

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW'S GOLDEN SECTIONS

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Elsewhere, I have tried to argue that quotations, like statistics, can easily be extracted to muster evidence for whatever "coherence," "logic," or "position" their manipulator wants to find anyway.¹ A possible counter-position to this is explored in this paper. I try to show how a critical reading of a fictional work can be constructed from passages which have been selected not on the basis of their support for a particular preconstructed argument but on random, or at least thematically unmotivated grounds. At the risk of self-defeat, to cite Gravity's Rainbow itself now: the "debate" between Mexico and Pointsman (89-91),² assuming we side with the former, the text's own clear favourite, would support a probabilistic reading over one founded on cause (predetermined theme) and effect (quoted passage). Another reason for selecting textual samples first (rather than selecting them later to support a pre-given reading) is that it avoids what is rapidly becoming, in the case of Gravity's Rainbow at least, a "canon" of Pynchon quotables.

No paper on GR is complete these days without mention of the fact that "everything is connected" (703); without indicating that "the narrator"--or worse, "Pynchon"--addresses "the reader" directly with "You will want cause and effect. All right." (663); without the "pencil words on your page only Δ t from the things they stand for" (510); without Leni Pöckler's "Parallel, not series" argument for the centrality of metaphor (159). They crop up everywhere, even though the first is a view of the world under the effects of Oneirine; the second is not clearly addressed by anyone to anyone at all; the question mark often gets dropped from the third; and the fourth should be read as Leni's fruitless "try" at translating her hermeneutic worldview into Franz's hopelessly positivist one.

The list could go on--for example, to mention the profusion of "stout rainbow cock[s]" (626), Death being told to fuck off (10), obligatory and multiple citations of the "progressive knotting into" (3), and the movement from "death to death-transfigured" (166). To say the least, it gets tiring. And to say the worst, there's a real question as to whether the Pyndustry may have got so grim, inbred and tame that it will never rise again from the ashes. For it seems like it's developing its own selective sub-texts of Pynchon to work on regardless of anything else that might occur between the covers. Perhaps this in itself needs to be accounted for.

In the conventional sense, GR appears to work hard on avoiding foreground/background distinctions. That is, no particular sections of text present themselves for attention. There is certainly a very high degree of stylistic difference,

but that difference is unrelenting: there is no "routine text" from which it emerges.³ Pynchon criticism, perhaps faced with this amorphous text in which everything and nothing acts as "punctum" in Barthes' sense,⁴ has begun to practise its own conventions of decoupage--selecting, cutting out particular objects of attention from the flow of writing, under the compulsion of a particular logic. That logic is almost always a logic of binarity, of polarised oppositionality whose forms, to mention only the ubiquitous, are: humanism/anti-humanism, damnation/salvation, election/preterition, cause-and-effect/probability, pattern/randomness, paranoia/hebephrenia, and the inescapable entropy and its many-named opposite.⁵ But I shaln't get into any more of a flap over this.

Instead, I want to experiment with a single, thematically unmotivated, method of text-selection and look at its upshot--as a possible way of reading GR.⁶ I have approached the text, then, informed by a geometrical principle rather than with any axe to grind in any interpretive debate. That principle is the "golden section" (g): a division of a line such that the whole of the line is to one part as that part is to the other part. Visually:



Where $ab : bc :: ac : ab$. This way of dividing a line is a conventional means of producing an aesthetically satisfying balance. It was a principle used in classical architecture to decide the placement of horizontal and vertical intersections that would be pleasing to the eye. A surprising number of paintings use g as a means of placing horizon-lines or other major picture-divisions. Debussy is known to have divided his compositions according to g in order to achieve a balance between mood and tonal sections. Certain paper measurements (such as A4, formerly) are given by g such that ab (in the figure above) forms the length of the sheet and bc its width. Most paperback books (Penguins, for example) are in the proportions of the golden section or golden ratio, as it is sometimes known. Also, g provides a basis for calculating Fibonacci number series: any large Fibonacci number divided by the next in the series will give an approximate value for g (such as 7752 / 12543, derived from the 3, 6, 9, 15 series).

Assuming the line in question to be a single unit in length, the formula conventionally used to find a point along it which satisfies g is $(\sqrt{5} - 1) / 2$ units. This works out at .6180339, calculating to seven decimal places. However, any line can be cut in two ways in order to satisfy our requirements. While .6180339 is the conventional number for finding the "major" section, a second point (g') can be found by calculating the same distance back from the right-hand point of

the line. Hence the number for calculating the "minor" section is:⁷

$$g' = (1 - g) = .3819661$$

Some interesting results occur if we use g and g' to locate two points in the standard edition of GR considered in terms of page and line numbers. Below, I will refer to these as Section 1 and Section 2 respectively.

Section 1

To arrive at Section 1, we apply g to the number 760 (the total page length of the text), with the result: 469.70576. This means we should look .70576 of the way into page 470. Since that page has 41 lines, this gives us the location: page 470, line 29. But since the formula is only approximate (e.g., if $g = .618$, the Section will occur at line 28), we should look for units of sense in the two lines preceding and following the section point:

They have been holding each other. She's been talking about hiding out.

"Sure. But we'll have to get off sometime, Swinemünde, someplace."

"No. We can get away. I'm a child, I know how to hide. I can hide you too."

The passage occurs in the post-coital space immediately following Slothrop and Bianca's mutual orgasm, the one after which it occurs to Slothrop that "he was somehow, actually, well, inside his own cock" (470). The assimilation of Slothrop's penis with the manned (or boyed) 00000 is no great leap of the critical imagination here; the text makes it explicit.

Sliding her arms around his neck, hugging him, she starts to come, and so does he, their own flood taking him up then out of his expectancy, out the eye at tower's summit and into her with a singular detonation of touch. Announcing the void, what could it be but the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself? (470)

Some connection between himself and the rocket is, we might remember, supposed to be Slothrop's "quest," the point of which is never made quite explicit. It does, however, have something to do with the fact that the rocket is piloted and that its pilot, Gottfried, is shrouded in an Impiplex something-or-other and that he, it or both (or some combination of these with something else unmentioned!) is or are known as the "Schwarzgerät." If there's an end to Slothrop's quest, it might as well be right here: it's perhaps the closest point at which he, his cock, the rocket and the idea of a human payload ("manned" flight) come, as it were, together. It's pretty much

from this point that Slothrop, after all, begins to disintegrate --and we shall see why.

But there's more to it than making a clear cock-rocket connection. That reading, like Slothrop, neglects Bianca. Section 1, that is, also falls at a place of supposedly genuine emotional involvement for Naline's little boy. And, if that's what it is, it's a pretty rare occurrence in GR: a novel where the sex tends towards the Pulitzer-offending end of the decadence scale, the mother-befuddling end of the deprivation scale, not to mention the exploitative and the phallogocentric ends of a whole range of other scales. What can, at its kindest, be called a "coupling" between Slothrop and Bianca here is clearly not without these elements. Bianca is, after all, very young, "11 or 12" (463), a figure drawn from the "Lolita" section of the official catalogue of masculine sexual fantasies. She is the archetype of the patriarchally constructed "ideal" female form in the postmodern era, the form Rosalind Coward has called "uncompromisingly adolescent." She goes on:

The sexually immature body of the current ideal fits very closely into these ideologies. For it presents a body which is sexual--it "exudes" sexuality in its vigorous and vibrant and firm good health--but it is not the body of a woman who has an adult and powerful control over that sexuality. The image is of a highly sexualized female whose sexuality is still one of response to the active sexuality of a man. The ideology about adolescent sexuality is exactly the same; young girls are often seen as expressing a sexual need even if the girl herself does not know it. It is an image which feeds off the idea of a fresh, spontaneous, but essentially responsive sexuality.⁸

Unaware of the sexual politics of the episode, Siegel is more concerned with the "seriousness" of the "relationship."⁹ He writes that "it is difficult to accept Slothrop's relationship with Bianca seriously because of her age." Despite the absence of this apparently necessary seriousness, Siegel goes on to opine, just prior to quoting from the text of Section 1, that "the narrator suggests that this is Slothrop's most poignant and meaningful affair, perhaps the only time he is really moved emotionally during sex."

What the text actually offers is something quite different:

Right here, right now, under the make-up and the fancy underwear, she exists, love, invisibility. . . . For Slothrop this is some discovery. (470)

So far, perhaps, so good. Excepting, of course, that it's all Slothrop's version of things. Bianca probably knows better, for the text moves immediately on in another way:

But her arms about his neck are shifting now, apprehensive. For good reason. Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost. (470; emphasis added)

Even more so than the moment of orgasm, the ensuing "love" is extremely fleeting. Slothrop doesn't lift a finger to protect Bianca; he doesn't stay with her, not even "for a while"; he doesn't go and hide with her. In no time at all, after a "bureaucracy of departure," "he's already forgotten about" coming back to her. It's possible that she dies (the text is ambiguous)--and it's therefore possible that she dies as a consequence of Slothrop's neglect. At least, the text itself seems to make such a condescending inference: it is "for this he is to be counted" as lost. But unlike the orgasm, any "poignancy" the "relationship" might have is all Slothrop's. Face it, Siegel: it's only another fuck. And, moreover, one straight from the pages of any wank-mag you might care to open.

It's no big deal that Slothrop can care for a post-coital micro-moment. Even at the point where he does consider going with Bianca, he says they should get off at Swinemünde--and his motives for that should be clear enough. Swinemünde is where Gerhardt von Göll waits with the S-Gerät for sale at half a million Swiss francs. Slothrop knows this, because Geli Tripping told him (294). Geli lets this particular one out of the bag in another post-coital scene, the one immediately following an orgasm which occurs, you guessed it, right on the button of . . .

Section 2

Using the value of g' (.3819661), we can locate Section 2 at page 291, line 12, and, as above, we should quote two lines preceding and following:

He's barely inside her before she comes, a fantasy about Tchitcherine in progress, clear and touchingly, across her face. This irritates Slothrop, but doesn't keep him from coming himself.

The foolishness begins immediately on detumescence.

This time the orgasm is somewhat less mutual. But again Slothrop has barely just met the person in question, Geli Tripping. She, along with her "young man" and sometime Slothropian alter ego, Tchitcherine ("another rocket maniac"), is first introduced to GR on page 290--just facing Section 2.

Geli is another adolescent fantasy. Like Bianca, she is described as "very young" (290); "she's just a little kid" (294), with "baby fingers" (291). But also, in order to meet the near-impossible demands of the ideal feminine, she's "long-

legged" (294). She mistakes Slothrop, as he enters her bombed out dress-shop, for Tchitcherine himself, and Slothrop lies to her about the comparison: "Just a hard-working newshound, is all. No rockets, no harems" (290). Geli either isn't fooled or doesn't care. She comes with a fantasy about Tchitcherine "in progress." It's so clear even that Tyrone can see it.

Again, the rocket and the penis overlap in a textually explicit way--though it's much earlier in the piece and not so much can be disclosed as at the major Section. And again, it's in the context of a kind of sexual transfer: this time Slothrop for Tchitcherine rather than for the penis/rocket inhabitant (Gottfried). And yet again, the "temporary alliance" seems to be less a "relationship" than a vehicle (a launch vehicle?) for asserting the primary phallogocentric image. No part of the text suggests any personal attachment between Geli and Tyrone. Their post-coital (which are also pre-coital) thoughts and talk turn instead to business, to the Schwarzgerät, its price and location. Slothrop (hard-working newshound) practically interviews her, for God's sake.

Okay, it may be paranoid, but it's at least creative. The golden section points can be read as marking off parallel episodes in the central phallogocentric nexus of the narrative: the penis-rocket nexus. And at least one of the points, the major point, marks as explicit a connection between penis and rocket as occurs anywhere in the novel. From this point on, Slothrop starts to be "lost," begins his famous disintegration. The passage in question suggests that this is precisely because of his subsumption by the business of the rocket at the expense of something in better faith. Yet, now that the S-Gerät business has come to prevent him from, for example, "genuine" relationships, he becomes proportionally less and less interested in pursuing his quest. He gets neither, becomes nothing. So we're dealing here with one of the famous binaries of the Pyndustry: the presence or absence of interpersonal ethics and their replacement by obsessional fetishes for the inanimate. The binary's central question is: can men (and the gender noun is deliberate--GR has little to say about women), can men genuinely care for others in the postmodern period that GR allegedly "assembles"? And the answer, at least from the Section points, is clear: yes, ephemerally--then the phallus returns.¹⁰

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Notes

¹ "Telegrammatology Part I," Pynchon Notes 18-19 (1986): 39-54. A revised version of that essay will appear as a chapter of Writing Pynchon (London: Macmillan, in press), jointly written with David Wills, on the relations between Pynchon's fiction and

the deconstructive criticism of Derrida, the later Barthes and others.

² All parenthetical page references are to the Viking/Cape edition of Gravity's Rainbow (New York and London, 1973). Henceforth referred to as GR.

³ See A. McHoul and D. Wills, "Gravity's Rainbow and the Post-Rhetorical," Southern Review [Adelaide] 19 (1986): 193-227.

⁴ See R. Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).

⁵ Writing Pynchon predicates the view that Pynchon criticism is unnecessarily bogged down in fruitless structural binaries (e.g., of the nihilism/humanism type discussed below) and that this applies, though in a less drastic way, even to critics of the "re-included middles" school, like Hite, who rely on ideas of binarity without choosing from between the oppositions they offer. See M. Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983).

⁶ Incidentally to this, the reading that follows has some, though arguably not much, relevance to one of the major binaristic debates mentioned above and going on within criticism on Gravity's Rainbow: namely, whether or not the novel is "essentially nihilistic, ultimately downbeat in its view of the nature of human experience." For a recent introduction to this "debate," see T. Moore, The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987). The quotation is from page 2. Another source is the introduction to C. Clerc, ed., Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983). It would seem from these two texts that the current move is away from the pro-nihilistic reading. However, pro-nihilism has been largely the prerogative of some reviews and short articles. No book-length work has ever sustained this position. Siegel, for example, took the same side as Moore and Clerc in the first full-length study of GR, albeit that he was a touch strong on the positive virtues ("charisma"!) of characters like Blicero and Hitler. See M. Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978) 97.

⁷ The last two decimal places of these calculations of g and g' are clearly suspect. That is, g' should also be able to be calculated as the

square of g . This would give g' the value of .3819659--a discrepancy of .0000002.

⁸ R. Coward, Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today (London: Paladin, 1984) 42-43.

⁹ Siegel 53. (This is Mark, not Cleanth or Jules.)

¹⁰ One traditionally celebrated exception to the absence of "genuine" human relationships in GR is Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake's. Mexico, that notorious pisser on conferees, is almost always read as the all-round nice guy, for some reason the exact antithesis of the American boor, Major Marvy. Mexico's "genuine" feelings are rarely questioned by critics, even though he's prone to understanding them via statistical metaphors. Jessica, on the other hand--and perhaps predictably, given the usual quantum of misogyny in the business--is often suspected of being Pointsman's plant and, for her own part, of merely using Mexico until she can return to that Jeremy Beaver of hers. It's more than a little unbalanced, then, but the affair, at least for a while, does seem to come close to the Pyndustry's dubious idea of the norm. (Though it should be remembered that the Blitz did some odd things, sociologically speaking, such as drastically reducing the suicide rate.) So it's quite refreshing to find Scott Simmon assembling the evidence to undercut this rosy picture. Simmon argues that the whole R&J episode, as the initials imply, is a satire of "romantic melodrama." Wouldn't surprise me--the relationship does, at least, come off as highly profilmic. The cutesy scene in the Kent church at Christmas (127-36) might, accordingly, be read as parallel to the Disgusting English Candy Drill only a few pages behind it (114-20). See S. Simmon, "Beyond the Theatre of War: Gravity's Rainbow as Film," R. Pearce, ed., Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 131.