REFUSED READINGS: NARRATIVE AND HISTORY IN "THE SECRET INTEGRATION"

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> Will Postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?
> --Gravity's Rainbow[1]

One of the most common impressions derived from Thomas Pynchon's work is that the author has digested libraries of information. Much of this information is obviously historical, yet the depth and scope of historical detail in Pynchon's fiction almost questions the very notion of the historical event. In Gravity's Rainbow, for instance, the Second World War is made to accommodate such traditionally marginalized matters as the fate of the Hereros, the political significance of the Zoot suit, the extermination of the dodo bird, etc. These are all elements that usually wind up on the trash heap of traditional historiography.[2] For Pynchon, however, they become the very substance of a counter-history.[3]

The organizational principle governing this counter-history can be better understood by examining it in a context where it is elaborated on a thematic level--that is, explicitly as trash. Trash is prominent in both "Low-lands" (1960) and "The Secret Integration" (1964). In Pynchon's early fiction, trash is emblematic of the refuse of an entire culture.[4] As Tony Tanner notes:

> Any reader of Pynchon will recognize that he has an extraordinary feeling for what society designates as 'rubbish'. . . . Many actual rubbish heaps or tips appear in his work--not as symbolic wastelands (though those are there too), but exactly as 'rubbish'.[5]

Tanner helps to draw our attention to the interpretive challenge posed by actual trash in Pynchon's work. In what follows, I concentrate on "The Secret Integration" in order to better illuminate the significance of trash as both a topos and an emblem of history as a narrative event.

"The Secret Integration" contains two main narrative events, in both of which the children demonstrate what is asserted throughout the story--their opposition to the world of adults. In one, the children come to realize their parents' hatred for the Barringtons, a black couple that has moved into their previously all white neighborhood. The narrative centerpiece, an analepsis, is the children's encounter with the alcoholic Carl McAfee, a black musician who is "just passing through"[6] town. Feeling the desperate need for drink, McAfee calls the local AA for help. In a story otherwise full of

pranks dreamed up by children, the most serious prank is pulled by adults. The adults at AA call young Hogan Slothrop and ask him to help McAfee. Hogan agrees, not suspecting that he is the agent of the adults' cruel joke. Hogan and his friends go to McAfee and help him as best they can, until McAfee is arrested for vagrancy. During their visit, McAfee tells the boys stories of his life, stories that somehow do not fit into the comfortable narratives their parents have provided for them. His stories seep into their minds, much as the disembodied voices of the ham radio they listen to in their sleep sometimes do: "It was as if Mr. McAfee too were broadcasting from somewhere quite distant, telling about things Tim would not be sure of in the daylight" (SL 179). To accept these stories, however, would be to question the very concept of narrativity as established by the adult world. According to the adult world, what McAfee tells the boys are not legitimate narratives. They necessarily constitute counter-narratives, narratives that stand in opposition to the reigning narratives established by the culture. It is towards this possibility of counter-narrative, nonetheless, that the children orient themselves in the story.

The children make two major efforts to produce counter-narratives. The first involves their imaginary friend, Carl Barrington, imaginary son of the Barringtons. The second, which I will deal with later, has to do with their hideout. Their parents would be horrified if the children were actually playing with a black child. Thus in their imagination they commit the greatest transgression against the taboos the adult world has taught them. The children construct Carl out of the refuse of the adult world, out of a refused race, but above all out of the refuse of representation and legitimized narrative:

> Carl had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts in Etienne's father's junkyard--things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with, piecing together, rearranging, feeding, programming, refining. (SL 192)

Just in imagining the existence of Carl, the children resist the racism of the adult world. Carl, moreover, does not remain a loose assemblage of cultural refuse. Rather, he functions as a character in the story. The narrative potential of refuse is granted a space within which it can articulate itself. Hence it is clear that cultural refuse can indeed be employed to construct counter-narratives.

It is important to stress that Carl does not merely serve to indict the racial prejudice of the adults in the story. He is also a figure for forms of knowledge that "The Secret Integration" can only hint at. He is an emblem of the sort of narratives that can be pieced together by picking through the

garbage of one's culture. Carl's possible significance is suggested as follows:

> Carl shrugged and sat watching them, as if he knew what, knew everything, secrets none of them had even guessed at. As if there were after all some heart-in-hiding, some crypt to Northumberland Estates that had so far managed to elude the rest of them, and which Carl would only someday tell them about, as reward for their having been more ingenious in their scheming, or braver in facing up to their parents, or smarter in school, or maybe better in some way they hadn't yet considered but which Carl would let them know about when he was ready, through hints, funny stories, apparently casual changes of subject. (SL 159)

Carl is, then, a figure for an organizational principle of possible counter-narratives in both history and culture. Just as Carl is pieced together out of cultural refuse, so would counter-narratives have to be constructed out of information and histories not granted a place in a reigning culture. This possibility is fully realized in Gravity's Rainbow, where the refuse of history and culture is embraced as a narrative principle.[7]

In a certain sense, Carl already belongs to the rainbow of Pynchon's later fiction--the pleasures tagged as "mindless" because they do not fit into the historical and cultural discourses of the West. One quality of Carl can hardly be accidental:

> [Tim] did think of Carl as not only "colored" himself, but somehow more deeply involved with all color. When Tim thought about Carl he always saw him against blazing reds and ochres of this early fall, only last month, when Carl had just come to Mingeborough and they were still getting to be friends, and he thought that Carl must somehow carry around with him a perpetual Berkshire autumn, a Wonderful World of Color. Even in the grayness of this afternoon and this district they had entered (which, it seemed, was deprived of its just measure of light because part of it belonged to the past), Carl brought a kind of illumination, a brightening, a compensation for whatever it was about the light that was missing. (SL 161-62)

Carl "colors" the narrative of "The Secret Integration" because he is the crystallization of everything that cannot be brought to narrative. Carl thus points to the explosive jumble of counter-narratives that come to dominate Pynchon's later work, for it is there that "Carl" becomes a narrative principle that attempts to piece together cultural and historical refuse.

Carl belongs to what is characterized in Gravity's Rainbow as the preterite. After "The Secret Integration," however, such figures in Pynchon's fiction do not remain merely at the margins of narrative. Instead, they work to elaborate a counter-narrative to their culture. This is, for instance, the function of WASTE in The Crying of Lot 49.[8] WASTE provides, for the preterite of The Crying of Lot 49, the very medium to articulate an oppositional form of knowledge of the reigning culture within which they live. This possibility is likewise employed in Gravity's Rainbow. Figures of preterition are not merely constructed in the resistant psyches of select characters--as, like Carl, are the blacks in the men's room of the Roseland Ballroom. Rather, they are empowered by narrative. Hence figures such as Enzian and the other Schwarzkommando are accorded a distinct place in the novel, and the counter-narratives they elaborate are carefully drawn out in the course of the narrative. More important, preterition becomes something that implicates all the characters of the novel. For this reason, it is only a small surprise that Tyrone Slothrop, as he uncovers the reasons for his being drawn to the V-2, learns that he was part of a bizarre experiment in which his code name was Schwarzknabe (blackboy: GR 286). In this sense, all the characters of Gravity's Rainbow become, like Carl, constructed out of cultural refuse.

The strategy of reading cultural refuse is adopted not only as a thematic element but also as an organizational principle in Gravity's Rainbow. To accommodate a wealth of historical and cultural detail, Gravity's Rainbow renounces the very form of traditional narrative. Linear progression is thus disrupted by a proliferation of counter-narratives. Indeed, the linearity and closure that traditionally define the novel as a genre are abandoned for virtually autonomous counter-narratives. In this way, Pynchon's fiction carries on the modernist attempt to undermine the form of Western narrative. Novels such as Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, Joyce's Ulysses, and Biely's St. Petersburg embraced the range of narrative detail to be found in quite limited spans of time. Yet, to the extent that the modernists ultimately subordinated the disruptive potential of the detail to the formal aesthetic properties of the text as a whole, they perpetuated the Western novel's imperative to inscribe narrative detail within a constraining economy of form. Pynchon, however, gives free rein to narrative detail. He pursues the plurality of narratives that an attention to detail requires. As a result, Pynchon's fiction makes a more decisive break with the detail-refusing novel of the West.

For the children of "The Secret Integration," the crucial confrontation with the adult world occurs when they discover the front yard of the Barringtons littered with garbage thrown there by racist neighbors. The children have trouble understanding why anyone would do this to the Barringtons, but to their shock they recognize the garbage--it belongs to them and their families. In this scene of actually reading refuse, the logic

of implication that the children have resisted is brought to the fore. The trash proves that all their parents are committing acts of racial hatred. At this point the children have only two options: either they must reject entirely the adult world, or they must submit to all of its narratives. The latter option would require that they no longer read the refuse of their culture. This is no doubt the significance of the story's ominous ending, involving the banishment of Carl. For Carl is, after all, constructed out of cultural refuse. It is also no doubt the significance of the story's ominous title. Only at the end of the story do we realize that the idea of a secret integration might refer, not just to an imaginary integration by means of the creation of Carl Barrington, but also to the integration of the children into the adult world by means of the banishment of Carl Barrington.

Where Carl is banished to, however, establishes the relation between narrative refuse and history. Carl is banished to the children's hideout, a house that is somehow bound up with local and international history. The house belonged to a would-be king, Yrjö, "a European pretender who'd fled the eclipse then falling over Europe and his own hardly real shadow-state sometime back in the middle Thirties (SL 160). King Yrjö is, along with all the other European emigrants who fled to America, part of the political refuse of Europe. The children sense that his house is tied to a history they have little knowledge of. In fact, this history constitutes a meta-narrative that the adult world of their parents is only a part of. As Pynchon writes:

> The king's exile, kids could sense, was something their parents were in on but was effectively cut off from the kids: There had been the falling dark, yes, and general flight, and a large war--all this without names and dates, pieced together out of talk overheard from parents, television documentaries, social-studies class if you happened to be listening, marines-in-action comics, but none of it that sharp, that specific; all of it in a kind of code, twilit, forever unexplained. King Yrjö's estate was the only real connection the kids had with whatever the cataclysmic thing was that had happened. (SL 160-61)

King Yrjö's house is linked in a tangential way to the Second World War, but not in a way that would find a place in any traditional narrative of that war. The house is certainly not the most distinctive remnant of the war, yet the children accept this piece of refuse as the most concrete evidence of "the cataclysmic thing." It seems to them a very tangible piece of history that is strangely ignored by the adults. Thus they accept it much more readily than all the narratives that are fed to them, for it is clear that there is something sinister about the war that the narratives of the adults only serve to

conceal. A counter-narrative of it could be elaborated only by reading the refuse of the war.

In "The Secret Integration" the strategy of reading cultural refuse is explored to a limited extent in the narrative development of the character Carl Barrington. This development is halted by a reading of actual refuse that establishes the extent to which the children in the story are implicated in the adult world. This strategy, however, suggests the possibility of linking narrative to cultural and historical refuse. King Yrjö's house, to which Carl Barrington is banished, is the site of Pynchon's later fiction. For it is in Pynchon's later fiction that characters are constructed out of cultural refuse in an attempt to develop a counter-narrative of history.

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Notes

[1] (1973; New York: Penguin, 1987) 56.

[2] For a unique and stimulating analysis of the theoretical implications of trash, see Michael Thompson, Rubbish Theory (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

[3] These issues are being addressed in some areas of contemporary historiography. Initially, it was the Annales school that confronted the economic and social structures of daily life. Successors to this school, such as Jacques le Goff and George Duby, have continued this effort to historicize what traditional historiography has considered the trivial aspects of individual and communal existence. Also of decisive importance to scholarship in the United States was the work of Michel Foucault, which presented extended "histories" of the historically and socially marginalized. The work of Paul Feyerabend is likewise of relevance in this regard in that it seeks to reveal how any historical account will always produce a certain amount of trash--that is, data and information that simply do not fit into the narrative being elaborated.

[4] For a discussion that links both junk and trash to the notion of entropy, see Peter L. Cooper, Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 53-58.

[5] Thomas Pynchon (London: Methuen, 1982) 20.

[6] Thomas Pynchon, Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) 167.

[7] For further elaboration of this notion, see George Levine, "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 113-36. Levine aptly notes: "The exhaustiveness of Pynchon's catalogues of waste moves him beyond decadence because he challenges us to resist the entropic reductionism of the systems we have been trained to impose on them. The question the prose proposes for us at every moment is whether we are strong enough to accept the details as they come to us" (116).

[8] (1966; New York: Perennial, 1986). As Pynchon writes of WASTE: "For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private" (124).