

Corrigenda: A Note on Gravity's Rainbow

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Mistakes in the text and texture of Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow become almost as controversial as the more central elements of the novel, but little effort has been expended to categorize and investigate those beyond the realms of verifiable historical and scientific data.<sup>1</sup> A brief look at several types of errors in the novel will reveal no apparent pattern, and thus every reason for the increased operations of paranoid critical faculties. The question of mistakes, after all, divides into the incidental and the intended (or, in more Pynchonesque terms, those we can plot over time, and those plotted for and against us). Ultimately, this distinction can be resolved by the element of control--or, as Pynchon suggests through the medium of Carroll Eventyr, "the illusion of control."<sup>2</sup>

The difference is often hard to determine. When, for example, Franz Pökler "returned from the Oie"--that is, the Isle--he found that not Ilse, his real or pretend daughter, but "Isle, her flowered bag, the clothing she usually left strewn on the cot, had all vanished"(414).<sup>3</sup> The transposition of letters is hardly an uncommon typographical error; but that the transposed "Isle" should occur here, uniquely in the text, immediately after the use of the word for isle in an archaic Baltic dialect, is all too fortuitous. Could this be the error of an editor or compositor, or a joke of the author himself? Is the text under control, or only its illusion? Whatever the answers, the reader must draw the same inference: in a fictional environment where Ilse may not be Ilse at all, she might just as well be Isle.

Other errors are not as easily explained away. Pynchon's Russian, for example: the first word of the title abbreviated as VTsk NTA should be transliterated as "Vsesoyuznyy" and not "Vsesoyznnyy," (352) as Pynchon has it. In the absence of moveable type, where the two letters are the inversions of each other, the mistake of "n" for "u" is most likely caused by misreading handwritten notes, and therefore Pynchon's own. His carelessness as a researcher is doubly em-

phasized because we know the source for this information on the NTA; and we therefore also know that he has reversed the phonetic values of K, which should have been the "ordinary K," and Q, which should have represented the "glottal K" (353).<sup>4</sup>

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

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

Finally, there are matters of apparent structure in usage. Out dognapping with Pointsman, whose foot is stuck in a toilet bowl, "Roger, snoot full of ether, can't check his lunge--as the doctor comes

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

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

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the one exception to this is the great anachronism hunt. While the novel seems rife with

anachronisms, I would caution detractors that what they might think of as recent slang has in many cases been around for quite a while. A literary example of this which comes readily to mind is Frank Norris's use of "outa sight" in his novel, McTeague (1899).

<sup>2</sup> Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 30. Further page references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

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

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas G. Winner, "The Problems of Alphabetic Reform Among the Turkic People of Soviet Central Asia," Slavonic and East European Review, 31, No. 76 (1952), 139-40.