

Textual Orbits/Orbiting Criticism:  
Deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow

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Effect, n. The second of two phenomena which always occur together in the same order. The first, called a Cause, is said to generate the other--which is no more sensible than it would be for one who has never seen a dog except in pursuit of a rabbit to declare the rabbit the cause of the dog.

--Ambrose Bierce,  
The Devil's Dictionary

I. Project and Projectile

The list of projects critics have imputed to Gravity's Rainbow generates a type of encyclopedia. There are projects of becoming, projects of knowledge, projects of social import, projects of reading and critical style, and projects of science. No wonder Edward Mendelson goes so far as to call the text an encyclopedic narrative, part of a class of books that "are metonymic compendia of the data, both scientific and aesthetic, valued by their culture. They attempt to incorporate representative elements of all the varieties of knowledge their societies put to use."<sup>1</sup>

But weighted down with so many imputed projects and while so many "data" accumulate and await deciphering--the text seems to be slipping away. Not that Mendelson means that the text results from a scissors-and-paste job performed on certain parts of encyclopedias, compendia of arcana, learned papers, books-of-the-month. Not that "data" fill in the void left by the text. Not even that, as Molly Hite says, ". . . Pynchon is flouting conventions that require an explicable coherence from the work of art precisely because the work of art must stand in ironic contrast to the 'chaos' of reality."<sup>2</sup> Quite simply, the "text" itself is slipping away.

That is, as a totalizing encyclopedia of Western Civilization, the text of Gravity's Rainbow is replaced by a double-edged series of alleged intentions and imputed goals. In the first place, it is reported that

projects such as history--World War II, the V-bombs, people who worked on the bombs, their lives, for example--generate the text, stand behind it, give it legitimacy, and impel it toward readers. In the next place (or in a simultaneous act, depending on how one reads), from this tissue of intentions the reader reportedly discerns the goals of the text and forms ideas such as: The Influence of World War II on American Fiction; Technology and Post-War Fiction; How Biography Enriches Fiction; etc. In this series of glosses and goals, meanings imputed, created, discovered, and replaced--the text slips away.

Slipping away is not the best phrase, perhaps. Actually, the text may better be regarded as a projectile: The projectile is launched, follows a presumed course, leaves a trace (or contrail if one prefers a more visible simulacrum), and presumably is targeted toward a certain objective. The assumption of a target means that the text/projectile will have an impact somewhere. What is more, the projects of the projectile are simply descriptions of the most likely points of impact. That one or more points of impact are possible or are to be anticipated need not disturb post-modernists. Thomas H. Schaub even opines that "Pynchon knows that he is addressing an audience addicted to knowing, and one which believes passionately in 'the facts.' . . . Pynchon's books are filled with so much knowledge, and flooded with so many facts and their endless relations, that they trigger in the reader a . . . hopeful expectation that reading them will result in enlightenment."<sup>3</sup>

However, the displacement of the projectile/text during an encyclopedic quest after knowledge is accompanied not by enlightenment, but rather by a series of metalepses (defined by Jonathan Culler as the substitutions of causes for effects).<sup>4</sup> In an event presumed to be unitary, the trajectory of the text produces a series of equations; that is, the projectile's formulas/sources/analogs theoretically make meaning manifest and support both the projectile and the readings that purport to track its progress. The simulacra of formulas/sources/analogs gloss over the text and ultimately are taken as a unity that corresponds with or is equifinal with the projectile/text.<sup>5</sup>

With metalepses, then, devolve another series of texts that in some respects have supplanted the projectile; one may, in fact, speculate that the critical or collateral texts are in orbit around the projectile. But hence again arises a series of problems: Schaub, for example, maintains that a "revelatory unity is present in the text, but without confirmation or recognition" (4). Yet how can unity be present, unconfirmed, and unrecognized?<sup>6</sup> --And by whom? And if the posited unity can be said to exist (some where, some how), then how is the posited unity available for discussion or analysis? In short, the presumption of a unitary theme assumes that the text as object has both a predictable impact and a certain intentionality. Further, because the "revelatory unity" is equated with the projectile/text taken as a unit, this "revelatory unity" must be a fixed item, still and frozen forever--the text at Absolute Zero, posited in an indecomposable absolute--Culler's felicitous phrase for a notion or object that is or signifies only itself and therefore is never amenable to discussion or analysis (see Culler, Chapter One).

Yet the "revelatory unity," posited as the projectile/text, "achieves" meanings (reaches "targets"), according to Schaub, because of the text/projectile's "insistence that meaningfulness requires uncertainty," and "Pynchon's style, then, opens up a space between chance and design, experience and meaning, and the profane and the sacred" (107, 108). Peter L. Cooper develops this theme in a different orbit: "Uncertainty . . . is not just a theme: it is also a technique, or rather an ultimate effect that Pynchon achieves through all of his fictional techniques."<sup>7</sup> Hite further suggests that ". . . Gravity's Rainbow dictates the terms on which [the novel's] totalization should be possible, even as it resists totalization" (97). However, the textual "unity" produced by critical orbits of "uncertainty" is paradoxical, since the manifest uncertainty is presumed to be masking a latent unity.

In fact, Gravity's Rainbow mocks the very process by which the text is reduced and treated as a conveniently fixed unity:

Is there a single root, deeper than anyone has probed [. . .]? Or has [Slothrop] by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words. . . .<sup>8</sup>

The point is that the "mathematics of combination" is not an equation of the sort that one can reconstruct or reduplicate from a textbook. And no equation will determine the meaning or even the impact of Gravity's Rainbow. Nor are footnotes of much help; consider Schaub's finding that:

The V-bomb distribution is one of the most well-known examples of a Poisson distribution. Pynchon may have read about it in an introductory statistics course at Cornell University. A footnote in Feller's An Introduction to Probability Theory refers his readers to the Journal of the Institute of Actuaries and a brief one-page article by R. D. Clarke, F.I.A., of the Prudential Assurance Company, Ltd., entitled "An Application of the Poisson Distribution." (108)

But the prudential assurance of a footnote only limits the possibilities of the text as such; that is, a footnote seems to generate a series of texts, ignoring the text qua text. Or to return to the notion that the text is in orbit: The attempt to surround the text with so many critical orbits that the text is--if not absolutely fixed--at least located within an area defined by probabilities, is itself an attempt to reduce the text to a limit of  $\Delta x$ . And the text makes explicit the problematic of reducing changes and attempting by equations to still that which is not inherently a product of equations. For example, "film and calculus, both pornographies of flight" (GR, 567), are assumed to be central to the text. But the text makes clear the potential futility of equations, calculus, calculations:

In the static space of the architect, he might've used a double integral now and then, early in his career, to find volumes under surfaces whose equations were known--masses, moments, centers of gravity. [. . .] But in the dynamic space of the living Rocket [/Text], the double integral has a different meaning. To integrate here is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled. . . . "Meters per second" will integrate to "meters." (301)

And were this not enough warning from the text, the passage just cited is introduced by an exchange between Etzel Ülsch, designer of the Mittelwerke, and the gnome Apprentice Hupla:

"It-it's about the shape of the tunnels here, Master."

"Don't flinch like that. I based that design on the double lightning-stroke, Hupla--the SS emblem."

"But it's also a double integral sign! Did you know that?"

"Ah. Yes: Summe, Summe, as Leibniz said. Well, isn't that--"

BLAM. (300)

One can wonder whether Etzel is like an Edsel, whether the gnome is gnomonic, whether the double integral is related to the "Ss" on the novel's second page, whether Leibniz said or wrote "Summe, Summe" (much less what he meant if he said it, or what resonance this has with the text), whether this is just more Hoopla, or whether such trains of thought are detonated by a BLAM.

The text calls into question not only the calculus of reading but also the reading of reading. Slothrop, by Jamf's crypt,<sup>9</sup> begins to read a document that Slothrop has sought, a document that is supposed to be about Jamf but is equally (one infers--the text, strictly speaking, is silent on this point) about Slothrop, a document that far from ending any quest on Slothrop's part appears relatively early in the quest/text. Were reading not sufficiently problematic, the text specifies that:

The absence of Jamf surrounds him [Slothrop/reader] like an odor, one he knows but can't quite name, an aura that threatens to go epileptic any second. The information is here--not as much as he wanted (aw, how much was that?) but more than he hoped, being one of those practical Yankees. In the weeks ahead, in those very few moments he'll be allowed to wallow in his past, he may even have time to wish he hadn't read any of it. . . . (269)

A reader may infer that the "information is here" at the same time that the reader does not know the information, at the same time that a parenthetical voice is speaking up, at the same time that the reader's reader (Slothrop) is potentially generating another orbit through his regional proclivities.

Not too surprisingly, Slothrop's readings have not been considered determinants of critical orbits around Gravity's Rainbow, even though his attempts to read his own history form a significant portion of the text. In this case, the combination of the very science and reading inherently questioned in/excluded from the text itself has been used in critical orbits that tend to fix the text as a closed item. The result is that in such cases Slothrop is not allowed to read; to the contrary, he is read. That is, from the orbits about the text, the hierarchy of meaning is subject to a curious set of rules. For example, once it is stipulated that Slothrop is like an electron, then it is relatively simple to presume that in the Zone, Slothrop is in orbit. As every schoolboy knows,<sup>10</sup> the next step is to jump a level without mentioning that one is jumping a level in reading, to invoke Heisenberg (for some reason, Korzybski is out of fashion in such reading circles<sup>11</sup>) to the effect that one can never know exactly where the electron/Slothrop is. Whatever affective validity such a construct may have for some readers, the jumping of levels can lead to critical orbits that obliterate the text, as in Cooper's conclusion that "Even Pynchon characters other than fetishists or sado-masochists behave so as to dissolve the borders between recognizable individuals but also between animate beings and inanimate objects" (50). But what is said about Slothrop?--that nothing can be

said? That he is indeterminate? Indeterminable? Undetermined? Without a terminus? That a failure in a project of reading erases a text and substitutes an orbiting discourse?

Thus, from certain critical orbits it may appear that Slothrop is dissipating (problems with someone's grasp of  $\Delta t$ ,  $\Delta x$ ?) while in Part Four readers "will want cause and effect" (663). Actually, after the text's excursions into the problematics of reading, being, and being read, Part Four is refreshingly stochastic--defined analogically by Gregory Bateson as a word that derives from "Greek, stochazein, to shoot with a bow at a target; that is, to scatter events in a partially random manner, some of which achieve a preferred outcome" (230). Slothrop's so-called dissipation, the problematics of reading, and the scattering of events are all complicated because while the text/projectile is in orbit, and while no one is taking credit for launching the text/projectile, there is no authority, no set of equations, to reassure readers about where the text is supposed to land. In short, to date no one can specify a "preferred outcome."

## II. Lost Causes

While the text is in orbit, the question of its point of launch is subject to debate, and in the absence of a ruling authority, the name-of-the-father cannot be enunciated. The text again is suspended, for there exists no authority for its issue. Thus, it is not uncommon for a certain tone of embarrassment to creep into critical orbits; Cooper, for example, begins by saying that "Reading Pynchon, or, certainly, writing about him, should make us self-conscious, for as readers and critics, we ape the plights and practices of the characters about whom we read" (1).<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Mathew Winston says: "I am also uneasy because the nature of Pynchon's writings compels me to examine my own reasons for pursuing the information I have sought."<sup>13</sup> Mendelson, among others, pursues a slightly different orbit in asserting that "Almost alone among his contemporaries, Pynchon has refused to let 'Pynchon' stand for anything but his books" (1). But this compounds the problematic, for at the same time, "Pynchon" is taken

to stand for two separate things: first, as a proper name, "Pynchon" may be the name-of-a-person; second, "Pynchon" may be taken as equifinal with the name-of-a-person who also is reportedly the progenitor of a text.

Beyond these considerations, there is a collateral and cultural habit asserting that an individual logic and talent produces a property that is consumed as text. Again according to this tradition or critical orbit, the progenitor of a text is at liberty to legitimize certain approaches to the text. That is, in certain circles, the logos of the progenitor permeates and sustains the text, and since progenitors typically are taken for males, a certain phallogocentrism governs many of the orbits around Gravity's Rainbow.

But again, the text mocks or elides such phallogocentrism. The "penis of official commendation" (GR, 516) is absent, and it is a mistake to assume that one can double-integrate, stop the action, determine a legitimizing source. Again the text is not subject to such simple means of recuperation: "all right, say we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop . . ." (520). Yet instead of a "penis of official commendation" there is a simulacrum, a rocket, and the quest for authority--be it for 00000, which still adds up to zero, void, null set--or for an Author.

Thus the metalepsis is doubled: "Pynchon"/author in some way produces a text that in some way produces results and readings and meanings. That is, "Pynchon" (sous rature) inscribes himself in a text and in the same gesture is circumscribed from the text. The text then is presumed to be in a certain trajectory, and attempts to fix that supposed trajectory instead inscribe orbits about it.

Another equation is the last thing we need--the text is already sufficiently plural. It has not yet been located, in spite of all the equations. Rather,



it has dislocated itself, and readers of the text are well advised to bear in mind Jean Pierre Faye's observation that a critique or reading is itself an activity subject to the same problematic that governs the text under examination:

Because history/story makes itself only in recounting itself, a critique of history/story cannot be exercised except by recounting how history/story, in narrating itself, produces itself.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Faye's historicity should be tempered with an observation regarding the very starting point of thinking about reading/writing; as Jacques Derrida says, we must "think the present starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral."<sup>15</sup> This is not simply a call for a so-called new approach. The text is always already a new departure.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edward Mendelson, "Introduction," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1981), 116. Schaub's next sentence mentions Pynchon's "encyclopedic knowledge."

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 87.

<sup>5</sup> strictly speaking, this projectile-cum-critical-orbits is not the "text" that ostensibly is under discussion, and for this reason, "text" should be understood under erasure (sous rature), following Derrida's practice. A theoretical discussion of the implications of this practice would create another orbit in the present writing (as does this footnote); see Derrida's Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976); Spivak's preface, esp. xiv ff., is helpful in explaining this practice.

<sup>6</sup> A text under erasure--"inaccurate but necessary, and thus

legible" as Spivak says (xiv)--may be so, but Schaub seems to be discussing the projectile as viewed from a very particular critical orbit.

<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Cooper, Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 174.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 391.

<sup>9</sup> Or the reader--by Slothrop's story. It is curious that while critical orbits dissect Slothrop, they do not highlight parallels between Slothrop's problems with reading and those of readers reading.

<sup>10</sup> See Gregory Bateson's Mind and Nature (New York: Dutton, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity, 4th ed. (Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library, 1958). See, e.g., 58.

<sup>12</sup> Just as I feel no need to carry on about parallels between rockets and phalluses, I shall not insist on a Freudian reading of Cooper's remark.

<sup>13</sup> Mathew Winston, "The Quest for Pynchon," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 253.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Pierre Faye, Théorie du récit (Paris: Hermann [Coll. Savoir], 1972), 9, my translation. Faye writes: "Parce que l'histoire ne se fait ou'en se racontant, une critique de l'histoire ne peut être exercée qu'en racontant comment l'histoire, en se narrant, se produit."

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, De la grammatologie (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 237, Culler's translation. Derrida writes: "penser le present à partir du temps comme différance."