

## Jokes and Puns in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Charles Hollander

*Gravity's Rainbow* contains so many jokes and puns that a typology might make a helpful doctoral dissertation. Here, only two of the best-known examples will serve as models: "The Disgusting English Candy Drill" (114–20) and "For De Mille, young fur-henchmen can't be rowing" (557–63). Each is lovingly set up. Steven Weisenburger calls "De Mille" the "most elaborately staged pun in all of *GR*. . . . Note that Pynchon has fashioned an entire narrative digression about illicit trading in furs, oarsmen in boats, fur-henchmen, and De Mille—all of it in order to launch this pun" (240). The Candy Drill similarly takes considerable narrative digression to get Slothrop with an English Nurse (Darlene), her landlady (Mrs. Quoad)—a self-described witch—and a jar of candies reflecting a fiendish sensibility. Neither De Mille nor Darlene ever reappears: indeed, it is questionable whether Darlene ever existed; and a Mrs. Quoad is mentioned again only to cast doubt on Darlene's existence. So we might assume these sections have no other purpose than amusement.

In addition to being entertaining, what do these sections have in common? They are implausible. "Fur-henchmen"? "Rowing"? "In boats"? A candy that "turns out to be luscious pepsin-flavored nougat, chock-full of tangy candied cubeb berries, and a chewy camphor-gum center" (118)? Implausibility is characteristic of Menippean satire, surely Pynchon's favorite form. In Menippean satire, characters come to stand for ideas in play in the text, and the interaction between the characters becomes the dialectic of competing ideas. For example, if Roger Mexico represents spontaneity, emotion and love, and Ned Pointsman represents determinism, conditioning and control, their personal interactions become freighted with a whole historical argument. To get the characters involved in meaningful exchanges, the plot must contrive implausibly, since outside of classrooms people usually don't just leap into conversations on such subjects. Implausibility is the order of the day for the antinaturalist genre that is Menippean satire.

Another similarity is that neither of these episodes overtly obeys the usual imperative to advance the novel's plot, develop a character or play a variation on a theme. On the surface, at the narrative level, aside from their being funny, there might seem every reason to delete them altogether. The novel would move along pretty well without them. So

why are these episodes in the text at all? Just for the laughs? There is precedent. Woody Allen, describing his scantily plotted screenplay for *Bananas* (1971), said he viewed the plots of his early films as "armatures on which to hang a million crazy jokes."

According to the ancients, an author has two responsibilities: to entertain and to instruct. Here, instruction is in the subtext. These funny episodes actually carry some heavy freight in the form of allusions and buzzwords. In the Candy Drill, the only two wine jellies named are Lafitte Rothschild and Bernkastler Doktor (116). These are not just any red-wine and white-wine jellies. Rothschild is a famous European Jewish banking and viticultural family, and Bernkastler Doktor is a famous German wine. Bernkastler Doktor is not without a bit of typical Pynchonian irony, suggesting Nazi doctors when it could easily have been any other German wine. Since historically, one of the Rothschilds died at Auschwitz, the episode starts to take on a not so funny meaning at the subtextual level.

After Slothrop eats a handful of these "'surprises'" (116), his "tongue's a hopeless holocaust. [. . .] 'Poisoned . . .' he is able to croak" (118). And shortly, the narrator mentions another "famous confection" the descriptions of whose flavor "resembl[e] the descriptions of poison and debilitating gases found in training manuals." In 1945, this rare confection can sometimes be found in out-of-the-way shops among other curios including gems set "in German gold" (119). Oddly, "Yrjö—a pretender but the true king" (119), whom we met in Pynchon's short story "The Secret Integration," reappears in this episode in Mrs. Quoad's reverie. King Yrjö, I have argued elsewhere, is analogous to King Carol of Rumania, a victim of fascist-antifascist struggles. He blends here into the ambiguity of figures Slothrop feels "are supposed to be [. . .] our allies" (117).

So what might seem casually dropped words in the middle of the Candy Drill are more highly charged than they first appear. We get allusions to the German war against the Jews, weapons of mass destruction, extermination camps, the confiscation of Jewish assets, enemies masquerading as allies and vice versa, the whole spasm of fascism that arose in the '20s and '30s and culminated in the war. All of this is by way of quodlibets, a medley of unattributed allusions, as Mrs. Quoad's name suggests. These proper nouns (names of wines), buzzwords (holocaust, poison gases), a character from an earlier work (King Yrjö) constitute a sinister subtext to the comical Candy Drill, a subtext that sustains the major themes of the novel.

The pun on "Forty million Frenchmen can't be wrong" is traceable to the 1927 song "Fifty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong" (Rose, Raskin and Fisher), popularized by Sophie Tucker, "The Last of the Red

Hot Mamas.”<sup>1</sup> The song satirizes the idea of the freedoms Americans were supposed to enjoy during the roaring twenties, freedoms circumscribed or forbidden by provincial convention (prudery or dress codes), by local laws (statutes banning public displays of affection or allowing censorship) and by Federal intervention (prohibition); and it offers as counterpoint the degree of freedom French society unflinchingly tolerated at the time (and does today), punctuating its assertions with the refrain “Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.” For example:

When they put on a show, and it’s a hit  
 No one tries to censor it.  
 Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.  
 And when a book is selling at its best  
 It isn’t stopped; it’s not suppressed.  
 Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.  
 Whenever they’re dry  
 For brandy or rye,  
 To get it, they don’t have to give up their right eye.  
 And when we brag about our liberty  
 And they laugh at you and you and you and me  
 Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.

Here Pynchon’s technique is misdirection. Something in the text, the De Mille pun, points to something outside the text, Sophie Tucker’s song, containing material that is thematically relevant to the novel. Freedom from state intrusion on personal and civil liberties has been one of Pynchon’s major themes at least since “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” (1966); it is obviously in play in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and is perhaps most visible and accessible in *Vineland* (1990).

Pynchon (somewhat like Woody Allen) uses most of his narratives as armatures on which to hang jokes, puns, discursions, meditations, allusions, quodlibets, etc., about thematic issues that repeatedly concern him: “power” and “unreason” (Pynchon, WSR 29), the relation of individual and state. The more elaborate the joke, the more likely it is to be thematically important; the more seemingly removed the passage is from the manifest issues of the text, the deeper we may have to look to find the referent. Since text and subtext in Pynchon’s fiction take turns carrying the thematic charge, we have to keep our magic eye peeled to, as the narrator tells us at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “Follow the bouncing ball” (760).

—Baltimore, MD

## Note

<sup>1</sup>My thanks to the indefatigable Keith McMullen for unearthing the lyrics.

## Works Cited

- Hollander, Charles. "Pynchon's Politics: The Presence of an Absence." *Pynchon Notes* 26-27 (1990): 5-59.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking, 1973.
- . "Words for Salman Rushdie." *New York Times Book Review* 12 Mar. 1989: 29.
- Rose, Billy and Willie Raskin. "Fifty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong." Comp. Fred Fisher. Perf. Sophie Tucker. 1927. <<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Corridor/5109/NovFifty.html>>.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.
- Woody Allen: A Life In Film*. Dir. Richard Schickel. Turner Classic Movies, 2002.