

TWO FAILED SCIENTISTS: *TIEMPO DE SILENCIO*'S PEDRO AND PYNCHON'S POINTSMAN

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In 1962 the Spanish psychiatrist and surgeon Luis Martín-Santos (1924-1964) published his first, and only complete, novel, *Tiempo de silencio*; greeted as «una novela irrepitible» (Domènech 4), the work is now considered «one of Spanish literature's true contemporary milestones» (Franz 324). In 1973 the American writer Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937) published his third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, recently described as «perhaps the most important work of fiction of the second half of the century» (Mchoul and Wills 23).

It is the purpose of this study to compare the presentation of two characters from these novels; the characters chosen are *Tiempo de silencio*'s protagonist, don Pedro, a young cancer-researcher, and Edward Pointsman, one of the principal antagonists of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a Pavlovian behaviorist and Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. Don Pedro (his family name never appears in the text) and Ned Pointsman are alike in many ways; there are also related aspects of the two texts which reveal marked parallels, particularly the treatment of the theme of science and the preoccupation with human freedom. This study seeks to illustrate the following statement of Tzvetan Todorov: «a work in its entirety can never be read in a satisfactory and enlightening fashion if we do not put it in relation with other works, previous and contemporary» (244). The «relation» between Pedro and Pointsman is a tantalizing one.

According to Ramón Buckley, the «anécdota misma» of *Tiempo de silencio* can be stated in a few words: the novel is «la historia de un hombre que quiso ser investigador científico y fracasó» (207). Pedro, forced to abandon his admittedly unproductive cancer-research at the Institute because of his involvement in a botched abortion, leaves Madrid at the close of the novel to vegetate as a provincial physician.

The plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a much longer text than is the Spanish novel, does not lend itself to so brief a summary, yet Pointsman's destiny clearly resembles Pedro's: the behaviorist's research having failed after a botched castration attempt, he is finally «restricted to one small office... officially in disgrace» (GR 716). Both men are vivisectionists, both work in a laboratory which features experiments with dogs (although Pedro's own experiments currently center upon mice), both fret over the lack of funding, and both –this is important and will be developed later– would be willing to use human subjects if necessary (in *Tiempo de silencio*, the young girl Florita who has been raising mice stolen from the Institute; in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the hapless protagonist, American lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, whose sexual encounters inexplicably precede the strikes of the V-2 rockets).

Beyond the general plot outlines, there are other similarities. *Gravity's Rainbow* opens with Pirate Prentice's dream of evacuating the bombed city of London; a bit later, Slothrop wanders through Germany during the desolate final months of World War II, while the German rocket-engineer Pökler unknowingly works next door to the concentration-camp Dora. (The action of the long novel occurs during 1944-45.) Although Pedro's misadventures taken to view: «Era un cuadro realmente muy malo... se habían representado las ruinas bambalinescas de una ciudad bombardeada» (73). Pedro reacts to the painting as «un presunto Dachau masturbatorio,» while his friend Matías tells him that «Nada me ha recordado más las cámaras de gas» (72).

Another structural similarity is the inclusion of *Walpurgisnacht* episodes. Novelist Juan Benet, a friend of Martín Santos, has written that the psychiatrist believed it necessary for «toda obra literaria de envergadura» to include such scenes, which in *Tiempo de silencio* take the form of two brothel visits «en obediencia al canon impuesto por Mabbot Street» (123). In addition to several brothel scenes of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop and the young witch Geli celebrate *Walpurgisnacht* on the Brocken, although this occurs technically «nearly a month late» (383).

There are other parallels. As mentioned earlier, Slothrop has come to Pointsman's attention because a map of his recent amorous adventures exactly reproduces the locations of V-2 strikes. This is very odd, since with the rocket it is «Explosion first, then the sound of approach» (99). In his famous closing monologue, Pedro comments: «Es un tiempo de silencio. La mejor máquina eficaz es la que no hace ruido» (238). Both authors make mention of our two characters as caught in a labyrinth. Pointsman has wandered into «a labyrinth of conditioned reflex work» (101; the metaphor extends throughout the book); the narrator describes the prison in which Pedro spends a short time as «tan curioso laberinto» (172).¹ While in his cell, with its narrow stone

1. The expression «tan curioso laberinto» occurs often in Spanish Golden Age works. My article «Fateful Labyrinths: *La vida es sueño* and *The Crying of Lot 49*» (*The Comparatist* 7 [1983]: 57-72) deals in part with the labyrinth figure in Calderón and Pynchon.

cot, Pedro stares at a wall, upon which he eventually draws a mermaid (177). Pointsman's room in *The White Visitation* has a narrow cot next to a wall «habitually blank» (159), but instead of drawing, he dreams. Both characters talk to themselves in moments of high stress (TDS 177, GR 323).

A major structural similarity is what one might call the «Nobel Prize/dogs» motif. Pedro and Pointsman share an obsessive desire to win a Nobel Prize for their respective research efforts. Pedro's laboratory contains a portrait of Ramón Santiago y Cajal, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1906. Never referred to by name in the text, «el hombre de la barba» who «libró al pueblo ibero de su inferioridad nativa ante la ciencia» (7) haunts Pedro, as do the dogs who are forced to share the laboratory with the exalted portrait: «Y las posibilidades de repetir el gesto torpe del señor de la barba ante el rey alto serían ya no totalmente inexistentes, como ahora, sino además grotescas» (10). During his final monologic ramblings, he touches upon «la vivisección,» then the «parabienes del rey de Suecia» (235).

In his turn, Pointsman, who first appears on the scene with his foot caught in a toilet-bowl during a nocturnal dog-chase, drifts off to sleep, after masturbation, thinking of Stockholm and «the yellow telegram» (164-65). When we last encounter him in his dreary Sub-ministry office, he is surprised to realize that he actually misses the «pack of slobbering curs,» like Pedro associating thoughts of the dogs² with «a 1st lock back at the door to Stockholm»(878). Pedro often thinks of the Nobel Prize in conjunction with the portrait of Ramón y Cajal, while for Pointsman it is the city of Stockholm which comes most often to mind. For both of our failed scientists, however, the road to scientific glory would of necessity be paved with the sufferings of other sentient beings, victims of the would-be victors.

Turning now to a comparison of the psychological profiles of our two subjects, it is apparent that they are much alike. A prison official in *Tiempo de silencio* tells young Pedro that «Ustedes, los inteligentes, son siempre los más torpes» (203); the comment applies equally well to the graying «master behaviorist» (Wolfey 100) Pointsman. The two scientists, excessively rationalistic, share strong repressive tendencies. When Pedro visits the painter's studio and sees some opulent nudes painted by a friend of the German, the paintings please him but also cause him to recall «sus propias represiones» (72). Although he is willing to marry beautiful Dorita after having been trapped into spending a night with her, «No podía devolverle las caricias» when she kisses him after his release from prison: «La voluptuosidad no tenía importancia» (205). Pointsman, who is unable to respond satisfactorily to Maudie's advances at an office Christmas party, is even unable to express an honest affection for his Welsh colleague Gwendidwy:

2. Pynchon's fondness for dogs is evident in the delightful final description of the dog Desmond in his latest novel: «face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes...» (*Vineland* 385).

«he's been too shy, or proud, ever to've smiled at [him] without some kind of speech to explain and cancel out the smile» (199).³ The two lonely men recognize their intellectualist problem and reflect upon it in a very similar form: «Deseando: Haber vivido algo, haber encontrado una mujer, haber sido capaz de abandonarse como otros se abandonan. Deseando: No estar solo, estar en un calor humano» (92). «I should... should have... There are, in his history, so many of these unmade moves, so many 'should haves'-should have married her, ... been kinder» (164). In both passages, the perfect verbal forms increase the sense of wasted lives.

Pedro and Pointsman also share anal-erotic traits. When Pedro at the novel's close is thinking about his drab future as a provincial medical doctor, he imagines himself treating «Pleuritis, pericarditis, pancreatitis, prurito de ano» (234), armed with «un manual diagnóstico del prurito de ano de las aldeanas vírgenes» (236), all ready to receive in his consulting-room any «linda mujer» who suffers from «prurito de ano» (239). (Typically, he pauses to reprimand himself harshly for such thoughts: «Escatológico, pornográfico, siempre pensando cochinas. Estúpido, estúpido» [236].) For Wolfey, it is most appropriate that Pointsman first appears with his foot in the toilet-bowl, since the Pavlovian is «the central figure in Pynchon's attack on the anal-erotic character» (111).

A shared result of these shared psychological problems is that Pedro and Pointsman experience an hallucination (visual and auditory, respectively) during the course of the two texts. When Pedro attends a cocktail-party after a simplistic lecture delivered by a perspectivist philosopher (possibly a parody of Ortega y Gasset), he breaks off his conversation about cancer-research because he has hallucinated the sight of the naked cadaver of the aborted girl lying on the thickly elegant carpet (141). While Pointsman is on vacation at the beach with some colleagues, he «suddenly goes a bit mental» (319), hearing a voice which urges him to take a certain unkind action so that he can be Nayland Smith and Fu Manchu at the same time (323).

To conclude this psychological profile, it is worthy of note that Pedro and Pointsman share a preoccupation with castration. In Pedro's case, the topic appears during his fascinating final monologue, in the course of which occurs the following passage: «¿Por qué me estoy dejando capar?... ni siquiera grito mientras me capan. Cuando castraban los turcos sus esclavos en las playas de Anatolia..., es cosa sabida que se les dejaba enterrados en la arena de la playa y que a muchas millas de distancia, los navegantes en alta mar podían oír... sus gritos de dolor... Pero mejor esto de ahora... ni siquiera se siente dolor... Es un tiempo de silencio» (237-38). For Pedro, castration

3. It is interesting to note that a critic has described Agustín, the protagonist of Martín-Santos's second (incomplete) novel, *Tiempo de destrucción*, in words which would apply perfectly to Pointsman: «la infancia, marcada por el signo de la represión..., cinismo, pedantería, necesidad de obtener la seguridad que confiere el cargo público...» (Mainer 23).

is a metaphor for passivity, lack of courage, inaction; his passive acceptance of his dismissal from the Institute seems to him unmanly, what Martín-Santos in his second, incomplete, novel describes as «la castración espiritual, el orgullo rebajado, la dejación de la gracia» (*Tiempo de destrucción* 235). Since Pedro is also a representative of the Spanish intellectual under Franco, his question «¿Por qué me estoy dejando capar?» is naturally not only directed at himself as an individual.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pointsman actively seeks to have Slothrop castrated, but a mix-up occurs, and the victim is the «ugly American» bigot Major Marvy. Pynchon's «castration episode» contains a curious number of Spanish referents. When the military police first come after Slothrop on Pointsman's orders, Slothrop—dressed in a velvet pig costume—happens to be in a military dispensary, of which the pharmacist in charge is listening to a radio broadcast of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, based of course on Rivas's Romantic play *La fuerza del sino*. Slothrop hides in a brothel, as did Pedro after the abortion. Major Marvy is also there, with Manuela, «who is from the Asturias which... felt [Franco's] cruelty two years before the civil war even began for the rest of Spain» (705). Marvy, now wearing the pig costume, is taken to the strand for the operation, «the sand just solid enough to hold the ambulance» (709). As in the case of the *Tiempo de silencio* passage quoted above, there is a castration/sandy beach association. «Ya salimos de España... pa' luchar en otros frentes...»

Pedro in disgrace after the abortion considers himself a spiritual eunuch; it is primarily the castration mix-up which causes Pointsman's final disgrace. Julia Kristeva has observed that castration's symbolic extension includes «all that is privation of fulfillment and of totality»; castration is an operation symbolic of exclusion and separation (41). It is thus eminently fitting that the failures of Pedro and Pointsman be linked with a powerful symbol of psychological and societal marginalization.

Tiempo de silencio, written by a scientist, has a scientist as its protagonist. *Gravity's Rainbow*, written by a former engineering student well read in scientific literature, counts many scientists among its numerous characters. Science itself is clearly a major thematic component of both texts. Martín-Santos and Pynchon have a great deal to say on the subject of science, and their presentations of Pedro and Pointsman seem to me particularly crucial for an understanding of the two novels.

Pedro is a young, middle-class provincial who happens to have a grant at a Madrid scientific Institute, in order to study cancer; he is not a certified physician. Indeed, Pedro is quick to point out that he is a researcher, not a medical doctor: «— ¡Ah! Usted... ¿Es usted médico? —Tal vez mejor dicho, investigador. Estoy haciendo unos estudios sobre el cáncer» (137). While he is intelligent enough to realize that his experiments are unlikely to be ground-breaking, he plods along, dreaming of a scientific glory which will enable him to belong to the privileged upper strata of society: «estar arriba, ser de... los selectos, de los que están más allá del bien y del mal» (140). His research project, to find a cure for cancer, is of course highly worthwhile,

but his motivation is fatally flawed, far from genuinely altruistic. When he runs out of the proper species of mice and must buy them back from the thief Muecas, he is fascinated by the remote possibility that the man's young daughter Florita, who has been in close contact with the mice, may have become infected with the feared disease: «¡Oh qué posibilidad apenas sospechada, apenas intuible, reverencialmente atendida de que una –con una bastaba– de las mocitas púberes toledanas hubiera contraído, en la cohabitación de la chabola, un cáncer inguinoaxilar totalmente impropio de su edad y nunca visto en la especie humana que demostrara la posibilidad –¡al fin!– de una transmisión virásica» (29). After such a passage, with the tremendous irony of the phrase «con una bastaba,» it is amazing to me that critics of the novel have not tended to judge Pedro more harshly.⁴ The entire novel is permeated with Martín-Santos's indictment of «our contemporary hero, the man of science» (Luna 241), an indictment even more biting for being in part a self-indictment as well – one may recall Benet's reference to «todo lo que sobre él [Martín Santos] se ha dicho... sobre su arrogancia intelectual, su afición al elitismo, y cierta proclividad hacia el poder» (131). Not only is Pedro quite disposed to sacrifice, figuratively, Florita on the altar of Science, he performs a surgical procedure after her botched abortion without being qualified to do so; his assistant Amador reflects that the young man «no sabía hacerlo. Se veía que era la primera vez... sin tomarle el pulso, sin pedir ayuda» (159). Pedro is rather drunk at the time, it is true, but it is his pride and scientific interest in the girl –not altruism– which caused him to accede to her incestuous father's wishes.

By no means, however, do I wish to give the impression that I consider Pedro «evil.» He does not wish consciously to harm anyone, and he even feels a certain pity for the laboratory dogs.⁵ He is young, he has been trained in the «positivist program to force multiform indeterminacies into specific slots» (Hayles 185), and he feels considerable guilt: «¿Por qué tuviste que beber tanto aquella noche?... Está prohibido conducir borracho y tú... tú...» (176). Much earlier he had had doubts about his vocation; in the depths of his soul, he recognizes the stirrings of Faustian pride: «Le parecía que quizá su vocación no hubiera sido clara, que quizá no era sólo el cáncer lo que podía hacer que los rostros se deformaran» (45). Pedro is basically a «pobre infeliz,» as his astute elderly landlady observes (177). An ambitious young man lacking in imagination, repressed, mechanical, egoistic, after drawing a mermaid on his cell wall, he reflects that—unlike the famous fairy-tale mermaid—his mermaid «no está dispuesta a dividir su cola con un cuchillo porque *no ama*» (177—my italics).

4. For instance, Feal has written that «Pedro es la víctima (mas no del todo inocente) de un sistema donde se exaltan los valores espirituales en detrimento de los instintivos» (210).

5. Ives-Marie Léonet has remarked that Pynchon «implicitly distinguishes between good and bad science» (45, note 11); while I believe that we are essentially in agreement, I should prefer the following wording: «good and bad *uses* of science.»

At one point in the text there occurs a well-known passage containing a «falso panegfrico» (Buckley 208) of science; it begins as follows: «Que la ciencia más que ninguna de las otras actividades de la humanidad ha modificado la vida del hombre sobre la tierra es tenido por verdad indubitable» (206). Is this really a «falso panegfrico» of *science*? For me, it is an attack not upon science, which cannot be either good or bad in itself, but rather on those *scientists* who allow themselves to be engulfed in the «enajenación del ideal científico» (Buckley 208) and transformed into quasi-automata: «las falanges de la ciencia marchan así en grandes pelotones bien organizadas» (207). For me, Pedro is no contemporary don Quijote who fails because his «ideal» turns out to be «impracticable» in today's world (Buckley 208). At the end of the novel Pedro is a thoroughly defeated man: «Yo el destruido, yo el hombre al que no se le dejó que hiciera lo que tenía que hacer» (236). I find totally untenable the view that the novel's closing pages reveal «la 'derrota del justo'» a protagonist who «todavía piensa, y con ello se salvaguardan el hombre y el porvenir» (Georgescu 119-20). As Gil y Casado has remarked, Pedro's existence has been described as «una prolongada serie de fracasos»; he is left with «en resumen una total desesperanza» (477). The cause of this individual disaster is not science in the abstract, the cause is the scientists's excessive desire for control: «la necesidad de establecer en cada hormiguero humano un a modo de reloj en movimiento incesante o de mecanismo indefinidamente perfectible... para que se logre un máximo de rendimiento y de disfrute: de poder sobre los entes naturales, de conocimiento de las causas de las cosas» (206) – a clear prefiguration of Pointsman's «stone determinancy of everything, of every soul» (99-100).

Edward Pointsman is in many ways a negative image of don Pedro. Pedro's youth, relatively low social standing, intellectualism, ambition, repressions – all have been either reversed, with negative effect, or increased, with negative effect, in the character of Pointsman. The behaviorist is a Royal Fellow, a «high-class vivisectionist» (42) who drives a Jaguar. While Pedro is to a certain extent mechanistic and characterized by a «racionalismo mórbido» (62), the Pavlovian «stands for strict determinism and predictability of material as well as psychic events» (Friedman and Puetz 73). We as readers naturally respond with considerable sympathy to Pedro's desire to find a cure for cancer, but Pointsman's attempt to establish the «stone determinancy of... every *soul*» (my italics) causes us to recoil. It is certainly true that Pedro hopes that Florita might have become infected, but he never acts on his hope. He operates illegally, but even her mother realizes that he did not cause the young woman's death (202).

Pointsman, on the other hand, takes direct actions which lead to the «disintegration» of Slothrop, as well as to the death of Brigadier Pudding. Slothrop obsesses the behaviorist, who is determined to discover the secret cause and effect pattern in that «truly classical case» (55): «We may finally have to starve, terrorize...» (104) – «The man will suffer – perhaps, in some clinical way, be destroyed» (168). But neither is Pointsman a monster. Like Pedro, he is searching for the cause of what he

at least considers a dangerous illness: «Even if the American's not legally a murderer, he is sick. The etiology ought to be traced, the treatment found... 'We must never lose control. [italics in the original] The thought of him lost in the world of men... fills me with a deep dread I cannot extinguish'» (168, 169).

Pointsman can be considered in himself the counterpart of Martín-Santos's «falso panegórico» of science. The «evil Pointsman,» a critic has called him (Stark 97), but I consider the behaviorist a rather pathetic character, an *exemplum* of what can happen when a scientist becomes a fanatic, a contemporary inquisitor ready to destroy any «heretic» who dares to challenge his mechanistic «sterile armamentarium» (878). Jessica Swanlake senses in the Pavlovian's character «a bleakness whenever she meets him... Hands that could as well torture people as dogs and never feel their pain» (67). When Pointsman tries to convince Roger Mexico, the statistician who is in many ways his opposite because of Roger's belief that it may be necessary soon «to junk cause-and-effect entirely» (103), the smile the older man bestows upon Mexico terrifies him as the «most evil look he has ever had from a human being» (103). Note, however, that the *look* is described as evil, not Pointsman himself. The evil lies precisely in the smile's «assumption of brotherhood» –the brotherhood of science. Roger is terrified because he is aware of the terrible dangers to which such a radical misunderstanding of science can lead, particularly –in the words of Martín-Santos– the acquiring of «poder sobre los entes naturales» (206): «'We both have Slothrop,' is what Pointsman has just said» (103).

There is something grotesque about both our scientists; we can note in both their characters what Unamuno called in 1902 «las ridiculeces a que lleva la ciencia mal entendida» (9). At the close of both novels, Pedro and Pointsman are examples of the «ex-scientist» (GR 878). Pynchon, R. Poirier has observed, is a «great novelist of betrayal» (29). Both Pedro and Pointsman, although to a lesser and to a greater degree, have betrayed the lofty ideals of true science.

In *Tiempo de silencio* and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Luis Martín-Santos and Thomas Pynchon have utilized the characters of don Pedro and Edward Pointsman as expressions of their profound interest in and concern for the role of the scientist in our increasingly science-dominated age. The two characters are also, of necessity, involved with the philosophical topic of human freedom, which preoccupies both novelists. Martín-Santos's Pedro wants desperately to believe in free will, but fails. During his prison monologue, he remarks: «Tienes libertad para elegir el dibujo que tú quieres hacer... Eres un ser libre para dibujar cualquier dibujo... y nadie te lo puede impedir... ¡Imbécil!» (180) In his final monologue, while preparing to take a train to the provinces, he attempts to console himself as follows: «¿Pero qué iba a hacer yo?... Si la cosa está dispuesta así. No hay nada que modificar.» (234) As we have seen, Pedro is a failure in large part because of his lack of will, his passive yielding to the climate of the «time of silence»: «¿Por qué me estoy dejando capar?» (237) Directly after this question occurs a passage of particular importance, which I shall cite in its entirety:

«El hombre fálico de la gorra roja terminada en punta de cilindro rojo con su fecundidad inagotable para la producción de movimientos rectilíneos, ahí se está paseando orgulloso de su gran prepucio rojo-cefálico, con su pito en la mano, con un palo enrollado, dotado de múltiples atributos que desencadenarían la marcha erecta del órgano gigante que se clavaría en el vientre de las montañas, mientras yo me estoy dejando capar» (237). Pedro here contrasts his own passivity with the power for control of the railroad switchman, the *pointsman*.

It is at least possible that *Tiempo de silencio*'s don Pedro influenced the characterization of Pynchon's redoubtable Pointsman, the incarnation of strict determinancy: «See the man back there. He is called the pointsman. He is called that because he throws the lever that changes the points» (751).⁶ Pynchon, rumored to have lived in Mexico, has revealed a considerable knowledge of Spanish literature in his writings.⁷ *Gravity's Rainbow* contains quotations from *Martín Fierro* in Spanish (450), and Pynchon felt confident enough to praise the Grossman translation of *Love in the Time of Cholera* for accuracy, although he modestly states that his «Spanish isn't perfect» («The Heart's Eternal Vow» 49). In any case, George Leeson's excellent translation of the Martín-Santos novel appeared in 1964⁸ and was reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* of November 29, 1964.

As we have seen, there are many «points» of contact between Pedro and Pointsman. Artistic creation, however, is not a simple matter of cause and effect; Pedro is not the «cause» of Pointsman. Yet it seems to me that there is indeed a possibility that Pynchon had read the Spanish text, because of the marked similarities in the presentation of the two characters: «Por una simple cuestión de simetría» (TDS 240), «Because of the symmetry» (GR 168).

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6. The figure of the pointsman occurs also in Pynchon's second novel: «Where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth? In another world. Along another pattern of track, another string of decisions taken, switches closed, the faceless pointsmen who'd thrown them now all transferred, deserted, in stir...» (*The Crying of Lot 49* 76).

7. The present study, as well as several others now in print, is to figure in my in-progress monograph on Pynchon's «Hispanic Connection.»

8. The Leeson translation, originally published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., has been reissued as a Columbia UP Morningside Edition (1989).

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