

Dogsical Reading: *Gravity's Rainbow's* Reversals and Reader Response Criticism

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Gravity's Rainbow has been stimulus to a number of responses that range from traditional hermeneutics to the so-called post-hermeneutic approaches of today. When Pynchon's text was published, one of the prevailing movements in literary theory was what has since been known as reader response criticism. Sharing an interest in questions of text-reader interaction—or, to be behavioristic, in aspects of literary stimulus-response schemes—the movement's theoreticians had soon developed such a vast number of rival models that it became inevitable to label the different reader concepts for the sake of clarifying who followed which line. Wild acts of naming ensued, a mania not unlike the one which hit those Nordhausen engineers who were given code names taken from German Expressionist movies. Family name: reader. Alias or first name: *arche* (Michael Riffaterre), *informed* (Stanley Fish) or *implied* (Wolfgang Iser). I shall name my specific *Gravity's Rainbow* reader Vanya.

This implies that for the time being, "we're working [. . .] with a dog" (GR 90), a dog resembling those Pavlov used (and Pointsman uses) for conditioning experiments. Vanya, the reader-dog, will go through the disturbing and distorting experiences of a reading that sets off from a firm hermeneutic basis (that is, the traditional, canonized reading conventions which Vanya was brought up with or, in that sense, conditioned to), that then passes through a phase of reversals of these very conditions, and that ends with that state of mental disarrangement which has become a stereotype in Pynchon criticism: paranoia. In this respect Vanya's development resembles that of a test dog, or guinea pig, which in the course of a behavioristic experiment gets driven into what Pavlov and Pointsman call the ultraparadoxical phase: "Yesterday," Pointsman remarks to Roger Mexico,

"we got him [Vanya] to go ultraparadoxical. Beyond. When we turn on the metronome that used to stand for food—that once made Dog Vanya drool like a fountain—now he turns away. When we shut off the metronome, oh *then* he'll turn to it, sniff, try to lick it, bite it—seek, in the silence, for the stimulus that is not there." (90)

On a level different from the literal one, Pointsman's explanation can be understood as a special comment on the reader's situation woven into the text itself—special, for it is not so much self-reflexive with regard to the novel's own design, but is rather an exact and irrefutable projection into the self-reflexive processes that go on in *Vanya*, its reader. The book brims with remarks of this kind, and the disclosure of what one might call a reader subtext makes up the first part of this essay.

Paranoia, *ultraparadoxical* phase. The second part of the essay parallels the notions of paranoia and paradox. In it I will connect the paranoia diagnosis, by now a cliché in Pynchon studies, that has stimulated many a critic to cultivate an awareness of one's necessarily "paranoid criticism" (see, for example, Bersani, and Berressem 49) with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, a constructivist approach to originally sociological questions at the core of which stands the concept of paradox.

The "reality" depicted by the text, and the reader-dog's expectation of what should be the reality represented in it stand in recurrent contrast. The result is *Vanya's* paranoia. This contradictory arrangement of two undeniably existing yet incommensurate aspects or sides of a distinction, and the reader's inability to logically unify these will effect what is commonly known as *aporia*, an undecidable or paradoxical situation.

Thus, if Luhmann's theory of the observer, a central part of his systems theory, offers the methodological framework for a revision of the debate, *Gravity's Rainbow* provides the stimulus taken from literary practice, and functions for the purposes of this essay as a re-conditioning, a decidedly new movie or, to bring Gerhardt von Göll's latest film into play, a new dope. As such, it is also a didactic movie, one teaching both *Vanya* and *Vanya's* observer, the reader response theoretician, a lesson. Reading its reader subtext, watching it as a movie made with Emulsion J, which reveals a director-audience-relation face just beneath the ordinary plot surface, they experience the effect of "a film we have not learned to see" (760).¹ Reader response criticism should not close its eyes, or leave the theatre, but rather take this phrase as advice, as a promise, as an imperative.

In striking similarity to the preterite figures in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vanya* begins his quest for a hermeneutically decipherable meaning, that is, one that emerges from the text itself, all the while relying on logical parameters like the cause-and-effect scheme and the neighboring category of chronology. And why should he not behave like that? The novel appears conventionally woven, with its ingredients of mystery

and enigmas, like Slothrop getting hardons whenever there are V-2 rockets heading for London, or Grigori, the octopus, attacking Katje on the French Riviera. The unspoken promise behind these incidents is that the cause for these visible effects will eventually be discovered. For sure, *some* of the riddles indeed get solved, fueling and inciting Vanya, reassuring him, and thus they confirm the old conditioning pattern: Grigori's behavior, for instance, turns out to be the result of Pointsman's intriguing conditioning of the octopus by means of a film secretly shot at Pirate Prentice's maisonette.

But as the novel explicitly claims in perhaps the very first of its reader-subtext passages: "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*" (3). The nexus of, for example, rocket strikes and erections remains an unresolved puzzle for both Slothrop and Vanya. It remains an effect without a visible cause—an effect that by itself brings about the quester's activity, be it, again, Slothrop or Vanya who starts looking for *the* cause.

Vanya now experiences a delusionary reversal of "real" time. Situated in a state of belatedness to *Gravity's Rainbow's* market launch, the reader, in true paranoid fashion, begins to make up the cause for the effects described in the text. In other words, Vanya-reader, in his state of belatedness, finagles the causes denied to him by the text. And this implies nothing less than the reversal of chronology as well as of the cause-and-effect pattern.

The reader subtext gives evidence of this reversal of chrono-logical arrangements in the connotations given to the rocket and the film motifs.² Supersonic rockets as well as films have the potential to suspend the cause-and-effect pattern, a pattern that both the preterite figures and Vanya have until then taken for granted as a firm coordinate; in terms of conditionings, it thus serves as one of the stimuli they expect to encounter. For Vanya, rocket and film appear to follow a counterclockwise mode, a mode contrary to the one he expects—reason enough to betray surprise and confusion, as do Slothrop, Pirate, Pointsman himself, Enzian and Franz Pökler, who all reflect on or experience directly this effect of time-reversal. Pirate observes that the rocket "travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you're still around, you hear the sound of it coming in" (7). By the same token, the phenomenon of Slothrop's erections has apparently nothing to do with what might be termed the V-1 conditionings, those that represent the well-known chronological mode. Here, says Pointsman, "any doodle close enough [. . .] ought to be giving him an erection: the sound of the motor razzing louder and louder, then the cutoff and silence, suspense building up—then the explosion. Boing, a hardon." Instead, Slothrop

apparently “only gets erections when this sequence happens *in reverse*. Explosion first, then the sound of approach: the V-2” (86). The link to the lost chronological order and to the film domain as well is drawn in a conversation between Pointsman and Spectro:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out . . . a few feet of film run backwards . . . the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what’s already death and burning. (48)

Accordingly, Vanya on his text-reader level is doomed to be hit by the rocket *Gravity’s Rainbow* when he acts out of his old conditionings, looking for a stimulus that is apparently no longer there, and trying to provide for the cause that the text refuses to communicate. In his belated, delusionary self, Vanya will only create the book as a rocket, although as text, it precedes Vanya’s act of reading. It is Vanya himself who makes the paradoxical arrangement perfect—a rocket that necessarily preexists the reader-dog’s reading, but only comes into being by this very reading act, a latent potential gaining concreteness. Observed from a strictly phenomenological perspective, the rocket turns into a rocket only after the book was launched on the literary market: it is only in the future of the book’s 1973 publication that its causes will be sought; it is then that the assumed reversal of time comes into existence.

In this very context, the following remark on Pökler’s mode of existence gains a completely new meaning, the engineer now standing for Vanya, and the rocket for *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* eventually turning into, getting constructed as, a supersonic missile: “Pökler was an extension of the Rocket, long before it was ever built” (402). Here the narrator, as one of the book’s own agents necessarily preceding Vanya, makes from his earlier temporal vantage an almost providential claim about Vanya’s fate as reader. In other words, the history of Vanya’s mode of reading has always and forever been determined and prearranged. In this sense, Vanya also runs parallel to the Schwarzkommando: Andreas Orukambe, explaining to Slothrop the teleological and future-bound implications inherent in the search for their V-2, remarks that the rocket

“was waiting for us when we came north to Germany so long ago . . . even confused and uprooted as we were then, we *knew* that our destiny was tied up with its own. That we had been passed over by von Trotha’s army so that we would find the Aggregat.” (563)

Andreas's depiction of the rocket-Aggregat discovery in terms of a deterministic, or preconceived, undercurrent to his tribe's history here resembles Vanya's own embodiment of the Aggregat-book's working principles: all converges in the—necessarily belated—focus of the reading act, and all has right from the start been arranged to come about only in the climactic, epiphanic moment of the book's concretization by its reader.

The description of the effects von Göll's film *New Dope* has on its audience at Der Platz in Berlin fuses the principles of counter-chronology and counter-entropic bundling, as appears from the illustration of bullets which return into gunbarrels:

There is a movie going on, under the rug. [. . .] The title is *New Dope*, and that's what it's about, a brand new kind of dope that nobody's ever heard of. [. . .] It is the dope that finds *you*, apparently. Part of a reverse world whose agents run around with guns which are like vacuum cleaners operating in the direction of life—pull the trigger and bullets are sucked back out of the recently dead into the barrel, and the Great Irreversible is actually reversed. (745)

The rocket and the film *New Dope* find Vanya—a finding that, once again, is possible only on the basis of Vanya's customary conditionings, his old dog perspective, or old dope, his expectations and searching moves, which prove co-responsible for the effect of being found, or hit. Not even the shadow of a doubt remains that the missile *Gravity's Rainbow* will hit its target. Everything appears fixed and determined right from the start: with dreamlike certainty, the missile will come down on the roofs of movie theatres, and on top of the skulls of preterite and *prete-reader* alike. The subtext continues accordingly, embracing Pirate's thoughts at the very beginning of the novel and its apocalyptic ending inside the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles. "What if it should hit *exactly*—ah, no—for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull" (7), Pirate muses about the "[i]ncoming mail" (6), the V-2 he observes approaching London. And just a few lines before William Slothrop's hymn and the final "Now everybody—," the text reads:

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t. (760)

When sent to Blizna-Heidelager by Weissmann to observe the fall of one of the test rockets, Pökler finds himself in much the same situation; his feeling of crucifixion and of resolving dissemination echoes another figure's fate, and makes Slothrop's end as "a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection" (625) interpretable on the reader-subtext level too:

[T]he day Pökler went out to sit in the Polish meadows at the exact spot where the Rocket was supposed to come down, he was certain.

[. . .] Pökler was by a small trench, in the Sarnaki target area, pointing his binoculars south toward Blizna like everybody else: waiting. Erwartung [the German word for expectation] in the crosshairs, with the just-sprung rye blowing [. . .] and at the very center down there, in the holy X, Pökler, crucified, invisible at first look, but in a moment . . . *now* beginning to resolve as the fall gathers momentum— (424)

The rocket spoken of here might in fact kill Pökler, but the cinematic book won't kill the reader, and Vanya will be doomed to live on, although, as reader-dog, he will forever be denied the revelatory insight into the central secret underlying the text. In this respect, he will be surrounded by textual silence, will never hear the sound of the rocket that he has turned *Gravity's Rainbow* into. Like Slothrop in "the white tiled room half an hour before hose-out time," Vanya experiences that "it isn't sooner and it isn't later, because the sound-shadow comes down on him" (696). The time has come to face a new conditioning, one which imposes paradoxes on the reader-dog by means of a text whose author, it appears, assumes the role of a second-order behaviorist, an anonymous agent of conditionings of a higher kind. The Pointsman of the subtext level is Pynchon himself, entering the stage of his own novel incognito, inviting the reader to come to grips with the ultraparadoxical phase inflicted on him just as he invites Vanya to

Come into the bulbshine and sit with him, with the stranger at the small public table. It's almost hosing-out time. See if you can sneak in under the shadow too. Even a partial eclipse is better than never finding out—better than cringing the rest of your life under the great Vacuum in the sky they have taught you, and a sun whose silence you never get to hear. (697)

After so much confusion and so many delusionary twists, the question remains: does *Gravity's Rainbow* leave Vanya in his deplorable state for good, or is there also a tipoff how to come to grips with the reader's precarious present situation? Indeed, the subtext offers, it

seems, a helping hand, and calls for the founding of a reader network to overcome the uncanny ultraparadoxical condition—a counterforce of prete-readers. The individual Vanya in his solitary confrontation with Pynchon's book parallels Pöckler finding himself reduced to just a "Victim in a Vacuum," a song title recalling the sound-shadow's vacuum. A couple of notes in the note inserted into the song echo the novel's famous last words:

All together now, all you masochists out there, specially those of you don't have a partner tonight, alone with those fantasies that don't look like they'll ever come true—want you just to join in here with your brothers and sisters, let each other know you're alive and sincere, try to break through the silences, try to reach through and connect. (415)

It is here where the concept of "[c]reative paranoia" seems to fit in, the concept Pirate propagates for "developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system" (638).

The path to be suggested here will differ, however, from the obvious advice the subtext gives. Instead of propagating a reader community for the sake of coming to grips with the paradoxical implications the novel's reading evokes, it features an adherence to the concept of an individual reader. It does not rely on the spatial dimension of the social—many interconnected readers simultaneously present—but rather stands up for a solitary, and therefore necessarily temporal alternative. For this sake, Vanya the reader must become Vanya the *observer*.

From a phenomenological point of view, the ordinary, chronological cause-and-effect scheme still prevails—although admittedly, it is one beyond Vanya's grasp, one outside his reach, beyond his self-inflicted quests for causes that made the reader-dog go paranoid: it can be observed only by an observer who is different from Vanya in the ultraparadoxical phase. The cause, after all, remains the novel itself, no matter how confusing Vanya's moves inside *Gravity's Rainbow's* intricate maze are, and the effect remains the delusionary state of the ultraparadoxical phase. On this meta-level, where the book's initiator assumes the role of the conditioning mastermind, and which lies, it appears, beyond victimized Vanya's tinged scope of apprehension, there are both a response—paranoia—and a stimulus to be made out—namely the very lack of a stimulus in the sense of the one Vanya had expected. All this calls for a Vanya who arranges his observations in a sequential order, one after another—which takes time. This, then, provides the nexus to Luhmann's theory of the observer.

Luhmann describes the act of observing as the drawing of a distinction, as the division into “two sides,” as he calls it, and the concentration on one of these sides—an act which in the long run helps to support a system’s self-containing quality as well as its stability.³ Defined as an operation that renders the world’s unmarked state into a marked one only by creating the mentioned binarisms, observing by itself necessarily produces recurrent paradoxes, for it is in the one act that the two sides find concretization (Luhmann, WG 95). Luhmann further differentiates between what he terms first- and second-order observations, and it is here where the constructive potential as well as the epistemological value of his concept lies, and where the operation’s own paradoxical implications are outweighed—and, ideally, countered—by the insights that might result from the operation. Not only will a second-order observer conceive of any accomplished first-order observation as a paradox-ridden fact; what is more, he himself will observe the very mode of that first-order observation, that is, the way it handles its inherent paradox (98). This implies another highly relevant aspect both for the theory’s own outline and for the intended transfer to the fields of para-dogmatic reading. Since any second-order observer creates a certain perspective on (or toward) the first-order observation, the very act of this second-order observation itself will necessarily carry self-referential traits (77). As a consequence, second-order acts of self-observation can also be effected; but these can by definition be accomplished only after a regular observation, that is, an observation preceding the reflexive one.⁴ Subsequence and temporality are hence the ultimate principles which, in the final instance, determine a reading manner that aims at putting into perspective the mentioned paradoxical implications superimposed on the reading individual by texts like *Gravity’s Rainbow*.⁵

All this can be retranslated into or projected onto Vanya’s very mode of reading: it may both help to explain how he has been irreversibly affected by the text’s inherent conditioning program and provide him with a theoretically advanced tool to come to grips with the dire consequences his traditional conditioning has had for him.

For Vanya, to observe means to create, or construe, a paradox. The two conditioning modes, that is, Vanya’s culturally imposed hermeneutic and the opposite one of a text which irreversibly appears to embrace and incorporate the first, represent a distinction of that kind—where once the distinction is drawn, no dialectic synthesis is possible any longer. Any reconciliatory move or attempt to merge the contradictory fashions is bound to fail, and will evoke only the painful paranoia experience of the ultraparadoxical phase. The crucial step to

take will, with Luhmann, consist of yet another step of observation, one in the course of which the previous, flawed step gets recognized, after all, as inadequate, and as responsible for Vanya's present state of mind. Only here, only now, after undergoing the brainracking *Gravity's Rainbow* experience, is there a chance for something like recovery—a chance that coincides with both a growth of awareness and an increase of complexity for the second-order observer Vanya himself.⁶ A painstaking process of learning it is, but there is apparently no alternative to it—for Vanya.

Yet there might be such an alternative for us—if we cultivate a self-understanding that defines us, for the time being, as the critical observers of textual phenomena as they become unbound in/by *Gravity's Rainbow* and ultimately hit the book's reader; as the critical retrospective observers of the Pynchon Industry's very own discourses; and, say, as the critical observers of a bygone theoretical debate. We can skip over Vanya's more precarious phases if we derive certain conclusions from how other readers observed (and documented their observations) before our own observation. And just like parasites, we can set Vanya's dire experience parallel to, for instance, what the controversy between reader response theoreticians Iser and Fish ended up with—namely the selfsame aporetic diagnosis. A learning effect can, in other words, also be brought about if one learns from other observers' questionable assumptions. Observe the observer: applied second-order observation, according to Luhmann. And the more other observers there are, the more will the final diagnosis consolidate from vagueness to certainty.

With regard to the experience factor, reader response critic Fish's views strikingly coincide with the condition Vanya ends up in, which presents us with a remarkable case of "a Fish called Vanya." Fish postulates the experience of reading as the very meaning of literature, and candidly highlights his own reading experiences (Fish 48ff.). In doing this, however, he violates the underlying agreement, the old premise, among reader response critics to produce theoretical patterns that must claim to be universally valid: so Iser remarks, for whom Fish undertakes "too" close a reading, one that "can only invoke an experience which, though indisputable, remains inaccessible to the theorist" (Iser 32). Iser himself indeed stays on firm theoretical ground, yet he shies away from the very consequences his negation theoremes imply. "The process of negation . . . situates the reader halfway between a 'no longer' and a 'not yet,'" he claims (213). His very own theoretical design, however, constantly denies the recognition that it is also he, Iser himself, who is caught halfway here. Iser utterly fails to outline the new conditions which would necessarily let his line of

argumentation tip over to the other side, and involve the reader in the reader-theoretician Iser in the very way Fish was frank enough to admit in his case.

The mutually exclusive positions of the two reader response critics confirm (and thus further stabilize) the diagnosis for Vanya, for just like the dog's hermeneutic and ultraparadoxical post-hermeneutic phases, Fish's allegedly too close and Iser's evidently too detached reading modes end up in a paradox. Thus it marks yet another observation: *now* the one which has been undertaken *here*, in this very text, for the sake of its thesis's consolidation. And as such, as yet another observation, it is now, half a minute before hose-out time, in for its own observer-reader's second-order verdict.

Unlike Them in "Their white Metropolis far away" (GR 285), where a total view seems possible, a simultaneous visual grasp of both sides of every observer's differentiation, we over here are doomed to follow the way of the paradox lanes. But a reading that is understood as *observing* can render the dire consequences less edgy, and can possibly help us come to grips with texts that artistically exploit post-hermeneutic axioms also in their reader subtext, as *Gravity's Rainbow* obviously does. It is as if Peter Sachsa, the medium, intones in the voice not only of Walter Rathenau but also of Vanya, still a dog, but now a conscious one, and no longer a test dog. Vanya, unobservable by now, beyond the bookend, as he reflects on the basic ideas of a lesson drawn from a film he has at last learned to see: "'The path is clear,' a voice moving Sachsa's lips and rigid white throat. 'You are constrained, over there, to follow it in time, one step after another'" (165).

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Notes

¹Film director von Göll

used to get cut rates on most of his film stock, especially on the peculiar and slow-moving "Emulsion J," invented by Laszlo Jamf, which somehow was able, even under ordinary daylight, to render the human skin transparent to a depth of half a millimeter, revealing the face just beneath the surface. (387)

²See, for the rocket motif, McHoul and Wills 212; and for the film motif, among many others, Berressem 151ff.

³For a concise outline of Luhmann's observer axioms, see WG 68–121. Luhmann's particular understanding of what the sociological theory of systems consists of is plainly illustrated in his *Soziale Systeme*.

⁴For the nexus between self-observation and reflexion, see Luhmann, WG 83ff.

⁵See Luhmann, WG 80, where he states that a second-order observer might “dissolve” paradoxes by making reference to (and use of) the temporal dimension.

⁶It has been one of the major motivations for Luhmann’s sociological approach to outline a model by means of which both individuals and society as a whole come to an improved understanding of the complexity surrounding them. Accordingly, his key phrase *Soziologische Aufklärung* (sociological enlightenment) explicitly aims at the expansion of man’s capacity ultimately to reduce the world’s (or environment’s) complexity by constructively drawing differences.

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