

HOW WE HAVE LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING

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The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State. By Dale Carter. London: Verso, 1988. 280 pp. \$45.00; pb \$15.95.

The last time the Bomb starred as the leading representative of our horror, as the mushroom phantasmagoria of the end, was in the films of the late (1960s-70s) avant-garde. Since then, activists--some historians, some of the arms negotiators, surely--have not forgotten to be afraid, but the rest of the country rather liked its entertainment to be post-apocalyptic, in the steel dawns of the barbaric future. When the Bomb was re-centered in the story, as in Atomic Cafe, we could have been traveling through America with Umberto Eco. The place looks grainy, hyperreal, provincial, high-spirited, and deadly. The Bomb itself and the technocracy that created it were crew-cut square and right out of Kansas. That was the forties and fifties, these films say; we can shudder and laugh, for we're so much more sophisticated now. Now with Eastern Europe retiring its communist parties while the Soviet Union applauds, the whole militarist rationale for the Rocket-Warhead State seems about to wither away. Bush is being cautious: he has to. For the Army is leaping ahead with scrap-and-retool plans to become a hot (surgical) strike force.

A new era? Who or what gets the credit for this yet another reason not to worry. Has the Pax Nuclear won? In freezing action and impoverishing both sides? Has the New Left won? In being the force buried in the samizdats and moving through the political underground of the East? The Church, in Poland? Labor, in East Germany? The Right, here? Or is this the promised convergence of the two world systems earlier theories predicted--or just an image of that end?

Dale Carter's The Final Frontier worries. It has not had the opportunity to relish these latest devolutions and developments. Its language is hard, and its ambition is very big. Carter believes Gravity's Rainbow sets the essential paradigms of the trajectory of the American century (a shortish century, beginning in the 1940s and curving downwards in the 1980s) at the moment when the Nazi Oven State was taken up and carried away to become the Rocket State. Actually carried away. Carter reports that in 1945 the US liberated from the Zone 400 tons of rocket equipment and 14 tons of printed matter, along with some famous Operations types like Werner von Braun.

Between 1946 and 1947, von Braun wrote a space-travel novel, tested the recovered V-2 rockets at White Sands, New Mexico, and created the math that would prove the feasibility of

space flight. The Air Force's Project RAND concurred with the Navy's report on the potential of Earth satellites just as Robert Heinlein was publishing Rocket Galileo. Heady opportunism seized fertile minds. It was not enough that the military had solidified science's incorporation into the superexploitable complex of war-fears. Science trained itself in its own needs by visionary fiction, until, according to Carter, fiction made science and vice versa. Scared and thrilled, the country watched.

It was quite a moment. The logic of nuclear warfare fueled the ambitions of the space age, with the movie makers pulling down the skies in disasters. Audiences were held in their seats at the Orpheus Theater with endless replays of invasion fantasies introduced by endless newsreels of the Red Menace sending its hordes over the geographical parallels, or infiltrating and corrupting the innocent. But, Carter reminds us, this "'transmarginal leap' between the actual and the imaginary can include a 'surrender' to hallucination, manipulation, and control, depending on the historical context: the terms of the 'nonstop revue'" (91). The country needed a fabulous adventure to uplift it from the scene. Americans could not be allowed to ponder too much the thought that all their great success and might would bring them was nothing but a cataclysmic terminus. This was a time when millions were sacrificed to inexorability at the war tables. These sacrifices would be worth it, big thinkers argued, until the point was reached when the survivors would wish to be dead. To shoot for the stars, or as Walter Cronkite remembers, to have been able to "wave goodbye to Columbus"--with the astronauts headed for the Moon--this was the country's reprieve. In Carter's view, this is Ilse Pöckler's dream. This is America's bright-white future of an entirely engineered world beyond this one, integrating us, transcending us, in the suspended time of space.

For Pynchon is haunted, says Carter, by the "grown baby" fantasy of the kind General Cummings voices in Mailer's The Naked and the Dead. Such a fantasy "transforms history into metaphors of inevitability, natural or mechanical, which requires a subordinate like Hearn to be 'nothing but a shell,' and which implies a society of would-be Führers engaged in limitless combat: a program of heroic vitalism and the antithesis of any sort of social coherence based on mutual aid" (70). One character after another in Gravity's Rainbow has invested in this "dream of inviolability" within a "single universal plot" of destruction, which "renders the human rigid and fearfully anxious within its codings, and constitutes a neurotic mania whose realization may be suicidal" (70-71).

Carter proposes that Gravity's Rainbow presents the "Genesis to Revelation" of the Rocket State's "origins, range, domain, and bearing, as well as its justification of false mobility within naturalized security," beginning with "the receding flood tides of World War II" and arcing towards "the

closing firestorms of nuclear war" (71). It is as if Pynchon's thoughts had rushed backward from where he sat in the decade of moon landings and blanket bombings of Vietnam to conceive of the point of inheritance, in the paranoid prescience of his characters, of the new "voluntary totalitarianism." Gravity's Rainbow puts before us the parable of the Descent and the Orpheus Theater as we sit in front of the television screens waiting for the Challenger show or the Star Wars show to begin.

For the historian Carter, the novel is utter inspiration, for its energy, dread, dissociation; for the way its anger and admonitions are woven through with historical persons and places; for the way it asks if there "might almost--if one were paranoid enough--seem to be a collaboration here, between both sides of the Wall, matter and spirit. What is it they know that the powerless do not? What terrible structure behind the appearances of diversity and enterprise?" (GR 165). To Carter, the novel is uncanny in the way it illuminates "The American vice of modular repetition, combined with what is perhaps our basic search: to find something that can kill intense pain without causing addiction" (GR 348), and in the way it images the America of the plastics factory, brewing its industrial secrets, dreaming of the Imipolex future. Above all, Carter admires the novel for the way it shows the "process of absorption facilitating the survival, transformation and reproduction of a partly obsolete imperial power structure in the form of its incipient totalitarian replacement" (8). All this encapsulation and representation stirs Carter to new efforts of "synthetic" history-criticism.

The Final Frontier aims to be, not a literary discussion or a social history of the space age, but a new thing, a form of high critique reaching through the structures and language of Gravity's Rainbow to draw parallel after parallel to the forces behind the story of America's space efforts. The result is obsessive, extraordinarily researched and detailed, brilliantly inventive about the novel, and pressed by a demon to reveal the meaning behind the spectacle. Eric Mottram, of King's College, is quoted on the book's cover as saying that this is a "sober and witty investigation of space-weapon and space-probe politics and technology." Perhaps to the Brits, who may all be mad. To American ears, even ones that can remember the emphasis the New Left gave to the language of incipience, transformations, and declines, this book is the last one would call sober and witty. It holds to the terms of the novel, no matter at what symbolic strain. And while Pynchon may indulge in "Gallows humor. A damned parlor game" (GR 165), Carter cannot. The not-so-funny, after all, picaresque of the novel (with, of course, the inverted dowser of Slothrop's cock) has to be forsworn in writing history.

While some of Carter's writing uses a narrative style, blending portraits, media, politics and economic forces, most of it reflects Carter's loathing for the power-players of the

nuclear threat, elevating them into maximal dissemblers and manipulators, while the culture as a whole is shown groping for emotional safety valves. America is dramatized as reconstructed from the chaos of the Zone, built upon a "precarious structure of immanent civil conflict and insatiable security programming, of evasive action and endemic stasis . . . by which the outdated and untenable relationships of authority and obedience characteristic of the imperial age are reproduced in the interests of the post-war order's extension" (9). One might ask why, with so much to be concerned with, Carter focusses on space. The answer is that the rocket is "the endlessly absorbing expression of such a movement" even as it is translated "into its more imaginative forms at the heart of the Rocket State's rise" (9). In Carter's mind, Gravity's Rainbow virtually propelled his study. "For as the parabolas leading from the UFA studios at Neubabelsburg and Lüneburg Heath clearing converge at the Orpheus Theater, creating the complex spatial and temporal intersection at 'the last delta-t' where the Faustian Rocket State is produced and consumed, so Pynchon projects a third parabola resulting from their occlusion . . . the American-manned space program" (83).

In Carter's description of that program, hardly an event gets named without reference to Gravity's Rainbow. Yet America's imaginative forms come through clearly enough, especially when it goes all out. Carter begins with a leap from the 1939 to the 1964 World's Fair ("the shape of things to come"). There on the horizon is Blicero's "'great glass sphere, hollow and high and far away"; there are the protesters, yelling about segregation in the fair's construction and about the shameless expense of the project, getting arrested; and there is Disney in Florida buying up land twice the size of Manhattan for his EPCOT center (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow). Thus the crisis years following Sputnik reveal their dynamics: fancy staging that pictures the future as the universe conducted by the US, the jeering part of the crowd that won't buy it, and the entertainment magnate dreaming of a world where social problems can be fixed by design. It's a show, it's daring, and from the start it suffered from an eroding set of beliefs. Soon the war, the inflation, the burning cities do their work; liberal capitalism falters, and the buck-makers use "vision" to sell their products. When the EPCOT center opens in 1982 as part of Disney World, Carter reminds us, its original futurist-utopian vision has been replaced by patriotic silliness and industrial exposition intended to "captivate the American public as loyal and satisfied customers without having to underwrite their liberation as informed and intelligent citizens" (6).

The next chapters document how truly successful that captivation became. By 1956, "the United States became the world's first service economy and the first country in which the population spent more time watching television than working" (100). Suburbia was growing forty times faster than the cities.

The consumer motor, in overdrive, rode in where angels feared to tread. Two hundred companies demonstrated the durability of their products within the blast zone of a nuclear test. Others labeled their products with the FBI's own "Fidelity, Bravery, and Integrity" slogan, to the FBI's outrage. By 1970, "52 per cent of the world's foreign investments were in the hands of American-based multinational corporations and banks, the result of an eight-fold increase in overseas capital accumulation by US firms since 1945" (32). And, "Within twenty years of the war's end, total short-term consumer debt rose from \$5 billion to \$74 billion to finance not just the 'pin-ups and library shelves' of the Orpheus Theater's 'invisible rooms' but the entire consumer goods fallout blanketing the new private quarters" (98-99).

But for all these distractions, never far from the minds and efforts of the "merchants of discontent" (although surprisingly far from most Americans' thoughts: in a 1954 survey, only one percent mentioned communism as their chief concern) was the "fetish of preparedness" against the communist threat. One megainstrument after another roared off into the blue. Korea was a "Lockheed war" and the first to claim a totally unseen kill. In the nuclear arsenal's hall of fame, the legend of unstopability went to the intercontinental ballistic missile. Silos, "top secret," were built at the edge of towns; everybody knew what those small zones of loathsomeness held.

In describing the shock of the nation at the launching of Sputnik in August of 1957 (and the jokes: remember the "Sputnik cocktail"--one-third vodka, two-thirds sour grapes?), Carter exorcises the "had-to's": "The United States therefore had to demonstrate the superiority of the free enterprise system by restoring a high level of economic growth; it had to prove its capacity for justice by making an effective commitment to civil rights; and it had to regain its position as the world's leading scientific power by overtaking the Russians in space" (126-27). When the Vanguard rose only four feet off its launch pad in 1957, the "Flopnik," "Kaputnik," "Stayputnik," flunked Eisenhower and brought Senators Johnson (the "Space Cadet") and Kennedy into position to deploy the rhetoric of the New Frontier. That frontier meant space; it also meant massive rearmament for flexible response and strategic strikes at a time Kennedy "later defined as 'the hour of maximum danger'" (138).

While Kennedy argued for a "politics of expectation," he was also proposing a "politics of exertion"--the great public sacrifice and unity he had praised in terms of "voluntary totalitarianism." Carter found this phrase in Kennedy's 1940 book, Why England Slept. Had Kennedy not used those words, Carter would have invented them. For they seem to explain a lot--the jingoism of "America first," the bases around the world, the wars of intervention, and the concomitant manufacturing of consensus at home that made it all possible. By the 1980s, the country acts sedated, tranquilized by disaffected, losing-the-race tremors, perhaps, but as has been

true for a long time, placated by the strength of a never demilitarized war machine throwing its fancy stuff at us. We seem to have voluntarily agreed to sham politics at home in order to wield the bludgeon in "our" interests abroad. For Carter, Kennedy becomes the very embodiment of this process at its formation; or, rather, Kennedy is "part of the Operation's multifaceted replacement for its outdated Führer system: a figure capable of addressing an appeal for voluntary totalitarianism across an indulgent society by calling for a more accommodating joint command structure" (9).

In naming this wholesale process "incipient totalitarianism," Carter admits that no single term adequately describes the post-war power structure. His Appendix I contains a curiously truncated discussion of the term. We have to interpolate for ourselves that Hannah Arendt's four conditions for totalitarianism (quoted on page 20) were beginning to be met in the America of the 1950s and 60s. First, classes have been transformed into masses in this country, at least in consumer sociology. Second, the party system has taken on nominal functions in representing the less well-to-do; that purpose has been taken up by the social movements. Third, the center of power has shifted internally from the army to the police and to the many branches of surveillance. Externally, we have called our various aggressions police actions. Fourth, we have established a foreign policy directed towards world domination, even if it is called containment.

The nuclear threat, arguably enough, terrorized us totally, and followed another of Arendt's maxims: this total terror, "independent of all opposition," brought about and carried forth as if by "the force of nature or of history," raced freely, "unhindered by any spontaneous human action" (The Origins of Totalitarianism [1973] 464-65). Loneliness for Arendt was the spiritual precondition for the collapse; the 1950s saw the American as a member of the lonely crowd.

One thought of Arendt's, however, does not yet seem to be so true, even granting the power of the Presidents. "Totalitarian policy," she writes, "does not replace one set of laws with another, does not establish its own consensus iuris, does not create, by one revolution, a new form of legality. Its defiance of all, even its own positive laws implies that it believes it can do without any consensus iuris whatever, and still not resign itself to the tyrannical state of lawlessness, arbitrariness, and fear" (Origins 462). Despite "Democracy by the US Airborne" policies, internally, Americans sense that they are diverse enough to be still capable of pulling and tugging at the control structure within the framework of courts and interests. True, these special interests block a "liberating tolerance," to use Marcuse's words, because as Robert Paul Wolff said, it is the genius of American politics to "treat even matters of principle as though they were matters of conflicts of interests" (A Critique of Pure Tolerance [1969] 21,

84). But events proved another point. Not to glorify them unduly, but the social movements (civil rights, antiwar, feminist, gay, ethnic minorities) did create a politics of principle in this country. They interrupted, for a while, the drive towards a Marcusean "totally administered society" whose opposition had given up, a priori, the threat of counterviolence. The cities did burn; there were stand-offs. The State has been forced to recognize demands for entitlement or reparations or needs servicing. Consider too the privacy/disclosure acts, the Watergate trials, the restraints on secret government; notice the recent desertions from the drug wars. These may be hopeless against the technology of the Rocket State, but they reveal a space for citizenship that might be just enough to slow down the full development of "casual" totalitarianism. Carter draws his position from the more radical critiques of Arendt; he is not prepared to equivocate, for all his mention of the "precarious structure of immanent civil conflict," despite what he hides in that word "incipience."

Instead, he emphasizes that zest for big government needs to be continually reinforced. The space program was and is America's most successful flag-waving venture. Every aspect of it--from the great new work force, the revitalization of the South and the extraordinary grab for public resources by the business community to the elaborately groomed appeal and political fortunes of the astronauts--has been an incontrovertible boon to the State. For a particular demonstration, after reading this book, visit the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum on the Capitol's mall. The New Future and America's claim to its achievements swing from the rafters in boosterism. The effect on most people is the sense that it just "had to be."

The space program also had to decline, under the pressure of enormous inflation and its woes, beginning in the late 60s. Between 1966 and 1971, two-thirds of the work force was fired. The dramatic manned flights were supplanted by satellites and shuttles. More sinisterly, the military made increasing inroads into a program that had previously been remarkable for allowing relatively free access to its information and for its dedication to scientific endeavors.

Carter's conceptual time comes down in 1986 with the "quick frozen permanent frame" of the death of Christa McAuliffe in the space shuttle Challenger--the nation's "most celebrated material icon." For McAuliffe, as it must be for all of us who somewhere dream Ilse Pöckler's dream, the stars "lit no viable way out." "On the contrary, as Pynchon makes clear when the Oven State's last clearing caves in . . . such dreams of transcendence rose on the very instruments of death they eschewed" (269). A possible coda to the story, the peace shield forever, SDI, Star Wars, trails off with Reagan as a lunatic lighting out "for

territories new." It resounds with Dr. Strangelove's gleeful yell: "Mein Führer, I can walk!" (271).

Not that the space age is over. We calmly await space stations and space probes, hoping sense will overtake Congress and they will stop Star Wars. But there's no question that space's political promise is more tenuous. And we have grown a little more lonely in the heavens, a little less sure that They are looking for us. In 1965, 10,147 UFO's were reported to the US Air Force; now such reports trickle into a single privately funded researcher, who carefully debunks them, for the record. Pravda (reporting a landing this fall in the Ukraine) is just keeping up the tradition.

What does Carter say about Gravity's Rainbow? The novel's brief time span is its key: all forces have rushed to that moment to accelerate the transition and maturation of the new order. The war has ended; Fascism, a most vicious element of a brutal system, is in defeat; the victors stand ready for the spoils. Though they may wrap themselves in the language of benign democracy and liberal markets, in fact they are reconstituting world forces with the tools and the rationale of perpetual warfare. The first hundred pages of The Final Frontier predict who in the novel will succeed in crossing the Zone and finding a place for themselves in the new order. Some, like Werner von Braun, are instantly whisked to new sites of operation. But others have to be tested, especially tested against capitalism's show of "leaving the war behind." What the transformation requires, in Rózsavölgyi's words, is something "able to draw them into a phalanx, a concentrated point of light, some leader or program powerful enough to last them across who knows how many years of Postwar" without the "terrible disease like charisma" (67).

The Rocket State, says Carter, "becomes an environment located, like Henry Miller's Air-Conditioned Nightmare (1945), somewhere between insane asylum and shopping center" (86). Consequently, we can count on Yoyodyne's Clayton "Bloody" Chiclitz, that man from the future, to demonstrate "essential" agency. He "translates military conflict and civilian anxiety into effortlessly marketable entertainment" (79), and he guesses rightly that V-weapons will be the way to go. Gerhardt von Göll will also rise. His "dream factory career documents the inflection of propaganda from its imperial form as a discrete intrusion on society to its totalitarian form as its continuous and pervasive condition" (80). So too the modest Pöckler. "Although his decision to 'quit the game' in the dying days of the Oven State seems to distinguish Pöckler from Burroughs' archetypal agent, who blows the world up because it is his job to do so, he first completes Gottfried's shroud, and his decision to 'quit' does nothing to stop his joining the next game, to be pulled in by new stakes and new players. Pöckler remains 'just the type they want'" (78-79). Plasticsman Mossmoon will triumph most of all, for he is "the synthesized

behavioral unit of post-war society," who acts as "the integrated circuit at the end of capitalism's own history: a temporary lodger in commercial accommodation; an interchangeable part inside a technical system" (46).

Pointsman makes a stab at the transition and loses--"his dreams of personal omnipotence an embarrassing and inefficient remnant" (43). Blicero, that "vehicle of imperialism" whose "plot is a monologue of retreat," must utterly dissolve. He, "like Pointsman, is an agent of power whose authoritarian dream is at once revealed and dismembered by the loss of his child victim; a would-be Führer who is himself rendered impotent in the interests of the Operation's survival" (48).

Finally, Slothrop is presented "not only as a wave but also as a particle whose decay releases new elements" (38). A knowing confidence man, a plaything of power, Slothrop is "broken down and removed from history: his engineered shells fill the naturalized environment of post-war morphological differentiation whilst his anarchic core is displaced to an ahistorical world of fantasy beyond" (41). He "escapes location and structure at the cost of identity and autonomy. In each case his division increases the entropic chaos of oversystematized energies as, in Hannah Arendt's sense, public praxis is displaced by social behavior" (39).

To Carter's credit, he rather wonderfully elaborates details and adds myriad references to these stick figures of economic and political allegory. His notes range easily from Moby-Dick to Marshall McLuhan and H. T. Wilson's The American Ideology: Science, Technology and Organization as Modes of Rationality in Advanced Industrial Societies. But patience can crack. Carter piles up associations even as he overworks his monolithic blocks of imperialism and incipient totalitarianism. The strain is often too much, his language glutted, harried, dogmatic. Powerful physical metaphors drive this book through the "political, economic, technical, and cultural minutiae of post-war American society" (83), as if Carter were too impressed with his own efforts to match Pynchon's arc for arc. Though Carter professes a history which is human-made, in investigating the "intersecting processes of evacuation, elevation, and elimination, of what Thomas Pynchon describes as the 'great frontierless streaming'" (6), he works too hard to reproduce those mechanisms. Cultural artifacts and political and economic "completions and transformations" are fused, as if a novel, a movie, a bid for the presidency, a merchandising scheme were always/already burned up in the aftermath of unstoppable technical trajectory, Blicero's virus of Death.

Admittedly, such synthesis is the ghastly inspiration of Gravity's Rainbow; history-writing usually dares not such paranoid feats. If Carter turns out to be right, and we should have worried more, and we live to reflect upon it, then indeed

we can grant him his due. We are doomed to the forces of a single dynamic emanating from the Zone of 1945.

--The Cooper Union