

Thomas Pynchon and the American Dream

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Look at a rainbow. While it lasts, it is, or appears to be, a great arc of many colors occupying a position out there in space. . . . And now, before it fades, recollect all you have ever been told about the rainbow and its causes, and ask yourself the question Is it really there?

--Owen Barfield

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Ever since Emerson--since long before Emerson actually, but I have to start somewhere, so I start with an open-and-shut case--American writers have struggled to liberate themselves from their Puritan heritage;¹ from the doctrine of predestination, which says that the present and the future are irrevocably determined by the absolute past; and from the doctrine of total depravity, which says that no matter what you do you are sure to do it wrong. As against predestination, the American wants to believe that the present is a time of origination; as against total depravity, that actions proceed from an innocent mind and will. The American dream is a dream of innocence and originality.

To continue with the obvious: the dream never comes true. Emerson's manifesto of originary self-reliance is fixated on the past it refuses and repeats; his protestation of transcendental innocence is a denial of corruption corrupted by the guilt it disavows. His consciousness blocks out realities (sexuality, death, etc.) that do not illustrate his thesis.² But the repressed returns to cloud his Edenic vision. Cataracts, as it were, of the transparent eyeball. Hawthorne cannot decide between the antinomian forest and the orthodox city. Temperamentally unable to breathe the transcendental gas, he has no illusions of natural innocence, and he knows that reality demands (though it will not inevitably reward) a candid confession of guilt and a stoic acceptance of destiny. His hopes for the future of the race are scarcely more

than wistful longings for an emancipation he sees no reason (in principle) to believe in. In "Song of Myself" Whitman manages to achieve the ideal American personality: Adamic, free, forward looking, sound of body and soul. But only as a myth. A colossal fiction that he himself did not and could not inhabit. A fiction that presumed to encompass crucifixion and resurrection (Christ's or, equivalently, Walt's), but which could not even contain the Civil War. Whitman's poetry, which begins as a celebration of life, passes through clouds of windy mysticism and ends in rapt meditation on death. Whitman the man, who displays himself on the frontispiece of his first edition as a hippie Christ, winds up hyping the good grey poet. A model of hygienic purity if not an insufferable prude.

The list could go on forever. But you get the drift. The question is: Why is it (apparently) impossible for Americans to escape the negations of New England Calvinism? The answer, I think, is simple. Am I still explaining the obvious when I surmise that for the American writer Puritanism is indistinguishable from reality? The conduct of life, the regulation of society, and the production of literary texts (inter alia) depend on the preservation of order (read: suppression of disorder) and respect for reason (read: suppression of the passions). But the only available paradigm of reason and order is Calvinist theology (or one of its secular derivatives), and outside the boundaries of that paradigm nothing has the right to exist, save in hell and Rhode Island.

That was (of course) exactly what the guardians of orthodoxy had in mind. In Michael Wigglesworth's great poem on the last judgment, the ultimacy and acceptability of the divine decrees, even for the preterite, is a function of their superior rationality. The reprobate infants appear before the throne of God and protest their innocence. But after God has taken off their arguments one by one and demonstrated their culpability, their consciences confess that "his Reasons are the stronger." The punishment of the damned is tolerable to the elect because it satisfies the demand for moral order no matter what the cost in personal wretchedness.³

Therefore, when American writers try (as they always do) to reject predestination (the tyranny of the past) and total depravity (the tyranny of guilt) in favor of originality and innocence, they are bound to see their exit from Puritanism as a flight from reason to unreason and from order into chaos. But this is intolerable--the irrational cannot be borne--and literally insufferable--the unordered cannot be--and so they invariably retreat, under whatever cover of mystification, into the very structures they tried to break out of. Guilt and predestination are the American reality, for which there is no cure that is not worse than the disease.

How else could one write a book? To write a book is to impose order and rationality on the boundless possibilities of language. The writer functions as a Calvinist God, predestining the creatures of his pen to weal or woe, inscribing in them from the first their total dependence on his authorial and authoritative decrees. The possibility of the book, presuming an omnipotent and omniscient narrator, demands the belatedness and impotence of its characters. In both senses of that word. The book itself, bound snugly within its covers, with well-defined beginning, middle, and end, is the suppression of everything irrational and chaotic. Life may occasionally fall apart, and death, while it does end things, is rarely a consummation. But the book hangs together and provides its readers with a convincing and fulfilling conclusion. Every Book is Domesday: a graphematic eschaton.

Now then, riding the same old rails, here comes Tom Pynchon, belated and guilt-ridden and very wise about all these things. His Puritan paranoid reflex honed to a fine edge and blown up to more than cosmic proportions, he too wants out. He wants a way out of war and work and government and austerity, and a way in to love, dreams, the spirit, the senses, and all the trivial joys that might (if there were any) fill the idle hours.⁵ He also knows that there is no way out, or rather, that the way out of Puritan reason and Puritan order is the way to dissolution. The way of the preterite. But, unlike his predecessors, Thomas Pynchon bites the bullet. He writes Gravity's Rainbow. The book that Leaves of Grass and The Scarlet Letter just failed to be, a book that is and must be a

rejection of all the patterns and all the powers of the book.

A lot of people have trouble reading, or at least finishing, Pynchon's novel. Maybe they're on to something. After all, Gravity's Rainbow (hereafter GR) is not exactly your ordinary book. It's what happens to the book when it is released from the Puritan reflex. From the itch for order that creates international cartels to profit from international carnage, and from the lust of reason (aka technology) that rapes the universe with its rockets. GR is (therefore) a wholesale rejection of every standard of taste, an offense against every rule of literary decorum, and a repudiation of the conditions of literary reality. It is a monument to vulgarity and a wagonload (Pynchon would have said "shitload") of obscenities. Qua novel, it is a gratuitous indecency.

Well, not quite. Pynchon is not quite liberated. As he observes, paranoia keeps flooding in. In lots of ways Tyrone Slothrop and Thomas Pynchon are the same persona. Neither fully succeeds in freeing himself from the sense that he is dominated and victimized by all the Western, Christian, European, and American⁶ forms of reason and order: industry, technology, government, work, law, international finance, and . . . war. Which are, after all, just the secular reduction and global expansion of the Puritan ethos.

GR wants to live--honestly--outside the law. A compost of mindless pleasures, it celebrates moments of pure innocence and perfect originality neither scripted nor rehearsed nor staged but simply enjoyed. And yet, when anyone does step outside the boundaries drawn by the Firm, he is likely to be snuffed. Tantivy Mucker-Maffick was erased when he leaked Ned Pointsman's plot to Slothrop. What cannot be recovered for and reinstated in the system will be denied all reality by the system. Roger Mexico's love for Jessica Swanlake, which is authentic and therefore strictly out of bounds, is replaced by her preordained marriage to Jeremy. Roger was a holiday from the austerities of war conceded to Jessica by the Firm (it kept her happy in her work); her marriage to the Beaver is one of the even more terrible austerities of peace.

Almost without exception experiences that seem to have escaped the surveillance of the Firm turn out to be its products. Slothrop's hardon for Katje Borgesius, which looks spontaneous enough and issues more than one mindless ejaculation, is a reflex prepared in his infancy. His opportunity to stick it in and get it off is prearranged by Pointsman with the help of a carefully conditioned octopus. Katje herself is a witting co-conspirator. Brigadier General Pudding, now chained to a desk and obliged to shuffle papers, relives the reality of World War I (a reality compounded of mud, shit, blood, and the manly love of comrades) in his sado-masochistic rendezvous with the Queen of the Night, who forces him to eat her filth in exchange for the gift of pain. But the account of these meetings, at once nauseating and deeply moving, is finally chilling. Domina Nocturna is Katje Borgesius in leather and furs, her performance a scenario written, produced, and directed by Ned Pointsman (complete with laxative tablets).

Reality is a spectacular put on by the Firm. Literary reality included. Nothing exists outside the system save death and dissolution. But death and dissolution are themselves effects of the system. From the people who brought you reality. The Puritan God (and the omniscient narrator), when he elects a few for salvation (eternal life), by the same act consigns the remainder to damnation (everlasting death). Election is reprobation. Life is death. There is no escape. In or out, you are in--that is, a creature of--the Firm. For the Firm (God, the author, etc.) ordains the dichotomies (in or out, life or death) by which persons/personae are predestined and in which, therefore, they are trapped. It is not that there is nothing outside the system. It's much worse: there is no such thing as "outside." As Father Rapier observes: "Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of being connected one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good. The word has ceased to have meaning" (539). And as Roger Mexico realizes, the "interesting" (and probably unanswerable) question is "which is worse: living on as Their pet, or death?" (713). Whatever you decide, your life and your death are defined by Them. Death without and living death within. Sort of neutralizes the oppo-

sition; robs escape of its promise and does nothing to make captivity more attractive.

That's Pynchon's problem. Pynchon the writer. No wonder the stuttering raconteur of GR is embarrassed by his own omniscience and half-ashamed of the blatant artificiality of his artifice. If he plays omnipotence to the hilt, then (not only his characters but) we (gentle readers) obediently engorge when Super-Pointsman strokes our critical members. And if he shows his hand, tips his trick, we are cut loose to twist in the wind. You read what's set down for you or you don't read at all. Either way your number is up. Your goose (you are goosed) is well-done and hanging high.

Apparently. But maybe not quite. Pynchon-narrator is red-faced and red-handed. Caught in the act. Caught, that is, at the most embarrassing moment of all: between inauguration and completion, cause and effect, complication and denouement. The instant of ejaculation, which (if you're caught at it) is thereby forever premature and unconsummated.

GR is a text poised at Brennschluss. Burn-out: the interface between the exhaustion of the power that sent the rocket up and the first tug of the force that will bring it down. Suppose the inconceivable: if there were no gravity, the path of the rocket would be a straight line. After Brennschluss it would continue climbing forever, powered by inertia. But there is gravity, and the rocket falls. Gravity bends the straight line of its trajectory into a parabola. The instant after Brennschluss is the infinitesimal point (Δt) just before gravity takes charge: the bare far side of orgasm just before your cock shrivels and Chiquita's picture flutters to the bathroom floor. At that point the rocket is neither launched nor falling, but--in that timeless moment and only there--hanging in space.

GR and its anti-hero Tyrone Slothrop are likewise arrested in the moment, out of time and out of history, that follows the burn-out of Western civilization. World War II was the explosion that exhausted its power. The Zone (northern Europe after the collapse of the New Order) is the instant after Brennschluss, frozen forever in the text. In Pynchon's novel (at

least)" "There are . . . no zones but the Zone!" (333).

As Pynchon informs Karl Marx, "Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression" (317). The engine of death and repression, of which New England orthodoxy is only the American variant, also powers behaviorist psychology, captivated by a dream of perfect control. And the technology of plastics--fired by Kekulé's vision of the benzene ring as the worm ouroboros--aspires to replace nature with a wholly self-contained system of artificial substances. Not to mention war and the rocketry by which the art of war is perfected: a "celebration of markets" (105) planned and executed by homosexual masculinity, an introversion of the male principle which (even when it uses her) neutralizes and displaces the female. Emersonian self-reliance, via Whitmanian masturbatory self-sufficiency, ends as fatal faggotry in high places. And "the real and only fucking is done on paper" (616).⁸

The preterite of course continue to die. Like his precursors, Pynchon is obsessed with the thought of breaking out of Puritanism--away from death and repression--into the exuberant vitality of mindless pleasures. But for Pynchon, as for his predecessors, to run from Puritanism would be to run into madness and chaos. An escape from the system (rationality and order) would be an escape from being (identity) and truth (intelligibility). Why is Slothrop in the Zone? Either They have put him there for a reason, or else he's just there without reason. Paranoia or anti-paranoia? Tyrone isn't sure he wouldn't actually rather have that reason (434). With it he's doomed, without it he'll disappear. Can he make it in the Zone without Pointsman? As Pointsman's control is relaxed and finally withdrawn, Slothrop slowly disintegrates, becoming at first invisible and at last inconceivable. The escape does not come off. And the novel (which for that reason is not a novel) remains fixed at Δt , between "It is too late" (3) and "There is time" (760). GR is the uninhabitable interface between a deadly conspiracy of predestination and depravity and an impossible fantasy of innocence and originality. Literature at Brennschluss. The literature of exhaustion, with no repletion in sight.

Virtually (it is impossible to be sure) every character, object, event, and institution in GR is intricately and obscenely (in both senses) connected with every other. That these connections exist adumbrates a pattern in which every particular has its place, its identity, its destiny. But the very complexity and confusion of the linkages frustrates the will to order and insinuates that all of these "Kute Korrespondences" (590) are random and lawless. There is too much and (for that reason) too little. The reader trying to dope out this "novel" is stuck at the interface of paranoia--Pynchon has designed and executed this book, and it's up to me to figure out what it means--and anti-paranoia--the whole thing is a medley of incoherences, no one is really in control, and there's no point worrying about what it means. Is the reader's role defined and thus constrained by the Omniscient Narrator (Tom Pynchon playing God)? Or is he released, like Slothrop, to be dismembered and dispersed among the errant signifiers of a preterite text? Between the slippery signifier and the superintendent signified, between word and world, between the either and the or, there is an arrow. And the caption: YOU ARE NOT HERE.

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The American dream was interrupted from the first by a recurring and unshakeable nightmare of belatedness and corruption. The Civil War was the waking reality. But in fact the dream was interrupted before the first. The founding fathers of Lincoln's address were already 150 years too late. Their version of innocence and originality--"we hold these truths to be self-evident"--was a desperate ruse to finesse their forefathers' convictions of total depravity and ineluctable predestination. The forefathers' forefathers were, in their time, exorcizing their own sense of belatedness. It was for these hard-shell Calvinists that America was the beginning place: the Canaan given them by God, where they might build a new Jerusalem free of the carnality and prelacy of old Europe. In themselves they conjoined, impossibly, originality and belatedness, innocence and depravity. The controversy in old New England between the orthodox and the antinomians was only the outward and visible sign of

a conflict deep within the Puritan consciousness: the civil war in the American soul.

More than one American writer has done his best to awaken from the nightmare of guilt and belatedness while continuing to dream of innocence and originality. Thomas Pynchon (aka Tyrone Slothrop)--how far-fallen!--is only the last of his line (569). Toward the end of GR we get two views of America. One is the terminal raving of that most corrupt of corrupt old Europeans, Captain Blicero:

"And sometimes I dream of discovering the edge of the World. [. . .]

"America was the edge of the World. [. . .] Europe had found the site for its Kingdom of Death, that special Death the West had invented. [. . .] America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it. It wasn't Europe's Original Sin--the latest name for that is Modern Analysis--but it happens that Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for.

"In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. [. . .] Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. [. . .] Death and Europe are separate as ever, their love still unconsummated. Death only rules here. It has never, in love, become one with. . . ." (722-23; bracketed ellipses mine)

Weissmann's America is Europe's Death: a gift from the invisible powers, by Europe refused and now returned (at the end of the world) to occupy and to rule, but not to consummate their love. His sacrifice of Gottfried is at once an attempt to break out of the cycle of infection and death and a cosmic Liebested uniting Blicero and his Lustknabe in a love that is immortal and a death that is final. But the ascent is betrayed to Gravity, and the rocket with its victim, rising on a promise of Escape, is in bondage to falling (758).

And here's Slothrop's America. He has just found, in the occupied Zone, the harmonica he lost in '38 or '39 down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom. But he no longer remembers that far back. Where should he go and what should he do?

[. . .] where, Slothrop? Huh? America? Shit. C'mon--

Yup, still thinking there's a way to get back. He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose--but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go. She's whispered love me too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises. One day--he can see a day--he might be able finally to say sorry, sure and leave her . . . but not just yet. One more try, one more chance, one more deal, one more transfer to a hopeful line. Maybe it's just pride. What if there's no place for him in her stable any more? If she has turned him out, she'll never explain. Her "stallions" have no rights. She is immune to their small, stupid questions. She is exactly the Amazon Bitch your fantasies have called her to be. (623)

For Slothrop/Pynchon America is a nostalgia for home and love. A mother (and lover) to whom he would like, for a while at least, to return. But Slothrop's America is haunted by a fearful ghost: "the coupling of 'Jamf' and 'I' in the primal dream. Who can he go to with it?" (623). The longing for home and love is troubled by the thought that the nest was fouled before the albatross of self had even hatched.

Slothrop's anxiety reflects the anxiety of America itself (herself?): the coupling of hope and fear. For Weissmann, America is Ground Zero: Europe's lover and her destroyer. For Tyrone, America is the place of origin . . . an origin always already corrupted. Both of these reports are torn by ambivalence. Blicero sees America as the end of the world, and longs to be lovingly one with her death. Slothrop dreams of a long-lost mother/lover, and knows in his heart of hearts that she is an Amazon Bitch. For both of them America is a way of return that is refused.

"Slothrop, just suckin' on his harp, is closer to being a spiritual medium than he's been yet, and he doesn't even know it" (622). In one of our last

views of him, Slothrop is recollecting his youth--a garbage heap of American trivia--"and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. . . ." (626) That's one of the few occurrences of the word--it may be the unique occurrence of the feeling--"natural" in the whole of GR. Nature's nation!

The problem is to find a way through the oppositions: orthodoxy/antinomianism, predestination/freedom, depravity/innocence, reason/madness, order/chaos, rocket/Gravity, male/female. The Opposition. Them. Opposed to the Opposition is the Counterforce. Of what avail the Counterforce? Roger Mexico fears the worst. He may (and does, literally) "'piss on Their rational arrangements'" (639), and he would like to "disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man." But the hard fact is that "[t]he Man has a branch office in each of our brains," so that even in opposing Them we "will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical. . . ." (712-13) In this worst-case scenario the opposition clearly becomes: Their life or your death. Which disjunction is also, as we have seen, a conjunction: Their life is your death. You get it either way.

Could that be the way out? Strictly speaking--that is, speaking as loosely as possible--it does no good to invert the oppositions. Opposed, the oppositions remain in force. But there is some point to the flip-flop. If the opposition is upended, and if the inversion is equivalent to the inverted, then in effect the opposition is leveled. Displaced from vertical and hierarchic opposition into horizontal and unvalorized apposition. "Outside and Inside interpiercing one another too fast, too finely labyrinthine, for either category to have much hegemony any more" (681). That may be GR's way of describing itself. And if that goes through, we may be home free.

"The dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you and I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad hoc adventure" (706). Adopted by the Gross Suckling Conference, the "resolution" here set down is a typical Counterforce gesture. Paradoxical as it is, it may be (cf. dozens

of references in the New Testament) a definition of grace: the state (pun intended) in which everything is gratuitous and free, if also without future and without promise. A grab-bag of mindless pleasures. "Your objective is not the King--there is no King--but momentary targets such as the Radiant Hour" (674).

Byron the Bulb achieves immortality because G. E. and its C(ommittee on) I(ncandescent) A(nomalies) cannot anticipate the random rapacities of bulb-snatchers. Rocketman scarfs the hash, right under the noses of the Russian guards, Mickey Rooney, Harry S. Truman, and the whole Potsdam peace conference. There are holes in the web. Hope is perilously possible in the interstices. Your job is to locate and occupy the uncharted place between the exclusive oppositions: the contingencies neither foreseen nor provided for by the busy spiders who weave your destiny.

One might, in her anti-paranoid moments, wish that were true. But is it credible? We have to be wary of belief. Creeds fatten on opposition and hierarchy. And the point is to transgress. Not to oppose or propose opposing positions, but: to transgress absolutely. To put the bananas in the refrigerator not in spite of but simply without any of the good reasons in Chiquita's hat. Just suck on your harp (or whatever organ is at hand), cry (or laugh) mindlessly, and feel natural.

New England Calvinists (as opposed to their co-religionists in Old England) were covenantal theologians. The Dutch rub. The elect, chosen by God for salvation in total disregard of their merits (they have none), nevertheless strike a bargain with their Redeemer. In return for election, they are bound (their part of the bargain) to keep his commandments and prosper his will. And thereby prosper. Election, though it preserves the elect from the otherwise ineluctable consequences of guilt, is not exactly liberation. If they are freed from sin and death, the elect are also (thereby) freed for obedience to the law of God: free to do what (God has decided) is good for them. Election entails obligation. It binds the elect to conditions, and if the conditions are not met, their election is uncertain.

If anyone is free--in the sense of "let loose"--in a world like this, it may be the preterite who, by virtue of God's neglect, are released at once from salvation and from the conditions of salvation. They die, of course, but (a) living on Their terms is not importantly different from dying, and (b) the preterite at least die without strings attached.

Freedom is not the opposite of predestination. It is the neutralizing transgression of the boundary between predestination and freedom. Just as innocence is not the opposite of depravity, but the appositional reduction of the difference between innocence and guilt. Seaman Bodine, farting melodies through the siren-ring installed in his asshole, signals "a return toward innocence" (740). As he gives Slothrop his Dumbo feather (a T-shirt stained with John Dillinger's blood), he tells him, "what we need isn't right reasons, but just that grace" (741). That's the wisdom of the preterite: of Pig Bodine, perpetually AWOL; of Plechazunga, whose misplaced pigskin preserves Tyrone's embattled testicles; and of all those trusting porkers, "possessed by innocence they couldn't lose" (555), who lovingly follow William Slothrop to the slaughter.

Analogously, GR is not the opposite of the novel. It does not simply contradict the assumption of auto-teleology that underlies our notion of the well-made book: the book as onanistic system. It is the transgression and the displacement of the will to contain and control. A book that is not a book: is it any wonder that the critical establishment has wanted to reject this. . . thing? This text which violates the (paradigmatically Puritanical) second law of thermodynamics by exploiting the powers left over when all the available energy has been used up and fiction is brought to terminal equilibrium. GR is a text always already from before the first remaindered: it is what remains when all the oppositions have failed--in flagrant disregard for the law of contradiction, that (paradigmatically Puritanical) most fundamental of all the foundations of law and order--to cancel each other out. What remains is this:

There's no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made--at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos

of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-round asshole[. . .] with hopes for success and hopes for disaster about equally high (and no, that doesn't cancel out to apathy--it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives). [. . .] Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as "the glozing neuters of the world" have no easy road to haul down, Wear-the-Pantsers, just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When's the last time you felt intensely lukewarm? eh? (676-77)

Now everybody. . . . (677, 760)

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Of course, if you do put bananas in the refrigerator, you get spoiled bananas and nothing to eat. Chiquita's revenge. And if you refuse to color within the lines, you get an F in--no, friends and neighbors, not coloring--: you get an F in conduct. John Dillinger and Jesus and Judas and all the trusting pigs and stupid lemmings of this world--not a one of them would color within the lines. They all got F. Tyrone Slothrop is taken apart and scattered. Maybe a D-?

It makes little sense, therefore, to ask: does Pynchon get away? He has disappeared--has always already been invisible and inconceivable--just like Tyrone. Does GR succeed in finding and following the "fork in the road America never took"? (556). Not to say. A preterite text, GR is not authentic. It is a work without integrity and without certifiable meaning. There is no definitive edition. Cut loose from superintendent significance (superintendence and significance are Their prerogative), the fiction like its author and like its hero is disassembled (dissembled) and dispersed. GR "exists" in diaspora and takes effect by dissemination.

GR suggests, both by what it says and by what it does, that everything is connected to everything else. But if that is the case, then nothing connects meaningfully with anything. Meaning demands connection, but also differentiation. For example, the differentiation

of the message from the static. But if there is no determinable difference--if anything and everything might mean everything and anything--then there is no meaning. Just noise. When the plot (both senses) has expanded to include everything, then there is no plot. No conspiracy and no story.

Too much is nothing at all: the problem of the author. But not enough is just about everything: the situation of the reader. YOU ARE NOT HERE. Where you are is Δt , not quite here but no longer there. "Their neglect is your freedom" (694). On his own, without an omniscient narrator--or (what's worse) with a narrator who blows his omniscience every time he opens his mouth--the reader is free to pursue his own mindless pleasure along the interfaces of this twisted text. Or for that matter (the reader as Gravity), to construct his own novel--an infinite series of novels--out of the accumulated wastes of his civilization, lovingly preserved if somewhat casually packaged by the last of the Pynchons. Those who do manage to read GR find that they have to read it again and again. And it's a different book every time.

Is that a description of narrative entropy? Or is it the final triumph of the preterite: their radical innocence (indistinct from original guilt) and their primordial originality (indistinct from terminal belatedness)? Is this the American Dream? Is it really there? Not to ask.

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Notes

¹ On Calvinism in Pynchon, see John M. Krafft, "'And How Far-Fallen': Puritan Themes in Gravity's Rainbow," Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 55-73; Louis Mackey, "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," Sub-Stance, 30 (1981), 16-30; Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History," Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (1975), 177-92.

² Some of them are remanded to his journals; where they function as the unconscious of his public pronouncements.

³ Michael Wigglesworth, The Day of Doom, stanzas 181 and 219, in Harrison I. Meserole, ed., Seventeenth-Century American Poetry (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 102, 112.

⁴ Cf. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), 18.

⁵ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 177. All subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Happily, they are not tempted to seek an anodyne in any of the varieties of self-mystification exported by the East. The point is not to elude one's heritage (the example of Emerson advises against that), but to confront the West and combat it on its own ground.

⁷ Cf. St. Augustine, Confessions, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor, 1963), Book I, chapter 6, 20: "I do not know where I came from into this mortal life or (should I say?) into this living death."

⁸ It may be argued that Pynchon's fiction is sexist, since (with the notable exception of Oedipa Maas) the women in his novels exist mainly to be used (more often abused) by the men. As the hapless creatures complain, "'Tits 'n' ass . . . , tits 'n' ass. That's all we are around here'" (507). Well, after all, it is a man's world. But the message of GR in this connection (if it has one) is: sooner or later Gravity wins. And Gravity is a female force. Gravity alone receives and reverses the thrust of a self-assertive masculinity. Mother Nature will not be fucked over by homosexual technology. The straight arrow: parabola:: the erect phallus: the climaxing and descending phallus. What comes between--and makes the difference--is the female = Gravity. Receiving the erect phallus (the straight arrow of flight at $G=0$), she bends it into the parabola of detumescence. Hers is the power of the passive, the venereal potency that always in the end subsumes and subdues the sword of Mars. That may be another reason to regard the rainbow--Gravity's own--as a sign of hope: if not the reality of the dream, then at least its possibility. Whether this is a feminist gesture or just another turn of the chauvinist screw I will not attempt to decide. I do know that it is a pervasive motif throughout GR.