

Prurient Ethics: Representing Multiple Subjectivity in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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To discuss subjectivity in relation to ethics is difficult because such a focus necessarily invokes ideas of difference, and difference as a theoretical term has many definitions in a variety of critical conversations. On the one hand, poststructuralism—the work of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze—theorizes difference in terms of linguistic instability and textual indeterminacy.¹ Alternatively, in many contemporary social fields, difference is the political recognition of the sexed, gendered and raced variety of a nation's citizenship. As theoretical and political vocabularies mix, each different use of the word difference hijacks each of its alternative meanings; each new use attempts to change the criteria of ethical judgment. On this uncertain ground we in the United States arrive at a place where difference stands as a significant measure of moral reasoning at the same time its theoretical uncertainty hinders our ability to know the subjects of inquiry. What follows is the disappearance of the other that our concern with difference set out to locate, and with that erasure comes the isolation of the individual subject. The impossibility of knowing the other, that is, the death of the subject, is well established; and yet the impossibility of the impossibility of the subject is equally clear, for as soon as the universal subject disappears, individual subjectivity, our own particularity, takes its place. Evidently, once we recognize the impossibility of any stable self or any fixed meanings, we are cast back onto the self we thought abandoned, namely, the particular physiological and philosophical body we carry around with us (or that carries us around) each day.

Where an examination of this dilemma of difference and subjectivity should begin is not altogether clear. What is clear is that we find ourselves in a historical moment when extreme oppression and violence do not look to be on the decline, and so we find ourselves in a position where we must judge the actions of others—both within and beyond our own immediate cultural environments—but have little if any ground from which to do so. The more we come to recognize the instability of language as well as the heterogeneity of our social and cultural realities, the more we appear unable to negotiate this uncertainty and complexity. In the face of such vast instability and cultural multiplicity,

we often choose to say and do nothing more than point out the instability and multiplicity. Difference as a philosophical and political designation ends up naming injustice without showing us what to do about it. When we confront the violence done by one subject to another, our theories of difference help us little because they do not give us any criteria to judge the particular manifestation a different subject might take.² The consequences of this critical failure for ethical reasoning are extreme. If we believe that difference separates one person from another because a word's meaning cannot be shared, then no interaction between particulars is possible because no conversation is possible. Without contact, without shared terms of ethical interaction, either we must not make ethical judgments about anyone other than ourselves, or we must do so without reason—become totalitarian.

When reading texts such as *Gravity's Rainbow* that use indeterminacy as a narrative device, critics often recreate this impasse by refusing to develop the consequences of their own theories of indeterminacy for fear that any developed argument about the consequences of indeterminacy will itself become a hegemonic or totalizing system. Thus they fall short of developing useful evaluations of difference, settle for pointing out the danger of totalizing systems, and then reinforce the importance of difference as an *idea*.³ But at every turn *Gravity's Rainbow* uses indeterminacy to undercut the understanding of difference as indeterminacy alone, itself an understanding that derails more progressive theories of difference. More constructively, *Gravity's Rainbow* asks its audience to read its account of difference as a matter of connection and not of opposition, a move the novel accomplishes by recreating the reading subject as part of the narrative subject: the person reading the novel is linked with the novel's many possible protagonists. All subjects in *Gravity's Rainbow* exist as subjects only when they are implicated in the lives of other subjects. The collapse of the line separating the person reading the novel from the persons being read about occurs through the way the novel continually makes a reader's participation in the narrative present to his or her own mind. A reader quickly realizes in *Gravity's Rainbow* that his or her life always exists as part of the life of another.

This subjective joining is potentially the main function of the pornographic scenes in the novel. In the search for intimacy, some form of human connection, many characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* turn to various forms of alternative, sometimes deviant, sexual behavior. Events on board the *Anubis*, for example, a series of drunken orgies involving an international cast of decadent European aristocrats, are not

simply masturbatory. Rather, they force readers to interact intimately with the novel.

Consider the scene in which Tyrone Slothrop is seduced by Bianca, the daughter of the woman with whom he has recently been traveling:

“Oh, dear,” lifting her dress, turning so she can also watch Slothrop back over a shoulder. “I can still feel *that*. Did she leave marks?”

“Well, you’ll have to come closer.”

She moves toward him, smiling, pointing toes each step. “I watched you sleep. You’re very pretty, you know. Mother also said you’re cruel.”

“Watch this.” He leans to bite her gently on one cheek of her ass. She squirms, but doesn’t move away. [. . .] She smells like soap, flowers, sweat, cunt. Her long hair falls to the level of Slothrop’s eyes, fine and black, the split ends whispering across the small of her white back in and out of invisibility, like rain . . . she has turned, and sinks to her knees to undo his pleated trousers. Leaning, brushing hair back behind her ears, the little girl takes the head of Slothrop’s cock into her rouged mouth. Her eyes glitter through fern lashes, baby rodent hands race his body unbuttoning, caressing. Such a slender child: her throat swallowing, strummed to a moan as he grabs her hair, twists it . . . she has him all figured out. Knows exactly when to take her mouth away and stand up, high-heeled Parisian slippers planted to either side of him, swaying, hair softly waving forward to frame her face, repeated by the corset darkly framing her pubic mound and belly. Raising bare arms, little Bianca lifts her long hair, tosses her little head to let the mane shiver down her back, needle-tipped fingers drifting then down slowly, making him wait, down over the satin, all the shiny hooks and laces, to her thighs. Then her face, round with baby-fat, enormous night-shadowed eyes comes swooping in as she kneels, guides his penis into her and settles slow, excruciating till he fills her, stuffs her full. (469)

This passage continues for several more paragraphs, building in intensity. Many pornographic scenes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are sado-masochistic, homosexual, passionate, tender or bizarre. Sex is depicted in a wide variety of ways—gentle, loving, boring, titillating, violent and domineering, terrifying and cathartic. While the scenes on board the *Anubis* depict a degenerate society based on wealth and social class, others more broadly critique the related problems of power and control. What unites the scenes is a reader’s response to each moment as pornography.

Rhetorically, pornography always functions in the second person through voyeurism. It is always conscious of a viewer, and the viewer

is always addressed directly as the actual subject of the pornographic scene. The pornographic events are staged for the viewer's sake. Pornography depends on a viewer to be pornography: that is the only convention of the genre. The nature of the depiction means the audience will necessarily have a physical response, for the power of pornography is that it asks the reader or viewer to imagine him- or herself in the place of one of the characters. Pornography makes an audience react physically the same way the instruction "don't think about white elephants" makes someone think about white elephants. A scene of supposedly consensual sex between a young girl and an older man demands a reader's attention on an emotional and physical level—as outrage, disgust, or even excitement.

As Bernard Duyfhuizen argues, however, this pornographic scene on board the *Anubis*—Bianca's character specifically—is a "reader-trap" that "court[s] the conventional readerly desire to construct an ordered world within the fictional space of the text, but that on closer examination reveal[s] the fundamental uncertainty of postmodern textuality" (1). After explaining that Bianca is older than she appears to Slothrop to be and that our vision of her is at all points determined by Slothrop's sexual fantasies—"fantasies and hallucinations [that] overdetermine her representation until she loses personality and becomes a fetish, a figure of cultural formation: the child as erotic object"—Duyfhuizen argues that we must read "beyond the fetish [and] attempt to read character as a system of signs that mean only in relation to other signs." In doing so, we must also ask "how this strategy of rationalizing textualization engages the reader's sensibility, and specifically how it interacts with the reader's gender formation" (27). In only partial answer to Duyfhuizen's question, I want to suggest that when we find ourselves reacting physically to the often violent and disturbing pornographic scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, we must give in somewhat to the reader-trap, even as we work to recognize its manipulation of us, because it is this trap that allows us to catch the full force of the novel.

That is to say, the intensity of the sexual images in *Gravity's Rainbow* forces the issue of a reader's complicity in cultural gender norms and of his or her position inside the textual complexity of postmodern narrative. Whether Bianca is prepubescent or not, Slothrop imagines she is, and the scene of their sexual encounter is graphic enough to leave a decidedly strong impression on the reader. Thus we cannot simply say Slothrop's having sex with her is not as objectionable as it looks, or Bianca is only a metaphorical vehicle; for Bianca's character cannot possess cultural and textual capital unless readers read her as, at least partially, a prepubescent girl—symbolically,

narratively and otherwise.⁴ Dana Medoro's argument about *V.* seems telling about *Gravity's Rainbow* as well:

The quest motif is . . . part of the text's self-conscious position on the construction of woman-as-truth, and *V.* is primarily about the ways the so-called enigma of femininity is a masculine discourse, a discourse which constitutes a culture of violence. . . . Exploring the narrative and ideological calibration of femininity with passivity, the text thus exposes it. (19–20)

By creating a series of misogynist sexual encounters, and woman characters as objects of male fantasy, *Gravity's Rainbow* exposes the violence of masculine discourse and its attempt to construct femininity. To sense the force of this critique, a reader must occupy both the trap and the position that recognizes the trap—both the constructed and the constructive positions in patriarchal discourse. In the case of the Bianca reader-trap and, through it, the larger erotic crises and gender politics of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a reader must confront Slothrop's fantasies of pedophilia as, in part, an actual event inasmuch as the novel intentionally blurs or confuses fantasy and reality, giving Slothrop's desires as much narrative reality as anything else in the novel. Any critique of patriarchal authority or masculine cultural norms offered by *Gravity's Rainbow* depends on literalizing the deviancy of Slothrop's sexual ambitions.⁵ Partially succumbing to the fetish trap Bianca sets up permits readers to negotiate these moves inside and outside fantasy—likewise foregrounding the uncertainty of postmodern textuality that Duyfhuizen so rightly points out. In this complex position, as sexed subjects, readers find themselves somewhere between arousal and disturbance, imagining themselves in the novel's pornographic scenes and simultaneously watching themselves read. Thus readers also find themselves participating in these pornographic passages in multiple ways while at the same time learning to recognize how they might be implicated in the cultural construction of gender relations.

The way the pornographic scenes in the novel implicate the reading subject with the narrative subject is amplified in the novel's movement among first-, second- and third-person pronouns. A sentence or paragraph often begins with one form of reference or address and ends with another. This shifting of persons keeps readers from establishing a consistent point of view: with each grammatical change comes a different relation to the characters and to the novel itself. An early passage begins with an image of someone sleeping, and then quickly changes settings, and possibly characters:

When did it happen? A certain early stage of sleep: you had not heard the Mosquitoes and Lancasters tonight on route to Germany, their engines battering apart the sky, shaking and ripping it, for a full hour, a few puffs of winter cloud drifting below the steel-riveted underside of the night, vibrating with the constancy, the terror, of so many bombers outward bound. Your own form, immobile, mouth-breathing, alone face-up on the narrow cot next to the wall so pictureless, chartless, mapless. (136)

After the continuation of this passage through a series of dream images, the narrative focuses on a scene at "The White Visitation":

Pointsman alone, sneezing helplessly in his dimming bureau, the barking from the kennels flat now and diminished by the cold, shaking his head *no* . . . inside me, in my memory[. . .] But by now he is shivering, allowing himself to stare across his office space at the Book, to remind himself that of an original seven there are now only two owners left, himself and Thomas Gwenhidwy tending his poor out past Stepney. (138-39)

How do we begin to make sense of such passages when it is not always clear who is the subject? How do we read the switching among first-person, second-person and third-person pronouns? From the context, we may, perhaps, assume "you" in the first passage to be the pavlovian Pointsman, but to suggest that such an identification answers the question of who "you" is misses the effect of the grammatical structure of the passage. *Gravity's Rainbow* uses our need to make narrative make sense to rewrite how we as readers understand our relation to narrative. The "you" in the first passage lasts for two pages: the length of the passage and the repetition of "you" force *you* to identify on some level with "you" as you read. As Michael Levine argues, the use of the second-person pronoun in *Gravity's Rainbow* blurs the lines separating characters, the narrator and the reader:

When "you" occurs in the narrator's language, it can refer to the reader, just as it would in any conventional second-person address by a narrator. Sometimes, however, "you" refers primarily to a character, even as its grammatical function insists that the reader be included as another possible referent. Even more ambiguity results when the identity of the character to whom "you" refers is not at first apparent. . . . What is finally most compelling about the function of "you" in *Gravity's Rainbow* is how little the word excludes. (120)

Gravity's Rainbow never clearly says that "you" in our sample passage is Pointsman; identification is left to the reader. As a result, the line

between Pointsman and the reader blurs, and the overwhelming senses of paranoia and fear cease to be things described and attributed to people within the work and instead become features of the narrative, effects of the reading, that is, effects on the reader as he or she works through the prose.

The extent to which we allow such an identification affects our understanding of Pointsman when the passage moves from third- to first-person references. While the third person in “sneezing helplessly in his dimming bureau . . . shaking his head *no*” begins to distance us from Pointsman, the momentary shift to first person in “inside me, in my memory” prevents that distance from asserting itself completely. “Me” creates ambiguity. Is it Pointsman addressing us directly? If so, how do we respond as readers to such an address? If we must engage with Pointsman, our relation to him shifts radically, from formal distance to face-to-face intimacy. When a reader continually reads “me,” to what extent does he or she become that “me” in the reading, necessarily occupying the first person when it is read or spoken? Or, how far does such a passage go in collapsing the identity of reader and character, and again throwing the narrative subject into question?

Brian McHale, almost alone among critics, cautions against too quickly identifying who “you” actually is in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. He explains all the possible uses of “you” in the novel: author to reader, narrator to narratee, narrator or character to other character, character to himself, even the colloquial equivalent of “one”—as in “if one goes to London” (100–10). And he points out the ways the second person stays indefinitely focalized, as always more than one possible subject or character. So I do not mean to simplify the “you” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. By arguing for a reading that blurs the line between reading subject and narrative subject, I want to suggest that when a reader finds his or her readerly position merging with the various subject possibilities in the novel, he or she must recognize the instability and multiplicity of that position. Such a recognition forces us to confront our construction of meaning in the novel. The reading subject reads as a metareader, who seeks not “solutions to the cruxes of Pynchon’s fiction, but rather *metasolutions*, accounts of the range of possible solutions and of what is at stake when any one particular solution is preferred over the others” (McHale 113).

Extending McHale’s reading of the many possibilities for the second person in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, I want to suggest further that second-person address creates subjectivity itself as always multiple—not simply indefinite, but decidedly varied in its particularity. Reading in too much distance between reader and narrative subject would be a mistake. Even if only for a moment, each passage of *Gravity’s Rainbow* asks a

reader to imagine him- or herself as either the first person or the person addressed. The occurrence of "me" or "you" often serves as an interruption in the narrative that functions as an aside would in drama, necessarily acknowledging, however tentatively, a reader's presence. This invitation to identification forces the negotiation of each possible subject position back onto the reader and his or her particular reading.

Gravity's Rainbow does not allow readers the luxury of a completely collapsed or a restored subjectivity. Not every reader reads the tensions among the novel's pronouns the same way. Each pronoun shift disrupts our perspective so that the differences among the novel's many subject positions provide new opportunities to identify with characters' perspectives. In the face of the novel's juxtapositions of first-, second- and third-person positions, the extent to which any reader identifies with Pointsman—or any other character, or several at once, or none at all—determines how he or she will read meaning into those personal passages and the passages that come up against them—those other paths that develop questions of power and control, language, consciousness, time, technology and death. Narrative meaning thus depends on how readers choose to identify with the various subject positions. Do we feel sorry for Pointsman in his obsessions? Do we identify with his need to control people and events, or do we detest him for his cruelty and manipulation? Depending on our answer, the invitation to dialogue that "me" issues will result in radically different readerly responses. Perhaps it pushes the argument too far, however, to refuse to acknowledge that Pointsman provides little opportunity for positive identification. He does stand as an example of someone bent on closure, a move that *Gravity's Rainbow* wants to put off. And yet, the subject position of the author, including its negative characterization of Pointsman, provides ample opportunity for insight into Pointsman's psychology, and so a reader's ability to inhabit Pointsman's narrative position remains multiply available.

The innumerable subject positions available to us in reading make subjectivity more a *process* of juxtaposing narrative possibilities, meanings and affinities than a fixed identity. The "you" that forces us into the skin of a character, rather than promoting a conventional immersion in the story, refuses to stabilize readings or identifications; that is, *Gravity's Rainbow* disrupts empathy. No movement of "I" feeling "your" pain occurs. Instead, the relation between reader and subject remains more complicated, at once collapsing and renegotiating the roles each plays in narrative development. As readers we become part of the narrative structure at the same time we control how it means and determine what that meaning does. In this sense, not all

possible formulations of the big questions of life, death and technology connect or get played out in similar terms. Instead, narrative divergences create a complex assortment of possible meanings.

With this linking of reader and narrative subject, the whole of *Gravity's Rainbow* begins to read as pornography. The lurking truth of the novel is that we as subjects are always involved with the world. There is no outside from which to view it, just as there is no position inside *Gravity's Rainbow* from which to view its characters with detachment. Even the aloof figures of "the Angel that stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid" (214), "the watchmen of world's edge" (215) on the Riviera, and the "Bicycle Rider in the Sky" (501) over Peenemünde are less characters than fleeting apparitions of personified natural and man-made events and objects, their immaterial qualities emphasizing the troubled, chaotic lives of the people in the Zone. Each passage of *Gravity's Rainbow* invites us to explore the ways a character informs our own lives—teaching us about our own thoughts on war and death, politics and government, sex and love. This joining of reader and narrative subject is intensified by the intimacy of the novel's language. Take, for example, a passage describing the bombing of London. The tone has more in common with one of Slothrop's sexual encounters than it does with a journalistic account of battle:

[N]othing can really stop the Abreaction of the Lord of the Night unless the Blitz stops, rockets dismantle, the entire film runs backward: faired skin back to sheet steel back to pigs to white incandescence to ore, to Earth. But the reality is not reversible. Each firebloom, followed by blast then by sound of arrival, is a mockery (how can it not be deliberate?) of the reversible process: with each one the Lord further legitimizes his State, and we who cannot find him, even to see, come to think of death no more often, really, than before. (139)

War in *Gravity's Rainbow* is pornography. The tone of this passage, a tone used often in the novel, is familiar, as if the narrator is confiding in us, whispering in our ear the untold truth of our lot in life: that we live (and die) in a world presided over by the Lord of the Night, that we are helpless under the Blitz, that we cannot reverse events or change our State. The "we" of the passage joins narrator and reader in the tragedy (we are in this paranoid fiction together), drawing the reader in, again implicating him or her in the narrative situation. The violence of firebloom, blast and sound of arrival turns the passage into a moment of intimate encounter in which reader and narrator share the knowledge

that comes with the recognition of mortality, in which all readers become scared civilians holding onto one another in the air-raid shelter, hoping not to be blown to bits.

In such passages readers take up the narrator's position as well as their own. There is no longer any simple difference between the world of *Gravity's Rainbow* and the world of its readers. It is no longer clear—in fact, it does not matter at all—which world *Gravity's Rainbow* describes: the one within its own pages, or the one in which we live. The wall between them collapses again and again. As we become the narrator, we also become the narrative subject; we read our own lives into the novel and read the novel into our own lives. Each narrative strategy reinforces this convergence of reading subject and narrative subject. Language level, pronoun usage and narrative development all cut from different angles at the reader's subjective independence. Reading the second-person address in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a simple, straightforward me speaking to you does not work. When we feel the intimacy of address in the novel, when we identify with or feel distanced from a character, when we read the pornographic scenes, we necessarily read our own responses as much as the narrative. We become two-part readers: readers involved in the action of the novel and readers interpreting that other reading self. Such two-part reading creates the "I" reading subject as always part of the "you" narrative subject; one does not exist without the other.

Seeing how *Gravity's Rainbow* rewrites the subject positions of reader and character to create an interdependent subjectivity brings us back to ethics, and brings us to Charles Altieri's discussion of difference in *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*. Altieri suggests that the use of the second-person pronoun in ethical discourse radically changes our position from one of "impersonality or transpersonality" to one of intimate connection. The third person may appear necessary as a "measure for assessing situations in moral terms because these seem the only vehicle allowing the participants to take the judgment as binding not because of the power of the judge but because of the agent's own consent to the process of litigation" (300). Unfortunately, the third person often leads to ethical abstraction and procedure, not "needs and ends" (302). The second person, on the other hand, forces us to deal with our ethical subjectivity on a personal level. Our theories cannot exist as abstract discussions of "them," "he" or "she," but must become discussions with "you." "When the 'I' turns to the singular 'you,' it seeks a relationship defined not by general rules but by specific conditions of adjustment and attunement ranging from intimate

companionship to internalized tribunals with the authority to judge the individual's actions and ends" (306).

Basing much of his argument on Wittgenstein's sense of grammatical structures, Altieri observes that first- and third-person positions slide easily into one another, so a first person may "entertain third-person investments" (306). "You" remains distanced from the first person because the second-person pronoun is always a direct address, which "makes this mode of speech more prone than others to radical misunderstanding" (307). And yet, Altieri argues, the benefits of second-person address outweigh the risks because "you" significantly alters the conditions of ethical relation:

[R]eciprocity shifts to another level, where it consists not of sharing the content of specific roles but of granting mutual commitments to treat one another's differences as themselves constituting an intimate bond of cares that shapes the course of future intercourse. Where third-person reciprocity depends on substituting oneself in a fundamentally spatial structure, second-person reciprocity depends on imagining time as a constitutive factor that allows addressor and addressee to trust in the possibility of genuine exchange as each contours himself or herself to even the most imperious "you." (309)

Altieri concludes,

Indeed, the more complexly we understand the relations of identity and difference that enter a "we" negotiated from the other pronoun positions, the greater is our incentive for binding ourselves to the demands of the pleasure of weaving the "I" into a social fabric. One might not be able to identify with everybody, except on the most abstract procedural levels, but one can always hope to engage "you" in the confidences that make our lives worth living. (316-17)

Altieri's formulation might strike many as the grammatical equivalent of Kant's Categorical Imperative or of the Christian injunction to "do unto others." However, both the Categorical Imperative and the golden rule can easily slide into abstraction or dogmatism if their practitioners are not careful. Altieri forces the conditions and structures of personal interaction in the "I-you" relation to the foreground. Arguing for the second-person pronoun as the condition of ethical judgment shifts the question from one of abstract truth to one of individual circumstances. This is not to say that truth does not come into play; it does. But we cannot simply apply general truths to complex situations,

as often happens, dangerously, through the exercise of institutional power—church, state or corporate.

Applying Altieri's discussion of the second-person pronoun to the link between reading subject and narrative subject of *Gravity's Rainbow* provides a way to formulate our concern with the ethics of difference as a problem of competing desires of individuals in our social milieu. By theorizing paranoia as a limitless set of connections, the novel forces each character, and Slothrop in particular, to depend on his various companions for the successful negotiation of his ever changing predicament. The effect is that Slothrop soon recognizes himself as only part of a larger narrative whole, even if he happens to be the center of his own paranoid story:

"This is some kind of a plot, right?" Slothrop sucking saliva from velvet pile.

"*Everything* is some kind of a plot, man," Bodine laughing.

"And yes but, the arrows are pointing all different ways," Solange illustrating with a dance of hands, red-pointed fignervectors. Which is Slothrop's first news, out loud, that the Zone can sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon himself . . . that these are the els and busses of an enormous transit system here in the Raketentstadt, more tangled even than Boston's—and that by riding each branch the proper distance, knowing when to transfer, keeping some state of minimum grace though it might often look like he's headed the wrong way, this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom. He understands that he should not be so paranoid of either Bodine or Solange, but ride instead their kind underground awhile, see where it takes him. (603)

As only one thread in the novel's large social fabric, Slothrop finds his lot cast with nearly complete strangers, and his fate becomes linked with theirs as he recognizes that his best chance for freedom lies in involving his own life with the lives of these other people, even as these people find their lives involved with Slothrop's and with the danger that dogs him in the form of military police. Creating a responsible ethics of difference, in this model, means negotiating a complex world made up of other subjects, a movement in which ethical action must be measured by a subject's interaction with those other subjects. Or, to put it in the language of American democracy, the right to self-determination must come second to the right of the other—Altieri's "you"—to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Cyrus Patell accounts for Pynchon's distrust of the first-person subject in arguing that notions of negative liberty (the freedom not to be told what to do) lead to a philosophy of self-ownership:

[T]o be an individual endowed with rights means to be acknowledged as the proprietor of your own person and your capacities: you own yourself and all that you can do. . . . Pynchon worries that this is a dangerous way of thinking about individuality because it leads us to think that what we have determines who we are. (93)

This dehumanizing transformation (to own something is to turn it into an object) comes to a "hideous climax in *Gravity's Rainbow* . . . in which the growth of state power has effectively replaced democracy with totalitarianism" (96). In much of Pynchon's fiction, and certainly in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the desire to free the individual self from the claims of others is what destroys that self's autonomy, because once a person is a thing, he or she is a potential commodity and no longer a person. When *Gravity's Rainbow* lets the second-person pronoun merge the reading subject and the narrative subject, the second-person pronoun takes on the burden of communication between a first-person self and another. Thus by making it impossible to think about oneself as apart from others, or others as apart from oneself, *Gravity's Rainbow* undermines any system of value that makes individual liberty and self-determination primary: neither is possible if there is no "self" by itself to act as a single point of reference. (As we will see, whatever self is achievable is realized through the multiple relations in which it is involved.)

Escape from our current "cultural impasse," Patell concludes, requires "that we . . . give up the rigid methodological individualism that characterizes our thinking on so many social and cultural issues if we are ever to achieve the values and goals that Emersonian liberalism and its popular variants were designed to foster" (191).⁶ Personal preferences cannot be the basis for judging a subject's actions; ethical criteria must recognize the complex interactions with all the other "you"s with which the world brings a subject into contact. What shores up our own particular ideological position, what we like, what is convenient, pleasurable or lucrative matters less than the "you"s we interact with. Our own pursuits undeniably mean a great deal, but they must not become our primary bases of judgment. Philosophers as divergent as Thomas Aquinas and Karl Marx have argued that the right to a decent life for the poor, for example, comes before the right of private property. We live in a community; our social positions do not exist in isolation. Any wealth we possess results directly from our social circumstances *and* our interaction with the community; therefore, the health of the community is what allows for the health of ourselves.

I am not arguing for neo-utilitarianism. *Gravity's Rainbow* does not argue for the good of the polis at all costs: far from it. As Patell rightly

points out, Pynchon's work is as distrustful of communitarianism as it is of liberal individualism. Rather than take either position exclusively, *Gravity's Rainbow* removes the barrier between the reader and the narrative subject to change the way readers negotiate their world. Thus the line between the narrative and the material world increasingly blurs; to rethink reading subjects means to rethink worldly subjects, because both are negotiated as objects of and within language. As second-person pronouns, they are not distinct from each other as language objects. All subjects find their existence in the existence of other subjects. When Slothrop has sex with an adolescent, we have a physical reaction, a reaction that has everything to do with how we live in the world. There is only a marginal difference between how we react to Slothrop and how we react to someone in the line at the grocery store, or, for that matter, how we understand ourselves. *Gravity's Rainbow* forces us to think of ourselves and each other, not as isolated egos or abstract third-person subjects, but as second-person personal "you"s that constantly make legitimate and equal ethical claims on the actions of one another.

Gravity's Rainbow ends with the object of Slothrop's quest, the Rocket, falling toward a movie theater in which we readers sit. This image provides two models for our initial concern with cultural difference. As the Rocket approaches, the final paragraph begins, "There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs" (760). We may either embrace difference to connect (even intimately) with someone else or emphasize difference to remain isolated in our own frame of reference. For all its darkness, the final scene allows a glimmer of hope when all the people in the theater are invited to join in song. The last words of the novel, "Now everybody," keep off death by Rocket as the moment just before explosion is suspended. Singing in unison becomes the final option for survival, and the song itself is a song of joining:

There is a Hand to turn the time,
 Though thy Glass today be run,
 Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
 Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
 Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
 All through our crippl'd Zone,
 With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
 And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . . (760)

In this connection—the hope of finding the last preterite one, and the vision of a Zone literally peopled with faces and souls—*Gravity's*

Rainbow turns the “I” reader into another “you”; it makes our subjectivity subject to all other subjects. Or, more precisely, *Gravity’s Rainbow* asks its readers to embrace such an understanding, for it is unclear whether the song will be taken up or not. That remains up to the reader, as does the vision of the Zone that the song provides.

Perhaps such a vision of subjectivity is at the heart of what we mean when we discuss the other in politics and theory, and what we really mean by respecting difference and diversity, but it does not always play out that way. As Altieri points out, much poststructuralist thought tends too much toward problematizing our “I”s, which is all well and good, even necessary, but ends up making dialogue with an other next to impossible because a problematized “I” remains an I and thus an isolated subject, and as such has no place to begin a dialogue with an other subject.⁷ Shifting ethical interaction to the “you” is not new, and might, again, seem obvious, a matter of common sense expressed in much simpler philosophies or religious teachings. However, the very straightforwardness of many ethical teachings often prevents a believer from using them dynamically. Altieri’s concern with the ethics of the second-person pronoun may seem unnecessarily complex in the face of its obviousness, but its obviousness is the very thing that forces us to complicate it. Simple and common-sense ethical formulations have a tendency to become dogmatic and violent.⁸ When *Gravity’s Rainbow* puts a reader in multiple subject positions within the text, it discourages dogmatism and violence by making all “I”s subject to the “you”s they might wish to judge and control, a subjection seen in Slothrop’s ancestor William’s tract on the holiness of “the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation . . . without whom there’d be no elect” (555).

Through the remade narrative subject, *Gravity’s Rainbow* asks us to rethink how we narrativize our lives and the lives of those around us. If we make sense of our lives through the stories we tell about them, then the way we tell those stories and how we fit other people into them make all the difference. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* and also in our own lives (a distinction I hope is now increasingly difficult to maintain), our narratives perpetually diverge as a way to keep coming back together, seeking out new connections and new ways of narrating our experience. In this position we can still judge our own and others’ actions based on the ways the “you”s interact. Institutions and hierarchies are not the problem in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; what it critiques are the uses to which we put them, whether those uses are deliberate acts like Pointsman’s experiments on Slothrop, or involuntary reflexes like Slothrop’s own sexual response to the rocket. Nowhere, then, does the novel permit a sense that life outside determining social systems is

possible. Rather, degrees of self-determination are found in the connections any one subject has with other subjects, connections shaped by the social context in which they occur.

Indeed, institutions and hierarchies give us the means to judge our own actions and the actions of others. When Slothrop's paranoia ties his life to the lives of his companions, his treatment of these people carries an ethical weight made available by paranoia itself; the paranoia that allows Slothrop to recognize his connection to others means that he is responsible for these connections—responsible to his own paranoia. And like paranoia, hierarchies not only provide criteria for one person to judge another; they also judge the judge. None of us stand outside the hierarchy we use. As subjects, like Slothrop, we must refuse the misuse of a rhetorical outside power, a misuse that dominates our hierarchies and our cultural institutions.⁹ To be held accountable, to work out the ethics of difference, means focusing on multiplying relations among "you" and any others. Spinoza's argument that to "live together in harmony . . . it is necessary that [people] should forgo their natural right, and for the sake of security, refrain from all actions which can injure their fellow men" (101) underlines the fact that to practice an ethics of difference we must forgo the centrality of our own ego for a dynamic interaction with a complex series of second-person relations.

Second-person relations often go against the conventions of philosophical and critical writing. Any use of the second person is fraught with difficulty because it makes claims on an unknown reader: Whom do you mean by "you"? But the second person remains necessary because it lends itself to criteria based on the recognition that the actions of an individual do not occur in a vacuum; and to judge within a social context we must have a conversation grounded on shared terms. Even if these terms are not identical, the dialogue about them gives us ground to act. We use the same words so we can talk to each other. That we can mean different things by these words ensures that no one subject alone gets to determine meaning, and so it is the linking of subjects that, in the end, allows all subjects to hold anything as true and to respond to that truth appropriately.

This sense of necessary connection among subjects is exactly what Harold Bloom's reading of "The Story of Byron the Bulb" misses. After quoting the passage in which Byron is "condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it" (GR 655), Bloom writes,

This seems to me the saddest paragraph in all of Pynchon; at least, it hurts me the most. . . . Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation. What remains is madness. . . . If at best, the / is an immortal but hapless light bulb and the *Abyss*, our Gnostic foremother and forefather, is the socket into which that poor / of a bulb is screwed, then the two absorbing facts themselves have ceased to absorb. (8–9)

Bloom does not take into account the reworking of the “I” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Byron certainly evokes despair, but he is yet another warning against stabilized first-person positions. He cannot escape his lot because he cannot live beyond the “I.” Without ways to complicate his first-person subjectivity, his knowledge remains useless. To survive and live ethically, we must have a “you” and “you”s to speak to; we must be able to tell the story of our lives and hear the lives of others. As narrative subjects, we are both the subjects of our own investigations and subject to the claims of others. Even if it does not contain a character who gives us hope by negotiating this complex and different world successfully, surely *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself, as a work, *gives us hope*. *Gravity’s Rainbow* warns us against becoming—and itself refuses to become—like the Dobermans and shepherds it so eloquently renders in their reflex to “Kill The Stranger” (614).

Subjectivity in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is redemptive in its demand that readers find themselves through its characters and that those characters arise only as part of the reader. This mixing and insistence on intimate encounter drive the novel’s pornographic poetics. The words that shape us do so by simultaneously making those other subjects that form our social context, and these lives cannot be separated. That the world these subjects move through is a world of indeterminacy and linguistic uncertainty means only that the connections among these subjects is still open for negotiation. For this reason *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a hopeful book. The mutual interdependence of this pornographic subjectivity creates an ethics of difference based neither on irreconcilability nor on coherence, but on the constant negotiation of each other’s lives. Difference in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is neither the isolated other nor the unbridgeable space between subjects, but the way subjects come together. In the end, an ethical reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not demand we take certain particular actions. Rather, reading ethically means *acting from* a particular understanding of the way our subjectivity necessarily involves the lives of others, acknowledging that each subject has a claim on the life of every other subject.

Notes

¹Of course, poststructuralism is more complicated than this basic characterization. For example, Derrida deliberately respells “différance” to indicate the deferral that accompanies difference in linguistic contexts. This complexity, however, further emphasizes my point about the difficulty of locating difference as a cultural and theoretical term.

²Take, for example, the consequence of conservative politicians’ putting minorities in positions of power. The left has difficulty responding to such a move because certain factions of the left have argued for inclusion and representation based solely on physical identity; thus when a member of a minority group forwards a conservative ideology, the left has no ground to respond. Certainly the empowerment of minority groups is essential to our national and moral health; but using physical identity alone as a theoretical criterion leads to philosophical contradiction because physical identity can never match up one-to-one to a critical position.

³Here I am thinking specifically of Molly Hite’s *Ideas of Order*, Tom LeClair’s *Art of Excess* and Paul Maltby’s *Dissident Postmodernists*. While each provides insightful commentary on the narrative structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, they spend little time developing the philosophical consequences of their recognitions.

⁴The question of whether Bianca is a child resonates with the current debate about virtual child pornography. Because the children depicted in such pornographic representations are not actual children, courts must rule such images legal (assuming laws against child pornography are meant to keep real children from being abused). However, the legality of such images does not change the fact that, from the perspective of the consumer, the viewer’s sexual fulfillment depends on the fantasy that such pictures are of actual children. While actual and virtual child pornography differ on the level of production, the single position occupied by the viewer carries the full force of problematic erotic desires.

⁵For a more complete account of the gender politics of Pynchon’s writing, see Medoro as well as Duyfhuizen.

⁶While I go further than Patell in his critique of liberal individualism, offering a model of intersubjectivity as a way to conceive of personal coherence through the abandonment of individualism altogether, Patell’s reading of Pynchon’s fiction is compelling for a number of reasons. His critique of American liberal political practice and methodological individualism is particularly perceptive and helpful on the level of cultural construction. In the end, I think our positions differ more in method than in conclusion, as it seems to me that any holding onto liberal philosophy will reduce itself to moral relativism, while Patell looks for a way to hold onto a revised form of individual liberty and in that way to overcome the danger of relativism.

⁷I do not want to suggest that poststructuralism is not immensely valuable as a critical tool. However, it often gets played out in ways that are counter to its intent. That is, criticism that uses poststructuralism often appears to reduce itself to the argument “there is no truth but the truth I claim here”; “there is no beauty but the eloquence of my argument”; “there is no stable language but the argument I am making.”

⁸The Crusades, Manifest Destiny, China’s Cultural Revolution, the Khmer Rouge’s massacre of millions in the name of the people, to name only a few.

⁹To put the argument in slightly more material terms, an important measure of both conservative and liberal ideologies is the way they deal with the individual. If Altieri is right, then our measure of critique is the way a theory is carried out on the level of the private citizen: any political system or ethical or religious practice that does not protect the individual in all cases is either a bankrupt system or an abuse of a legitimate philosophy. Marxism is an enormously powerful analysis of economics and class. While Stalin’s use or misuse of Marxism to motivate murder by the millions says more about Stalin than about Marxism, it must still give us pause. The fact that a conservative institution like the Catholic church does more to help the homeless and poor of the world than private companies or governments do must also make us refrain from categorical dismissals of its philosophical position. Certainly there is a lot to criticize, but just as we must be concerned about what goes along with the material aid, we must also examine what it is about the philosophy that allows for so much social work.

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