

The Harmless Yank Hobby: Maps, Games, Missiles and Sundry Paranoias in *Time Out of Joint* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

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At this climactic moment, when he could bear the preternatural joy no longer, he threw a small switch.

With a deafening bellow, a magnificent billow of orange flame spurted out of the rocket. Every throat in Heldon joined with Feric's in a wordless cry of joyous triumph as the seed of the Swastika rose on a pillar of fire to fecundate the stars.

—Norman Spinrad (243)

“[O]ur Bible is Nature, wherein the Pentateuch, is the Sky,” says Charles Mason, former Assistant to the Astronomer Royal, at the end of *Mason & Dixon* (772). Besides its theological implications, this statement also describes Pynchon's poetics. Anyone who has read a single page of his novels knows what inexhaustible quarry of metaphors nature is for him, as rich as the Bible (or Shakespeare) has been for so many English-writing authors. But nature provides Pynchon with metaphors (so many that they do indeed “jump into your Arms” [773]) only thanks to the ceaseless mediation of science and Technology (with or without the capital T). And ICT (Information and Communications Technology) in the form of the World Wide Web, with its endless metaphorical possibilities, elegantly embodies the fundamental literary principle of intertextuality.

What hackers, professionals, practitioners, amateurs and humble workers in the web call hypertextuality is in fact a comfortable metaphor that may well enlighten us about the wonders (but also the pains) of intertextuality. Hypertextual links teach us to reconsider those

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textual grafts called quotations, epigraphs, insertions, inscriptions, echoes, traces, loans, plagiarisms, unashamed imitations and thefts by mature poets, considering them no longer as exceptions but as the Rule, with capital R.

My aim here is to examine a certain hypertextual link, verifying its functionality and measuring to what extent the two objects it links are what they are and, above all, mean what they mean thanks to that link.

Intertextuality contributes to explaining some more or less enigmatic passages of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, like the Kenosha Kid sequence at the beginning of episode 10 (GR 60–62). Although a 1931 pulp Western by Forbes Parkhill has recently been identified as the likely source of the name Kenosha Kid (which may also be, as has often been suggested, an allusion to Orson Welles), the sense of the variations on the sentence "You never did the Kenosha Kid" will be much clearer if we read that part of the text as a hypertextual/intertextual link to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, where bored and depressed Major Major decides to sign Washington Irving's name to the documents he has to endorse, "just to see how it would feel" (95). This practical joke gets more complex when Major Major decides to switch from Washington Irving to John Milton (a shorter name that enables him to double his bureaucratic output):

Major Major soon found himself incorporating the signature in fragments of imaginary dialogues. Thus, typical endorsements on the official documents might read, "John, Milton is a sadist" or "Have you seen Milton, John?" One signature of which he was especially proud read, "Is anybody in the John, Milton?" (100)

This is not so far from Tyrone Slothrop's variations on "You never did the Kenosha Kid"; the first text in that series of variations is a document, however imaginary—that is, hyperfictional.¹ At the beginning of *GR* episode 10, Slothrop imagines a letter to the Kenosha Kid, to which he receives this reply:

Dear Mr. Slothrop:
You never did.
The Kenosha Kid (60)

That is the first occurrence of the sentence. The letter might just be formally similar to ones Slothrop had to endorse while working at ACHTUNG ("Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany"). The Heller hyperlink hints that both Major Major and Slothrop are just small cogs in the vast, senseless machinery of

bureaucratized warfare, trying to enjoy whatever fun their boring activity yields now and then. At the same time, the fake signatures are Major Major's only successful rebellion, an attempt to set himself free from the identity and position the U.S. Air Force has imposed on him, and from the ludicrous name, Major Major Major, his father imposed on him. By adopting another name, like John Milton—one that is "supple and concise" (100)—Major Major rebels against the patriarchal power that made him ridiculous. By playing a similar game, Slothrop may also find relief from the dissatisfaction and senselessness which eventually lead to his desertion (like that of Heller's protagonist, Yossarian). And after the Kenosha Kid episode we learn that something has been (patriarchally) imposed on Slothrop too: his Pavlovian conditioning by Laszlo Jamf.²

How can such an intertextual/hypertextual link help us to read *Gravity's Rainbow*? The metaphor of the HTML <A> tag which facilitates internet hypertextuality can help us understand the meaning and the function of the *Gravity's Rainbow-Catch-22* link. A hypertext link in a webpage indicates that the present text, the currently displayed page, is not self-contained or self-sufficient; that its meaning, content or communicational potential is not fully expressed, but can be supplemented by something else: other words, sounds, images—contents not immediately present but easily reached. Breaking the linearity of our reading as we enter an intertextual shunt, the hyperlink, is not like turning a page (that function is performed by the Next-Page and Previous-Page buttons); it is leaving the present text to reach a different text (often physically hosted in a different location, on the other side of the Earth even). And it is a facultative act. Following a link is not compulsory. Accessing the shunt to enter a different word flow, a different linear text or image or whatever is up to the reader. It does not abolish linear reading, as some theorists with a misplaced revolutionary enthusiasm have claimed. It makes linear reading more complex, enriches or enhances linear reading, turning the alleged linearity of the text (provided the so-called linear text was that linear) into a weblike structure with segments of linear text connected in a three-dimensional architecture by means of intertextual shunts, the links.

There is obviously a big difference between a hypertextual webpage and a highly intertextual novel like *Gravity's Rainbow*: you cannot click on the printed words in the book. No way to open the Kenosha Kid and reach Major Major busy signing his papers as Washington Irving or John Milton. But since the link is facultative, this inability is not such an impediment: you can go on reading the story of Tyrone Slothrop, thinking that the different versions of the Kenosha Kid sentence are no

more than free associations, idle thoughts of a bizarre mind. You miss something, but that does not prevent you from going on. You can go back and follow the link later, maybe after you have read *Catch-22*. Or you can rely on critics, whose business is to follow links wherever they suspect there is one. Still, the weirdness of scenes, characters, actions in Pynchon's novel is a signal the author uses to warn us that below the printed page is an intertextual shunt to be activated. Such weirdness is like the underscoring or colored fonts web designers use to highlight hypertext links. Once we have followed all the links in the pages of Pynchon's novels (a task that could keep busy a couple generations of scholars), we might realize that Pynchon's bizarreness is nothing more than a superficial side-effect of our ignorance.

A more complex hypertextual/intertextual link or group of links connects *Gravity's Rainbow* and a novel published fourteen years earlier, *Time Out of Joint*, by another American author whose fame and respectability are quietly growing: Philip Kindred Dick. Both stories involve rockets (or better, missiles), hobbies, maps and paranoia. Comparing Dick's character Ragle Gumm and Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop can teach us something quite interesting about Pynchon's textual strategies. Let us start by recapitulating the plot of Dick's novel, which is much less famous than Pynchon's.

The story begins in a nondescript U.S. small town in 1958. Ragle Gumm, the protagonist, is an idler who, at the age of forty, has no job, no family and no house of his own. He lives with his sister, Margo, who is married to the owner of a supermarket, Vic Nielsen. Ragle's only occupation, apart from attempting to seduce his neighbor's wife, is solving the puzzle published every day by the local newspaper, the *Gazette*. The contest—*Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next?*—consists of locating, on a map divided into squares, where the little green man will appear, and when. Contestants have to choose the right square on the basis of a semi-logical procedure involving deciphering some sibylline sentences and taking into account previous answers. Ragle has been the undisputed champion of the contest for years: he keeps finding the right answer day after day, month after month, something that makes him and the editorial staff of the *Gazette* quite happy. He wins, it must be added, thanks to his records, his charts, his deductive abilities, but above all thanks to an almost inexplicable intuitive talent.

Ragle is quite famous locally. Every day the newspaper publishes his picture above the contest grid. He is so popular that readers have grown fond of him: he is like a family member, and they expect him to keep winning week after week. This is why the editorial staff,

exceptionally, allows him to submit more than one solution for each day's puzzle, provided he indicates their order of value—the most probable solution, then the second-most probable, etc.

The secret compact between Ragle and the staff of the *Gazette* is odd, but the nameless town Ragle lives in is even odder. In what should be an ordinary town of the United States in the late fifties, Marilyn Monroe is unknown, Richard Nixon is known as the Director of the FBI, there are no radios but only TV sets, etc. Characters remember small details of their lives, their homes, their workplaces that turn out to be false or inconsistent: a light switch that should be there is not, a step someone remembers is missing, and so on. And when a soft-drink stand in a public park disappears, leaving an astonished Ragle with a slip of paper in his hand with "SOFT-DRINK STAND" on it in block letters, we cannot help thinking something is rotten in that nondescript, would-be ordinary town.

In fact, a conspiracy is going on. Ragle is not the man he thinks he is; Vic and Margo are not his relatives; all the world we have been shown in the first fifty pages of the novel is totally, irredeemably bogus. The story takes place in 1998, but not our 1998; Dick has envisioned his 1998 in 1958 through the lens of SF of the fifties. Earth is ruled by a totalitarian planet-wide government (called One Happy World), which has now banned space exploration. After the Moon was colonized, the lunar colonists grew to resent the domination of Earth and eventually revolted, adopting attrition tactics to compel Terra to acknowledge the independence of the Moon. Every day they launch a missile against a target on Terra, choosing it on the basis of a more or less randomized, would-be unpredictable pattern. And there is only one person who can (usually) foresee where the big missiles with nuclear warheads will fall next.

That person is Ragle Gumm. Thanks to his partly deductive, partly aesthetic technique, Ragle can envision a pattern in the previous strikes and locate the next target (with a certain degree of approximation, which is why he is allowed to provide alternative solutions). While he thinks he is following in the green man's footsteps, he is actually following in the Rocket's tracks.

Not much is to be said about why Ragle is imprisoned in a fake town of the fifties and can solve his ballistic problems only if they are disguised as a harmless contest. Those in power (or better, They, with capital T) decided that Ragle's moral doubts about the war made him too unreliable to be left free; then Ragle's retreat syndrome, triggered by excessive strain, facilitated Their putting him into an artificial urban setting which reproduced the world of his childhood. In the end, Ragle manages to escape and join the Loonies, the Lunar rebels. What is more

important is that in this novel an absolutely irrelevant activity, an apparently harmless (American) hobby, turns out to be not at all harmless. It is absolutely important, a vital strategy for the survival of the whole planet.

We should note a further element. As in other Dickian works, the main character asks himself what is wrong in his world; but he is not sure, not at all, that there really is something wrong. He oscillates between the feeling that a vast organization is busy around him to cheat him and his relatives, and the atrocious suspicion that the conspiracy is no more than the creation of a deranged mind: his. Until its denouement, *TOJ* might well be a realistic novel realistically describing a case of paranoid syndrome. (Such might have been what Dick was originally aiming at, since another, almost contemporaneous novel of his, *Confessions of a Crap Artist*,³ pivots on a character who is really deranged and only imagines aliens, flying saucers, etc.)

This situation should sound quite familiar to readers of *Gravity's Rainbow*, notwithstanding the completely different historical and geographical context. In *GR* we are in London, during winter 1944–1945; the Second World War is about to end, Nazi Germany being on the verge of defeat. But, like the Lunar rebels, the enemy can still strike the British capital city with *Vergeltungswaffen* (reprisal weapons, as Hitler called them), the first ballistic missiles, the V-2s (aka A4s).⁴ Though the Allies are winning the war (unlike the One Happy World regime), they are unable to defend themselves against the V-2 (like the One Happy World regime), because in 1944 no aircraft, rocket or gun can intercept such a weapon. Londoners must live in the same nightmare of random and unpredictable destruction hinted at in *Time Out of Joint*. As the Lunar agent Mrs Keitelbein says of those trying to protect Earth, “they can never tell if [the rocket] is a full-size transport with a full-size H-warhead, or only a little fellow. It disrupts their lives” (*TOJ* 173). Pynchon’s V-2s are similar to Dick’s “research rockets” and “communication and supply rockets, small stuff good for a few farmhouses or a factory” (*TOJ* 173); but the threat in *TOJ* of the bigger missiles with nuclear warheads probably fascinated Pynchon, who, from February 1960 to September 1962,⁵ wrote technical articles for Boeing about the nuclear-capable Bomarc anti-aircraft missile.

Gravity's Rainbow's Slothrop, a young American officer stationed in London, has a map “[t]acked to the wall next to [his] desk” (*GR* 18), a peculiar map of London. On it our hero has pasted small stars in different colors, each star marking a place where Slothrop, who seems to lead a busy sexual life, has allegedly had sexual intercourse. Each star is labelled with the name of his partner of the occasion and with the date. A curious hobby, with an exhibitionistic flavor. But in wartime

London everybody acts eccentrically, and Slothrop's colleague, Lt. Oliver ("Tantivy") Mucker-Maffick, thinks it is rather innocent: "'Some sort of harmless Yank hobby,'" he tells a friend; "'Perhaps it's to keep track of them all. He does lead rather a complicated social life'" (19). A harmless hobby, like building airplane models or collecting postage stamps. As harmless as playing the daily contest won by an ordinary guy named Ragle Gumm: that is, not harmless at all.

In fact, Slothrop's map, with its harmless stars, is kept under careful surveillance by the Firm and analyzed by PISCES ("Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender. Whose surrender is not made clear" [34]). It is methodically matched with another map in the office of PISCES statistician Roger Mexico, on which all the places where V-2s have fallen have been marked: Slothrop's stars all coincide exactly with rocket-strike circles; and his copulations occur before the corresponding falls of V-2s, preceding them by a mean (calculated by Mexico) of "about 4½ days" (GR 86).

Like Ragle Gumm, Tyrone Slothrop seems to be able unconsciously to foretell the arrival and targets of missiles. He thinks he is doing one thing (keeping a record of his erotic adventures) while actually doing something completely different. Like Ragle, Slothrop is an exceptional man who thinks he is a very ordinary guy. Like Ragle, Slothrop is under discreet but thorough surveillance, erections included, since his tumescence is the first index of an eventually incoming V-2. And like Ragle's talent, Slothrop's is inexplicable and baffling (even spooking) to those who keep him under surveillance, as we can deduce from their more or less wild hypotheses (GR 85).

The behaviorist psychologist Pointsman is the most perplexed of all (GR 83-92). He firmly believes that a stimulus is *followed* by a psychophysical response (84). But Slothrop seems to respond before the stimulus (which Pointsman assumes, "somehow, *must* be the rocket" [86]): he gets excited (and copulates) two to ten days before the missile arrives. This inversion seems uncanny, like the scream of the V-2's approach heard only after its explosion.⁶ Pointsman and Mexico's discussion of the upsetting scientific and philosophical implications of Slothrop's odd form of foresight (GR 88-91) resembles the conversation of Ragle Gumm and Stuart Lowery, from the *Gazette*, about Ragle's solving technique (TOJ 27-31), a passage we will discuss in detail later.

Before we go on, we should note the objection to my intertextual exploration represented by Bernard Duyfhuizen's "Starry-Eyed Semiotics: Learning to Read Slothrop's Map and *Gravity's Rainbow*." Duyfhuizen carefully explores the context of the map and questions its referential value, arguing that Pointsman makes a serious mistake when

he reads Slothrop's map as a real, referential map (a mistake many readers and critics have repeated): "Pointsman and his colleagues assume that the identical denotative function of cartographic language is present in the sign system of Slothrop's map as it would be in ordinary maps" (22). But it can be shown that Slothrop's map, unlike Mexico's map, is not a faithful and objective record. There is a good deal of fiction in it, or, to use Pynchon's term, "yarns" (GR 19, 302).

A yarn, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, is "a long, often elaborate narrative of real or fictitious adventures; an entertaining tale." It is a) not totally reliable, b) lengthy and c) narrative. Its unreliability stems from its mixing elements that have some referential value (real adventures) with elements that do not relate to any real content (fictitious adventures). *Gravity's Rainbow* itself (if not the whole genre of the novel) can thus be seen as a yarn: a long, often elaborate, not totally reliable narrative. The problem with Pointsman's (and Their) referential reading of Slothrop's map is that it assimilates a fictional (yarn-based) text to a scientific representation, Mexico's map. "The White Visitation writes a text of Tyrone Slothrop based upon the similarity between Mexico's map, which in both its languages—cartographic and statistical—is denotative in relation to reality, and Slothrop's map" (Duyfhuizen 22). That is, mistaking fiction for fact, they try to turn yarns into science—the best way to produce something that is at the same time bad literature and bad science.

However, even if we cannot read Slothrop's map referentially (even according to the special referential function hyperfictional texts may be endowed with inside fictional texts, as in the case of Mexico's real map in a fictional world), does that prevent us from intertextually connecting it with Ragle Gumm's 1,208-square contest form? No. The aforementioned intertextual connection between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Catch-22* even helps strengthen the connection.

Indeed, there is a substantial shift between Major Major's and Slothrop's variations on a theme: while Major Major actually signs his documents with "Washington Irving" or "Irving Washington" (leading to the practical consequence that Chaplain Tappan, suspected of being Washington Irving, is seriously interrogated in chapter 36), Slothrop's Kenosha Kid variations are no more than a reverie, idle thoughts in an idle mind. Thus Pynchon turns an actual event in Heller's novel into an imaginary series of "changes on the text" (GR 61). We might designate them hyperfictional or hypervirtual texts, or better, hyperfictional contexts that give new meanings to the obsessive sentence "You never did the Kenosha Kid."

Such a translation of material from the fictional to the hyperfictional level seems to have occurred also with the reference frame of Ragle

Gumm's story from *Time Out of Joint*. Ragle's 1,208-square map is a real semiotic construct in his fictional world; it refers, though in a hidden, ciphered way (because the people in the nameless city think the game is only a harmless hobby), to real events (lunar-missile strikes). Ragle's map resembles Mexico's 576-square map (another real semiotic construct referring to real events/places); but it has also been translated into the not-wholly-reliable Slothropian starry map, the hyperfictional artwork that "is primarily a narrative device for the purpose of the novel's discourse" (Duyfhuizen 25), and is thus closer to the Kenosha Kid variations, a hypervirtual element of the text. But, like Major Major's surrealistic, creative signatures, Ragle's map is clearly recognizable in both its Pynchonian renderings: Mexico's denotative chart and Slothrop's artistic, colorful and cheerfully unreliable constellation.

Duyfhuizen's argument that Slothrop's starry map is a *mise en abyme* (27), an emblem or internal image of the whole novel, challenging us to abandon Pointsmanian die-hard referential or denotative reading strategies and to adopt richer, multiple, more sensitive approaches to Pynchon's multidimensional construct, takes us back again to Dick's novel. "Isn't Ragle Gumm, losing time with a childish game, an alter ego of Phil Dick, wasting time with a literary form that had almost no cultural dignity at that time? Isn't the final condemnation of the 1959 reality the revenge of the loony Phil Dick?" (Rossi, JBW 208). As a subtle form of metanarrative, of literature reflecting on itself, generating a vital misreading by characters and readers (cf. Duyfhuizen 25), the self-referential device of Slothrop's map derives from Dick's textual strategies in *Time Out of Joint*.

In fact, the not wholly rational quality of Ragle's puzzle-solving technique indicates that there is an aesthetic component in his map too:

"You work from an æsthetic, not a rational, standpoint. Those scanners you constructed. You view a pattern in space, a pattern in time. You try to fill. Complete the pattern. Anticipate where it goes if extended one more point. That's not rational; not an intellectual process. That's how—well, vase-makers work." (TOJ 30)

Vase-makers have important symbolic value in Dick's oeuvre (Mary Anne Dominic in *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said* is the most archetypal), and they usually represent art in general, especially in connection with its healing, salvific power. They also stand for the maker of the text itself, Dick as a writer/creator. Ragle Gumm is a (self-) portrait of the author as a young paranoid, and his map is the prototype

of Slothrop's starry graph, an emblem of the novel, in all its yarn-like unreliability.

Moreover, *Time Out of Joint* stages a revenge of science fiction that will take us back to *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the beginning of *TOJ* we are reading a realistic novel dealing with the daily life of a middle-class suburb of the fifties in the *America Felix* of Eisenhower, Elvis Presley and Doris Day—mainstream fiction, as SF buffs would call it. In that world, Ragle (considered an alter ego of Dick) is no more than a bum, a grownup who squanders time with a useless hobby. Even though he earns a living by it, it is not a respectable occupation in the status-obsessed Eisenhower U.S. But, in the end, we discover that the peaceful, Peyton Place-like suburb is fake, we are in the future, and the real world is that of science fiction. Ragle Gumm manages in the end to escape from the fake town and to reach the moon (travelling in a rocket, the very symbol of SF [cf. Disch 57]), thus freeing himself from the cultural and psychological conditioning by which he had been imprisoned in the bogus small town, the ghetto of worthlessness and delusion. Ragle is not just an idler: he can alter the course of history. (At least at that time, Dick had a similarly high opinion of his own mission and his works.)

A-and something similar happens in *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the end of part 2, Slothrop manages to elude his controllers' surveillance, and in part 4 ("The Counterforce"), he escapes even *our* surveillance. Slothrop disappears, as if the Foucaultian gaze that surveils and punishes, while *Theirs* (with capital T), might also be the reader's (capital R optional). Slothrop escapes the surveillance of those in power, but above all escapes *our* not-at-all-innocent narrative surveillance.⁷ Pynchon's strategy seems again to be the deliberate heightening and complication of Dick's fictional constructs.

Another link Pynchon seems to have deliberately established is the Loonies connection. In Dick's novel, the Lunar rebels are derogatorily called "Loonies" by Earth authorities. When Ragle uncovers the conspiracy he has been the victim of and flees from the fake city to a real city of 1998, he finds the sheet music for a propaganda song, "Loonies on the Run March":

You're a goon, Mister Loon,
 One World you'll never sunder.
 A buffoon, Mister Loon,
 Oh what a dreadful blunder.
 The sky you find so cozy;
 The future tinted rosy;

But Uncle's gonna spank—you wait!
 So hands ina sky, hands ina sky,
Before it is too late!! (162)

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, when Slothrop is in Zürich looking for any information he can get about Laszlo Jamf and Imipolex G (257-69), he finds it difficult to sort out real corporate spies, who could give him the information he wants, from mythomaniacs offering bogus techno-scientific information—the so-called Loonies on Leave. This gives Pynchon the opportunity to insert a musical number titled “Loonies on Leave!” (259-60), remarkably akin to the song in *TOJ*.

The songs in both novels focus on the uses of technology. Dick's Loonies are maligned as goons and buffoons by the conservative Earth government because they advocate space exploration and the colonization of other planets. But in the end Ragle is persuaded they are right (and probably we should also be persuaded), so he joins them. Pynchon's Loonies really are mad, and propose suspect inventions such as “the two-hundred-mile-per-gallon carburetor, the razor edge that never gets dull, the eternal bootsole,” even “ornithopters and robobopsters” (260). In both cases technical innovations are proposed by a minority group and rejected by the establishment, but Pynchon's song ironically reverses Dick's. The would-be inventors and innovators of “Loonies on Leave!” really are madmen who promise something for nothing, which is “the main objection engineers and scientists have always had to the idea of [. . .] perpetual motion” (260). So here we have another shift of fictional level when textual components pass from Dick to Pynchon: metaphoric Loonies to real loonies.

If we need any further evidence of the hypertextual/intertextual link between *TOJ* and *GR*, the initials of *Gravity's Rainbow* reverse those of *Ragle Gumm*. The order is reversed because in the ultraparadoxical phase everything is “ass backwards” (GR 683-84).

Evidently Pynchon knew of Dick and his novels, and the intertextual links connecting the two writers should not surprise us. Like Pynchon, Dick is a poet of paranoia, less baroque than Pynchon but just as mistrustful. In Dick's novels as in Pynchon's, a conspiracy seems to explain all: an absolutely unbelievable conspiracy, like the one outlined in Dick's *VALIS*, where all the history of humankind after 50 C.E. is a gigantic collective hallucination (virtual reality, if you like), the (Roman) Empire still exists, and we all are its prisoners. (We will return to *VALIS* later.)

Dickian links in *GR* do not connect it only to *TOJ*. For example, one of the nightclubs where Slothrop hunts for girls is called the Frick Frack Club (22). Steven Weisenburger tells us that “the Frick Frack is

unknown" (27), but even if that name in Pynchon's novel does not refer to a real club in Soho, it does transmogrify something from another Dick novel. If we replace the Cs with Ns, we get "Frank Frink" (reversed), one of the main characters in Dick's most famous novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, an alternative-history novel depicting a world in which Nazi Germany and Japan have won the Second World War.

Another scene that hints at this Dick novel is that in which Slothrop discovers that Roosevelt has died and Truman is now the president (GR 373–74). In Dick's alternative history, Roosevelt was assassinated in Miami after being president for only a year, before he could restore the U.S. economy and armed forces. He was followed by weak, incompetent Presidents who were unable to prepare the country for the war against Germany and Japan, hence the defeat and the partition of the nation into three quisling states. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Roosevelt is the protagonist of another, however short-lived, alternative reality, because Slothrop does not know about his death until informed by Säure Bummer in July 1945 (Roosevelt having died in April). Slothrop remembers Roosevelt fondly:

Slothrop was going into high school when FDR was starting out in the White House. [. . . Y]oung Tyrone thought he was brave, with that polio and all. Liked his voice on the radio. [. . .] Roosevelt was *his* president, the only one he'd known. It seemed he'd just keep getting elected, term after term, forever. But somebody had decided to change that. [. . .]

"They said it was a stroke," Säure says. (373–74)

The climax of this reverie is the recollection "Almost saw him once too [. . .] but Lloyd Nipple, the fattest kid in Mingeborough, was standing in the way" (374). This reverie, tinged with sentimentality and slapstick, reverses a passage in *The Man in the High Castle* where Robert Childan, one of the main characters, thinks, "Maybe I don't actually recall F.D.R. as example. Synthetic image distilled from hearing assorted talk. Myth implanted subtly in tissue of brain" (141). Roosevelt is myth in both Dick and Pynchon, whether it stems from assorted talk or from almost direct experience. But what is implanted subtly in tissue of brain changes from Dick to Pynchon: the waning collective myth in Childan's brain is quite different from the Pavlovian conditioning of Slothrop's gray matter.

Pynchon's German obsession may owe a lot to Dick's, but more important is the fact that Pynchon has phagocytized several Dickian works.⁸ He has used the diegetic framework of *TOJ* to build the first section of *GR*. He has evidently inserted allusions to *The Man in the*

High Castle. He also gestures toward another Dickian masterpiece, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*: “the great bright hand” Slothrop is afraid to see “reaching out of the cloud” (29) not only is the hand of God (in the form of a rocket) but also recalls the shining steel hand of Dick’s disquieting entrepreneur/drug dealer.⁹ And given that *Gravity’s Rainbow* centers on the towering and menacing Rocket, a notorious phallic symbol (an identification Pynchon insists on), can we ignore the fact that a common slang term for the male sexual organ in the States is *dick*? Would anybody suggest that this pun escaped Pynchon’s notice? C’mon!

The relation between these two writers may not be one-way only. At the moment we have no proof that Dick was familiar with Pynchon’s works, but Dick scholarship has unearthed only some of the documents that could shed light on this matter: the publication of Dick’s notebooks and letters is far from complete. There are no references to Pynchon in what we have now, but we do not have everything yet.¹⁰ Nevertheless, some correspondences are quite striking. After 1977 Dick’s narrative changed remarkably. There is surely a Pynchonian atmosphere in his last narrative achievements, *VALIS*, *The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*—three novels Dick saw as panels of a unitary triptych, the so-called *VALIS Trilogy* (something that can be read as a trilogy only at the purely hypertextual/intertextual level). *VALIS* is especially Pynchonian: hypernarrative, encyclopedic, quotation-ridden, proliferating; and it is perhaps no mere coincidence that its title’s initial is the arch-Pynchonian V. In addition, like so much of Pynchon’s fiction, *VALIS* is a quest. Horselover Fat’s search for the cause of his visions and of a series of weird events in his life becomes nothing less than the search for God—*VALIS*, the Vast Active Living Intelligence System (a Pynchonian acronym like *PISCES* and *ACHTUNG*). *VALIS* is no less weird (or crackpot) an entity than V., the Rocket, Pierce Inverarity or the Trystero. The encyclopedic proliferation of hypotheses during the quest, and the oddness of the questers (a bunch of oddballs with a countercultural past in Southern California) also have a strongly Pynchonian flavor.

Dick’s last three novels are all centered on the opposition paranoia vs. conspiracy, like V., *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Till the ending of *VALIS*, we are never sure whether Horselover Fat is a prophet or simply a crackpot. In *The Divine Invasion*, Herb Asher is not certain whether he is living a real life or a computerized simulation; readers know the latter is the case, or think we know: our certainties are mightily shaken in the end. Even bishop Timothy Archer can be considered a sufferer of delusions as well as the only one who has discovered the ultimate reality hidden behind Christ: a hallucinogenic

mushroom.¹¹ These three works are tragedies of paranoia, or comedies of paranoia, or both.

Another element should be taken into account, slippery as is the ground here. We know that the radical change in themes and narrative strategies that led to Dick's highly sophisticated fiction of the late seventies and early eighties was preceded by the so called 2-3-74 experience (Sutin 208-33), a long series of visions and odd events Dick never described systematically but reported piecemeal, both in the massive and still mostly unpublished journal called "Exegesis" and in some of his novels, from *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* to *VALIS*. This is no place to delve into this complicated matter, which is still debated by Dick's commentators,¹² but at least one fact should be taken into account. One of the phenomena Dick allegedly experienced in February-March 1974 was anamnesis, the recovery of lost memories. Repression/recovery of memories is a typical feature of Dick's fiction, as we have seen in *Time Out of Joint*; it is an important element in such other works as *The Game-Players of Titan*, *A Maze of Death* and *Lies, Inc.* In one "Exegesis" entry Dick declared he was the reincarnation of an ancient Roman from the early years (45-50) of the Christian era (Sutin 211). This person had three names: Simon, Firebright (one of Dick's tentative explanations of his being both a modern-day American SF writer and one of the first Christians was the mediation of a "spiritual force/entity of wisdom and light" [Sutin 211]) and Thomas.

Is that name a link to the writer who had tapped his *Time Out of Joint*? The name Thomas more probably hints at the author of the so-called fifth Gospel found in Nag Hammadi in 1946, a text Dick knew well. Recent critics have been busy tracing Pauline and Gnostic elements in Dick's later writings, and the importance of these theological traditions for a thorough understanding of his works is nowadays undeniable. But the coincidence of names is worth citing because Dick could have seen the writer who appropriated *Time Out of Joint*, unveiling the hidden narrative potential of that underrated SF text, as an alter ego of sorts, and a source of inspiration (given the similarities between Pynchon's fiction and Dick's after 1977). Not that we have indisputable evidence here; all we have is a working hypothesis that could be useful to both Pynchon and Dick scholars.

The story of the Pynchon-Dick relationship does not end here. Its last chapter might well be Pynchon's *Vineland*, heavily indebted to at least two novels Dick wrote in the seventies, his so-called drugs novels *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* and *A Scanner Darkly*. Apart from the drugs theme, which is so important in *Vineland*, those two novels (plus Dick's last novel, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*) are, like

Vineland, a bitter and passionate reckoning with the failure of the whole counterculture generation of the sixties. Fired by what Pynchon calls “the Nixonian Repression” (VI 71), Dick’s imagination started to work on police states, embodied in the planet-wide police apparatus in *Flow* and the high-tech narks in *Scanner*. Bob Arctor/Fred’s friends in the latter novel are survivors from the sixties, like most of the characters in *Vineland*, Zoyd Wheeler being only the most obvious specimen. And the widespread atmosphere of decay and death in *Vineland* (embodied in the weird community of the Thanatoids) could well have its roots in the funereal atmosphere of the ending of *Scanner*, with its list of Dick’s friends killed or impaired by drug abuse, and in the series of deaths that structures the narrative of *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (beginning with the death of John Lennon that opens the novel).

When Pynchon decided to paint his fresco of the American eighties, he found in Dick, for the second time, an important reference point. Dick was a member of the generation whose dreams had been swept away by the Reagan tide, like Zoyd Wheeler and his former wife, Frenesi. And Dick had lucidly and often mercilessly portrayed the political and intellectual shortcomings of that generation in his last novels, especially *Transmigration*. Also, *Vineland*’s federal prosecutor, Brock Vond, arguably owes something to the police general Felix Buckman in *Flow* and to the police-surveillance apparatus in *Scanner*. Surely *Scanner* and *Vineland*, their historical distance notwithstanding, share the same atmosphere of war-on-drugs hysteria, though the irony quotient is noticeably higher in Pynchon’s novel.

We might end by asking why Pynchon chose *Time Out of Joint* as an important source for *Gravity’s Rainbow*, thus opening the (hypothetical) intertextual dialogue I have outlined. Like Ragle’s and Slothrop’s maps, both *TOJ* and *GR* are harmless Yank hobbies: an SF novel and a comic fiesta of untrustworthiness bordering on slapstick. They both hide, behind their harmless appearance, something terribly, even monstrously serious: the unsettling idea that, in a statistical, network-regulated and bureaucratically-managed world, paranoia may well be the only defence (counterforce?) for what residual humanity we have been left with; that at least paranoia can give a sense to our lives; that paranoia may be the only protection we still have against the Conspiracy (with capital C: Echelon, for instance).

Perhaps the harmless Yank hobby, recapitulating the American novel, is the only viable narrative form for such truly American novelists as Dick and Pynchon, most unworthy heirs of Hawthorne and Melville— a harmless hobby, small and negligible. But we should know, thanks to Dick and Pynchon themselves, that in this ultraparadoxical world of reversals, we should look for the signs of the divine among the waste,

the pariahs, the losers. There Dick, a utopian scavenger like Pynchon, sought hope and salvation, a not-totally-unaware heir to that Jewish tradition which tells us it is through the narrow door that at any moment the Messiah may come to visit us.

The Messiah, or, for us unbelievers, the Liberation (with capital L).

—Rome

Notes

¹“These changes [. . .] are occupying Slothrop’s awareness as the doctor leans in out of the white overhead to wake him and begin the session” (GR 61).

²Another important intertextual connection between Pynchon and Heller is the concept of the Zone, which Pynchon seems to have evolved from Heller’s Mediterranean as a space of both military operations and economic exchange. See my “South of the Zone: Guerra, Economia e Reaganomics in *Catch-22* di Joseph Heller.”

³According to Lawrence Sutin, Dick’s most reliable biographer so far, *Confessions* was written in 1959, though it was not published until 1975 (298).

⁴The V-2/A4 is the archetype of almost all the drawings of spaceships on the covers of pulp SF magazines of the forties and fifties and of early science-fiction books—exactly Dick’s literary milieu when he wrote *Time Out of Joint*, though this novel should have been his way out of the SF ghetto (Sutin 94). For instance, the sun and the V-2-shaped starship are the symbols of the Empire in Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* (1951–1953), an archetypal SF novel if there ever was one.

⁵We have no way to know *when* Pynchon read *Time Out of Joint* or whether he read the respectable 1959 Lippincott edition or the garish 1965 Belmont SF paperback “with an SF cover depicting spacemen and the moon falling out of the sky” (Sutin 94); the latter might be likelier statistically.

⁶Thus the title of the novel’s part 1, “Beyond the Zero”: beyond (or below) the zero, we enter a paradoxical (or, to quote Pointsman, an “ultra-paradoxical”) realm of negative time or inverted time-flow. This recurring obsession in Pynchon’s work can also be connected with a novel of Dick’s, *Counter-Clock World*, where time flows backwards: you are born after you die, you get out of the tomb to get into the womb, and so on.

⁷I wish to thank Richard Hardack for that suggestion. The original French title of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* is *Surveiller et punir*. *Surveiller* means “to watch closely,” and has been rendered as *surveil*, an awkward derivative of *surveillance* which has encountered the same critical resistance other back-formations such as *diagnose* and *donate* once did.

⁸And those of other SF writers as well, including George Orwell, whose *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is hypertextually linked to part 1 of *GR*. Orwell’s dismal London, now and then hit by missiles, closely resembles Pynchon’s, especially

in the sequences describing Roger and Jessica's affair, which echoes Winston Smith and Julia's clandestine meetings in the shabby little room above Mr. Charrington's shop. Furthermore, in Orwell, "The proles . . . seemed to possess some kind of instinct which told them several seconds in advance when a rocket was coming, although the rockets supposedly travelled faster than sound" (69). This instinct is not so different from Slothrop's and Ragle's alleged ballistic clairvoyance.

⁹See my "Dick e la questione della tecnica (o Della tecnologia)," where I examine the theological background of *The Three Stigmata* and analyze Palmer Eldritch's semi-divine status.

¹⁰Besides, as Harold Bloom reminds us, writers do not always overtly admit their strong literary influences.

¹¹Here Dick has clearly been inspired by the theories of John M. Allegro about the Qumran sect.

¹²While some critics take Dick's 2-3-74 narratives at face value as denotative accounts of weird events (then try to explain them rationally: for instance, as results of drug abuse or temporary mental disease such as temporal-lobe epilepsy), others see the abnormal experiences as proof of Dick's madness, thus devaluing his subsequent literary production. More rewarding is the position of Thomas M. Disch, who noticed interesting internal inconsistencies in Dick's versions of the 1974 experiences, inconsistencies which hint at a heavy fictional manipulation of those narratives: "[Dick] was proud of his persuasive powers and would tailor each new account of the VALIS experience to suit the expectations and vocabulary of his audience. Many of the details of our long confabulation have appeared in other reports in another, significantly different form" (154). Disch seems to be more interested in understanding the fictional potential of the 2-3-74 experiences (which Dick used to build his last four novels) than in ascertaining their factual reliability, and this is probably the safest critical stance until other factual evidence becomes available.

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