

A Comic Source of Gravity's Rainbow

Mathew Winston

Among the cultural trivia which fascinate Thomas Pynchon are comic books. They appear from time to time in his works, whether generically, as in "the outer-space comics" and "marines-in-action comics" in "The Secret Integration" (Slow Learner, Little, Brown, 142, 161), or more specifically, like the "American Bugs Bunny comic book" read by an anonymous corporal in Gravity's Rainbow (Viking, 592). References to comic-book characters are scattered liberally and sometimes thickly in Gravity's Rainbow: three paragraphs on pages 751-52 invoke the names of Submariner, Plasticman, Superman, Jimmy [Olsen, Superman's sidekick], and the Daily Planet, the newspaper for which both Jimmy and Superman work (the latter disguised as Clark Kent).

Pynchon's knowledge of comic books is secure enough so that he can play with them in different ways. He can invoke the obscure, like "Hap Harrigan comics" in The Crying of Lot 49 (Bantam, 53), whose protagonist becomes "Hop Harrigan" in Gravity's Rainbow (117). And he can allude obscurely: readers of Gravity's Rainbow unfamiliar with German popular culture may not recognize that the Max and Moritz who launch Blicero's rocket (757-58) are the creations of Wilhelm Busch, who in the nineteenth century wrote comic poems for children which he illustrated with cartoons. Anyone who does not know that Batman's other identity is Bruce Wayne will miss the pun early in the novel, when Pirate Prentice is chauffeured by "his batman, a Corporal Wayne" (11). Pynchon even invents his own comic-book heroes, as when Slothrop helps to complete the "Floundering Four"--a parody of "the Fantastic Four"--otherwise consisting of "Myrtle Miraculous [who] specializes in performing miracles" and is herself a friend of Mary Marvel and Wonder Woman, Maximilian, "a Negro in a pearl-gray zoot," and "Marcel, a mechanical chessplayer dating back to the Second Empire" (675).

Comics occupy a less significant place in Pynchon's mythology than do movies, and a number of characters who exist in comic-book form appear in their cinematic

incarnations, as is the case in Gravity's Rainbow with "Donald Duck cinema cartoons" (146) and with Mickey Mouse, who is characterized by his voice (392-93). This is also true of Pynchon's favorite comic character, Porky Pig. In The Crying of Lot 49, old Mr. Thoth tells Oedipa a dream about his grandfather:

"It was all mixed in with a Porky Pig cartoon. [. . .] Did you ever see the one about Porky Pig and the anarchist? [. . .] It dates from the 1930's. Porky Pig is a little boy. The children told me that he has a nephew now, Cicero. Do you remember, during the war, when Porky worked in a defense plant? He and Bugs Bunny. That was a good one too." (66)

The cartoon in Thoth's dream--actually an animated cartoon called "The Blow-Out," which was released by Warner Brothers in 1936--enters Gravity's Rainbow when Pirate Prentice offers Katje Borgesius a ball of taffy, "boobish as young Porky Pig holding out the anarchist's ticking bomb to him" (545), and later several characters appear with Porky Pig tattoos on their stomachs (638, 711). Porky may be part of the inspiration for all the swine in Gravity's Rainbow, from those driven to market in the seventeenth century by William Slothrop, to "Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero" (567), whose costume is worn by Slothrop, and later, with less fortunate results, by Major Marvy. Porky may be ultimately responsible for the stutter which marks the narrative. And certainly he provided the inspiration for the name of Dr. Porkyevitch, the Pavlovian trainer of octopus Grigori. Earlier in Pynchon's career, in V., the name of Porky Pig is echoed even more clearly in that of Vladimir Porcépic, the avant-garde composer of "L'Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises--Rape of the Chinese Virgins" (Bantam, 371), during a performance of which Mélanie l'Heuremaudit is impaled.

In an essay on "The Quest for Pynchon" (in Twentieth Century Literature 21, no. 3 and in Mindful Pleasures), I indicated that Pynchon's interest in the German rockets known as Vergeltungswaffen might have begun with a 1954 exhibition in a museum near his home on Long Island. Now I want to add that his notion of inserting a human cargo into such a rocket may have had its origin in a comic-book story by Stan Lee entitled

"If This Be Treason" in the Marvel Tales of Suspense, #70 and #71 (October and November 1965). In this story, Dr. Cedric Rawlings, an American scientist, has been led by the Nazi Major Uberhart to betray his country and to entrap Captain America and his sidekick Bucky Barnes. The Nazi also holds Rawlings' sister. On page 10 of #70, the major tells the beaten scientist, "And now, our three prisoners shall go for a little ride . . . straight to the heart of London!!" The horrified Rawlings responds, "You mean . . . the V-2??! No! You can't! Not my sister . . . not her!!" The major then sarcastically consoles Rawlings, "But think how glorious her end will be! She will be in such famous company!! And her name will be remembered always . . . for she will be in the rocket which blows up London when it lands at 10 Downing Street where Churchill lives!"

Page two of #71, following the full-page illustration whose text summarizes the previous issue, shows the rocket and bears the caption: "Within seconds, the narrow steel door of the awesome V-2 slides open, ready to receive its helpless passengers . . ." Rawlings, kept back by a Nazi guard, cries out, "No! You can't do it . . . You mustn't! I've worked for you . . . betrayed my own nation for you . . . you can't send my sister to her doom!" Major Uberhart, monocled and with his arms across his chest, replies icily, "On the contrary, Rawlings . . . we can do it . . . and we shall! She attempted to save our enemies . . . and to a Nazi, that is an unforgiveable crime!" In the same panel, Rawlings' sister, who is being led to the open door of the rocket, behind the unconscious heroes, turns to her brother and says, "Cedric . . . I beg of you . . . stop your useless pleading! We cannot think of ourselves with all of London in danger! At least let us meet our fate with dignity!"

Needless to say, unlike Rocket 00000, the missile bearing Captain America does not destroy any of its intended victims, and the rest of the comic book is irrelevant to Gravity's Rainbow.

I have not found references in Pynchon's work to Captain America or to any other characters in the comic book, and unquestionably Pynchon could have invented Blicero's monstrous launching of Gottfried

without having read Tales of Suspense. Nevertheless, given Pynchon's demonstrated knowledge and use of comic books, the parallels are suggestive.

--University of Alabama