołnierze – jego **biedna trzoda** – nawdychali się gazu. Był sam (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 192).

(Example 2) When rendering 'dreaming of their certain resurrection', the translation by Sudół ('śniących o swym niewątpliwym zmartwychwstaniu') stresses and recreates Pynchon's sympathetic irony towards the poor fate of the Preterite, as, according to Fowler, "in Pynchon no sympathetic creatures are ever scheduled to be redeemed from death" (94).

All these horizontal here, these comrades in arms, look just as rosy as a bunch of Dutch peasants **dreaming of their certain resurrection** in the next few minutes (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 4)

(...) wszystkie te poziome sylwetki, towarzysze broni, wyglądają czerstwo jak gromadka holenderskich chłopów, śniących o swym niewątpliwym zmartwychwstaniu w ciągu kilku następnych minut (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 10).

(Example 3) When rendering 'On Preterition' as 'O pominiętych', the translation by Sudół does not preserve the Puritan intertextuality since the key concept for understanding *Gravity's Rainbow*, i.e. Preterition, is replaced with the target text item having no explicit religious connotations ('pominięcie'), just preserving the denotation of 'being passed over'. Although possibly because of the cultural remoteness (religious ancestry) there is no lexicalized word for Preterition in Polish, the Polish language has a history of internalizing Latin borrowings (like in case of 'Predestination', a better-known Puritan concept, assimilated in Polish as 'predestynacja').

He wrote a long tract about it presently, called *On Preterition*. It had to be published in England, and is among the first books to've been not only banned but also ceremonially burned in Boston (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 555).

Niedługo potem napisał długi traktat, zatytułowany „**O pominiętych**”. Zmuszony był wydać tę książkę w Anglii, stała się ona zresztą jednym z pierwszych dzieł zakazanych i spalonych ceremonialnie w Bostonie (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 438).

(Example 4) Pynchon's works are full of references to Preterite-like animals (e.g. sheep, pigs) that reflect the dire situation of the cosmically under-privileged. When rendering 'turning sheepish' as 'potulnieje', the animal symbolism is partially recreated, although the direct reference to sheep is lost, the Polish phrase 'potulnieje' can be associated with the comparison 'potulny jak baranek' retaining the 'sheepishness'.

"Oh," Pirate **turning sheepish**, "you are, you know." (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 107)

- Och - Pirat **potulnieje** - a jednak jestem, wiesz? (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 92)

(Example 5) The source text 'passing over' is not precisely rendered as 'przemijalność' bringing even more confusion by translating the Puritan dogmatic 'passing over' (in the meaning of being overlooked by God) as the completely unrelated 'przemijalność', which might be seen as considerable translation dystrophy. Moreover, the Polish term 'odtrącenie' used in translation of 'Preterite', again does not recreate the Puritan intertextuality and adds to the terminological confusion ('odtrącenie' is too strong to describe the fate of the Preterite since according to Puritan dogma they were passed over, ignored or left on their own). It is not consistent with other target text translations of Preterition (i.e. 'pominięcie', 'odrzućenie'), which causes the lack of mutual referentiality in the target text.

But if they were chosen to come to Mauritius, why had they also been chosen to fail, and leave? Is that a choosing, or is it a **passing-over**? Are they Elect, or are they **Preterite**, and doomed as dodoes? (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 110)

Ale skoro zostali wybrani, żeby przybyć na Mauritius, to dlaczego przegrali i musieli odejść? Czy to powołanie, czy tylko **przemijalność**? Czy są wybrańcami, czy **odtrąconymi**, których los przesądzony jest jak los dodo? (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 94)

(Example 6) Another limitation of Puritan intertextuality as the objects, described by the term 'preterite', are not easily associated with the Calvinistic dogmas and God's cosmic plan and could be more precisely denoted not as 'rejected' but 'passed over'.

He (...) following the scraper that clears the winter's crystal attack-from-within, its white necropolizing . . . picking up rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with **preterite** seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding **preterite** snot, **preterite** tears (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 626).

(...) idąc śladem zgarniarki, która oczyszczała pozostałości kryształowego ataku zimy od wewnątrz, jej białą nekropolię... zbierał zardzewiałe puszkę po piwie, kondomy pożółkłe od **odrzuconego** nasienia, chusteczki higieniczne, zmięte w kształt mózgu, kryjące **odrzucony** smark, **odrzuconą** łzę (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 494).

(Example 7) 'The glozing neuters of the world' is a reference to Puritan intertextuality and the sermons of Thomas Hooker (a prominent Puritan colonial leader, highly significant for the development of the Puritan religious thought in New England) who called indifferent and uncommitted members of the congregation (not caring for the spiritual life), glozing neuters like lukewarm water. In Hooker's collected sermons *The Soules Implantation into the Natural Olive*, there is an intermediate plane between "open enemies of Christ" and "fawning hypocrites", called "glozing neuters" (Hooker cited in Weisenburger, 346), whose humanity is nevertheless

defended by Pynchon in the fragment below. The translation by Sudół recreates the style of the Puritan sermon using markedly archaic expressions as well as the denotation of the original. The Polish archaic equivalents, not found in popular usage in the contemporary Polish language, are 'czyży' ('meaningless' or 'futile') and 'bezstronnik' ('neuter').

Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as "**the glozing neuters of the world**" have no easy road to haul down, Wear-the-Pantsers, just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When's the last time you felt *intensely lukewarm*? eh? (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 677)

Ci, których w starych purytańskich kazaniach nazywano „**czczyimi bezstronnikami świata**” nie mają łatwej drogi, Szefie, to, że nie widzisz, nie znaczy, że nie ma! Energia tkwiąca wewnątrz jest tak samo rzeczywista, tak samo władna i nieusuwalna, jak energia, która się ujawnia. Kiedy ostatni raz czuleś *przełożoną obojętność*, he? (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 533)

In another fragment 'just a neuter' is rendered as 'czysta bezstronność' and, as a result, the networks of meaning are consistently recreated and so is Puritan intertextuality ('bezstronnik' - 'bezstronność').

I can't even masturbate half the time ... no nasty jissom getting all over their reports, you know. Wouldn't want that. **Just a neuter**, just a recording eye. ... (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 216)

Nawet nie mogę się za często masturbować... Sprawozdania nie są więc poplamione, no wiesz. To byłoby niepożądane. Musi być **czysta bezstronność**, tylko rejestrujące oko... (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 179)

(Example 8) Linearity is one of Pynchon's leitmotifs, which resurfaces in various contexts, here omitted as 'in line', has no equivalent in the target text. In this example it refers to the Preterite to suggest their "submissiveness and resignation", whereas any possible disjunction might signify anarchic yearning for freedom from organized structures of power (Barciński 205).

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 (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 3).

Właśnie ruszyli. Wyjeżdżają z dworca głównego, ze śródmieścia, prą do starszych i wyludnionych części miasta (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 9).

In another fragment linearity is recreated with the introduction of mathematics by means of the term 'wektor': 'in preterite line' is rendered as 'wektor odrzuconych'. In this item, Sudół amplifies the role of sciences in the subjugation of the preterites: the Elect use their scientific expertise to develop oppressing technology (especially in the military sector).

In preterite line they have pointed her here, to be in touch with Earth's gift for genesis (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 316).

Jak **wektor odrzuconych** potomstwo skierowało ją do tego miejsca, żeby złączyła się z darem ziemi do rodzenia (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 256).

(Example 9) The source text 'other orders behind the visible' are precisely rendered as 'inne porządki za fasadą widzialności' with some explicitation ('fasada'),

which plays an important role in Pynchon, stressing the prominence of 'interface', i.e. the aspect of permeability between two realities and what comes in between the outside and inside like in mirrors.

it's a Puritan reflex of seeking **other orders behind the visible**, also known as paranoia, filtering in (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 188).

przesącza się teraz purytański odruch doszukiwania się **innych porządków za fasadą widzialności**, znany również jako paranoja (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 156).

(Example 10) The source text 'word-smitten' is rendered as 'porażeni słowem', which precisely brings out the aspect of smiting, the privilege of God. The Polish translation by Sudół emphasizes the power of the Word, the transgression of which can have consequences in the form of lightning (as in 'porażony piorunem').

Sir Stephen considers this, seeming pleased. Did They choose him because of all those **word-smitten** Puritans dangling off of Slothrop's family tree? (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 207)

Czy wybrano go ze względu na tych wszystkich purytanów, **porażonych słowem**, zwisających z drzewa genealogicznego Slothrop'a? (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 172)

(Example 11) The source text 'the powdery wipe of Nothing's hand' is rendered as 'pylista ręka Nicości', which recreates aspects of Calvinism in relation to the doctrine of Providence, i.e. divine intervention in the world.

the prone and noseless caryatids, rust already at nails and naked thread surfaces, **the powdery wipe of Nothing's hand** across wallpaper awhisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep lawns to Georgian houses long ago, to safe groves of holm oak... (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 24)

przewrócone na twarz, beznose kariatydy, w miejsca, gdzie rdza pokrywała już gwoździe i obnażone nity, gdzie **pylista ręka Nicości** odsłoniła tapetę szeleszczącą ogonami pawi, rozpostartymi na miękkich trawnikach przed domami z georgiańskich czasów, w bezpiecznych dąbrowach... (Pynchon, *Tęcza...* 26)

(Example 12) The source text 'O.K. on their intentions' is rendered in a more formal register focusing only on the denotative aspect: 'potwierdzenie słuszności ich postępowania', which obliterates the irony of the original: Providence offers Puritans a colloquial 'O.K.' rather than a more fittingly solemn sign, an example of patient distrust to Puritan beliefs, not obvious in the target text.

Another phrase from the source text: 'outward and visible' is rendered as 'zewnątrzny, namacalny'. This expression comes from *the Book of Common Prayer*, where "the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward grace" (*The Book of Common Prayer*). Pynchon uses it to mix the formal religious and the colloquial discourse to enhance irony. The translation by Sudół seems to recreate the salience of religious discourse by using 'namacalny', a word present in the Polish religious discourse.

(money in the Puritan sense – an **outward and visible O.K. on their intentions**) enough to tip the Discovery of Guilt at the cusp between scientific theory and fact (Pynchon, *Gravity's...* 652).

(pieniędzmi w purytańskim rozumieniu tego słowa – czyli **zewnątrznym, namacalnym potwierdzeniem słuszności ich postępowania**), było tego dostatecznie dużo, by umieścić Odkrycie Poczucia Winy na styku teorii naukowej i faktu (Pynchon, *Tęcza*... 514).

In another fragment the recurrent use of the phrase in Pynchon is not recreated and the reference to religious text lost: ‘outward and visible’ is inconsistently rendered as ‘zewnątrzne, widome’.

Around the tables, Empire chairs are lined up precise and playerless. But some are taller than the rest. These are no longer quite **outward and visible** signs of a game of chance (Pynchon, *Gravity's*... 202).

Dokoła stołów ustawiono starannie bezpieczeństwa krzesła w stylu empire. Niektóre z oparciami wyższymi niż pozostałe. To już nie są **zewnątrzne, widome** atrybuty hazardu (Pynchon, *Tęcza*... 168).

Once again in the fragment below the Puritan intertextuality is inconsistently rendered: ‘outward and visible’ as ‘widoczny, zewnętrzny’. Here, the religious reference suggests the discrepancy between sacramental faith and the metropolitan “irreversible spiritual illness” (Price 185). Sudół renders the intertextual reference to John Winthrop’s *A Model of Christian Charity* along with the significance of the image of a city upon a hill for the colonial community (‘the City Sacramental’ – ‘Sakramentalne Miasto’). The preserved intertextuality seems to be an important historical aspect of the text as Pynchon’s ancestor, William Pynchon dined with John Winthrop on the board of *Arbella*, sailing from England to the New World, the description of which is also included in the novel (Pynchon, *Gravity's*... 204).

If there is such a thing as the City Sacramental, the city as **outward and visible** sign of inward and spiritual illness or health, then there may have been, even here, some continuity of sacrament, through the terrible surface of May (Pynchon, *Gravity's*... 372).

Jeżeli istnieje coś takiego jak Sakramentalne Miasto, miasto jako **widoczny, zewnętrzny** wyraz wewnętrznej, duchowej choroby lub zdrowia, wówczas być może obowiązywała, nawet tutaj, jakaś ciągłość sakramentu, rozpięta na wskroś straszego maja (Pynchon, *Tęcza*... 300).

Conclusion

The analysis of extensive references to Puritanism in *Gravity's Rainbow* in comparison between the source and target text reveals that many source text items are recreated and pivotal themes seem to be retained in the target text. However, the remainder of underlying Puritan ancestry reference is released only to a limited extent. The biggest losses in terms of lost references are the rendition of the term ‘Preterition’ (lost reference to the Puritan doctrine and inconsistent translation). Many aspects are partially recreated: Pynchon’s irony towards the fate of the Preterite, animal symbolism (the depiction of sheep is excessively negative in parts), the motif of linearity and Puritan intertextuality (inconsistent translation of references to historical Puritan works). It may be concluded that despite the overwhelming negative tendency in the translation process pointed out at the outset of the analysis, i.e.

plaisir-asation, which may be also seen in all other themes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, some aspects are still preserved, mainly references to the religious discourse. Although the specificity of the postmodern convention seems not to have been recognized by Sudół, religious motifs are still present in the target text. That said, the biggest loss in the Polish translation of Pynchon's seminal work is the omission of the significant aspect of Puritan referentiality, i.e. the key motif of Preterition.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that only thanks to the erudition of translators and their ability to fathom the multi-facetedness of a literary work, such as *Gravity's Rainbow*, can it be possible to obtain high quality target texts with preserved references to Pynchon's Puritan ancestry reflected in his work.

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