Kant, Terror and Aporethics in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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An Ethics? In *Gravity's Rainbow*? What would it look like? Where would one begin? Here, for example: on the knotted questions of comparison (which X is this?), occurrence (how does X arise?) and reference (what does X stand for?) with which the novel opens. "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. / It is too late" (3).

Losing the object of comparison eliminates the axis on which any act of comparison turns. Without this axis or groundwork, a Kantian or classical ethics based on duty or reasoned choice becomes untenable. These ethics allow declarative statements or actions, and those in turn require a coherent and definable set of choices to base decisions or actions upon. A choice that can be regulated is predicated on the capacity in any given instant to distinguish between coherent forms or complete sets of things: distinguishing X from Y requires that X and Y be complete or wholly formed entities that maintain an identifiable beginning and end. One's actions or judgments are thus defined by their likeness to another set of actions, or by their capacity to match the form of their current act to the end of the complete set of actions. Removing the capacity to identify the object of an intended comparison removes the potential for completedness, which in turn eliminates the ability to act from a basis of coherent criteria.

Comparability drives aesthetics as well. Novels, as coherent forms, are compared to each other—*GR* to *Ulysses*, for example—and typologies within novels allow internal comparisons: we can compare *GR*'s opening to its ending, or Slothrop's presence to his subsequent lack thereof. In each case the existence of an identifiable object of comparison enables the comparison, so that without the ability to compare, the category of aesthetics would no longer hold. Without comparability, therefore, *GR* would not exist as a novel and as a model for action or judgment.

The question of how to square *GR*'s opening with the fact of its existence forms the basis of this essay. I will begin by drawing out the philosophical implications of a questioned comparability, paying attention to the problems of temporality involved, and I will move into Kant by asking whether it is possible to form an ethics in an epistemological condition of non-comparability. By exacerbating the gap

between sign and referent, Pynchon poses this question of comparability in the semiotic field as well; I will connect this problem of the sign-referent gap to the question of *GR*'s ethics. The final section of the essay will distinguish an ethics in *GR* as it moves away from Kant's: where Kant seeks to reduce empirical contingency through the use of a regulative ethics, Pynchon in *GR* writes a non-regulative ethics grounded on contingency.[1]

The concept of comparison—derived from Latin *com*, together or with, and *pār*, equal—asks us to make two things equal. Making things equal allows both aesthetics and ethics to function. *GR* is like *Ulysses* in many ways; there are a wide variety of tropic and typic systems in *GR*; and one can talk about an ethics derived from its pages. But, as we discover in Pynchon's unholy trinity of opening sentences, the activity of comparison in *GR* is seriously questioned. The opening emphasizes the non-comparability of the screaming in several ways. First, while the statement of non-comparability is itself stated necessarily within a general condition of comparability ("there is nothing to compare" cannot exist without its difference from the statement "there is something to compare"), the particular object of comparison is unknown ("nothing" names no object). The object is to be considered unique (beyond or outside comparison) while still in the possibility of comparability.

Second, this loss of the object's comparability necessitates a diachronic temporality: "now" is "too late." It has passed beyond "before" when it "happened," and presumably when it was comparable. The "now" is dissimilar to the "then" of the "before": the amount of time passed between then and now is sufficient to intercept comparison. But there is also a synchronic aspect to the "now."[2] This first "now," as we will discover 757 pages later, proleptically connects with the "Now" of "the last delta-t" (760), which, in its doubling of the first now (and of the many nows in between), is always and already above our collective heads. So time here functions in at least two ways: "now" as indicating what has diachronically been passed and lost; "now" as the what-we-are-always-in, the transtemporal—and terrifying—condition of the last delta-t.[3] The object of comparison is unknown, we have passed beyond the time when it happened, and we are always in the time of having passed beyond.

A story constructed from this combination of doubled temporality and non-comparability within a condition of comparability states that the object has passed into non-comparability, possibly as a result of the radical heterogeneity of the "now" and the "then," and that this form of passage—this event of passage—constitutes the general epistemology of the present "now." Because the unknown object

constitutes the primary metaphor of the novel, the object can be understood to paradoxically demand its comparison from some futurity. The futurity of the opening sentences in *GR* is the fulfillment of comparison—the speaking of the proper analog or likeness to the unknown object. The speaking of such a likeness is paradoxical because of the simultaneous demand from the unknown object for its comparison and the absolute unknowability of the object to be compared.

The disjunction between the demand for comparison and its fulfillment is further emphasized by the ambiguity of "It." "It has happened." We have seen how "it" is "too late," but we have not determined the relation of the nominative "it" to its referent. But Pynchon leaves open at this point whether "it" refers to the as yet unknown object or to the formal event of its appearance—the object or the screaming. We (now) encounter the over-comparability of the ambiguous sign: the "it" jumps unaccountably between possible referents (the object and the screaming of its arrival) and between possible temporalities (before and now). The demand, then—which is added to the demand of the unknown object for its comparison—is to decide to which referential system to assign the "it," even though at the instant you do decide, the "it" will necessarily exceed your chosen referent.

In this paroxysm of demand from the object to be compared and of the impossibility to compare, ethics meets semiotics. Comparison is fundamentally an act of passage: passing over difference to make two things equal. Linking words and objects is also a form of passage: to make the word approximate the object—to such an extent that the sign assumes the properties of what it signifies—is to pass over irreconcilable difference between word and object. On the one hand, Pynchon's semiotics stresses the difficulty—the impossibility—of passing from matter to word. On the other hand, there are words in the novel, and they consistently and convincingly refer to things. The ethics in a semiotics occurs in the knot of signification itself: the arrival of a word is in part determined by the necessity of choosing the most relevant word for an object ("choice," here, as will be shown below, is false; there is a delusion of choice, under the guise of a passing subjectivity, but neither choice nor stable identity is possible at signification). This gap between word and object is paralleled in *GR* by a gap between the reader and the chosen referent, or object of comparison. Any resolution of these gaps enacts an ethics, which is a passage: a passing from object to word or word to object, and from non- or over-referentiality to stable referentiality.

"Rocket" or "V-2," as Marc Redfield writes, "naturalizes and provides a referent" for an absence (what has already passed), and in doing so allows for its subsequent use and appropriation (160). We can then speak, albeit inadequately, about an "it." "It" becomes the manifestation of the unknown object's demand for comparison or signification. But each rhetorical strategy, as De Man shows (following Nietzsche and Derrida), not only exhibits a fundamental error (the sign bears no necessary relation to the referent) but reinscribes the radical difference between sign and referent, and engenders an "infinity of future confusions" (10, 109).[4] An impassable gap exists between the object and its signification ("rocket"), which emphasizes the impossibility of accessing or perceiving the object in itself. This also emphasizes the fact that perception of the rocket consists solely of figuration. Thus, by the authority of the opening sentences, the rocket in *GR* is perceived (settled upon) only through a necessary process of absolute misreading.[5]

Can there be an ethics of non-comparability or misreading? Certainly not, if we look to Kant. Kant's ethical system, developed explicitly in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, is designed to defend against the potential for the "infinite confusion" involved in the "misreading" of and through empirical existence. For Kant the empirical world threatens the possibility of actualizing an idealized rational society. Actualizing pure reason—transferring *a priori* schemata into the object of a sensible intuition—works toward the achievement of freedom (GMM 105). A free society sublimates the sensible content of empirical objects into their rational forms, which both precede and effect their sensible content (Kant, CJ 221). The concept of a free society is the finality that drives what Lyotard calls Kant's "teleological argument" (167). The teleologization of the sensible according to the finality of a free society subordinates the sensible content of empirical objects to the prescriptions of the rational forms. Sublimation of the sensible is necessary because of the possibility of a disruption between pure reason and understanding: regulative fore-sight (*Absicht*) is vulnerable to demolition (*Abbruch*) before it becomes actualized.

The possibility of demolition arises in an empirical actuality not previously inscribed in what is fore-seen—since, for example, the fore-seen qualities of an exemplum in any illustration are subject to the contingencies of audience understanding, and are therefore not the exclusive property of the exemplum itself. This is the point at which the exemplum is set against the idea of singularity. Singularity for Kant consists of an empirical object's resistance to becoming universalized: singularity is transformed into exemplarity in the process of universalization. The exemplum's openness to diversion—the capacity

of the singularity in the exemplum to *not* correspond to its prescribed exemplarity—produces a profound and anxiety-ridden gap between empirical and formal realms. This gap necessitates a regulative ethics based on a system of dutiful adherence to, or reverence for, practical and moral law (GMM 69, 107). Kant's categorical imperative of acting according to the maxim of universality produces "moral value" (GMM 74). Moral value is the disposition to act exclusively for the sake of duty itself, which effectively "obliterates" love of the self, and which becomes the force capable of transforming the sensible into the rational (GMM 75).

The Kantian transformation is compatible in one respect with the mechanics of *GR*. Both Kant and Pynchon face a gap between form and thing. This gap is instantiated most pointedly by the arrival of a "sublime object." For Kant, the sublime object (an "outrage on the imagination") monstrously attacks all systems of figuration, but quickly becomes "employed" by the faculty of reason as an *a priori* concept (CJ 100–07). Reason "triumphs" by profiting from that which previously disrupted reason, as the sublime and sudden appearance of the object is retroactively shown to have always been pointing toward the finality of rationality (cf. Lyotard 183–88). The concept which comes to precede the object reveals itself to be brought forth from the realm of pure reason. Pynchon's sublime object, however, while similar to Kant's profound disruption of the faculty of reason, retains an element of radical heterogeneity to its concept, or, for Pynchon, its proper name.[6] The name misapplied to the arrived object in the process of necessary misreading bears no necessary relation to its referent. *GR*'s ethics are an ethics founded on the terror—not on the sublimation —of contingency.[7]

The rocket's absence at the novel's opening impresses us into a process of misreading that is more severe than mistranslation. It is not merely an obscuring of the translation of noumena into phenomena. It is *non*-translation: no correspondence between the absent referent and the auditory signal of its absence can be established. The delta-t marks the temporal disjointure between the novel's sign-systems and their referents. Each delta-t demarcates the "nearly pure terror" (Pynchon, CL 41) of temporal infinity. To move from referent to sign is to pass over atemporality at the rate of infinity (GR 664). The wedge of atemporality absolutely disjoins sign and referent: with the delta-t it is never possible to prove a correspondence between the word and the thing it stands for. The referent, therefore, cannot be properly transluced in the sign. It is no longer possible, in the strictest sense, to predict or fore-see from any position the point of signification, or the content of what is to become legitimated. This eliminates any form of

transcendental reference or immanent *doxa*: no proper relation can exist between sign and referent, and signs and referents can act and emerge unpredictably and independently of each other.

This is the strength and terror of contingency—and the source of Kant's anxiety. Kant resolves the contingency of concept-production by sublimating singularity into categorical law. In *GR*, despite the repeated emphasis on the anti-referentiality of language, there *is* a primary referent, and it *is* given a host of signs. A closer look at *GR*'s process of designation allows us to see how it differs from a Kantian system. *GR*'s sign-production—as illustrated by the problematics of transforming "impact" and "explosion" into "rocket" and "V-2"—can be seen as occurring in three stages: first, that which arrives does so; second, *noesis* (from Greek, to perceive, or to have direct intellectual apprehension) occurs after the fact of arrival; third, *nomos* (Gr. *onoma*, *onuma*, to name) follows *noesis*.[8] Arrival, perception of explosion, "V-2." In this tripartite process of sign-giving, no temporalized instant has a necessary correspondence to what precedes it. Naming occurs two orders removed from the event, and each order is separated from other orders by the delta-t. That the relation between figure and event, name and named, is disjunctive, that there is no *necessary* relation between sign and referent, signals the contingency and inappropriateness of the name itself. No regulative horizon or principle ("guiding thread," for Kant) can negotiate the delta-t to determine the formation of a sign. The "pencil words on [our] page" are a delta-t "from the things they stand for" (GR 510), and the sign's emergence follows (in both senses of the word) no prescribed ordering system. No economies hold in the disruption of the delta-t: one cannot invest in the referent any form of return; no psychologism grounds the referent as alterity; and no shadows of god redeem the gap.

Pynchon's use of preterition further complicates the relation between name and named. Preterite functions in three ways in *GR*: grammatically, as the verbal form which denotes something done or existing in the past; theologically, as those who are passed over by God in Calvinist doctrine; and, through its etymological convergence with the rhetorical trope *praeteritio*—the figure of conspicuous omission—as that which is named negatively by omission.[9] Preterition thus characterizes the act of naming simultaneously as already having occurred, as being exclusionary, and as naming by not naming. Preterition denies systems of mastery, authenticity and *proprius* by its principle of exclusion, and denies the attempt to recuperate the content of what is negated in naming. In a system of election, the negation of the named in the act of naming is redeemed by the resurrection of the named in its sign. In preterite naming, however, the principle of

exclusion offers no such salvation. The named, as it is negated, is traced in preterite language instead of resurrected. The trace of the named is made incomplete by both the passing over and the denial of subsequent resurrection: at no point will the trace ever achieve empirical or ontological stability, or untroubled effectivity. Preterite naming, then, by its incompleteness and omission, exceeds and ruptures totalizing recuperative systems. The elect are ultimately sublated, but the preterite spectrally populate a material zone through and by the act of naming that enacts a momentary and divided and ruptured nominal (non-)status. "They" will never catch Slothrop, and "Slothrop," in time, will never have existed. Or the Schwarzkommando will always have been divided between the Empty Ones' suicide and Enzian's Holy-Center-Approaching.

The term "paranoia" adds another dimension to preterite naming in *GR*.[10] Pynchon here elaborates his use of paranoia from *Lot 49*, where it worked as the key term to organize the book's epistemology. As Oedipa fights to become "relevant" to the question of the Tristero, she is enjoined to develop a form of functional, or "creative," paranoia.[11] In *GR*, the injunction to enact a strategic form of paranoiac being echoes *Lot 49*, though now it is expanded to characterize the epistemological condition in the Zone as a whole. Pynchon's interest in paranoia is apt. "Paranoia" itself incorporates the terms and conditions of his creative paranoia: the paranoid allots or parses (Latin, *parcae*) or begets (*parire*) to itself a share or part (*portio*) of *nomen*. The paranoid's name is always already made heterogeneous to itself in a condition of para-noia by the principles of exclusion and omission. Paranoia names its plot systems as it names itself—partially. In their partiality, in the fact that "[t]he history of the old Hereros is one of lost messages" (GR 322), which is to say in the fact of history, the paranoids' names have already fallen a-part. *Noesis* contains its own *askesis*: the already divided annunciatory instant of direct apprehension is traced incompletely.

Pynchon's use of ellipses, which indicate grammatical incompleteness through omission, parallels his concern with preterition. But the omissions' indices—Pynchon's ubiquitous dots—perform grammatical disruption not by incompleteness but by excess. Pursuant to the logic of Gödel's Theorem, and reformulating the activity of the polyvalent "It" with which the novel opens, Pynchon's ellipses indicate the necessary incapacity of language to capture or contain the immensity of its always dividing and proliferating referent.[12] That "there is bound to be some item around that one has omitted from the list" indicates, by preterite logic, any list's necessary incompleteness. The logic of the ellipsis describes omission as an instance of the

impossibility of containability (GR 320). Both ellipsis and preterition point back to the atemporality of the delta-t. Difference happens in (and from) the infinitesimal paranoid eye-twitch between phenomena and noumena. Preterition and ellipsis argue the under- and over-determination of signs and their relation to excessive and proliferating referents.

This contingency and heterogeneity of sign and referent reveal the problem of the movement between singularity and exemplarity, which returns us to Kant and the explicit question of ethics. Among the delta-t, preterition and ellipsis, the notion of the complete, undivided or indivisible exemplum, the necessary condition of any example, is broken in *GR*. Kant acknowledges the loss of the possibility of completeness in the empirical exemplum. Yet his ethics demand that one act *as if* one's empirical actions were based *a priori* on universalizeable completeness (GMM 95-96). Universalizeable decisions, for Kant, are categorical instances of reverence for the law of moral principle, of which the person becomes an exemplar (GMM 69). The law, not the person, evokes reverence (a feeling analogous to fear and inclination). Exemplarity thus consists of the appearance or translucence of the moral law in the sensible object—one acts as if the law transluces in the object. This reduces the contingency inherent in the *differend* of the sensible by instituting a regulative system of behavior that would sublimate the temporal gap between empirical and *a priori* realms. The regulative future of universalizeable action consists of an *a priori* tendency toward the finality of an idealized society of rational beings (GMM 105). Contingency is thus seen to be sublimated as it becomes appropriated or employed by pure reason (Lyotard 173, 187-89). The sublimation of contingency is the transformation of the singular into the universal. As singularity becomes exemplarity, that which is singular is destroyed: for the concept to transluce into the exemplum, the concept must exhaust the exemplum. The least contingent exemplum provides no empirical claim to the concept: the dead man becomes ortho-dox, categorical, the straight/correct/prime example of the cause to be accepted, or law.[13]

Kant's ethics amount to a rigorous technology to sublimate singularity. This technologization of the gap between empirical particulate and concept is attacked in *GR*. Pynchon shares Kant's concept of a distinction between the world of experience and a realm beyond experience. But *GR* consistently refuses and problematizes the impulse to technologize this distinction. On the one hand. On the other hand, what is the delta-t, in its demarcation of the temporal split between sign and referent, singularity and concept, if not a technology? The delta-t marks the temporal duration of contingency in any given

decision or instant/instance of naming. As the rocket ascends, the delta-t provides the mathematical measurement necessary to determine the correct duration of fuel-burn before *Brennschluss*: the rocket will hang contingently during its flight—a moment of openness when no particular destination is established—but that duration is marked and calculated by the delta-t. It is, as Franz Pökler says, "'just a convenience'" (GR 159). Compatible with Kant's regulation of the present by a promised finality that effectively bounds the temporal disruption between present and future, the delta-t bounds the rocket's movement into contingency by placing contingency into a realm of measureability. Both systems seek to reduce contingency effects and increase the technologization of ethics. With, then, the simultaneous existence of the delta-t and preterition and ellipsis, Pynchon has written a basic contradiction into *GR*.

This contradiction is also seen in Slothrop. Slothrop disintegrates. He scatters across the zone without offering any Sparagmatic returns of heroic disintegration. He simply disappears without reason; his *Brennschluss* is radical dispersion. Slothrop is the preterite *par excellence*: his disintegration (dis)embodies the naming of absence. But in the process, Slothrop also moves into the category of the exemplum. By demonstrating the impossibility of containability, or the unnameability in the act of naming, Slothrop becomes an allegory of non-containability or incompleteness. Throughout *GR*, readers are repeatedly offered the seduction of the totalizing interpretation, the *Logos*.[14] That Slothrop typifies the seduction of characterological teleology and breaks it locates Slothrop in a rhetoric of typology: as Old Testament prophets prefigure Christ, Slothrop's ambiguities exemplify the novel's desire to emphasize and disrupt the containment strategies of the hermeneutic circle. Slothrop is the *visibilia* of deferral that refers to the *allegoria* of error and incompleteness. His singularity, in a rigidly Kantian move, is therefore exhausted in the concept of contingency. Slothrop's contradiction consists of 1) the character who strangely disintegrates—the singularity of his particular history—and 2) that which figures or typifies disintegration—the exemplary concept of the book. Slothrop's terrorizing and para-doxical contradiction is the impossible coexistence (or, perhaps, radical agonistics) of singularity and concept.

Slothrop is that which is terrorized by its constant obliteration. The fact that Slothrop is terrorized defeats any Kantian claim. Slothrop embodies a technological imagination—a name—which, in its rhetorical (in the De Manian sense) capacity, reduces or eliminates the contingency of his particularity. But he is also that which is terrorized, and he who disintegrates. Slothrop's particularity maintains an

unallegorizeable insistence on singularity: Slothrop himself and the novel's schematics as a whole repeatedly slip out of exemplarity by constantly performing unpredictably new and subversive acts. Each act is susceptible to subsequent appropriation into a use-value system, but each act is also a disruption of existing systems. His disintegration both shows excess, omission and exclusion—the impossibility of any technologization of an event's heterogeneity and contingency—and performs excess, omission and exclusion. Pynchon subverts a regulative ethics by disallowing any stable relation between technology and contingency, name and naming. What, then, is the form of ethics that can be built out of the Slothropian condition? How or to what extent can terror constitute a ground for ethics?

An approach to this question can be framed if we see Slothrop's basic contradiction as an aporia. Derrida's aporetic ethics describe a condition parallel to Pynchon's impossible and "progressive *knotting into*" (GR 3): both stress the impassability of the aporia between what comes from the future and what is annulled in the coming to pass, and both are "simultaneously conjunctive, disjunctive and undecidable" in their efforts to justify an ethics based on the nearly pure terror of contingency (Derrida, A 20).

The shift from contradiction to aporia is a shift in logic. Contradiction asserts a dialectical logic where opposition eventually results in negation and lifting up. The gap becomes instrumental in the process of synthesis. The aporia, however, is appositional and never synthetic: two orders set themselves alongside each other and establish a problem of passage. Between the two orders exists the putting into question of translatability (Derrida, A 20, 42; D 222; SM 36–37, 176). Pynchon's logic is appositional: the name Slothrop is irresolvably set alongside the naming of Slothrop; the order of the impossibility of naming is next to, asymptotically close to, the name itself (GR 322, 366).[15] Neither order is stable—both orders are imperfected and polyvalent—and the space between is at once absolutely impassable and necessarily passed over.[16] *GR* itself, bookended as it is with explicit markers of time, can be seen as 760 pages of the putting into question of translation—the contradictory interstitial and impossibly time-less (though unrelentingly urgent) zone of "the act of naming."

For Derrida and for Pynchon, the primary question enjoined by the writing of the aporia is the question of justice: How do you act when at any second it could land on your head? What are the criteria (*Grundlegung*) for a *just* decision under the urgent threat of obliteration? More: what is justice when you have always already been obliterated— "when" there is no "you" to act? "It all poises here," as Pynchon writes, on the precipice—or in the throes—of a choice (GR 724).[17]

Both *GR* and *différance* interrogate and problematize the paradoxical stances of "the proper and of property in all their registers, of the subject, and so of the responsible subject, of the subject of law and the subject of morality, of the juridical or moral person, of intentionality . . . and all that follows from these" (Derrida, FL 8). The perverse relation between *GR*'s encyclopedic scope and its unspeakability attests to its interrogative line, as does the book's constant deconstruction of itself. Systems (of identity, of subjectivity, of ontology, of ethics, etc.) are solicited by Derrida and Pynchon: unsolicited systems are simply the corporate structure of lies about death that, more often than not in Pynchon's fictions, neither offer protection from death nor do more than promote menacing systems of control and exploitation.[18] Moreover, the rocket's ubiquitous threat of disruption, on the one hand, sets conditions that cannot support the existence of coherent and stable systems, which in turn reveals the bad faith exercised in any statement of identity. On the other hand, this disruption produces the impossible opportunity to affirm—an affirmation, though, which disallows any trace of agency—the unpredictability of what happens next. Granting unpredictability is reading "[t]he scene itself . . . as a card: what is to come." That which comes to be "preserved" (named) is never known ("has no name") and is never fore-seeable (has "no agreed assignment in the deck"), and preservedness is never granted intransigence or completeness (GR 724). Come what may, one must flip the next card, even as one is always and already put into question.

The "'Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point. Nowhere is safe'" (GR 728). Pynchon's Rocket is the arrival of death, sublime Revealer, showing that no society can offer protection, that all systems are inadequate to—and disseminated in—the insistence of death. Death paradoxically (and paranoiacally) names or marks itself as what exceeds language; saying "V-2" (which is properly impossible) enacts a convenience which gives us the illusion of proper naming necessary for the return of our identity that has already been obliterated. Thus, death's "gift" is the catachresis of our proper name. *GR* marks the murder of the event in a violent and terrorized catachresis of an improper naming.

The rocket, then, can be seen as analogous to Derrida's absolute arrivant. The absolute arrivant, which does not have a name, "calls into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity" (A 34). And yet it makes possible all the systems of identity it destroys (35). The act of naming is revealed to be the point of the problem: it is the instanciation of an impossible passage over a *differend* between one imperfected and unstable non-set or non-unity of relations and another. It is also,

simultaneously, the activity of demarcation which comes to allow — sets the limits of — the possibility of passage across/through/beyond the aporia. This occurs in a condition in which the decision between just and unjust is never ensured by a rule, and is always already ruptured and divided from its empty origin.[19] This, again, is the passage from singularity to exemplarity, or the problematic of the emergence of the concept. The snare of language is the grammar that apposes the impossibility of the proper name with its already having occurred moment of being named. Rocket and arrivant arrive, are absolutely unknown, and make possible the language necessary to name them. The aporia between arrival and naming is the language of unnameability, and the condition for justice.

The just and responsible instance of naming, of making a decision, as Derrida and Pynchon argue in perversely different ways, is one that must, in its proper and urgent moment (that is already too late), be both regulated and without regulation. It "must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each [singular] case" (FL 23). Reinvention thus becomes a contingently-based praxis of the principle of singularity: a simultaneity of regulation and singularity that really does not contradict itself by virtue of the radical contingency of what comes next. The principle of singularity transforms Kant's categorical imperative into an *aporethical* imperative in *GR*. To be aporethically principled, in this sense, is to 1) accept the illusion of choice; 2) choose to affirm both the content of what is to come and the form of its contingent coming; 3) resist the impulse to sublimate the event of its coming — which might include notions of causality, diachronic succession, necessity, synthesis/progression, etc.; 4) name (be named by) what comes. Even as singularity can never really happen in the temporal bandwidth of the now, the aporethical principle of contingency allows for an appropriation of the event that might take into account (as difficult as a desire of this kind is to justify) the power relations of its appropriation.[20]

True justice will always be betrayed to gravity: it will never reveal itself, in any temporality, as the right thing to do, as a proper extension of a coherent subjectivity. And so it is at this point — the point of incoming mail, the brightness of a new star, the press of an impossible weight descending *now* — that the process of naming reveals itself, in true Pynchonian fashion, to be a screaming.[21] This is the terrifying process of necessary misreading, or ordeal of the undecidable, within a Slothropian ethics: to speak impossibly in an Orphean theater while watching illusions of movement and continuity, with the urgency of imminent death demanding from the interrupted future a decision whose outcome will never be known, and yet whose effect has already

produced the conditions of your execution. This is also, then, the definition of aporetic ethics, or, unjustly coined, Aporethics.[22]

Aporethics and Slothropian ethics are parallel ethics of contingency which neither categorically resolve nor reduce the disseminating and *différantial* gap between a regulative, non-contingent ethics and an ethics open to a non-regulating and unlimited horizon, but which instead emphasize the justice of the absolute impassability of their resolution *and* the imperative to make a decision while in (impossibly) the aporia.

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Notes

[1]Many readers have emphasized *GR*'s forcing of an ethics of reading. The reader must choose among often multiple possible interpretations, and just as often must decide to avoid or resist the necessary reduction a choice would require. The latter is closer to the ethics of deconstructive reading I am proposing *GR* enjoins us to engage in. See McHale 112–13; Quilligan; Smith and Tölölyan; Schaub, especially 57, 76–138.

[2]Smith and Tölölyan use Sacvan Bercovitch's terms "horological" and "chronometrical" to define Pynchon's doubled temporality. While those terms are undoubtedly relevant to their study of *GR* and the American jeremiad, I have opted for terms more germane to semiotics, partly to avoid confusion and partly to emphasize Pynchon's theory of language.

[3]It is terrifying in part because, as this essay argues, the last delta-t forces the act of comparison despite the fact that the object to be compared no longer exists, is absolutely absent. One is terrorized by the simultaneous injunction to compare and the impossibility to do so.

Thomas Schaub also uses "terror" to describe Pynchon's "moments" when a decision must be made. To appease the terror of uncertainty in any given moment, people seek the "control" of perceiving "their experiences through forms" instead of being open to a non-reductive, non-rationalized condition of possibility. See Schaub, especially 57–66.

[4]De Man's emphatic disjunction between language (rhetoric) and the metaphysics of the extra-linguistic referent is extended primarily from Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," and from the notion of artistic error De Man sees active in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Derrida's "Différance" and "White Mythology" also figure prominently, if indirectly, in *Allegories of Reading*, and De Man's process of critical reading is often termed deconstructive reading.

[5]Which is not to imply, in any way, a pathos. Absolute misreading defies any metaphysics of recuperating this passage into nomen-clature as system or model of authority (theology, psychoanalysis, etc.). Neither is it to confuse or

misuse the extremely useful reading of "(mis)reading" in/of *GR* by Brian McHale. Being "left with elements whose ontological status is unstable, flickering, indeterminable" instead of determinable "realia" in *GR* (McHale 70, 66) is compatible with my notion of misreading, particularly as misreading functions as an ethical injunction: which do you want it to be?

⁶I am trying to keep separate the Kantian use of concept or schema in this context and Pynchon's focus on the name. Naming as such is not at issue in Kant. I do see, however, a structural harmony between the schema in Kant and the name in Pynchon, up to the point at which Pynchon's name resists formalization.

The name is a concept insofar as it functions generally—for example, all people have names. But the proper name has a dimension of radical particularity —each person's name, while potentially shared with others, is qualitatively unique, and resistant to generalization. Each person's proper name, while being a concept, is not equal to the category of concept. Another way to frame this essay's larger concern with the question of the relation between comparability and non-comparability, or of the relation between sign and referent, is in the philosophical tradition of the name. The proper name is, first, contingently related to the object it names, but it is also capable of resisting generalization— of defying or exceeding conceptualization. This is much more Pynchonian than Kantian, and will be more substantively addressed below.

⁷This formulation might incline one to describe a phenomenology of terror. While the idea of determining such a phenomenology is attractive, it is not in the least possible. Terror, as I am working it out here, denies any systematization: nothing holds. No interest-dividend arrangements, no form of affirmation, no subjectivity, no identity politics—in short, no ontologies, no phenomenologies, no temporalities.

⁸I base this process of designation on Nietzsche's outline set out mainly in "On Truth and Lies" but also echoed in, though not limited to, sections of *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In "On Truth and Lies":

> What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus. . . . To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one. . . . [W]e possess nothing but metaphors for things—*metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities*. (81–83; emphasis added)

See also *Gay Science* sections 12–13, 109–12, 272–73, 356; *Beyond Good and Evil* sections 34–36, 41, 44, 192; *Genealogy* essay 1 section 13, essay 2 section 10, essay 3 sections 11–13.

⁹I am primarily indebted for this section to Louis Mackey's work on the concept of preterition in Pynchon's writings.

[10]Much has been written on paranoia in Pynchon. The following have been useful for this essay: Schaub 88–101; Sanders; Berressem, especially 17, 47–48, 97, 136–37, 180.

[11]For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (CL 182; cf. GR 638)

[12]Pertinent references to Gödel's Theorem in *GR* occur on 275 and 320.

[13]This is the point at which a Kantian ethics opens itself most poignantly to unintended appropriation. That is, in a contemporary understanding of terrorism, the logic used by the terrorist who identifies and executes a citizen of a targeted nation is compatible with Kant's. Executing the exemplary individual—"obliterating" (Kant's term) the sensible by responding to a transcendent, or categorical, call, and so bringing the idealized finality that much closer into view—is the process of actualizing the noumenal in the phenomenal.

[14]Molly Hite's still-resonating reading shows the simultaneous attraction of and difficulty with meaning systems in *GR*. See Hite 95–157.

[15]Pökler's "hunt[ing] . . . across the Zero, between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation," such that "pökler" becomes "[t]he fear of extinction named Pökler" (GR 406) also instances or parallels this type of apposition between name and naming.

[16]This can be seen most economically by the convergence of the concepts of delta-t and identity. Pynchon shows that the radically disruptive dynamics of the delta-t constitute precisely the identity of Slothrop:

> Slothrop, as noted, at least as early as the Anubis era, has begun to thin, to scatter. "Personal density," Kurt Mondaugen in his Peenemünde office not too many steps away from here, enunciating the Law which will one day bear his name, "is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth."
>
> "Temporal bandwidth" is the width of your present, your *now*. It is the familiar "Δt" considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you're having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you're doing *here*, at the base of this colossal curved embankment. . . .
>
> "Uh," he turns slackmouth to Närrisch, "what are we . . ." (509)

[17]"[D]iscourses on . . . the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable, the incommensurable or the incalculable, or on singularity, difference and heterogeneity are also . . . at least obliquely discourses on justice" (Derrida, FL 7).

[18]For "solicit," see "Différance," in Derrida, MP 16, 21.

[19]Derrida names this condition the "condition of impossibility," which certainly contains within it "impassability"—the aporetics of passage. See, among many cites, A 20–21, 34–35.

[20]On "appropriation," see Jacques Lezra, especially 24: "For every model of allusion, of mimesis and of imitation, as well as every subsequent model of literary, critical, or political authority, can be understood to rely upon a naturalized or phenomenalized model of the relation between . . . events and their cognition, an authorizing statement and its subsequent use and appropriation."

[21]"The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness" (Derrida, FL 26).

[22]I owe this term to Lezra.

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