The Rats of God: Pynchon, Joyce, Beckett, and the Carnivalization of Religion

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Numerous recent commentators have pointed out the advantages of using the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to read the works of Thomas Pynchon, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, though, as far as I know, no one has attempted to read all three simultaneously in this way.[1] But viewing all three of these writers through the common optic of Bakhtin reveals certain family resemblances among them, in particular their participation in the Menippean tradition privileged by Bakhtin. Such a reading strategy also highlights the intensely political vision that informs the works of these three writers, all of whom mount fierce assaults on authoritarian ideologies of all kinds. Since a full study of the political similarities among Pynchon, Joyce, and Beckett is obviously beyond the scope of any single essay, I will concentrate here on the ways these writers use organized religion as a central instance of the authoritarian ideologies they oppose, particularly the ways they carnivalize religion by juxtaposing the high-minded idealistic claims of the Church with images of the mortality and physicality Christianity attempts to repress. One specific image cluster reappears in the work of all three authors. Pynchon, Joyce, and Beckett all use rats as images of abject physicality to subvert the spiritual/physical hierarchy maintained in traditional Christian thought.

Institutionalized religion has not fared well in modern literature. While some prominent modern writers (most notably T. S. Eliot) have been strong proponents of the civilizing virtues of organized religious belief, most have viewed religion as an oppressive social force and as an insult to human dignity. Writers involved in identifiably emancipatory political projects have consistently used the Church as a prime symbol of the authoritarian structures they seek to subvert. The recent, highly-publicized controversy between Salman Rushdie and the institutional leaders of Islam provides a vivid example of this phenomenon, but numerous other examples can be found, particularly in writers with cultural backgrounds that involve religion as a dominant social force. The rejection of Catholicism in Irish writers like Joyce and Beckett is an excellent case in point, as is the dialogue with the Puritan tradition in Pynchon. For such writers the Church becomes a central instance of the "official," "high" culture they oppose. Thus the

dialogue between emancipatory writers and organized religion can tell us a great deal about the dynamics of literary transgression in general.

Sometimes the subversion of religion in such writers is quite subtle. At other times it is overt, as in Beckett's anecdote of "a priest who, on leaving with a sigh of relief the chapel where he had served mass, with his own hands, to more than a hundred persons, was shat on, from above, by a dove, in the eye."[2] This passage is especially effective, of course, because of its contrast with the usual symbolic associations of doves in Christianity. And rats, given their traditional association with the kind of abject images normally repressed by Christianity, would seem to be ideal symbols to use in this project of gnawing away at the institutional power of organized religion.[3]

Thomas S. Smith sees Pynchon's project as largely a "general critique of the West's legacy of 'death and repression,'"[4] and Pynchon's dialogue with religion is part of this critique. Christianity (especially Calvinism) and technology are singled out in his work as avatars of repression in Western society. In some very Nietzschean meditations on Christianity as a religion of death, we read that "Christian Europe was always death . . . death and repression," and that "'Religion was always about death. It was used not as an opiate so much as a technique--it got people to die for one particular set of beliefs about death.'"[5] But death is associated with the kind of abject images from which the Church typically seeks to distance itself. Pynchon's suggestion of a complicity between Christianity and death thus already acts to deconstruct the traditional hierarchy of the spiritual over the physical, the transcendent over the historical. This deconstruction of hierarchies is especially clear in the conflation of rats and religion in the story of Father Fairing in *V.* During the dark depression years of the 30s, this priest became convinced that human civilization was in its last days, and that the world would soon be ruled by rats. "This being the case, Father Fairing thought it best for the rats to be given a head start--which meant conversion to the Roman Church."[6] So the good father descends into the New York sewer system, catechism and breviary in hand, to begin the conversion of the city's rats to Catholicism.

The tale of Father Fairing would seem to be so offbeat that surely Pynchon is here, for once, being entirely original. But not so--this episode carries a full complement of the rich intertextual echoes for which Pynchon's work is so notable. For example, Father Fairing carries with him on his mission to the rats, not only religious materials, but also (for unexplained reasons) a book entitled *Modern Seamanship*. Any such odd bit of information in Pynchon usually indicates an allusion to something outside the text, and this book would appear to

be no exception. Given the obvious importance of Conrad as an intertextual source for so much of *V.*, Father Fairing's *Modern Seamanship* may well echo Towser's (or Towson's) *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, which Marlow finds so comforting as an emblem of civilized order amidst the wilds of the African jungle in *Heart of Darkness*.[7] As usual with Pynchon, the allusion is far from gratuitous. The link to Conrad suggests a powerful ideological complicity between the Christian drive to convert "heathen" peoples and the drive for imperial domination that informs *Heart of Darkness*. Father Fairing is supposedly working for the salvation of his rodent congregation, but he in fact quite literally feeds off them, killing and eating three of them (a symbolically appropriate number) per day for his own sustenance while in the sewers.[8] Fairing's treatment of the rats thus resonates with the hints in *Heart of Darkness* that Kurtz may have descended into cannibalism. Moreover, it suggests in general the way colonizing powers, though justifying their activities with the high-sounding rhetoric of the "white man's burden," in fact feed off the peoples they colonize and treat them like animals.[9]

Pynchon's conflation in this episode of the Catholic Church with sewer rats also initiates a subversive dialogue between the "high" cultural realm of Catholicism, with its spirituality and denials of physical reality, and the "low" realm of the New York sewers, with its ever so explicit reminders of the abject realities of the physical side of human life.[10] The initiation of such clashes among discourses originating from widely different cultural perspectives is a distinctive feature of Pynchon's work, and one of the reasons Bakhtin is such a useful tool for reading Pynchon. As Allon White notes, Pynchon's novels

> provide perfect examples of Bakhtin's thesis. The "high" languages of modern America--technology, psychoanalysis, business, administration and military jargon--are "carnivalized" by a set of rampant, irreverent, inebriate discourses from low life--from the locker-room, the sewers (in *V.*), the jazz club and cabaret, New York Yiddish, student fraternities and GI slang. (White 135)

Such dialogic discursive interactions are also a hallmark of Joyce's work, and the subversive commentary on Catholicism in Pynchon's story of the rogue Jesuit priest inevitably recalls Joyce, whose entire career was informed by an assault on the authority of the Church. Specific details of Pynchon's story provide even more striking links to Joyce. One of Father Fairing's prize rat pupils is named Ignatius, and though this Ignatius is a skeptic who resists Father Fairing's teachings, the name suggests Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit Order, the prime target for Joyce's invective against religion.[11] Finally, the hints of a possible sexual relation between Father Fairing and the

rat acolyte Veronica recall Joyce's favorite motif of undermining religious dogma with insinuations of an underlying sexual motivation. I have discussed elsewhere at length Joyce's consistent use of the Church as a figure of tyranny and oppression against which he formulates his project of transgression and liberation.[12] What is especially interesting here, however, is that one of Joyce's techniques for undermining the Church consists precisely of the kind of juxtaposition of priests and rats found in Pynchon's *V.* Joyce's formulation is more subtle than Pynchon's, but among the exquisitely delicate interlacings of images in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a family of associates which identifies priests with rats.

In a pivotal early scene, young Stephen Dedalus is pushed into a "square ditch" of sewage by his schoolmate Wells: "And how cold and slimy the water had been! And a fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum."[13] Chilled by the cold water, Stephen soon falls ill and is visited in his bed by the prefect:

> And he felt the prefect's hand on his forehead; and he felt his forehead warm and damp against the prefect's cold damp hand. That was the way a rat felt, slimy and damp and cold. Every rat had two eyes to look out of. They could understand how to jump. But the minds of rats could not understand trigonometry. When they were dead they lay on their sides. Their coats dried then. They were only dead things. (Portrait 22)

In this rich passage, Stephen shows a conventional tendency to associate rats with filth and degradation, particularly with death. In evoking the rats' dead bodies immediately after noting their lack of mentality, Stephen suggests that rats represent the purely physical existence that is the precise antithesis of the purely spiritual existence privileged by the Church. His sense that the priest's hand feels like a rat thus acts to deconstruct the hierarchical opposition between the physical and the spiritual upon which so much Christian doctrine is based.

Ill, the imaginative young Stephen thinks of his own death, envisioning the sorrow of his fellows after his demise, eventually conflating his imagined death with the real death of Parnell (Portrait 27). This network of images linking rats, death, Irish politics, and priests continues to build when Stephen, now recovered, goes home from school for Christmas. There, in the famous Christmas dinner debate over the Church's treatment of Parnell, Simon Dedalus is driven to a passionate condemnation of priests: "Sons of bitches! cried Mr Dedalus. When he was down they turned on him to betray him and rend him like rats in a sewer. Lowlived dogs! And they look it! By Christ, they look it!" (Portrait 34). Not only does this declaration link priests quite explicitly with rats (sewer rats, no less), but the

accusation that the predatory priesthood betrayed Parnell also implies by synecdoche that the Church preys on the Irish people as well.

Given the formative influence on Stephen of such experiences, it comes as no surprise that this network of associations irrupts once more in a later time of stress. When Stephen goes to the retreat in honor of Saint Francis Xavier, he already feels steeped in guilt over his youthful encounters with Dublin prostitutes, and the hellfire and damnation sermons on physical sin he hears there seem directly addressed to him. He reacts with a sudden revulsion at all things physical, again entertaining a fantasy of his death, this time linking it to an abject image of his body's decay:

> Into the grave with it! Nail it down into a wooden box, the corpse. Carry it out of the house on the shoulders of the hirelings. Thrust it out of men's sight into a long hole in the ground, into the grave, to rot, to feed the mass of its creeping worms and to be devoured by scuttling plumpbellied rats. (Portrait 112)

This image of rats is triggered by the priest's sermon. Given the general attitude toward priests in Joyce's text, it seems clear that the rats and the preaching priest are to be closely associated--the image of the rats devouring Stephen's body is directly linked to that of the priest, who is attempting to devour his spirit.[14]

Joyce's conflation of rats with Catholicism continues in *Ulysses*, where Leopold Bloom directly associates rats and Christianity by musing on the way rats tend to get into breweries and get "drunk on the porter. Drink till they puke again like christians."[15] But the most powerful link between rats and priests in *Ulysses* begins with Bloom's seeing a rat in the graveyard where Paddy Dignam is being buried. His reaction to the rat, which will haunt him throughout the rest of the day, resonates powerfully with Stephen's fantasy at the retreat in *Portrait*: "One of those chaps would make short work of a fellow. Pick the bones clean no matter who it was. Ordinary meat for them. A corpse is meat gone bad. . . . Cremation better. Priests dead against it. Devilling for the other firm" (Ulysses 94). That Bloom's associative train leads from rats to priests is in itself telling; moreover, he indicates here that the priesthood, through its opposition to cremation, is in complicity with rats, providing them with corpses for food.

To the deliciously irreverent Bloom, whose hybrid religious background already questions the claims to authority of any one religion, the eating of corpses is a central tenet of Catholicism. When he enters a church early in *Ulysses*, he immediately notes how it would be a good place "to be next some girl." Then he observes some women taking communion: "What? *Corpus*: body. Corpse. Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first. Hospices for the dying. They don't

seem to chew it: only swallow it down. Rum idea: eating bits of a corpse. Why the cannibals cotton to it" (Ulysses 66). This exposure of the abjection at the heart of Catholicism undercuts the Church's claims to spiritual authority and resonates with the motif of cannibalism in Pynchon's depiction of Father Fairing. Bloom's mention of cannibals is also a reminder of the contemporary historical context of 1904, in which Christian missionaries were strenuously attempting to convert "savage" peoples around the world. This link between Joyce and Pynchon (especially given the 1904 suppression of a native uprising in Southwest Africa that figures in *V.*) again recalls Conrad, providing another reminder of the complicity between these Christian missionaries and European imperialism.

The juxtaposition of religion with abject images like rats and cannibalism is also characteristic of Joyce's friend and protegé Beckett. Beckett came from an Irish Protestant background, so his dialogue with religion is necessarily somewhat different from Joyce's. Yet his transgressions against religion are still directed primarily toward Catholicism, which is understandable given the political dominance of the Catholic Church in Irish life. Subversions of the pretensions of organized religion can be found almost everywhere in Beckett's work, often in passages that either recall Joyce or anticipate Pynchon, or both. One might point, for example, to the case of Moll in *Malone Dies*, who wears two crucifixes (representing the two thieves) for earrings, and whose canine tooth is carved in the image of the crucified Christ.[16] This motif anticipates Pynchon's Lady V, especially her ivory comb representing five crucified Englishmen.

But for the present purpose the most relevant passage in Beckett concerns the meetings of Sam and Watt in the garden of their insane asylum in *Watt*. These two mental patients enjoy a number of abject entertainments, including the destruction of freshly-laid birds' eggs, but their favorite pastime involves games with the rats that inhabit the garden. Luring the rats to them with discarded food, the two lunatics enjoy having the rats crawl over them. The entertainment becomes still more horrific when they begin to feed small live animals to the rats. Then it gets even worse: "Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative" (Watt 156). Sam then makes clear the link between this abject incestuous rat cannibalism and the pretensions of religion to bring humankind closer to God: "It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God" (Watt 156). One can easily visualize Sam and Watt here as priests administering a macabre Eucharist to their rat congregation, an image strengthened

further a few pages later when Watt accidentally becomes tangled in the garden fence, which leaves him in the posture of Christ crucified, as Sam explains: "His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ believed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it" (Watt 159).

The striking resemblances among Pynchon, Joyce, and Beckett in the use of rats to carnivalize religion are also remarkable. Such similarities may be entirely serendipitous, but they tell us a great deal about the affinities of these three writers with the Menippean tradition. These affinities help us see the subversion of organized religion effected by these writers as part of a broader opposition to authoritarian ideology in general. This opposition is illuminated by Bakhtin's work on parody and carnival, particularly by his vision of the carnival as a locus of subversive interaction between dominant and marginal cultural groups. In the carnival, with the rules supporting the hierarchical distinction between these groups temporarily suspended, license is given to mock high culture and to expose the fatuousness of its pretensions to superiority. The carnival presents an opportunity for a return of the socially repressed, for an emergence into full view of the kind of images from which official, high culture usually attempts to distance itself, associating them with marginal groups instead.

Rats, of course, perfectly exemplify such marginal images, suggesting physical aspects of human life that are often repressed. In this dynamic the human body serves as a metaphor for the existing social structure, as demonstrated in Bakhtin's readings of Rabelais. To Bakhtin, attempts to taxonomize the body into "high" and "low" segments stand as a figure for the oppression of marginal social groups by dominant ones in class society. Further, attempts to view the body as a classical whole by denying excremental and other processes that emphasize the dynamic interaction between body and world represent a denial of history. For Bakhtin, the "unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects."[17] Moreover, the dynamic nature of this blending and of the carnivalesque representation of body functions thrusts the subject directly into the contemporaneous flow of history: "The material bodily lower stratum and the entire system of degradation, turnovers, and travesties presented this essential relation to time and to social and historical transformation" (Bakhtin 81).

In their extensive study of the social implications of this aspect of Bakhtin's work, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White find that hierarchical systems of classifying both body functions and literary works

participate in a general trend toward social domination of oppressed groups by ruling ones:

> The ranking of literary genres or authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes is a particularly clear example of a much broader and more complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space, and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low.[18]

Stallybrass and White emphasize the way oppressed, marginal groups are systematically identified with aspects of existence (death, excrement, etc.) deemed unpleasant by the dominant group, which in turn seeks to distance itself from such facts of life through oppression and rejection of the group with which they are identified. This process is one of which modern authors like Pynchon have shown a profound understanding. For example, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon neatly summarizes the tendency of white culture to associate excrement with death and to associate both with dark colors in a dynamic that provides support for racism. The flushing of excrement out of sight down sparkling white ceramic toilets thus becomes a metaphor for the exclusion of blacks from full participation in white society:

> Shit, now, is the color white folks are afraid of. Shit is the presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself inside the whiteman's warm and private own *asshole*, which is getting pretty intimate. That's what that white toilet's for. You see many brown toilets? Nope, toilet's the color of gravestones, classical columns of mausoleums, that white porcelain's the very emblem of Odorless and Official Death. Shinola shoeshine polish happens to be the color of Shit. Shoeshine boy Malcolm's in the toilet slappin' on the Shinola, working off whiteman's penance on his sin of being born the color of Shit 'n' Shinola. (GR 688)

Western religion in general and Christianity in particular have long been marked by an especially virulent form of the rejection of the physical discussed by Bakhtin and by Stallybrass and White. As vividly shown in the writings of Saint Paul, Christianity has long maintained a hierarchical duality between spirit and body, arguing that things of the spirit are to be emphasized and praised while things of the body are to be rejected and repressed. The spirit is the province of God; the body is the province of the Devil. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Church figures as a central target of the subversive emphasis on the physical that Bakhtin sees in Rabelais.

It also comes as no surprise that the works of modern writers like Pynchon, Joyce, and Beckett, centrally concerned with undermining the claims to authority made by organized religion, should be informed by a Rabelaisian excremental vision. Their works bring into full view the abject images religion typically seeks to repress, emphasizing that physical facts like excrement and death are in fact common elements

of the human condition having no special relation to marginal racial or social groups. All three writers seek to undermine Christianity by exposing its abject core, as in their common juxtaposition of rats and religion. There are numerous echoes of both Joyce and Beckett in *V.* and indeed throughout Pynchon's work. But as to whether Pynchon was intentionally alluding to either Joyce or Beckett (or both) with the story of Father Fairing and his rat parish, I can only recall the words of Mr. Hackett after Tetty suggests that God should forgive Hackett's mother for allowing him to fall off a ladder as a child: "'Faith I wouldn't put it past him'" (Watt 16).

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Notes

[1] On Joyce and Bakhtin, see R. B. Kershner, *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989), and my own *Works in Progress: History, Subjectivity, and Textuality in the Fiction of James Joyce*, now in the final stages of preparation. On Beckett and Bakhtin, see Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1988), and my "Subverting the 'Powers That Be': Beckett and Bakhtin," now circulating. Edward Mendelson first pointed out the relevance of Bakhtin for explaining Pynchon's excremental vision in "Gravity's Encyclopedia," *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 173-74. On the general relevance of Bakhtin to Pynchon, see also Allon White, "Bakhtin, Sociolinguistics and Deconstruction," *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1984) 135-36, and my "Gravity's Novel: A Note on the Genre of *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Pynchon Notes* 20-21 (1987): 61-68.

[2] *Watt* (New York: Grove, 1959) 91.

[3] On the concept of abjection, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982). See also my *Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque: Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, now circulating.

[4] "Performing in the Zone: The Presentation of Historical Crisis in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Clio* 12 (1983): 247.

[5] *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 317, 701.

[6] *V.* (1963; New York: Perennial, 1986) 118.

[7] Joseph Conrad, *"Heart of Darkness" and "The Secret Sharer"* (New York: New American Library, 1950) 107-08.

[8] Cf. Frans Van der Groov's vision of the conversion of the dodos, GR 110-11.

[9] The horrific stories sprinkled throughout *V.* of the treatment of African natives by European colonizers reinforce this anti-imperialist motif.

[10] Cf. Slothrop's sewer journey, GR 63 ff.

[11] In one of his exchanges on religion with Father Fairing, Ignatius says, "I cannot see how this differs from Marxist communism" (V 119). This conflation of Christianity and Marxism further complicates the dialogic texture of *V.* and is a notion Pynchon suggests elsewhere as well. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Wimpe suggests that Marxism is as much an opiate of the masses as is Christianity and that both lead to death (GR 701).

[12] See my *Works in Progress*.

[13] *"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man": Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: Viking, 1968) 14.

[14] Later in this same sermon, the preacher addresses the secret sinners of his audience: "O you hypocrites, O you whited sepulchres, O you who present a smooth smiling face to the world while your soul within is a foul swamp of sin, how will it fare with you in that terrible day?" (Portrait 114). The reference is to Matthew 23.27: "Whited sepulchres which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones." Interestingly, Conrad alludes to this same passage to indicate the rottenness at the heart of European imperialist society when he has Marlow call the European city from which his trip originates a "whited sepulchre" (Heart 73).

[15] *"Ulysses": The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Random House, 1986) 125.

[16] *Three Novels: "Molloy," "Malone Dies," and "The Unnameable"* (New York: Grove, 1965) 263-64.

[17] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 26-27.

[18] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 2.