Texts of the Text: Citations in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Gravity's Rainbow is full of the explicit, precise mention of other written texts. Some of these are real, like Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Many more of them are fictional, ranging from *Neil Nosepicker's Book of 50,000 Insults* (83), through *Tales of the Schwarzkommando*, collected by Steve Edelman (315), to the article "Regions of Indeterminacy in Albatross Anatomy," by one Natasha Raum, from the *Proceedings of the International Society of Confessors to an Enthusiasm for Albatross Nosology* (712). Why are these citations so numerous? What difference, if any, does it make to an understanding of *Gravity's Rainbow* that some of these texts are real and some not? And finally, what does the examination of these texts reveal about the idea *Gravity's Rainbow* proposes for itself as its own true Text?

My concern is only with written texts whose titles are specifically cited, rather than with the enormous proliferation of anonymous transcripts and documents everywhere mentioned, or with such items as the Admiralty papers Tchitcherine consults or the journal Enzian keeps. I am interested in the Proverbs for Paranoids and the Rocket Limericks because it would appear that a source could have been given for either group, although it is not, and I am not interested in the numerous songs or slogans provided by the narrator throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* because not one of them appears to have been quoted from any printed source.

Furthermore, I do not intend to consider references and allusions either to authors like Emily Dickinson, Krafft-Ebing, Adam Smith, L. Frank Baum and M. F. Beal or to specific works from the *I Ching* to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. From its very publication, *Gravity's Rainbow* has been discussed in terms of its astonishing range of allusions.[1] Its astonishing range of citations has been ignored—perhaps, for one thing, because references to movies and comics appear to be more immediately accessible or more exciting. Another reason is more abstract. Citations, of course, are not allusions; not only do citations acknowledge a textual source, but they give any text in which they occur a more explicit position of indebtedness or subordination to a specific source. This kind of relation is indicated in *Gravity's Rainbow* when, for example, the first two lines of the poem Borges may have dedicated to Graciela Imago Portales are actually given (383), or when

"Stodda's treatise on steam turbines" is mentioned in characterizing the progress of the propulsion group to which Pökler belongs (406).

Steven Weisenburger allows that Pynchon may have made up the Borges lines, and says that the reference to Stodda's treatise is "Unknown" (187, 196). Before we ask why the novel might want to blur repeatedly the distinction between an actual text and a fictional one, we first need to acknowledge how much even the narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* has a citational character, like both Slothrop's letter to the Kenosha Kid and the Kenosha Kid's reply to Slothrop, each printed as a real letter (60). Of course they are fictional. But nobody in the narrative seems worried about the difference. Whether or not the whole of *Gravity's Rainbow* is understood as emanating from the consciousness of one narrator, the whole is represented as being indiscriminately absorbed by, if not in love with, texts not only performed or sung but also printed—novels, poems, silly collections of this and that, recondite articles on all manner of things. The passage quoted (complete with editorial interpolation) from Laszlo Jamf's advertising brochure for "Kryptosam" (71) is of a piece with the remarks by a spokesman for the Counterforce quoted in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (738–39).

Indeed, the whole *is* in one clear sense a whole because of the sheer zest everywhere apparent for so much reference. It comes as no surprise to read the word "great" by the time we are told "Pointsman owns a matched set of all the books in Sax Rohmer's great Manichaean saga" (631), or to be bidden to "Check out Ishmael Reed" (588). Texts of all kinds possess an enormous authority in *Gravity's Rainbow*. This is why they are not only alluded to but quoted from, referred to directly and cited generally. And yet, even judged on the basis of the moments when it becomes a bizarre fusion of antiquarian and zany energies, the book seldom seems bookish. Why should this be so? *Gravity's Rainbow* increasingly transforms the slavishness implicit in one text's citing another into the radical negativity exhibited by a text staging its own indebtedness to itself, through citing sources that either cannot be located or cannot be taken seriously.

Many characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* are enormously dependent on books. This is obviously so in the case of Pointsman, with respect to Pavlov's lectures, and of Blicero, with respect to Rilke's poetry. It is equally so in the case of Brigadier Pudding's relation to his own "mammoth work entitled *Things That Can Happen in European Politics* (77), and of El Ñato's relation to his "copy of *Martín Fierro*, which has long been thumbed into separate loose pages" (386). In the context of such characters, we can well understand how film critic Mitchell Prettyplace could have produced his "definitive 18–volume study of

King Kong" in the first place. "[I]t appears," we are told, "that Prettyplace has left nothing out" (275).

If you strive to leave nothing out of one book or one project, you will have, presumably, the same obsessive, monumentalizing relation to it as Prettyplace. In the same sense, if the book already exists for you in which nothing has been left out, you will have the same hushed, worshipful relation to it as Pointsman has to Volume Two of Pavlov's *Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes*. Much of the critical commentary on *Gravity's Rainbow* can be classified on the basis of whether it holds that Pynchon himself writes on the model of Prettyplace or of Pointsman. If Prettyplace, then we have Edward Mendelson's account of the book as an encyclopedic narrative. Nothing—including an encyclopedia of literary styles—must be left out, because the whole of national (not to say Western) culture demands no less of the genre as well as the ambition to aspire to it.

If, on the other hand, Pynchon writes more as Pointsman, then we have a far more devious, troubled, inward performance. The writer becomes a reader, and, moreover, a reader of a sovereign text already written. The effort to leave out nothing by appropriating all known sources of written authority is now crossed, if not exactly canceled, by the certainty that the truth is already known in one Text. In fact, though, "the real Text" occasions so much fear as well as fetishization that it might well be "somewhere else" after all (520). For example, although Pavlov's *Lectures* is quoted from, its title is named neither by Pointsman nor by the novel's narrator. Such an omission is particularly striking in a text where so many other titles are so casually given, and this absent title can be related to a number of other citational omissions, ranging from the exact texts in which Wernher von Braun and Richard Nixon, respectively, utter the epigraphs of the first and fourth parts of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the various Baedeker guides and wartime issues of the London *Times* which, though suppressed in the novel, are apparently sources of much of its detail.[2]

The difference between the two models of authorial relation to a book can be seen with respect to the passage from which I have just quoted above—one of the passages privileged in critical commentary on the novel over the years, where our fate as "Kabbalists" and "scholar-magicians of the Zone" is speculated on, and our burden suggested as being merely to pick apart, annotate, explicate, and masturbate some absolute "Text" (520). Mendelson quotes this passage in a paragraph where he cautions that "*Gravity's Rainbow* not be confused, even locally, with the world it illuminates" (183). Such a confusion would, presumably, compromise Pynchon's magisterial, encyclopedic stance. Compare Hanjo Berressem, who assumes—to use Mendelson's

vocabulary—that the confusion between the novel and its world is in effect the most vital, theoretically provocative thing about it. In his chapter "*Gravity's Rainbow*: the Real Text," Berressem quotes the same passage in order to assert, "The text, like the landscape and the rocket, can be read only as a belated effect, never as the true, real message—the signal zero itself" (131). According to this view, even the narrator's attempt to construct a secret, transcendent message is implicated in—not to say contaminated by—the designs of everyone else.

Gravity's Rainbow may well be more compelling today in terms of its inevitable failure to illuminate the world than in those of its enormous success. So Berressem, at any rate, appears to presume—and therefore gives us many illuminating pages of his own on the internal convolutions of inside and outside, the impossibility of metalanguage, and the inescapability of (digital) simulation. If the novel's failure is what enchants us now, however, then we must acknowledge that this failure passes through a profound need everywhere inscribed in the novel to entertain itself as a complete Text, or Book, on the model of Pointsman's cherished volume of Pavlov, in which the truth exists not only to be known, but to be venerated, cited by chapter and verse.

The myriad specific textual references in *Gravity's Rainbow* are significant because each preserves the form of this veneration while at the same time expressing its dispersal. The dispersal is so radical and lowly that it includes a fragment "thought to be from the *Gospel of Thomas* (Oxyrhynchus papyrus number classified)" (537) and a spicy quotation from the anonymous chronicle *How I Came to Love the People* (547). Yet the impulse to honor the written word is never wholly absent because the word never loses its citational character, even in the form of such sidelong references as the one to "Paranoid Systems of History (PSH), a short-lived periodical of the 1920s whose plates have all mysteriously vanished, natch" (238), or such quick quotations as that from the "authoritative *A Cheapskate's Guide to the Zone*" (559).

Gravity's Rainbow makes up so many silly titles in despair of the need for one true Text as much as to accumulate the materials (including published ones) to represent such a Text. It does not suffice merely to argue that these titles function according to a metonymic logic of displacement so the novel can avoid a definitive form of itself. Indeed, if for no other reason than its encyclopedic aspirations, the novel cannot entirely avoid the project of some definitive form. Gabriele Schwab writes that Pynchon's presentation of the Second World War "must develop strategies to undercut the remythologizing effects of its own system of representation" (182). However, part of what defines

this system, in turn, has to do with the notion of the Text as a species of idea so ultimately sublime that it cannot be undercut. Instead, it can only be disclosed.

One of the most interesting citations in the novel comes during the episode in which Thanatz is rescued by a Polish undertaker who "has been obsessed with this business of getting hit in the head by a lightning bolt" "[e]ver since reading about Benjamin Franklin in an American propaganda leaflet" (663). In the course of explaining what the leaflet left out and what the undertaker doesn't care about anyway, the narrator imagines the possible existence of a "private monthly magazine *A Nickel Saved*," only to transform that title into the "real title . . . *Long Enough*" (because Franklin's words should be replaced by Mark Hanna's), and then spins out a pastiche of the sort of thing that would appear in the magazine. "To outsiders it's just a pleasant little club newsletter," but to "Those Who Know" it is a text full of coded revelations (664–65).

The magazine is not an example of "the real Text." Indeed, the clearest thing about the magazine is that it is not real. Yet the narrator openly represents the magazine as something that could be cited, if only it were real. Much of the logic whereby *Gravity's Rainbow* repeatedly stages this sort of citational carnivalesque is revealed with especial fullness here. It is as if the real must be reimagined to bring out its deeper truth, on the model of a text whose title must be transformed because its ostensible title is misleading. What this suggests, however, is that any title is misleading. We may have to cite texts. How can they matter at all if they cannot be cited? But their titles are illusions, half-truths, and, finally, fictions. So in the last two hundred pages or so of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we have the citation of fictions replaced by the fictions of citation.

Schwab claims that "Pynchon depicts literary characters who harbor various mythologies of language—such as the myth of the True Text or the myth of silence—and at the same time establishes a textual perspective that critically exposes these mythologies." On the contrary, I would argue on the basis of such citations as those above, simply by virtue of the very fact that they are citations, that Pynchon is embedded in a textual perspective that reinstates the realm of the mythological, notwithstanding the dissolution of what Schwab calls "the readability of the world" into "the instability of signs" (185). During a late conversation among Katje, Christian and Enzian, the narrator interpolates, "Saves trouble later if you can get the Texts straight soon as they're spoken" (729). Alas, few texts of any sort stay straight, even at the moment of utterance, and the ones that get

written are doomed to go astray. This does not prevent the continual predication, as here, of some absolute condition of Textuality.

Schwab is more acute about the novel's textual perspective later, when, while discussing Pynchon's "carnivalized gaze," she remarks that "his refusal to integrate the diverse intertexts into a homogenizing structure reminds one of aesthetic transcendence downward" (206). My own feeling is that citations in *Gravity's Rainbow* constitute such a structure. Granted, the citations are many and varied. Granted also, the magazine *Long Enough* is not integrated into the fallen modern world that includes both *Neil Nosepicker's Book of 50,000 Insults* and the Myth of the Rocket as the Holy Text.[3] Nonetheless, the effect of these citations is to situate, precisely, a transcendental space whose downward location can be glossed by Slavoj Zizek's argument about the Sublime.

The Kantian idea of the Sublime, according to Zizek, presupposes a Thing-in-Itself beyond representation and beyond phenomenality. The Hegelian idea, on the other hand, accepts the radical inadequacy of all phenomena to the Idea. This negativity is all there is. Therefore, Zizek explains, "the negative experience of the Thing-in-Itself must change into the experience of the Thing-in-Itself as radical negativity. The experience of the Sublime thus remains the same: all we have to do is to subtract its transcendent proposition" (206). What we ultimately get with *Gravity's Rainbow* at each moment when it cites other texts is a series of attempts to subtract the transcendent proposition.

It is one thing, in other words, to conclude, as Deborah L. Madsen does, that "the transformation of pretext into intertext in postmodernist allegoric narratives [of which she takes *Gravity's Rainbow* to be a signal example] requires that the activity of constructing meaning itself be confronted" (111). It is another thing to understand that the authority for the construction is not to be repossessed by the reader, as Madsen urges, but abandoned. Underlying the novel is indeed what she characterizes as a "systematic pursuit of a transcendental signified" (111). But the activity is subtractive, not additive.

In this sense, the more insistent, exclusive avowal in the novel's final pages of the purely fictional nature of cited texts substantiates what Zizek calls the "last secret" of dialectical speculation: "not in the deduction of all reality from the mediating movement of absolute negativity, but in the fact that this very negativity, to attain its 'being-for-itself,' must embody itself again in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover" (207). The texts of *Gravity's Rainbow* thus emerge as so many necessary little bits of the Real Text, even the final one on the last page, a hymn by William Slothrop: the narrator can still quote its words, but its sublime absence is registered by the fact

that we have to be told it is "centuries forgotten and out of print" (760).

What are the implications of this reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* for future study of the novel? The first is obvious. Pynchon criticism ought to rethink its overwhelming commitment to the very sort of literal-minded encyclopedism the text is engaged in shedding rather than accumulating. It is not that no more sources need be tracked down and toted up. It is more that the logic of such scholarship is seriously misleading insofar as it presumes to restore a presence where *Gravity's Rainbow* strives to locate an absence. In this respect, finding at last the source of von Braun's words, and therefore being able accurately to characterize them as a citation, is a dubious discovery if we forget how faint, or, in Emerson's words, how inferior, are both the source itself and, more important, Pynchon's relation to it.

Emerson says, in his great essay "Quotation and Originality," "Quotation confesses inferiority" (188). But there is little to be done: as he says earlier, "all minds quote" (178). What to do? *Gravity's Rainbow* can be read as a kind of response to the solution Emerson's neglected essay offers: make up your own quotations, because you will be quoting anyway. As Emerson concludes, "Only an inventor knows how to borrow, and every man is or should be an inventor" (204). Just so, a Pynchon who invents his own borrowing, like Emerson before him, presents to us anew the critical spectacle of an utterly *American* figure, whether a sixties radical or a reconstructed neo-pragmatist. Even Pynchon's impulse to negative transcendence, which I have used a European thinker to gloss, can be cited from an American tradition of philosophic commentary, exemplified by Kenneth Burke (a sort of homegrown Zizek): "Materialism pure and simple contrives a kind of 'inverted transcendence,' or 'transcendence downwards,' resolving the contradictions between mind and matter by voting that the *essence* of the duality is matter" (90). Nowhere better than in his citations, Pynchon is a materialist, imperiled to invent the text that must be given as out of print.

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Notes

[1]Weisenburger's *Companion* in this sense marks a monument—if not an end—to a standard critical enterprise with regard to any text whereby all allusions exist to be identified, clarified and explained. So it tells us who "Watson and Rayner" are, and that the phrase "holding a red rose" may point to "a principal symbol of Rosicrucianism" (56, 254). The interesting moments in Weisenburger from a theoretical point of view are when he appears to

appropriate something of Pynchon's creative energies to rewrite certain allusions as at once more recondite and more direct. Thus, for example, when Blicero sees "scratched in the bark . . . the words IN HOC SIGNO VINCES" (GR 101), Weisenburger pronounces it "a wonderful allusion," and then cites Gibbon, the insignia on the Pall Mall cigarette pack, and a book on ballistics and rockets by J. M. J. Kooy and J. W. H. Uytenbogaart (66–67). There are no fictional sources in the standard critical practice of comprehending allusions, even if the process of locating them sometimes resembles the creation of imaginary circumstances so real things can be found.

See also David Cowart's early study. Charles Clerc has a comprehensive discussion of filmic sources in the novel.

[2]Weisenburger simply ignores the von Braun and Nixon epigraphs. His careful attention to the Baedeker guidebooks and the London newspapers, on the other hand, is everywhere in the *Companion*. The source of von Braun's words is now possible to cite. They can be found in a short piece, "Why I Believe in Immortality," he wrote for the magazine *Words to Live By*, collected in *The Third Book of Words to Live By* (see Nichols). However, since it has taken some twenty-three years to locate this source, von Braun's words have functioned since the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* as perhaps the premier example in the text of a possibly specious citing, in the same vein (if more ponderously situated) as the two lines from the Borges poem. A recent posting to the Pynchon e-mail list ignores the same sort of possibility concerning Nixon's question by attempting to locate it in the Haldeman *Diaries*. Once more, what is at stake here is not so much how the difference between a citation and an allusion can be confounded but how the difference can be transcended by recreating the authority of the one in the guise of abandoning the other.

Finally, the *Times* is in fact cited explicitly in *Gravity's Rainbow* for three texts: Pudding's "letter-feuds . . . with critics of Haig" (80), Mrs. Snade's letter "asking who was the man with the lovely deep voice singing 'Diadem'" (169), and Tantivy's obituary (252).

[3]This lack of integration is arguably the primary thing that distinguishes *Gravity's Rainbow* from *The Waste Land*, its exemplary precursor with respect to citations. I have commented elsewhere about Eliot's footnotes as allusions: "In a sense, they are not because lines which could have proceeded by indirection are instead cited and therefore take on the character of quotations. Yet in another sense the footnotes preserve the submerged texture of many of Eliot's lines by extending their allusiveness still further. Indeed, this is why many original readers took the footnotes, and even the whole poem, to be a parody" (80). With Pynchon, we might say, and with postmodern texts generally, the allusiveness is more openly flaunted to register the parodic nature of the whole text. Or to put the point in Zizek's Lacanian idiom, in *Gravity's Rainbow* the lack of integration is transformed into the integration of lack.

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