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# PYNCHON NOTES

## February 1981

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note on Pynchon's Naming</td>
<td>Terry P. Caesar</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pynchon's Two Tchitcherines</td>
<td>David Seed</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrigenda: A Note on <em>Gravity's Rainbow</em></td>
<td>David R. Mesher</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Long View of V 2</td>
<td>Bernard Duyfhuizen</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baedeker to Pynchon: Review</td>
<td>David Cowart</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and Queries</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editorial

We have received gratifying notes and comments about the most recent issue of Pynchon Notes. Readers and teachers of Pynchon's work have submitted to us short essays that record their own explorations and tentative conclusions, some of which are to be found in this issue. Naturally, this is the principal form that we hope the response of our readers will continue to take in the coming months.

While our mail daily brings us evidence of widespread interest in Pynchon's work, the MLA Convention seminars have not reflected this interest for some years. One of the co-editors of PN (Tölölyan) was involved in organizing the seminars or special sessions devoted to Pynchon in 1975-1977, but his later efforts to continue met with the MLA's refusal, as did Beverly Clark's, last year, for reasons unsatisfactory and largely unexplained. This year, other colleagues are proposing a special session which is described below. We urge all our readers to support this proposal in any way they can.

JMK, KT

CALL FOR PAPERS

"Re-evaluating Thomas Pynchon": Topic for proposed special session, Modern Language Association Convention, December, 1981

The publication of Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon's third novel, divided the critics. Many reviewers compared the novel favorably to Ulysses; Edward Mendelson used the term "encyclopedic narrative" to group the novel with Moby Dick and Tristram Shandy. Others were more guarded in their response, if not downright hostile: Gravity's Rainbow was criticized as obscure, overly complex, flippant, and obscene.

Eight years later, Pynchon's importance is still being debated. Much has happened in Pynchon criticism since 1973: at least six critical studies and two collections of essays have appeared; a journal, Pynchon Notes, is in its third year, and many essays have appeared in Critique, Contemporary Literature, Modern Fiction Studies, and others; and Pynchon has been the
subject of dozens of Ph.D. theses. According to Viking Press, Pynchon's publishers, a new novel will be published in the near future. Since the MLA has not offered a session on Pynchon since 1977, we propose this special session to reassess his status as novelist.

Papers or abstracts are therefore solicited for a special session dealing with Pynchon's reputation at mid-career. These should address either the present state of criticism about Thomas Pynchon (books, articles, reviews, bibliography, dissertations, etc.), or Pynchon's importance as a novelist. Papers or abstracts--in duplicate--must be received by April 1, 1981.

Gary Thompson (Saginaw Valley State College, University Center, MI 48710)
Walter Isle (Rice University, Houston, TX 77001)
A Note on Pynchon's Naming

Terry P. Caesar

Why do Pynchon's characters have the names that they do? The names are provocative, clever, funny, appropriate, bizarre, and multifarious, everyone seems to agree, but virtually no critic has inquired into the distinctive logic by which Pynchon impacts the significances he wants to reveal into the names he gives his characters.

The usual procedure is to pick off a symbolic possibility from a character's name, and work it into the interpretive scheme of whatever it is that the critic happens to be discussing. Thus William Plater, in his commentary on the fruitless "tour" of Oedipa Maas, emphasizes her passive isolation by noting that "Oedipa's own name suggests Newton's second law of motion in which mass is the term denoting a quantity of inertia." Other critics have been quick to convert the obvious lure of Oedipa's first name into meaning of a more active sort (for her). No one, so far as I know, has sensed the pun—especially on the oedipal resonance of her first name—when both names are pronounced: "Maas" can be voiced to sound like "my ass"; this Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader's peril.

It is a peril, I think, few critics of Pynchon have been mindful of, because they simply assume that Pynchon chooses symbolic names for his characters in the way that most authors do. The names are meant to disclose some essential facet of character which it is the burden of the narrative to enact and clarify: so the major characters' names in the novels, from Profane and Stencil to Slothrop, Pointsman, and Blicero, have been explicated. The deliberateness of the naming is seldom conceded its joking, ironic, tear-away dimension, much less the sense in which a name such as Oedipa Maas seems to provide an overload of significance, and almost more information than can be pressed into a determinate "meaning." Pig Bodine's question at a party in V., "What do you think of Sartre's thesis that we are all impersonating an identity?" is an idle one, but the thesis deeply
informs Pynchon's characterization, by which charac-
ters are often discontinuous with their names. They
are who they are, and it is appropriate—that is to
say, revealing—that they are named "who" they are;
what we usually experience, as with Oedipa Maas, is
less an identity than a name where an identity ought
to be. Pynchon names his characters as he does in
part because he wants to confer on them an identity
or identities they are only partially able to embody.
Their names are roles which they impersonate with
varying degrees of success, but never completely.
Their names always elude them, persisting almost as
titles which they never fully lay claim to; there is
always the sometimes comic, consistently ironic Pro-
fane who longs for transcendence, or Pointsman, who
suffers the nightmares of a meagre personal existence,
or Oedipa, who never kills her father and never suffers
the recognition.

The most important thing to stress about Pynchon's
naming is that it is his. It is something he
"performs" upon his characters, whom we therefore
never cease to view as "characters." How else can we
regard a macho stud named Duke Wedge or a functionary
who "absorbs" information named Stanley Koteckis?
Gravity's Rainbow alone is filled with over a hundred
minor characters, all (as we say) "aptly" named, every
one of them so utterly "in" the name as to make each
seem a role, an artificial creation, or a pun, and
little more. We respond continually to the irony of
the gap between the name and the impersonation (es-
pecially when the latter is not apposite or runs
counter to the former); only here, since the charac-
ters are minor, we seldom get to see a Thunder Prodd
or a Webley Silvernail act out the absence. There is
only a name—a joke—where we would expect to find a
human presence, a "god fried" where a Gottfried is.

Richard Poirier especially has written eloquently
of Pynchon's deep suspicion of literature and his im-
patience with "literary" versions of experience. In-
scribing caricatural functions in names, and embedding
otherwise imperceptible significances in them, are
both means to expose the illusions of fiction-making
which aspire to present the reader with "real" char-
acters who have an independent existence apart from
the design of the world they inhabit, and from the creator who gives them a local habitation and a name. But the crude, outlandish, or just plain silly nature of Pynchon's naming also enables him to ground the whole enterprise of writing in something more rough, gratting, lavish, energetic, and, perhaps above all, mindless than the very connotations of the word "enterprise" allow, much less the conventions and the refinements of "literature." To name a character Diocletian Blobb is to mock the very act of naming. The pleasure one takes in such a name is a mindless pleasure—even as one remains mindful that Pynchon needs such naming in order to counterbalance and renew his severe, powerful intellectual energies that could easily threaten to take full possession of the fiction.

Of course the sheer range, if not quite the force, of Pynchon's mind finds expression in his naming as well. A name such as Fergus Mixolydian is a resource of a name, a creation compounded out of literary and musical lore. Many of Pynchon's names are repositories of his knowledge, like this one. The effort to discern their aptness, in terms of both the character and the novel in question, seems to me to be one of extraction. Portmanteau constructions such as Pierce Inverarity are often clear enough ("inverse" and "rarity") and often allusions (to Moriarity, in this case) but understanding the principle will not easily yield up the multiple puns and arcane allusiveness of Vaslav Tchitcherine or even Blodgett Waxwing. Regarding the latter, for example, according to what logic are we to rule out the waxwing in the first line of the poem in *Pale Fire*? Pynchon encourages as much as discourages, I believe, the sort of higher nonsense he knows was openly elicited by Joyce, and this is one reason to stress the affinity in Pynchon of the higher with the lower sort. Whatever the ingenuity and the care which conceived these names, they never lose their ironic character and their irony is never very far from the frivolous.

Frivolous, it needs to be said, because the act of naming is so serious. We are told the act is crucial twice in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel which most fully explores the insidious consequences of names of any sort. Insofar as we are speaking of the naming of
characters, Edward Mendelson has already stipulated what I take to be the most vital rationale Pynchon wants: "In his books, character is less important than the network of relations existing either between characters, or between characters and social and historical patterns of meaning." Pynchon's naming enforces this aim by incorporating vast amounts of what might be called lore, or, more clinically, data: not only social and historical, but also scientific, linguistic, filmic; there seems to be no type of cultural discourse he does not draw from, no type of discourse he would have us not immerse ourselves in in turn. His characters have the names they do because they are not merely their personal histories. They are the products of more "networks" than they can possibly know, and so names must be devised to make them known. What the Pynchon name discloses is less the human identity than the constituent elements of that identity, which does not reside in what is most personal, nor even in what is most "human," about that character. Where does it reside instead? It depends on the character, of course, but generally we must attend to the social or historical patterns of meaning Mendelson writes of. Or we must attend, in a word, elsewhere. The Pynchon name is actually a pastiche of familiar and recondite data. The name—any name—is but a chance distillation, which it is the burden of the fiction to assemble, configure, and connect.

This is why Pynchon's naming must be frivolous. To recall the passage about naming in Gravity's Rainbow: "There may be no gods, but there is a pattern: names by themselves may have no magic, but the act of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern." Pynchon's names finally amount to a demystification of naming itself. Taken by themselves, each separately, they have no magic—they are too silly, too extravagant, or too self-consciously "clever" to be that—but there is magic in them: the magic of a pattern. Pynchon does not so much desire to impose the pattern as to reveal it, disclose it, inscribe it. Therefore the names are ultimately codes—the process by which they are conceived is a coding—which need to be seen in relation to other codes, semantic and otherwise, which the whole narrative of each novel weaves, disperses, and authenticates. The name of each char-
acter only partially signifies that character. It also signifies pattern, function, energy, information—and the impure, free-spirited play of signification itself.

One of the most chilling moments in Gravity's Rainbow is when Slothrop discovers the initials "T.S." in Jamf's codebook: "Well, holy cow, Slothrop reckons, that must be me, huh. Barring the outside possibility of Tough Shit." (286) What is so chilling is Slothrop's realization (and ours) that he has been determined. He realizes that all his life until this moment he has been imprisoned in a name which was Theirs. The "T.S." which confronts him reveals a business transaction coincident with his very identity and suggests the control inscribed in his very desires. "Jesus Christ," Slothrop thinks, "I've been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef," (286) and a feared smell thickens in his memory until he becomes aware that it now has a name as well as a history: Imipolex G. The sense in which this name acts in turn to usurp his own name is confirmed to him by his recent dream of long ago reading "JAMF" in an old German dictionary: "The definition would read: I." (287) "Jamf" is of course yet another name which converts into him and he into it; Slothrop feels lost, dispersed, and nameless amid the power of Their own nomination.

The disclosure of this pattern to one of his characters has not existed before in Pynchon's fiction, and much of the sheer excess of Gravity's Rainbow is, I feel, explained by it. The exacerbated, lurid, prankish, and pitiless assault of idioms, perspectives, and structures that overwhelms the reader is configured, for a moment, in the consciousness of one of the characters, who feels the stark truth of his own bewildering personal history with almost visceral force. The experience is an experience of subjection, and its simple poignance here indicates Pynchon's own felt subjection everywhere to the sheer authority of naming—not only the naming of characters, but, it may be, the naming of anything, or of language itself. Certainly in this novel to name is to have the power to do so, and, insofar as characters are concerned, to name is to inflict that power on another, as They do to Slothrop, or as MANC to Enzian. Much as he wants to depose this power, Pynchon cannot help but be

impli-
cated in it. All he can hope to do is turn names against themselves, keep the energy of their authority circulating, and load the principal character of his last novel with so many names that by the last time we glimpse him he seems to have eluded them all, and to be passing out of the text nameless.

Clarion State College

Notes


3 In The New York Times Book Review of July 17, 1966 (22, 24), Pynchon has the following reply to Romain Gary, who charged that the name, "Genghis Cohen," found its way into The Crying of Lot 49 from his own novel:

I took the name Genghis Cohen from the name of Genghis Khan (1162-1227), the well-known Mongol warrior and statesman. If Mr. Gary really believes himself to be the only writer at present able to arrive at a play on words this trivial, that is another problem entirely, perhaps more psychiatric than literary, and I certainly hope he works it out.

What is especially interesting here is how willing Pynchon is to concede the triviality. He makes no statement of any great or distinctive purpose. He was merely being sportive, nothing more.


Pynchon's Two Tchitcherines

David Seed

In Part 3 of *Gravity's Rainbow*, during a factual introduction of Tchitcherine where at last identifying details are given the reader about this character, Pynchon states, "He is no relation at all to the Tchitcherine who dealt the Rapallo Treaty with Walter Rathenau" (338). This Tchitcherine (Georgi) also participated in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, where he briefly met Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway wrote up the encounter for the Toronto Daily Star and the article was subsequently reprinted in a collection of his journalism called *By-Line* (1967). John Stark has speculated (*Pynchon's Fictions*, 107) that an intelligence report mentioning a Russian major in charge of captured rocket materials may have given Pynchon the idea of Tchitcherine. Equally well, Hemingway's report or any other reading Pynchon was doing about inter-bellum Germany may have given him the name. Georgi was a diplomat par excellence who had survived the Russian revolution and who, according to Hemingway, had a cold brain and a weakness for uniforms. Pynchon's Vaslav Tchitcherine is identified as having a "mythical half-brother" in Enzian before he is contrasted with the diplomat, which entangles the reader in conflicting levels of reality. Vaslav Tchitcherine seems a historical figure because of his contrast with his namesake and because of his participation in a historical process (the enforced introduction of an alphabet into Central Asia). The duplication of names momentarily adds yet another pair to the doublings which occur throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* and adds exactly the same kind of uncertainty as Joyce creates when he introduces a dentist called Marcus J. Bloom into *Ulysses*. Both duplications are traps to the unwary reader: he might jump to conclusions about the historical identity of Pynchon's Vaslav, or about Leopold Bloom's relation to the dentist. R. M. Adams has discussed this use of names in *Ulysses* (*Surface and Symbol* (1962), 234-42) and notes that Joyce pointlessly reintroduces characters from his earlier fiction. Pynchon does the same thing when Yrjö, the nineteenth-century pretender to an Eastern European throne who used to inhabit the
abandoned mansion in "The Secret Integration," grotesquely reappears in the memory of Mrs. Quoad. Mrs. Quoad, whose exotic candies almost destroy Slothrop's palate forever, thinks back to the time when Yrjö touched her in the gardens at Bournemouth to cure her of the King's Evil (119). This time Pynchon adds the detail of his being involved in the maneuverings over Bessarabia in 1878, when it was returned to Russia. In "The Secret Integration," Yrjö is a safely remote dream-like figure who exists within the boys' imagination. In Gravity's Rainbow, however, Pynchon undermines the reader's secure sense of reading an enclosed and autonomous fiction, then assaults his credulity by having Mrs. Quoad suffer a disease around 1900 which is associated with the seventeenth century. Anachronism gives way to the same kind of uncertainty about character as his two Tchitcherines create, since Yrjö is related to a historical event (the Congress of Berlin). But then Bessarabia to Bournemouth to Mingeborough are fantastic jumps for a character to make and reflect a playful tendency on Pynchon's part to unsettle his reader's certainty about the status of his characters.

The University of Liverpool
Corrigenda: A Note on Gravity's Rainbow

David R. Mesher

Mistakes in the text and texture of Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow become almost as controversial as the more central elements of the novel, but little effort has been expended to categorize and investigate those beyond the realms of verifiable historical and scientific data. A brief look at several types of errors in the novel will reveal no apparent pattern, and thus every reason for the increased operations of paranoid critical faculties. The question of mistakes, after all, divides into the incidental and the intended (or, in more Pynchonesque terms, those we can plot over time, and those plotted for and against us). Ultimately, this distinction can be resolved by the element of control—or, as Pynchon suggests through the medium of Carroll Eventyr, "the illusion of control."2

The difference is often hard to determine. When, for example, Franz Pökler "returned from the Oie"—that is, the Isle—he found that not Ilse, his real or pretend daughter, but "Isle, her flowered bag, the clothing she usually left strewn on the cot, had all vanished"(414). The transposition of letters is hardly an uncommon typographical error; but that the transposed "Isle" should occur here, uniquely in the text, immediately after the use of the word for isle in an archaic Baltic dialect, is all too fortuitous. Could this be the error of an editor or compositor, or a joke of the author himself? Is the text under control, or only its illusion? Whatever the answers, the reader must draw the same inference: in a fictional environment where Ilse may not be Ilse at all, she might just as well be Isle.

Other errors are not as easily explained away. Pynchon's Russian, for example: the first word of the title abbreviated as VTSK NTA should be transliterated as "Vsesoyuzny" and not "Vsesoyznny," (352) as Pynchon has it. In the absence of moveable type, where the two letters are the inversions of each other, the mistake of "n" for "u" is most likely caused by misreading handwritten notes, and therefore Pynchon's own. His carelessness as a researcher is doubly em-
phrasized because we know the source for this information on the NTA; and we therefore also know that he has reversed the phonetic values of K, which should have been the "ordinary K," and Q, which should have represented the "glottal K" (353).\textsuperscript{4}

The same sorts of mistakes occur in the novel's German. The printer's union, for instance, should be a "Buchdruckerverband," and not "Buchdrucherverband" (571) as Pynchon has it; and again the mistake of "h" for "k" is most readily attributed to misreading one's own notes. A more serious sort of error crops up in Slothrop's German slogan, "Fickt nicht mit der Raketemensch"(435). The phrase is Pynchon's favorite warning, variations on which in the following pages include "Fuck ye not with Gory Gnahb"(498), and "Fuck not with the Kid" (559). But "der Raketemensch" is the wrong case (or, perhaps more interestingly, the wrong gender). While we can discount Slothrop's claim to "have a great passive vocabulary" in Russian (513), as a bluff to keep Tchitcherine honest, Slothrop is frequently portrayed as speaking with Germans and apparently in fluent German; the credibility of those scenes is thus threatened by Slothrop's own pronunciation.

Questions of language trouble the reader in other ways as well. Discharged from St. Veronica's hospital, Slothrop thinks "he's back on the street, shit, last chance for a Section 8 'n' he blew it. . . ."(114). The reader recognizes "Section 8" as a synonym for "mentally unfit," and indeed Slothrop himself uses it soon afterwards to mean "raving maniacs" (182). But this is a colloquial usage; in the first instance, Slothrop's allusion is to a remote but real hope of being disqualified from further military service under Section Eight, Army Regulation 615-360. But that regulation was in force only until July, 1944, and the first V-2s were not fired at London until September of that year. So the remark is made months after that "last chance" has been removed—a fact someone like Tyrone Slothrop would surely be aware of.

Finally, there are matters of apparent structure in usage. Out dognapping with Pointsman, whose foot is stuck in a toilet bowl, "Roger, snoot full of ether, can't check his lunge— as the doctor comes
spinning round again Roger careens on into him, toilet bowl hitting Roger a painful thump in the leg" (45). For a British speaker of English like Roger or Pointsman, "careening" can only be a lurch sideways; for an American like Pynchon, "careen" can mean the British "career"—that is, a headlong lunge. Though the direction here does not seem to be of much consequence, it might be important to specify that Roger has indeed gone forward, as the scene requires. First, that motion connects him with a number of other characters in the novel, like Tchitcherine, who imagines himself going on "headlong, a raving snowman over the winter marshes" (345-46), and like Mucker-Maffick, whose nickname "Tantivy" similarly means "headlong." Second, direction is crucial to Pointsman's discussion with Roger about causation. Replying to Mexico's suggestion that "the next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle!" Pointsman is adamant: "'No--not 'strike off.' Regress. You're 30 years old, man. There are no 'other angles.' There is only forward—into it—or backward." (89). And this in turn reminds us of the "progressive knotting into" on the novel's first page.

Those who find it important to keep Pointsman and Antipointsman diametrically opposed will no doubt see Roger "careening" at some "other angle" than forward, against all sense of the scene. But I think Pynchon is doing something very different here (and in the other corrigenda I've discussed). He is not simply imposing a structure on the fiction: he seems to be allowing the language to make its own connections, to create its own patterns. The mistakes of fact and language are finally unimportant by themselves—and even help to create the texture of the novel. Just as the cultivated French of Nabokov's fiction marks that author as incurably European, so Pynchon's careless indifference and errors in German, Russian, and even English, help make Gravity's Rainbow imaginative fiction of a particularly American stamp.

Tel-Aviv University

Notes

1 Perhaps the one exception to this is the great anachronism hunt. While the novel seems rife with
anachronisms, I would caution detractors that what they might think of as recent slang has in many cases been around for quite a while. A literary example of this which comes readily to mind is Frank Norris's use of "outa sight" in his novel, _McTeague_ (1899).

2 _Gravity's Rainbow_ (New York: Viking, 1973), 30. Further page references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

3 Of the mistakes under discussion here, this alone has been corrected in the Bantam edition (New York, 1974), 482. In itself, such an alteration—or its absence—in a later text cannot be used to show conclusively any authorial intent. Perhaps it would be best to consider such changes as "corrected" readings, and unchanged errors as the "preterite."

A Long View of V 2

Bernard Duyfhuizen

In tracking down references to the V-2 rocket in the London *Times* for the period corresponding with the first book of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I came across a number of interesting items, such as: the official appearance of Duncan Sandys at the opening of a flying bomb exhibition (Nov. 1, p. 2, col. 2); a condensed version of an announcement from the German High Command which was the first public mention of the V-2 rockets, citing rocket strikes in London, the British Government's silence about this new weapon, the destruction of the Euston Station, and "extremely heavy damage to blocks of houses and traffic installations [in the London district]" (Nov. 9, p. 4, col. 4)--this last echoes the opening nightmare of *GR* (pp. 3-4); the transcript of Churchill's speech before Parliament concerning the rocket attack on Britain, in which we read the statement that the rocket "outstrips sound" (Nov. 11, p. 2, col. 1); a report of a rocket falling back on its launch site (Nov. 29, p. 2, col. 4); numerous reports of the English Spitfires which attacked the launch sites--"Spitfires come roaring in low over the dark sea at suppertime" (*GR*, p. 96); and finally, a technical article on the rocket's operation (Dec. 9, p. 2, col. 3 and p. 10, an illustration). For propaganda purposes the *Times* downplayed the rocket attacks and rarely gave specific details concerning a strike. Therefore, it is debatable as to how much Pynchon may have used the *Times* as a source since more complete accounts of the period were available at the time Pynchon was writing.

But the most interesting item from the *Times*, in terms of the text of *Gravity's Rainbow*, was a letter to the editor (Dec. 12, p. 5, col. 7), which I will quote in full, side-by-side with corresponding passages from the first chapter of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

A LONG VIEW OF V 2

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir--Recently an occasion of extraordinary clarity in the much abused Lon-

The sun is still below the horizon. The day feels like rain, but for now the air is uncommonly clear. [...]
ondon atmosphere permitted the view of a V2 rocket being fired from its distant base on the far side of the North Sea. Before dawn on that morning I chanced to glance eastward from a small London window and was astonished to see, through a gap between the surrounding buildings, the bright trace of a rocket against a still dusky sky. I had previously seen Press photographs of such trails taken from a point nearer their source, and I readily recognized what I was seeing. A visual range of 200 miles or more may seem surprising, but although London was hidden from the direct rays of the sun, this would not apply to a rocket ascending from a point nearer the sunrise. I will not detail the other observations I made as they would be out of time and place.

Where the rocket went when I lost sight of its trace I cannot tell. But during the following minutes I felt rather like a cricketer deep in the field who sees suddenly a fast ball coming his way and wonders whether he will catch it. With little regret I did not; nor did anyone else.

Yours sincerely,

[...] This well-scrubbed day ought to be no worse than any--

Will it? Far to the east, down in the pink sky, something has just sparkled, very brightly. [...] The brilliant point has already become a short vertical white line. It must be somewhere out over the North Sea [...].

What is it? Nothing like this ever happens. But Pirate knows it, after all. He has seen it in a film just in the last fortnight ...it's a vapor trail. [...] This is the new, and still Most Secret, German rocket bomb.

 [...] the range of these things is supposed to be over 200 miles. You can't see a vapor trail 200 miles, now, can you.

Oh. Oh, yes: around the curve of the Earth, farther east, the sun over there, just risen over in Holland, is striking the rocket's exhaust, drops and crystals, making them blaze clear across the sea....

The white line, abruptly, has stopped its climb. [...]

 [...] Already the rocket, gone pure ballistic, has risen higher. But invisible now. [...]

What if it should hit exactly--ahh, no--for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with
the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull.... (GR, pp. 6-7; bracketed ellipses mine)

Pynchon, of course, expands upon this scene, but the remarkable resemblance between the two passages, plus the correspondence between the probable date of SCIENTIST's sighting and the late November-early December opening of the novel, is an uncanny coincidence. Furthermore, if Pynchon had seen this letter during his research, he would surely have been intrigued by the enigmatic author—"SCIENTIST"—and the ambiguous last line, which could imply that this rocket is still up there: "Screaming holds across the sky" (GR, p. 4).

University of Tulsa

Note

1 As noted in Javaid Qazi's "Source Materials for Thomas Pynchon's Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography" (PN 2, pp. 11, 14), Basil Collier's The Battle of the V-Weapons and Kooy and Uytenbogaart's Ballistics of the Future are essential works on the operational end of the V-2 program, and they contain more details than the London Times of the period.
Baedeker to Pynchon

David Cowart


Just as Gravity's Rainbow generates inevitable comparisons with Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, a reader's guide to Pynchon's novel must stand comparison with such monuments of Joyce criticism as Stuart Gilbert's James Joyce's Ulysses and Campbell and Robinson's A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake. In its introductory chapters (the length of a short book), A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow compares favorably: the first-time reader of Pynchon's encyclopedic novel will find handles with which to heft the giant package, and the more advanced reader will find new trails into and out of the labyrinth. Douglas Fowler's attitude toward his subject, however, is a far cry from the reverence of most Joyce critics, and unfortunately he falters at times with detailed annotation. Unlike the exhaustive information in, say, Gifford and Seidman's Notes for Joyce, the running glosses here are sometimes inaccurate or thin. For example, the comment on an allusion to Tchaikovsky, "Tchaikovsky offers yet another musical reference," doesn't really provide a reader much help. Similarly "Si me quieres escribir" is translated but not identified as a song from the Spanish Civil War, and Utgarthaloki is placed in Norse mythology, but without an adequate explanation of the particular appropriateness of a character's having this name. Readers with special interests will notice their own categories of thin commentary; I found the discussion of film--Abbott and Costello are repeatedly invoked as a universal standard of the comic in movies--particularly sketchy. But however disappointing the commentary, one finds the broader critical features of the book stimulating and challenging.

Before we proceed, a few fulminations for Ardis Press. Years ago, desirous of catching all the jokes in The Crying of Lot 49, I made the mistake of asking a middle-aged Hispanic woman, proprietress of one of those "Cuban-Chinese" restaurants frequently seen in
New York City, if chingado was a Spanish word. She nearly threw me out. I was asking, of course, about K. da Chingado and Company, publisher of Oedipa Maas's paperback anthology of Jacobean plays, and I'm afraid Emory Bortz's response to that book ("Misprints. Gah," he sputters) came to mind as I read A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow, for the printing here is also distressingly chingado. The misprints are numerous and distracting. One becomes involuntarily fascinated with the little transpositional dance executed by the "e" and the "i" in various appearances of the name Weissmann. By contrast, the "e" and the "i" don't dance at all in Freida, Speiler, Kreigsmarine, and Festspeilhaus, though the second "u" in Lüneburg is as likely to appear as an "e" as not. The opera by Rossini turns up now as Il Baberia di Sivile, now as Il Barbier di Sivilia, but never as Il Barbiere di Siviglia. At a certain point one begins neurotically counting: I found about a hundred such misprints in the last half of the book.

The oversights of the proofreader adumbrate those of the copy editor, who fails to rescue the author from the kind of minor mistakes that will crop up in any book labored over, as this one was, for a period of years. Alphdrücken, for example, is translated "Nightmare" on one occasion and "Nightmares" on another; Penelope is now Jessica's niece, now her sister; and Hugh Godolphin, the Antarctic explorer in V., finds Vheissuvian spider monkeys at the wrong pole. But at a certain point--when the errors mount up, and the carelessness becomes increasingly reprehensible--it is the author who must be taken to task. When Pynchon's famous opening line, "A screaming comes across the sky," is glossed "The rocket is falling ever closer," one wonders at the failure to consider the possibility that the rocket has already fallen, since it travels faster than the speed of sound and strikes before it is heard. Even if the rocket, at this point, figures only in a dream, the dreamer has recently been briefed on the characteristics of this weapon. Indeed, a case can be made for the novel's beginning seconds after the impact at hand on the last page. Gravity's Rainbow would thus be an elaborate version of Kekulé von Stradonitz's dream of the serpent devouring its tale--an oneiric meditation, in
Other mistakes are minor but persistent. Don Giovanni is by Mozart, not Rossini. Tancredi is not opera buffa. Elizabeth, in Tannhäuser, does not commit suicide. The word "necropolis" is not Pynchon's coinage. Morra is not an Italian card game (it is played, like "Scissors, Rock, Paper," with the fingers; because of the violent altercations it causes, it is outlawed in Italy). The "alb" in which Byron the Bulb is wrapped is a clerical vestment, not a dawn song. Moira Shearer, not Norma, starred in The Red Shoes. There is, finally, no German expressionist movie entitled Attila. The Attila Pökler sleepily watches appears in Lang's Die Nibelungen, and this is the movie that runs four and a half hours, not Metropolis.

The translations of Pynchon's many foreign phrases are also occasionally a bit suspect. Though one is impressed by Fowler's resourcefulness in translations from the Herero, the translations from other languages tend toward the heteroclite and sometimes the dead wrong. The name of the Toiletship, Rücksichtslos, means "Inconsiderate," but Fowler translates it "Lack of Hindsight." Such a reading is possible if presented as an explication of etymological wordplay—not, however, as translation. Less excusable is the neglect of the wordplay in "Säure" and "Morituri" or the rendering of Gruss Gott, an alpine greeting, as "Great God." Sinverglenza, which can be congratulatory (before intercourse) or reproachful (after), comes out as the tortured "Outrageously depraved one!" Hier, in "hieropons," is glossed but not the equally important pons. "Mille-Feuilles à la Fondue de la Cervelle," surely no more than a joke at the expense of pretentious cuisine (like S. J. Perelman's "Isle Flottante de Ma Tante Leonie"), is surmised to be "a Genoese pastry made with hearts of palm ('Cervelle')." "Brain Fondue" would be closer.

Elsewhere Fowler makes a point of not bluffing: "I don't know who the 'Kenosha Kid' is," "'Little Pard' baffles me." But some of these shrugs could have been dispensed with—and other glosses could have been fuller—if the author were more up-to-date on Pynchon criticism. He could have cited Richard Poirier's
plausible suggestion that the Kenosha Kid refers to Orson Welles (born in Kenosha, Wisconsin), and he could have explained the term "175's" for homosexual detainees as a reference to Article 175 of the criminal code that dictated their incarceration. These oversights would scarcely matter, except that they seem to reflect a somewhat overly selective bibliography. Although it includes Jules Siegel's scandal-mongering in Playboy, it omits Mark Siegel's Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (1978)--the only book, before this one, to take the single novel as its subject. Joseph Slade's Thomas Pynchon (1974) appears, but not William Plater's The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (1978). These omissions cannot be blamed on the publisher's taking an unconscionable time in bringing out the book, since the bibliography includes items as late as 1979. The point here is not that the secondary bibliography in a book such as this one ought to be comprehensive, but that Fowler has neglected some aspects of the critical background on Gravity's Rainbow to the detriment of his own critical performance.

Yet notwithstanding its errors and omissions, Fowler's book is an important contribution to Pynchon criticism. Its virtues lie chiefly in the general introduction, in which the author argues (1) that Gravity's Rainbow is a gothic novel, (2) that the technique of its creator must be understood as something closer to modernist poetics than to traditional canons of narrative, and (3) that meaning and value in the novel inhere in "polarized codes." According to Fowler, Pynchon has assembled Gravity's Rainbow with an eye to the effects of juxtaposition and without much concern for the shibboleths of fiction-writing: action that grows out of character and plot that relies on organic development rather than coincidence. Where the growth and interrelation of characters occupy the foreground in a conventional novel or play, it is the relationship between speaker and audience that counts in a poem, and Gravity's Rainbow is in effect a vast, intricate poem whose departures from novelistic decorum are calculated. Related to this thesis are the observations in a subsection entitled "Style, Motif, Structure," in which the author explains that "the nervous system of
Pynchon's novel is... composed of webs of meaning interwoven into each other to create complex structures of suggestion, symbolism, and coded value, and we must be attentive to these chains of meaning as we read." Fowler's idea here—that "the essence of Pynchon's style is the use of polarized codes"—is a helpful formulation, though to my mind it tends to be invoked reductively. We sometimes lose sight of the webs and complex structures as Fowler's hermeneutics becomes mere labeling: "Bounce's IG Farben Award signifies he's a bad guy," "Säure is a good guy," "Bloat's sobriety marks him off as a bad guy," and so forth until one is reminded of 1066 and All That, the popular burlesque of the schoolboy's examination essay ("the Protestant Reformation was a Good Thing because...").

Fowler's description of Gravity's Rainbow as a gothic novel provides a challenging and stimulating explanation for aspects of that work that have occasioned some controversy. One follows Fowler's impressive cataloguing of supernatural features with increasing amazement that Pynchon could ever have been read as a glum empiricist, a chronicler of the depredations of entropy. Fowler differs implicitly with critics who see Pynchon's supernaturalism as evidence of a refusal on his part to eschew transcendental mythologies and explicitly with those who see his sensationalism as a device in the service of a humanistic literary purpose. "The sensational and lurid nature of [this] writer's work has been reflexively diminished by our fixation with regarding serious art as being intrinsically beyond violence and grotesquery for its own sake"; moreover, "a glance at the astonishing amount of sensationalism in Pynchon's fiction tells us a good deal about his sensibility and leads us toward conclusions very difficult to explain within the humanistic clichés and unconvincing pieties of contemporary criticism." One senses, behind statements like these, the Nabokovian notion that ideational content somehow spoils art. "Remember that mediocrity thrives on 'ideas,'" Nabokov once told an interviewer. "Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories." Though Fowler points out the prominence of sensational, gothic elements in the most
serious literature (a passage on the gothic features of The Waste Land is particularly illuminating), he seems finally to want us to see Pynchon as a gothicist whose sensationalism is, as entertainment, its own justification, rather than as the serious artist whose gothicism serves higher ends. In support of his argument that Pynchon is less earnest than is commonly thought, Fowler adduces the author's attention, in a novel ostensibly about World War II, to fictional grotesquery like Blicero's sadism and Brigadier Pudding's coprophagy--instead of to real, historical horrors like Auschwitz. Emphasizing Pynchon's adeptness with the gothicist's bag of tricks, Fowler casts doubts on the ultimate seriousness of a book like Gravity's Rainbow.

Fowler's ideas will generate some interesting discussion, for they are fascinating, forcefully argued, and surely controversial. I for one am intrigued by what Fowler has to say, though I feel that, carried away by his argument, he has erred in attempting to expel Pynchon from the august company--that of Melville, Cervantes, and Rabelais--in which recent criticism has placed him. Fowler's revisionism seems at times disingenuous, as if he means, under the mantle of Nabokovian iconoclasm, to end up characterizing Pynchon as little more than a sleight-of-pen artist, an entertainer incapable of the mythic depths of a Coleridge, a Melville, or a Mary Shelley. One of the reasons Fowler's book gives this impression may be the tendency of the author to patronize his subject. Fowler starts by frequently drawing our attention to what, by common critical standards, are flaws in Pynchon's technique: characters are introduced briefly and abandoned for hundreds of pages (or for good); situations are developed, then abandoned. These "flaws," he explains, are in fact features of a novelistic technique that is original, not to be judged by ordinary standards (it is, as explained above, "poetic," rather than conventionally narrational). But then something odd happens. As he continues to point out technical problems, he seems less and less willing or able to explain them. Eventually he abandons the attempt and starts merely complaining about aspects of the book he finds inferior, or thinks others will find inferior. Thus we hear about "the
most ridiculous scene in the entire novel," "signs of author's fatigue," Pynchon's "indecisiveness, his revisions, his second thoughts," "the poverty of Pynchon's resources," "Pynchon's weaknesses," and "the queer singularity and arbitrariness of the motives he visits on his creatures, the psychological murkiness of individual impulses, the fancy talk that leads nowhere." And we've merely scratched the surface of what seems more and more like contempt masquerading as critical tough-mindedness ("in learning to read his work," says Fowler at the outset, "we should never forget his limitations or confuse a lack of interest or discipline on his part with a failure of perception on ours"). Statements like the following are everywhere in the book: "Pynchon closes out the scene with a weak joke," "Pynchon evidently can't think of anything much for him to do," "Pynchon is emptying his notebooks," "Boredom and irritation . . . clearly vitiate a good many scenes in GR," "now and then we have to be a little patient while [Pynchon] rummages around for another other-worldly effect," "No editor ever seems to have asked this writer to take anything out," and "My guess is that the detailed and bookish information about Argentina . . . may once have been the preliminary notes for a novel or story that Pynchon intended to write. . . . it stinks of the lamp. . . ."

No one will accuse Fowler of being a Gravity's Rainbow Kultist. I suppose a certain amount of skepticism is healthy, since many of Pynchon's readers do tend toward hero-worship, but Fowler overdoes it and eventually generates more doubts about his own resources than about Pynchon's. Nevertheless, the book deserves attention and will, I think, spark a good deal of profitable debate. Its introductory essay can and should be read for its valuable insights and stimulating arguments. Although the page-by-page glosses that follow are too riddled with errors and oversights to be strongly recommended, the Pynchon tyro who wants quick and easy information about some of Pynchon's esoterica will be reasonably well-served if occasionally misinformed. Not that some of the entries aren't quite good, for Fowler is a master of the concise, even epigrammatic definition: "A mantra is a prayer that intensifies and extends
the edges of consciousness," "a 'ratchet' is a gear that can advance but not reverse." The little essays on Manes, the Cathari, and Samuel Maharero are filled with concise information, and I learned a great deal from the explication of the wind-motif that figures in all of Pynchon's books. There are also good definitions or discussions of Gödel's Theorem, the delta-t, the naif-hero in Pynchon, the Tarot, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival. In short, a book in which much is to be disputed, and much is to be learned.

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Notes and Queries

Panel Discussion: "Teaching Pynchon to Undergraduates"
At the CEA (College English Association) meetings in Cherry Hill, NJ, April 2-4, 1981. Chairing the session will be Beverly Clark of Wheaton College. The panelists are as follows:

Craig Werner, University of Mississippi.
"'Entropy' as an Introduction to the Major Works of Thomas Pynchon"

Raymond J. Wilson III, Bellevue College.
"Ten Study Guides on V."

Carol Marshall Peirce, University of Baltimore.
"Pynchon's V. and Durrell's Alexandria Quartet: A Seminar in the Modern Tradition"

Martin Green, Fairleigh Dickinson University.
"Pynchon's Heart of Darkness: The Crying of Lot 49"

Roger Clark, Sociology Department, Nichols College.
"Imperialism in Gravity's Rainbow"

Elaine B. Safer, University of Delaware.
"Teaching Gravity's Rainbow in 'The Contemporary American Epic Novel'"

Terry Caesar comments "On Notes and other Bibliographical Items: these sorts of items are inevitably interesting and I hope you keep your criteria of what merits interest generous, not to say arcane, as I think befits Our Author. But should the net be cast so wide as to include, for example, the review of NASA's "The Space Movie," on pages 42-45 of the Fall, 1980 Film Quarterly? Though the reviewer never mentions Pynchon, statements such as 'it is not surprising that, above all, the film celebrates the enormous, upright rocket and its straining for climactic release from gravity' provoke more thoughts about him than most things I've read which have little merit simply because they merely mention Pynchon. Another extremely stimulating article, which again never mentions Pynchon specifically but is more profoundly and meditatively 'about' him than (to me) most articles which are, is Kingsley Widmer's 'In Praise of Waste' (Partisan Review 46, 1979, 542-52). Your readers would not, I think, want to miss these two pieces, or
at least I would not want to have, no matter how much else goes on—unknowingly—under the name 'Pynchon.'"

Brian McHale offers the following items:

"I was delighted to see that someone else (Javaid Qazi, in PN 2) had been struck by the convergence (or whatever it is) between GR and Hawkes's Cannibal. However, the connection does not appear to end there. There is a striking resemblance between Pynchon's version of London under the blitz and Hawkes's in the opening chapter of The Lime Twig (New Directions, 1961). More problematically, there may also be a distant echo of Hawkes's The Beetle Leg (1951) in Slothrop's hallucination of Crutchfield the westward-man (or am I hallucinating this myself?). Mightn't the connection extend even further than this? It bears looking into.

Pynchon specialists might not be expected to look into Harold Bloom's A Map of Misreading (Oxford University Press, 1975), but if they did they would find (pp. 31, 38-39) some extremely provocative remarks on Pynchon as 'Sado-Anarchistic parodist': 'I greatly prefer Pynchon to Mailer... because a voluntary parody is more impressive than an involuntary one.'"

T. S. Tillotson passes along two further offerings "for the open-ended bibliography (dare I call them quasi-Qazis?). These were brought to my attention in an unpublished paper (14 pages, single-spaced, with a two-page bibliography) written several years ago by Bob DeBroux, which dealt with the Herero connections in GR:


Apparently washing blue was actually used as one 'abortifacient of choice' by the Hereros. Steen-
kamp's unique solution to this problem (offered on p. 35) involved the 'grafting of Government method onto [the Herero's] puberty school ideas.'

The aptness of Pynchon's description of the White Lady (p. 658) and of references elsewhere in the text of GR can scarcely be appreciated without a glance at the picture on p. 27, showing what Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa calls 'such a well-known figure that it can almost be regarded as the emblem of rock art in Southern Africa.'
Bibliography

CRITICISM:


Comments on Gravity’s Rainbow as "sado-masochistic parody."


Quotes V.’s version of the "modern urban legend."


(9)

Mentions Pynchon.


Mentions Pynchon in headnotes on Bierce and West, and in introduction to "Contemporary American Prose 1945--."  


Mentions Pynchon.


Brief remarks on *Gravity's Rainbow*.


Mentions Pynchon's scientific orientation and the Pulitzer balk.


Mentions Pynchon.


For Gravity's Rainbow, among other modernist texts, no such thing as the ideal reader exists.


In colleges today, Pynchon's works "are still read as examples of 'experimental fiction.'"


FORTHCOMING:


Werner, Craig. Rev. of Plater, Siegel, and Cowart. Studies in English.


Contributors

TERRY CAESAR is Associate Professor of English at Clarion State College, in Pennsylvania. His Ph.D. dissertation, "'Violating the Shrine': Parody Inside and Outside Literature" concluded with a section on Pynchon. He has a Fulbright to Turkey next year, where he will probably not be able to do research into the New Turkic Alphabet.

DAVID COWART, Assistant Professor of English at the University of South Carolina, is the author of Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion, and of numerous essays on a wide variety of topics in English and American literature.

BERNARD DUYFUZEN is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tulsa where he also teaches rhetoric. His previous publications include "'Words [Mis]taken': The Opening Sentence of the Retreat Sermons" in James Joyce Quarterly, and "On the Writing of Future-History: Beginning and Ending in Doris Lessing's The Memoirs of a Survivor" in Modern Fiction Studies. Forthcoming works include essays on Pynchon and on Samuel Johnson.

DAVID MESHHER is a member of the Department of English of Tel-Aviv University.

DAVID SEED, a member of the Department of English Literature of the University of Liverpool, is the author of "The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon," in Critical Quarterly, and of "Order in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy,'" forthcoming in the Journal of Narrative Technique.

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