

“It Has to Be More Than the Simple Conditioning of a Child, Once Upon a Time”: The Use of the Child in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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The December 1995 discussion of Bianca’s age on pynchon-l, an Internet discussion group (at www.waste.org), shows that a deep concern about child molesting makes readers worry about whether child characters are presented as sexually abused. However, this preoccupation with sexual molestation is only the tip of the iceberg, because Pynchon deals with an abuse of the child more deeply ingrained in our rational and scientific Western culture. The images of children and childhood in *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be interpreted as a reflection on the use of the child as the Other, the use which consists of reducing an archetype to a signifier.

The vision of the child as a powerful symbol emerging from the unconscious constitutes the core of C. G. Jung’s concept of the child archetype. In the individuation process the child archetype anticipates “the figure that comes from the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. It is therefore the symbol which unites the opposites; a mediator, bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole” (164). Jung emphasizes a striking paradox in all child myths. On the one hand, the child is delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and is in constant danger of extinction, while on the other, she possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity:

The “child” is born out of the womb of the unconscious, begotten out of the depths of human nature, or rather out of living Nature herself. It is a personification of vital forces quite outside the limited range of our conscious mind; of ways and possibilities of which our one-sided conscious mind knows nothing; a wholeness which embraces the very depths of Nature. (170)

Pynchon’s reflection coincides with a common diagnosis of the banishment of the marvelous, demonic and irrational—that is, the Other—from the dominant discourse of Western culture since the seventeenth century.¹ Philippe Ariès emphasizes, in *A History of*

Childhood, that since that period the understanding of children's innocence has been limited to their being sheltered from the "dirt of life," especially from sex. Meanwhile their education has been aimed at exercising reason, developing rationality and "weeding out" their weaknesses. Paradoxically, however, the child's helplessness and fragility, construed as purity, have become an essential part of the modern notion of innocence (Ariès 122, 125). The internal contradictoriness of the child figure which typifies the multiplicity of experience is thus reduced to only one pole of the contradiction: weakness and purity. What is left out is the divine prerogative, hermaphroditism—emblematic of "a union of the strongest and most striking opposites" (Jung 173)—and invincibility.

It is the weakness and purity of the patients in St. Veronica's hospital that whet Pointsman's desire.² Although a Pavlovian reductionist, Pointsman senses that there is more to psychology and patients' reactions than reflexes developed in response to stimulation of the cortex: "these poor human palimpsests [. . .] drowning in tears and snot of grief so real, torn from so deep that it [. . .] seems *more than their own*" (GR 50; emphasis added). Pointsman appears to be almost on the threshold of recognizing the significance, depth and force of the collective unconscious. One could speculate why he feels attracted to the children he sees in these patients: the transcendence of opposites characteristic of the child archetype could be what particularly—although, perhaps, unconsciously—appeals to him. After all, Pointsman is obsessed with "this transmarginal leap, this surrender. Where ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness" (50). Interestingly, like Blicero, Pointsman seeks to effect this transcendence by means of violence, violence that springs from attempts to control and manipulate reality on the assumption that it is exhaustively explained by science.

Pointsman uses patients as convenient experimental objects and metaphorically inscribes his desire and the discourse of rational science onto their psyches:

out of each catharsis rise new children, painless, egoless for one pulse of the Between . . . tablet erased, new writing about to begin, hand and chalk poised in winter gloom over these poor human palimpsests shivering under their government blankets, drugged, drowning in tears and snot of grief so real, torn from so deep that it surprises, seems more than their own. (50)

He thus disconnects the child in these patients from the deep archetypal resources of life energy residing in the collective unconscious and, by inscribing his desires on their psyches and bodies,

incorporates them into the discourse of Western civilization. The psyche and the flesh become signifiers.

How Pointsman lusts after them, pretty children. Those drab undershorts of his are full to bursting with need humorlessly, worldly to use their innocence, to write on them new words of himself, his own brown Realpolitik dreams, some psychic prostate ever in aching love promised, ah hinted but till now . . . how seductively they lie ranked in their iron bedsteads, their virginal sheets, the darlings so artlessly erotic. (50)

Pointsman would introduce the child in these patients to the binary distinction between Eros and Thanatos whose Thanatos term underlies mainstream Western culture, in which the Jungian drive toward self-realization and individuation through transcending opposites seems to be stunted.

By sacrificing, or selling, the archetypal child to science, Western culture loses touch with the order of the real, or the Other, and begins to identify with the order of discourse. Slothrop exemplifies the child sacrificed to science in the service of industry. Whether or not Jamf existed and whether or not Slothrop was conditioned by him, the victimization of the child goes much deeper than the conditioning of reflexes. "It has to be more than the simple conditioning of a child, once upon a time" (143), as Pointsman believes. Be that as it may, the victimization has not been complete, and Slothrop is not out of touch with the child in himself or, in other words, with the madman or the fool. This makes his escape possible, as well as effecting his dissolution in the Zone. Unlike Slothrop, Gottfried submissively awaits his death as a double victim of the technocratic state and of Blicero's romantically demonic vision of false transcendence. Gottfried's craving to be controlled seems to be caused by that more underlying factor Pointsman alludes to, a factor later pondered over by Sasha Gates in *Vineland*. She traces the craving to be controlled metaphorically to genetic coding or tampering:

she'd felt in herself a fatality, a helpless turn toward images of authority, especially uniformed men . . . and she further believed that it could be passed on, as if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control. (83)

The opinion on a relation between human beings and control presented in *Vineland* seems explicitly metaphysical, although there Pynchon uses terms from contemporary biology, sociology and political science. What

he says in *Vineland* goes far beyond the view of the victimization of the child by civilization. Sasha's belief concerning the corruption of an ideal genotype by a Cosmic Fascist comes very close to the Calvinist view of the human being as utterly corrupt. The state, or for that matter civilization, thus simply coopts the "natural"—because genetically programmed—human proclivity for control.

It is worth noting that through modulation of the narratorial voice in the Pointsman episode at St. Veronica's, the reader (clearly cast as a male reader, though) is also implicated in using children. In the entropic environment figured as a vast urban bus station, the child's archetypal life energy is drained. This time too the sexual undertones are clear:

A thousand children are shuffling out these doors tonight, but only rare nights will even one come in, home to your sprung, spermy bed, the wind over the gasworks, closer smells of mold on wet coffee grounds, cat shit, pale sweaters with the pits heaped in a corner, in some accidental gesture, slink or embrace. (51)

Perversely, the child, a symbol of Nature's potency, becomes associated with chaos, entropy and emotional sterility.

Intentionally and artificially induced sterility aimed at the collective suicide of the whole tribe of Zone Hereros can also be construed as the use of the child, if only in negative terms. The Zone Hereros, particularly the faction of Empty Ones, "Europeanized in language and thought, split off from the old tribal unity" represented by the mandala-shape of their old African villages, are possessed with one thought—that of overpowering the life energy and reaching "a final zero to a collective history fully lived" (318). By not letting children be born, the Empty Ones, in the binary Western manner, forestall any transcendence of opposites effected by the child archetype and substitute an absolute inanimateness for the life force. The incorporation of Hereros into Western rational discourse has occurred at the expense of the extra-discursive unity of opposites and harmony with the universe depicted by the mandala. The Empty Ones embrace the idea of tribal suicide even though they find "the why of it [. . .] mysterious." They simply continue the policy of their ancestors in the colony of German South-West Africa, who, faced with the choice between tribal death and Christian death, chose virtual collective suicide, thus proving they were not "conned" by what they called (or Pynchon calls) the "Baby Jesus Con Game" played by Europeans (318). Baby Jesus is a powerful actualization of Jung's child archetype. On the one hand, Baby Jesus reconciles the contradictory planes of the divine and the human. On the

other hand, through the incarnation of the Word, the Holy Infant enters discourse, thus bridging consciousness and the Other. From the vantage point of the Hereros' extra-discursive tribal unity, the incarnation of the Word is a reduction of the unspeakable to the rationally comprehended and thus a departure from original harmony and innocence. This, in turn, they see as a con game. By being Europeanized, the Zone Hereros have already become implicated in this game.

It thus seems that complete, pure innocence is likely to exist only outside a signifying system. Mystical experience—such as the experience of the Kirghiz Light—inaccessible to any character caught up in the rhizome of Western discourses, makes a return to original innocence possible. This experience enables immersion in the original preconscious, or baby-like, state.

For I tell you that I have seen It
 In a place which is older than darkness,
 Where even Allah cannot reach.
 As you see, my beard is an ice-field,
 I walk with a stick to support me,
 But this light must change us to children.

And now I cannot walk far,
 For a baby must learn to walk.
 And my words are reaching your ears
 As the meaningless sounds of a baby.
 For the Kirghiz Light took my eyes,
 Now I sense all Earth like a baby. (358)

It seems, however, according to Pynchon, that no radical, extra-discursive innocence can be found in the European reality of the twentieth century. When speaking about the function of Zwölfkinder, a holiday resort for children, the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* sarcastically voices his concern with the reduction of the child's character to politically defined innocence:

In a corporate State, a place must be made for innocence, and its many uses. In developing an official version of innocence, the culture of childhood has proven invaluable. Games, fairy-tales, legends from history, all the paraphernalia of make-believe can be adapted and even embodied in a physical place, such as at Zwölfkinder. (419)

The multi-dimensionality of the child archetype is flattened and reduced to suit the needs of the corporate State, whose functioning is based on binary distinctions conducive to the standardization of life and the development of technology. The irrational and the marvelous connected with the Other, with the unconscious and with the mystery of original unity are reduced to a political dimension by substituting objects or simulacra of a marvelous environment for them. Ironically, the liberating effect of fairy tales connected with their partaking in the collective unconscious, pointed out by Bruno Bettelheim (39–64), is replaced in *Zwölfkinder* by the captivating property of representation and simulation.

Gravity's Rainbow shows one fairy tale in particular—the tale of Hansel and Gretel—to have been appropriated by the They-system. The original tale shows how two abandoned children escape death and the evil of a controlling power embodied in the character of a witch. This story about escaping control and surviving is cynically used by a system which seeks global control and is infatuated with death. The Blicero-Gottfried-Katje triangle acts out a parody of the tale in which only one child-figure, Katje, manages to survive and finally leaves the site of the sadomasochistic masquerade. For those three, the formal organization of closed space—the witch's house—offers security from chance and chaos. This space is organized around the Oven—a symbol of technology in the service of death. Ironically, the Oven guarantees the order it is designed to destroy:

Katje, Gottfried, and Captain Blicero have agreed that this Northern and ancient form, one they all know and are comfortable with—the strayed children, the wood-wife in the edible house, the captivity, the fattening, the Oven—shall be their preserving routine, their shelter, against what outside none of them can bear—the War, the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency here, in its midst. (96)

The original fairy tale is supposed to provide the reader—usually a child—with the means to manage and be reconciled with the chance, danger and chaos in the world. It is meant to represent a stage to pass through in the process of individuation rather than a haven from reality. However, in acting out the tale, Blicero, Gottfried and Katje seek permanent predictability, regularity and closure. Unlike Hansel and Gretel, Gottfried and Katje do not attempt to flee the control of Blicero. On the contrary, control and captivity shelter them from reality.

The tale of Hansel and Gretel is also staged in England on Boxing Day. The pantomime Roger Mexico takes Jessica and her nieces to see is interrupted by the explosion of a German rocket, at which point it

turns into a grotesque vaudeville. Whereas by becoming familiar with the tale of Hansel and Gretel children learn how to manage and survive, in the pantomime the children learn to die:

Turn your pockets and get-your surprise,
 There was nobody there af-ter all!
 And the lamps up the stairway are dying,
 It's the season just after the ball . . .
 Oh the palm-trees whisper on the beach somewhere,
 And the lifesaver's heaving a sigh,
 And those voices you hear, Boy and Girl of the Year,
 Are of children who are learning to die. . . . (175)

Moreover, parents are presented in this Boxing Day episode as having been coopted by the system which spreads death, thereby betraying their children. Contrary to the original tale, parents abandon their children not because they cannot go on living with the burden but because they die.

Mothers and fathers are conditioned into deliberately dying in certain preferred ways: giving themselves cancer and heart attacks, getting into motor accidents, going off to fight in the war—leaving their children alone in the forest. They'll always tell you fathers are "taken," but fathers only leave—that's what it really is. The fathers are all covering for each other, that's all. (176)

Children are not taught to cope with problems cropping up in the process of individuation, problems like death, as part of life. They are taught instead to deal with betrayal and alienated violent death. And so the tale originally rooted in the collective unconscious by means of archetypes has become incorporated into the reductive discourse of technocratic civilization.

Controlling reality by reducing it to discourse is an ideal tool for inducing submission, whereas the multifariousness of the universe that transcends binary distinctions can provide a basis for resistance. Weissmann, as a representative of the system, attempts to dictate the conditions of the relation between Franz Pökler and his daughter, Ilse, to keep the engineer submissive. Joseph Tabbi points out that as long as Pökler perceives the growing up of the girl in terms of film frames, or stills—that is, in terms of representation—he is not emotionally engaged and so remains obedient to Weissmann; but when he lets himself see beyond the categories of cinematic discourse, he is

overwhelmed by the tragic complexity of reality and the power of emotions that defies control (Tabbi 114-15).

Ilse appears to be a child whose innocence is absolutely corrupted as she is an inmate of a concentration camp: "My job is being a prisoner. I'm a professional inmate. I know how to get favors, who to steal from, how to inform, how to—" (430). Ironically, the postulate of transcended opposites inherent in Jung's child archetype seems fulfilled in her character: Ilse is weak, abandoned and invincible. As a shadow child metaphorically fathered on the actress Margherita Erdmann after a showing of *Alpdrücken*, she bridges reality and illusion. As a metaphorical daughter of Pökler and Erdmann, she links dreams about rocket flight and the moon with the earthliness signalled in Erdmann by her surname and evinced in her swamp murders of little boys. As an actual daughter of Pökler and Leni, Ilse combines the engineer's submissiveness and yearning for state control with the spirit of her mother's radical resistance and non-binary thinking. Leni knows that oppositions have to be transcended to effect change: "It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and Symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems" (159). Therefore, Ilse, although used by the corporate State, retains what little innocence is possible in the Zone. In her, the Jungian indomitable child triumphs, however imperfect this triumph may seem (see GR 610).

Another child who embodies a Jungian transcendence of opposites attainable in the Zone is Ludwig, a boy on the lookout for Ursula, his pet lemming:

Out of [his] pocket peer two furry little bright eyes. It is fat Ludwig and his lost lemming Ursula—he has found her at last and after all and despite everything. [. . . A] boy and his lemming, out to see the Zone. Mostly what he's seen is a lot of chewing gum and a lot of foreign cock. How else does a foot-loose kid get by in the Zone these days? Ursula is preserved. Ludwig has fallen into a fate worse than death and found it's negotiable. So not all lemmings go over the cliff, and not all children are preserved against smuggling into the sin of profit. To expect any more, or less, of the Zone is to disagree with the terms of the Creation. (729)

Ludwig is a victim of the military-industrial complex's war machinery. He is used by the system, which clings to the idea of the child's purity while simultaneously profiting from innocence lost.³ Still, his innocence is preserved because his psychic resources are not limited to the rational and practical; he is also capable of remaining in touch with the irrational and mad. His affection for the pet animal provides the energy

necessary to transcend the binary nature of instrumental treatment of a human being.

The child archetype bridges opposites and, in the process of individuation, reconciles them into a harmonious whole reminiscent of the original equipoise of the opposites visualized as a mandala. Steven Weisenburger points out that *Gravity's Rainbow* "is plotted like a mandala, its quadrants carefully marked by Christian feast days that happened to coincide, in 1944–45, with key historical dates and ancient pagan festivals"; however, "the circle of redemptive death, or foolishness," is not quite closed (9–10). The return to the site of original harmony, interpreted as the return home, is thus impossible in the novel: "But there is the occupation. They may already have interdicted the kids' short cuts along with the grown-up routes. It may be too late to get home" (GR 744). Home is where the original innocence of the child is sheltered. However, the original, extra-discursive mystical innocence like that of the viewer of the Kirghiz Light is unattainable. What is possible is maturity, or the imperfect innocence regained in the Jungian process of individuation (Jung 178–79). On the other hand, equivocal as it may be, the mandala symbol—around which "preterite souls come together" (Weisenburger 11)—points, after all, to the original unity even if this unity is unattainable. The possibility of returning home—even if it is a troubled home⁴—emerges as an option only in Pynchon's next novel, *Vineland*, where the child Prairie is sheltered by her father from being used; Zoyd is able to shelter her because he has not denied the child in himself. But that is another story.

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Notes

¹See W. E. H. Lecky, qtd. in Terry Castle 14–15. Lecky discusses how, between 1650 and 1800, the spirit of rationalism gradually supplanted the system of European magical belief and folk superstition. See also Keith Thomas, qtd. in Castle 15. Thomas attributes the abandonment of long-established magical beliefs—in ghosts, witches, demonic possession, astrology, divination, omens, and the like—to changing patterns of social organization rather than to the decline of theological explanations of reality postulated by Lecky. However, Thomas agrees with Lecky about its dramatic effect on human consciousness.

²I am very grateful to Brian McHale for pointing out to me that the children referred to here (GR 50–51) are, in fact, metaphorical children, that is, the children Pointsman sees in the patients. Furthermore, the patients who are the objects of Pointsman's desire in this scene are not his own patients, but Kevin

Spectro's—a fact which does not, however, make the implications for Pointsman's own actual practice any less disturbing.

³Interestingly, the molesting of Ludwig has not become a topic of heated discussion.

⁴James Berger "reconsider[s] the possibilities of nostalgia through a discussion of" Pynchon's *Vineland*, which seems, in its story's emphasis on repairing the broken family, to veer toward an almost Reaganesque nostalgia. The novel ends with a family reunion; its final word is "home."

Vineland works its way, however, to a very troubled home, and its "sickness" [nostalgia is "homesickness"] is not a conventional nostalgia for idealized sites of origin. (3-4)

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