

Not for Specialists Only

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Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction, by Gabriele Schwab. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994. 280 pp. \$34.50.

Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930–1980, by Steven Weisenburger. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995. 320 pp. \$45.

Steven Weisenburger would call *Gravity's Rainbow* a satire, albeit of a special sort. Gabriele Schwab would call it a transitional text, although of a consummate kind. What difference do such classifications make to the understanding of Pynchon's novel? This is one question. What difference does Pynchon's novel, in turn, make to some understanding of the sophisticated theoretical vocabulary used by both critics? This is another question. Each of these books variously demonstrates how difficult it is to keep the two questions apart, which is probably just as it should be.

It is very much to the point that *Gravity's Rainbow* is given as an example of something, a literary genre and an apocalyptic metafiction, respectively. These books remind us that, for a number of years now, some of the most industrious writing on *Gravity's Rainbow* has not been restricted to books devoted exclusively to Pynchon. Indeed, as the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication approaches, we have grown accustomed to witnessing how the great novel is regularly situated within academic fields like American fiction and literary theory, and then developed according to their respective idioms and issues.

Hence, for another example, John A. McClure distinguishes *Gravity's Rainbow* as a late imperialist romance because it "celebrates worldly resistance, rather than religious resignation, as an alternative to empire," and "recommends worldly spiritualities, rather than unworldly Christianity, as sources for re-enchantment" (*Late Imperial Romance* 175). These will not be startling points to Pynchon specialists. Nonetheless, if *Gravity's Rainbow* is now an acknowledged classic, that is because it belongs exclusively to specialists no longer.¹

Weisenburger's new book is particularly compelling in this regard. The author of the *Companion to Gravity's Rainbow* is a Pynchon specialist. But not for the occasion of his new book, which proposes a reading of satire that counters traditional assumptions about stable

aesthetic structure and consensual-knowledge claims. Instead, Weisenburger puts a modernist and postmodernist case for the subversive eruptions and disfiguring energies of satire. We are urged to put down Northrop Frye on irony and pick up Rene Girard on violence. The point about satire is its degenerative function—whether in terms of narrative representation, rational structures, universal values, cultural work of any sort, you name it.

The thesis is neat and clean, and holds together pretty well; if it makes a significant intervention in how satire is conventionally understood, the formalist pieties of textbook definitions will have to be adjusted. Just as important, Weisenburger writes with wit and elegance about difficult things. This is one of the best-written books of literary criticism I've read in some time. As literary history, though, *Fables of Subversion* risks appearing slapdash. Why several pages on *The Day of the Locust* and none on *Nightwood*? Why *The Magic Christian* (in a nice chapter about black humor) but not *Naked Lunch*? Come to this, why does the study end in 1980? Weisenburger gives no good reason (beyond convenience). Consequently, his historical claim finally sags, and the thesis itself thins out, because it cannot comprehend something like (say) *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. Mark Leyner seems typical of a markedly contemporary satire whose provocation lies in blandly accepting the whole nature of Weisenburger's degenerative mode and just cavorting about in it as if there were no offense meant.

Put another way, we might speculate that the distinction between generative and degenerative satirical modes is now in danger of collapse. Will the center hold for a culture where William Burroughs appears in a Nike commercial? This is where the use Weisenburger makes of the figure of Pynchon becomes particularly interesting. *Fables of Subversion* gestures at *Vineland* in its final pages as an example of how the basic distinction remains in good shape. I wish Weisenburger had tried to make the case—as he does earlier with *The Crying of Lot 49*, and then preeminently in his last chapter with *Gravity's Rainbow*. By the end, in effect, *Gravity's Rainbow* (along with *J R*) is positioned as more representative of American satire than it might in fact be, both for subsequent decades and even for previous ones.

I don't mean so much to dispute Weisenburger's thesis, even insofar as it functions inevitably like an evaluative instrument, by which *Slaughterhouse-Five* lacks the courage of its degenerative dimension, while the "mature aesthetic" of John Hawkes is up to the task. I do mean to inquire into the status of specialized knowledge insofar as it seeks, or even requires, wider application. It comes as no surprise that Weisenburger's pages on *Gravity's Rainbow* are the best in the book;

his discussion of the regressive hysteron proteron (tantalizingly noted earlier in the *Companion*) marks a permanent contribution to Pynchon scholarship. But what contribution to scholarship on satire does the whole book make, especially if the example of *Gravity's Rainbow* is responsible for the model in the first place? A discussion of the notorious Brigadier Pudding coprophagy is the first literary illustration provided. I can imagine readers of *Fables of Subversion* more skeptical and scandalized than I am who will not grant the satiric palm to Weisenburger's fundamental distinction, if only because they haven't read *Gravity's Rainbow*—judged to be *too* degenerative.

What to conclude, then, about devotion to the novel as a condition of specialized knowledge? Weisenburger may not value his knowledge in these terms. (Indeed, why would he write about satire if he did?) Furthermore, specialization sounds like Them, and so Pynchon—we assume—would never elicit it. (The contrast scarcely needs to be drawn with the Joyce who proposed lifetime study as the proper response to *Finnegans Wake*.) Nevertheless, the knowledge proper to *Gravity's Rainbow* (extending from laws of engineering through doctrines of Gnosticism to convictions about subversion) may well coalesce into something ultimately too specialized—that is, incapable of continually generating wider terms or of intervening decisively (back) in other fields. *Fables of Subversion* at least prompts readers of a specialized journal to face the question squarely: what if the enabling conditions of specialization can open out only so far?²

Of course, no field is sufficient unto itself. Boundaries are permeable—with other fields, entirely different disciplines, or the culture as a whole. A specialization proceeds, in one sense, by admitting from elsewhere the latest critiques or cutting-edge issues. Suppose we ask what's hot at present in the study of *Gravity's Rainbow*? Well, narrative theory. Weisenburger is hep to it; this is what makes his chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow* (viewed in terms of its impulses to escape casual seriality and narrativity entirely) so good. What about ideology? Not so hot. Is this why the issue of ideology is blurred throughout *Fables of Subversion*? A book about a nation's satiric tradition simply fails to respond to how ideological interrogations have revived the study of American literature in recent years. To cite one: Sacvan Bercovitch's supposition about the curiosity of "an antagonist yet representative American literature," in which "our major writers were not subversive at all, or were radical in a representative way that *reaffirmed* the culture, rather than undermining it" ("The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History" 644).

Even granting the most narrowly or specifically national text its encyclopedic aspirations, I don't think any Pynchon critic has been

entirely at ease considering *Gravity's Rainbow* a purely American writing. Perhaps the reason such a shrewd critic as Weisenburger forbears considering very much the ideological construction of subversion is the same reason he doesn't consider American literary history more comprehensively: subversion might well emerge as predictable, or routine, from the depths of its national setting. One of these years somebody is going to write a book that has a chapter featuring *Gravity's Rainbow* as one of the great affirmative novels. My guess is that the basis of the argument will be that it is a profoundly American book, along the lines of Bercovitch's characterization. The chapter will, of course, have to recognize its debt to *Fables of Subversion*, even while countering that it is not easy to talk about degeneration as constituting cultural work all of itself if the whole imperative of cultural work is that it be, exactly, degenerative.

The best thing about Schwab is that she has a more searching psychological and philosophical understanding of, if not such a national tradition, at least a most contradictory, ambivalent text within the dynamics of its socio-historico-cultural moment. In this sense, *Subjects Without Selves* is strongest where *Fables of Subversion* is weakest: its account of the framework in which something like subversion operates. Schwab doesn't write about *Gravity's Rainbow* as a specialist. She doesn't write about anything as a specialist. In even sharper contrast to Weisenburger, she comes across as more of a continental thinker than a literary critic. (The book was first published in German in 1987.) Schwab cares about subversion because she cares about primary processes (the psychological vocabulary is consistent throughout); she cares about primary processes because she cares about aesthetic forms; and she considers *Gravity's Rainbow* because she wants to see how its peculiar "thematic poles" of apocalypse and transcendence rehearse new formations of subjectivity, neither Cartesian nor historical.

The representation of knowledge in *Subjects Without Selves* is derived from a number of sources. We are not surprised to find Lacan or Bakhtin. (Schwab's Bakhtin is more conservative than Weisenburger's, and his carnivalizations can be made subject to their own codifications.) We might be surprised to find Anton Ehrenzweig and D. W. Winnicott. Although the latter's notion of a "transitional object" is registered in Schwab's subtitle, the former's ideas on the importance of "unconscious scanning" in aesthetic reception are at least as crucial. Indeed, if a reader of *Fables of Subversion* ought ideally to proceed to a (re)reading of Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, a reader of *Subjects Without Selves* ought to proceed to Ehrenzweig's *Hidden Order of Art*. The difference is that a reader of Schwab

probably needs to. *Subjects Without Selves* is the sort of book you have to read a lot of books to read.

Gravity's Rainbow is only one of them. (There are also chapters on *Moby-Dick*, *The Waves*, *Finnegans Wake*, and *The Unnamable*. I liked the one on Beckett best.) Even though the scholarship Schwab cites is a decade old, her chapter is a powerful study of how the novel not only develops strategies to undercut the remythologizing effects (about there being a "True Text") of its own demystification but resists the closure proposed by the very entropy and apocalypse it simulates. She writes of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Its literary devices are inspired by the idea of a multidimensional and transpersonal order that at this point in history can only be deduced from theoretical positions." *Subjects Without Selves* is at once a reading of these positions and a study of their aesthetic disposition in a series of novels. *Gravity's Rainbow* is the last in the series.

Why? Sometimes it seems that the distinctiveness of each of Schwab's texts is just ground into a sort of transitional mush, and so we read the following sort of thing: "It testifies to a cultural politics that uses the capacity of language to draw from unconscious energies and creative skills in order to resist the unifying and codifying powers of language and thus to expand the boundaries not only of language but, mediated through it, of perception, communication, and emotion." Does it matter what "it" refers to in this instance? Schwab wants to be talking about everything at once. Consequently, one can be the more grateful for Weisenburger, who states clearly over and over again what he is talking about, and then sums it up in two admirably lucid and incisive sentences: "These texts do their best work in shouting 'Fire!' or in otherwise firebombing the cultural theatre where meanings are made. That, if we must have it so, is the cultural work of these fictions."

Yet Schwab explains better why we must have this sort of cultural work, or why we must have cultural work in the first place: secondary processes demand it. In her terms, Weisenburger's degenerative energies are too terminal. They belong instead in a transitional space, characterized in part by "its ambivalence toward the cultural environment in which it is created." The subversion Weisenburger values for its own sake is the sort of thing Schwab esteems instead as a standard part of primary-process operating procedure in literary texts, which, in turn, allow for complex interactions and new holistic orders whose value consists precisely in how it has been brought about by eluding the priorities of rational or analytic consciousness.

In other words, with respect to the categories of the multiple and the nonhierarchical, Weisenburger and Schwab would agree that, as

the latter puts it, "what *Finnegans Wake* generates on the level of words and syntax, *Gravity's Rainbow* simulates in its networks of narratives." They might even agree that it doesn't greatly matter if you prefer to align Pynchon with Flannery O'Connor rather than Joyce; Pynchon is never going to fit very definitively into one national tradition, not even his own. What would interest both critics more is the vexing matter of generation: Weisenburger plays it down, while Schwab plays it up. He studies Pynchon's subversion of narrativity. She studies how "Pynchon's transgression of boundaries is embedded in a dialectic of utopia and pathology." An escape route is built into Weisenburger's favored trope. An expansion is built into Schwab's dialectic.

It is too tempting to posit Weisenburger's book as an example of the limitations of specialized knowledge and Schwab's book as an example of the limitations of synoptic knowledge. I don't want to resist the temptation, although in another sense each of these books is, admittedly, about something either larger or smaller than its ostensible subject. From the perspective of *Subjects Without Selves*, *Fables of Subversion* just uses something called satire to study similar sorts of narrative possibilities, mental structures, modes of representation, and aesthetic experience. From the perspective of *Fables of Subversion*, *Subjects Without Selves* wants to posit "the holism of subjectivity" to recuperate the enormous degenerations—ecological, cultural, and so on—postmodern flesh is heir to, and is being lost to. It turns out to be easier than you might imagine to write a book that merely includes *Gravity's Rainbow*, if you concentrate on how *Gravity's Rainbow* is a book—just one book—in the first place because it examines the most fundamental conditions of its own coherence, which are not narrative at all.

Finally, how best to write about these conditions? Of course you can always restrict yourself to meat-and-potatoes explication. Neither of these fine books under review, however, can be recommended to anyone who wants to find fresh analogies to the Kenosha Kid episode or new light on Byron the Bulb. Weisenburger is more interested in the whole meal, while Schwab is even more interested in the digestive process itself. To both, *Gravity's Rainbow* is not so much a great example of a comic text, or only so in a primary-process, in-your-face carnivalesque sort of way. Instead, the book represents an enormous and enormously aggressive *feast* upon the basic stuff of Western knowledge. The wonder in how the table is set lies in how totally and unrelentingly everything is arranged to bring about as transgressive, not to say regressive, an indulgence as possible. It's no news that you have to know a lot to set up shop as a Pynchon specialist. The latest

news, from both inside and outside the field, could be about how much you have to let go. The field, like any field, consists of many strategies to include its own Otherness or to represent the circumstances of its own repression.

Near the end of *Subjects Without Selves*, Schwab (considering yet another thinker, Gregory Bateson, in order still better to locate literary texts in cultural terms) writes: "If one understands differentiation and dedifferentiation as complementary processes of systematic regeneration and reorganization, dedifferentiations appear not only as changes within a specific system but also as an affect of cultural contact between systems." This can be taken to mean one thing for the study of satire. It means another thing for the study of subjectivity. For the study of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I think it means that to be inside a specialization looking out may ultimately not be so different as to be outside looking in. Certainly it is almost impossible to keep differentiation and dedifferentiation apart when you have before you a text that stages contact between systems to watch the collisions, whether or not you value the collisions for the integrations they either fail or don't fail to make.

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Notes

¹Indeed, a regular lament has developed in books with chapters on *Gravity's Rainbow* to the effect that the very specialist project is what now troubles or restricts understanding of the novel. See, for example, Jeffrey T. Nealon's rather breezy ("almost at random") summary of the standard romantic-humanist positioning of the reader (*Double Reading* 108–09). Compare the lack of such a lament in, for example, Brian Stonehill's *Self-Conscious Novel* only a few years earlier. Of course, Stonehill went on to become something of a Pynchon specialist himself, or so one concludes from the location of the Pynchon Home Page on the World-Wide Web at his institution, prominently—not to say proudly—displayed.

²There is, of course, good reason why the study of *Gravity's Rainbow*, most particularly, should be concerned with this question. Again, see Nealon, who finds the novel much absorbed in disrupting "a pluralist economy of ends," and who remarks of this economy that it "remains an economy of opposition because it does not consider the structure of the field or network in which truth arises. Its conception of multiplicity consists rather of (re)evaluating competing claims among opposing truths" (119). Whether fairly or unfairly, Nealon would presumably give Pynchon scholarship as an example of such an economy.