

Seeing the Wood for the Trees: Levels of Reading and Intertextual Mythmaking in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

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In 1967, in an article entitled, "The Literature of Exhaustion," the novelist and critic John Barth suggested that the novel as traditionally conceived was facing a serious crisis. In his analysis of the state of contemporary fiction he noted an increased tendency and need on the part of many "serious" writers to engage in a kind of fiction that took writing as its subject. Barth saw this increasingly self-reflexive fiction as a tacit admission that traditional forms of narration were becoming outmoded and were perhaps on the verge of becoming obsolete. Citing Borges and Beckett as writers who had successfully responded to the literary legacies left by Eliot and Joyce, Barth's essay effectively laid down a challenge to contemporary writers to find new ways of renewing the novelistic genre. Six years after Barth's influential article, Thomas Pynchon published *Gravity's Rainbow*, which, in its hugely complex encyclopedic nature, suggested not only that the novel as a form was alive and well, but equally that, in Pynchon, a highly original writer capable of creating new spaces and modes of narration had emerged. In the nearly four decades since its publication, *Gravity's Rainbow* has consistently frustrated attempts by critics to provide totalized interpretations. The novel has fallen under the rubric of the postmodern and has come to be considered as an open text *par excellence*, a work whose magnitude and scope resists both traditional hermeneutic and poststructuralist modes of interpretation.

Here I argue that certain sections of the novel represent closed systems, with implicit rules and codes that are intended by the author to limit the number of possible interpretations of his work. In addition, I will suggest that one of the key practices underlying Pynchon's poetics is the kind of literary symbiosis that modernists such as Joyce and Eliot advocated, that key building blocks of Pynchon's text can best be described as modernist. Such sections do not limit, but extend and adapt, to invest his work with the kind of originality for which Barth had called.

Although the underlying theoretical approach is comparative and semiotic in nature, it is the act of reading and the role of the reader in producing the text that are my focus here. In particular I will be emphasizing the importance in recognizing the self-reflexive nature of Pynchon's text, how

in a similar vein to Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow* may be a text as much concerned with its own form and structure as its content. Here I am referring in particular to the various instances in which an unidentified narrator, who displays a level of omniscience concomitant with that of the author, seems to directly address the reader and offer instructions to his audience. The consistency and frequency of these authorial intrusions suggest that the narrative is intended to operate and communicate on more than one level and that Pynchon had two different types of implied reader in mind when writing and constructing his narrative.

Umberto Eco's notion of first- and second-level readers provides a useful framework, which will help contextualize the following reading. In his essay "Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading," Eco notes that one of the common stylistic features of postmodernist writers is *doublecoding*, which he identifies, quoting the architect Charles Jencks, as a text which "speaks on at least two levels at once," addressing "simultaneously a minority, elite public, using 'high' codes, and a mass public using popular codes" (214). He then explores the kinds of reactions that readers tend to have when confronted with *doublecoding* and, with the exception of someone who objects outright to mixing cultured and popular styles, he identifies two kinds of reader who seem to fit the profile of the typical reader and critic. The first kind of reader, who is oblivious to the significance of intertextual references and quotations, perceives "the entire text as a pleasant invitation and does not in the end realise the extent to which it draws on elite styles (so he enjoys the work but misses its references)." In the second example, the reader "feels at home precisely because he enjoys this process of alternating between difficulty and approachability, challenge and encouragement" (218). The latter reader is able to pick up on the nuances of intertextual irony and is thus able to establish a privileged relationship with the multilayered text.

For the purpose of my own argument, I consider as first-level readers, those who follow and read the story or primary narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* without noticing or choosing to address and respond to possible self-reflexive or inward turns in the text. For these readers, the primary narrative is in effect an historical fiction, a surreal and atmospheric story of some three hundred mostly fictional characters set in the final months of World War II and its immediate aftermath. The overriding metaphor which dominates this complex surface narrative is the V-2 Rocket, an extremely powerful symbol, thanks to the Cold War and the nuclear age. When one considers the sheer magnitude and scope of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and especially Pynchon's anatomical treatment of the V-2 rocket, it is easy to imagine why first-level readers might miss or choose to ignore, various signposts in the text indicating an inward self-reflexive turn in the narrative.

My nominal second-level readers are those whose first-level enjoyment of the story is interrupted when they are made aware that a subtle linguistic

event may have occurred, one that does not seem to have a bearing on the primary narrative. More often than not, this realization is occasioned by the sensation that the tone or register of the narrator seems to have shifted, and that another layer of discourse interrupts momentarily the primary narrative. While continuing to read the text, their awareness of the possibility of *doublecoding*, authorial intrusion and other self-reflexive practices is heightened.

One of the most important self-reflexive turns in the novel occurs in episode 10 of “Beyond the Zero,” in which Tyrone Slothrop, the novel’s principal character undertakes a bizarre metaphysical journey into a toilet world. Slothrop has agreed to report for duty as a test subject at a fictional London hospital called St Veronica’s, so that a shady scientific outfit called PISCES can investigate his peculiar relationship to V-2 rockets—the locations of Slothrop’s purported sexual conquests appear to coincide with the sites of subsequent V-2 rocket strikes. This episode represents one of the few cyclical narratives in the novel, which, at least structurally, has the appearance of being a unified self-sufficient whole and foregrounds three of the key binary oppositions in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, black and white, North and South, and the word and shit (Weisenburger 43). The possible symbolic relationship between the word (information) and shit is an important element in my reading, which will be highlighted later.

1. Slothrop’s Descent into the Toilet World

The episode begins with an exchange of letters between Slothrop and one of the most mysterious and enigmatic of Pynchon’s fictional creations, the Kenosha Kid, who appears at the beginning and close of the episode. Weisenburger has called the Kenosha Kid “one of the outstanding enigmas of *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (43) and as yet there is no critical consensus regarding the identity or genesis of this character. Recently huge interest was generated by the discovery of a Western novelette by Forbes Parkhill entitled “The Kenosha Kid” (1931). While Parkhill’s novelette may well have inspired the name for Pynchon’s Kenosha Kid; there do not seem to be any further significant parallels that can be drawn between the two texts. Later, I will consider whether the fact that Orson Welles’s birthplace was Kenosha, Wisconsin is purely coincidental, and I will also argue that the Kenosha Kid may in fact represent Pynchon himself. For now, the importance of the Kenosha kid lies in that he both opens and closes the episode, indicating a circular pattern to the narrative. Read with this in mind, the main body of the episode can effectively be broken into three identifiable parts, two distinct and substantial sections which are connected by a bridge.

The first section takes the form of an imagined drug-induced historical analepsis set in Boston in 1939 in the men’s room of the Roseland Ballroom,

where "Red," a young Malcolm X, is working as a shoe-shine boy. After a booze-filled night of excess, Slothrop finds himself perched on the rim of a toilet bowl, while downstairs white Ivy League students dance to the sounds of "Cherokee." Music is extremely important throughout the episode and this section is dominated by the figure of Charlie Parker and his rendition of the classic jazz standard "Cherokee," entitled "Koko." Interestingly, Pynchon quotes almost verbatim a large section of an interview Parker gave in *Down Beat* magazine, describing how he developed his original style (Westerath 112). The key moment is, however, when Slothrop's harmonica, "which he packs everywhere he goes" (63) falls into the toilet: "With no warning, as tears stream out his eyes, PLOP goes the harp into the, *aagghh*, the loathsome *toilet!*" (63). The notion of personal loss as a catalyst for engaging in hardy metaphysical journeys is a familiar trope. Obvious literary precursors in this regard are Dante Alighieri and Virgil who provide their own reworked versions of Orpheus's visit to the Greek underworld. In consistently referring to Slothrop's harmonica in terms of a harp, Pynchon seems to cast Slothrop's descent in Orphic terms. It is also worth noting the harp's symbolic importance, both in poetry and music, as a symbol of artistic creativity. In particular, the Aeolian harp is a recurring trope in much Classical and Romantic poetry and, as will be argued later, this may signal that the author intends the ensuing events to be read not just in a literal sense, but figuratively. Indeed a literal interpretation of the events subsequent to Slothrop's plunge into the toilet world, is undoubtedly limiting as Pynchon's highly amusing and dynamic prose insists that we enter realms of further possibility.

Having escaped the clutching hands of Malcolm X and his accomplices, whom Slothrop imagined clutching at his ankles, a transitional bridge section begins. The fictional cosmos which Slothrop now moves through is full of signs and symbols, suggestive clues introducing epistemological concerns, central to the developing narrative.

A-and there's *still* no sign of his lost harp. The light down here is dark gray and rather faint. For some time he has been aware of shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this ceramic (or by now, iron) tunnel he's in; shit nothing can flush away, mixed with hardwater minerals into a deliberate brown barnacled of his route, patterns thick with meaning, Burma-Shave signs of the toiletworld, icky and sticky, cryptic and glyptic, these shapes loom and pass smoothly as he continues on down the long cloudy waste line, the sounds of "Cherokee" still pulsing very dimly above, playing him to the sea. (65)

As Slothrop descends further he begins to adapt to his environment, and once "shit-sensitized" (65) he is even able to read. Throughout this transitional section, the reader is informed that much of what Slothrop sees in this world is familiar, but Slothrop is unable, or to be more precise, is not allowed by the

author to recognize, the “patterns” which are “thick with meaning” and the “icky and sticky, cryptic and glyptic” clues (65). Indeed, the only signs that he seems to recognize are those of Harvard acquaintances, amongst whom is a young JFK. Before his reminiscences can be completed, however, he hears a “godawful surge” approaching and is engulfed by a “jam-packed wavefront” of all sorts of detritus, a “mind-boggling mosaic . . . seems he’s been tumbling ass over teakettle—though there’s no way to tell in this murky shitstorm, no visual references . . . from time to time he will brush against shrubbery, or perhaps small feathery trees. It occurs to him he hasn’t felt the touch of a hard wall since he started to tumble, if that indeed is what he is doing” (66). Slothrop is disoriented and as he gathers himself together, a new world with its own distinct topography gradually begins to materialize and take shape. Since his unceremonious exit from the Roseland Ballroom, Slothrop had been in free fall, in a literal sense, progressing down a network of iron sewage pipes. Now he has hit rock-bottom and as he finds his bearings in these waste regions, he is surprised to find “contacts” living here, within shells of “fine-packed masonry ruins” (66). The underworld which he now finds himself in is exceptionally well ordered, and he sees people he knows but can’t quite identify sitting “about the worn flagstones” transacting, “something vaguely religious” (66). The following reading will suggest that the image of familiar figures sitting around “flagstones” may represent the first discrete sign in the text that the reader should examine the text closely during the act of reading so as to identify these figures. While this can only be noted retrospectively, the idea that the toilet world Slothrop experiences may be more familiar than seems at first sight, is subtly planted in the reader’s mind.

After defining and delineating the contours of this new world, the final and most crucial section of this episode begins. The crux of this article will focus on a close reading of the initial paragraph: (1) when Crutchfield is first introduced (67-68); (2) the parody of the western standard “Red River Valley” which immediately follows; and (3) the next short paragraph which begins, “Oh, it’s the Red River all right, if you don’t believe it just ask that ‘Red,’ wherever he may be,” etc. In effect, I will argue that Crutchfield may have a distinct second-order identity, linked to the actor Henry Fonda. This suggests a significant artistic and creative debt on the part of Pynchon to Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon A Time in the West*, and to a lesser extent to John Ford’s 1940 adaptation of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Rather than simply imposing a Leonian or Fordian model on the text, this reading of Pynchon’s narrative takes its cue from the text itself and comes from my identification of the following passage as a possible authorial intrusion in which the reader is addressed directly:

Now don’t you remember Red Malcolm up there,
That kid with the Red Devil Lye in his hair . . . (67)

Here now is Crutchfield or Crouchfield, the westwardman. "Not archetypical" westwardman, but *the only*. Understand, there was only one. There was only one Indian who ever fought him. Only one fight, one victory, one loss. And only one president, and one assassin, and one election. True. One of each of everything. You had thought of solipsism, and imagined the structure to be populated—on your level—by only, terribly, one. No count on any other levels. But it proves to be not quite that lonely. Sparse, yes, but a good deal better than solitary. One of each of everything's not so bad. Half an Ark's better than none. (67-68)

The first couplet of the above passage signals a break in the narrative and contains a momentary reminder of Slothrop's earlier experiences in the Roseland Ballroom and his lucky escape from the grasping clutches of the young Malcolm X. The previous paragraph saw the end of Slothrop's descent, the bridge that links the Boston and Crutchfield sections. Now as Slothrop's new environment takes on a concrete form for the first time and before Crutchfield is introduced, there seems to be a subtle shift in tone and register. A direction is given not to "remember Red Malcolm" which can be interpreted as signaling a break with the preceding narrative. Just who exactly is issuing this direction and to whom is it addressed? It is certainly not Slothrop talking to himself and it is extremely unlikely, although possible, that the advice comes from the scientists organizing the experiment in St. Veronica's. The didactic tone which predominates in the first part of the next paragraph, suggests that here, the reader is being addressed.

This is the critical moment when the paths of first-level and second-level readers may diverge. The first-level reader who is either too engrossed in the plot or doesn't consider the possible shift in tone and register worthy of consideration, will continue reading without interruption. Second-level readers will, however, be stopped in their tracks. If this is a direct command who is it directed at? Who does the word, "Understand," attempt to contact? Furthermore, if the reader is being addressed by the author, what is he or she to make of the declaration quoted above: "You had thought of solipsism, and imagined the structure to be populated—on your level—by only, terribly, one. No count on any other levels. But it proves to be not quite that lonely. Sparse yes but one of each of everything's not so bad. Half an Ark's better than none"? If the reader is indeed being addressed, the direct commands and advice given in the second person can be perceived as advocating a possible code, which could prove useful in interpreting the Crutchfield episode. This would suggest not just an attempt on the part of Pynchon to control the possible number of interpretations of his text, but a self-conscious, self-reflexive impulse to draw attention to his own craft. The second-level reader thus proceeds with the primary narrative, but now with one eye open to possibilities that might tell him something about the story of the making of the story.

In his *Companion to Gravity's Rainbow* Weisenburger provides explanations of Spanish terms, cowboy slang and geographical landmarks referred to in the text, which indicate that the world at the bottom of the toilet that Slothrop experiences is some kind of direct albeit bizarre transposition of the American South West.¹ Other critics, such as Moore and Cowart, have concentrated on the cinematic nature of the passage, but while they note the potential influence of western movies in the text, crucially they do not investigate the section where Crutchfield is first introduced.² Luc Herman provides the most comprehensive and detailed study of the Crutchfield section in an important article that considers the novel in terms of parody. For Herman, the target of parody is the western itself, and therefore he concentrates on the scene's generic western qualities, although he also recognizes the interactive and metafictional dimension of the text. While he stops short of identifying the section discussed above, "Here now is Crutchfield" to "Understand, there was only one," as a specific code, he does note the readers' role in using their generic knowledge in making sense of the scene and how "at the very moment the reader is summoned to activate his generic knowledge, the author is playing around with it" (215). Pynchon may not be simply playing with his implied audience's interpretive skills, but as I will argue, he may well be consciously testing those abilities.

While Herman's detailed parodic reading of the comic and surreal latter stages of the episode seems appropriate (69-71), in the initial stages when Crutchfield is first introduced, Pynchon may be resorting to pastiche rather than parody. The refunctioning of a scene from Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* in Pynchon's narrative as an extensive allusion may at first seem parodic, yet there is no explicit attempt to produce the kind of comic effect or reaction in the reader which is the usual intention of parody. Indeed, the didactic, measured tone of the narrator before and during Crutchfield's introduction, as well as his neutral initial presentation, which is devoid of comic elements, points to pastiche rather than parody. When contrasting pastiche and parody, Margaret Rose observes that the principal difference is that the former is usually a "neutral practice," whereas the latter usually contains some comic or critical charge (72). The author's engagement in "neutral" pastiche rather than parody, does not, however, signify that the covert grafting of a complex allusion from Leone's film on to his own text is not loaded with intent. Indeed, my reading suggests that Pynchon's recourse to Leonian myth is part of a larger metafictional project being undertaken in the episode, in which the author seems to be prompting and testing his reader's interpretive abilities. The notion that Pynchon might inscribe codes in his text, so that readers can then identify source texts that he uses to construct his own narrative has far-reaching implications. Not only does this suggest the importance of recognizing and responding to potential metafictional digressions in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it also suggests a self-conscious writer drawing attention to his own craft and artistry.

One of the key reasons that the metafictional dimension of Pynchon's text is possibly overlooked or, most often one suspects, only referred to in passing, is that such readings often depend on having a clear idea of who is narrating and to whom the narration is addressed. This is a key interpretive problem facing readers attempting to gain a foothold in *Gravity's Rainbow's* treacherous fictional cosmos, and the few critics who tackle this issue rarely reach consensus.³ Smetak considers the root of the problem as emanating from Pynchon's use of indirect free style or speech, what Henry James called "third-person narrative limited," "a style marked by the use of words denoting mental processes, by use of the features of direct speech, by idiosyncratic idioms and exclamation marks, and by a sense of heightened subjectivity" (94). This third-person narrative limited style tends to omit quotation marks and exclamation marks and is thus very difficult to recognize, as phrases such as "he said" and "he thought" as well as qualifiers such as *that* and *you* are often absent. These important omissions make the reader's task similar to that faced by Slothrop, as he fumbles about for visual references and information in the Toilet world.

My hypothesis is that some of the confusion regarding just who is talking in specific instances in *Gravity's Rainbow* may not be simply a result of the author's use of indirect free style, but may be also due to Pynchon's willingness to engage in authorial intrusions. By entering his own text and addressing his readers directly, Pynchon temporarily eliminates the traditional boundaries between the author and his text, and consequently shifts the focus of the text from the characters and plot, to the relationship between the implied author and his readers. Instances of possible authorial intrusion, such as that considered here are never clearly signposted and may, to some degree, be masked by Pynchon's use of indirect free style.

What these difficulties make clear is that regardless of external contexts or theoretical methodologies, the basis of any real attempt to come to terms with *Gravity's Rainbow* must begin with the text itself. The only way to gain a foothold in this most complex of postmodern textscapes is through the act of reading and paying attention at all times to the tone and context of the narrative voice. The idea that Pynchon may be engaging in an authorial intrusion provides the catalyst for the following second-level reading of the Crutchfield section, which traces Western myth and film in the episode. I shall then address how Pynchon's mythmaking strategy underpins his writing.

2. Pynchon's Spaghetti Western and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*

Since there are many studies detailing allusions to films in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it seems strange that no critics have looked at this section in terms of the films of Sergio Leone, especially as Pynchon's western scenario brims with violence, double dealing, sexual ambivalence, and betrayal. One of the standard tropes

of Leone's Spaghetti Westerns is that the entire plot tends to move inexorably towards an inevitable ritualized Mexican standoff. The reader will not witness Crutchfield's shootout with Toro Rojo, as the effects of the sodium amytal will have worn off Slothrop before their duel can take place. But the text signals this stereotypical denouement is inevitable:

What the white man does not have to utter, however casually, is anything like "Toro Rojo's gonna be riding in tonight." Both pardners know about *that*. The wind bringing them down that raw Injun smell, ought to be enough for anybody. Oh God it's gonna be a shootout and bloody as hell. (69)

As already mentioned, the Western that may have the most important bearing on the Crutchfield section is Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, released in 1968 and starring Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson. The most obvious sign in Pynchon's text which suggests that he may be drawing for inspiration from Leone's film stems from the following sentence: "There is somebody playing a mouthharp behind an outbuilding—some musical glutton, mouth sucking giant five-note chords behind the tune of Red River Valley" (68).

Among the most distinctive features of Leone's Westerns are the musical scores provided by Ennio Morricone, which in many ways are integral to the conception of the movies themselves. *Once Upon a Time in the West* stands out in this regard as Leone played Morricone's soundtrack on the set of the film during the shoot. Afterwards the actors' dialogue was recorded and Morricone's music was then superimposed, with varying degrees of volume, over the dialogue. For Bronson's character, this overdubbing is exaggerated so that when he is portrayed playing the harmonica, the accompanying soundtrack is always unrealistic and hyperbolic. In many respects, Leone's use of the harmonica is not unlike Pynchon's description of a "musical glutton" (68). Although the theme that dominates the movie contains only three chords, it arrives always in bursts of five notes, which suggests that it conforms very closely to Pynchon's description of "mouth-sucking giant five-note chords" (68).

Although Bronson took lessons in how to hold and play a harmonica from the actual musician heard on the soundtrack, Leone purposely overdubbed the movie so as to imbue the film, which is fastidious in its attention to historical detail, with a sense of unreality and the mythic. This juxtaposition of historical accuracy and over-the-top Romantic mythologizing of the American West contributes to the underlying poetics of the entire enterprise. Unusually, and in a radical departure from typical Hollywood westerns, the title of the movie was the conceptual beginning of the creative enterprise. Leone's clear intention was to use and adapt some of the conventions, devices and settings of the traditional American Hollywood Western in such a way as to provoke a strong reaction from his audiences. From the first, before a line of

the script was written, the objective was to juxtapose the contrasting worlds of fable and history (Frayling, 251). The many references to classic Westerns, particularly those of John Ford, were explicit and meant to be recognized by fans of the genre. In the spirit of Joyce and Eliot, Leone's art, as he describes it, was unashamedly indebted to his precursors:

We wanted that feeling throughout of a kaleidoscopic view of all American Westerns put together. But you must be careful of making it sound like citations for citations' sake. It wasn't done in that spirit at all. The references aren't calculated in a programmed kind of way, they are there to give the feeling of all that background of the American Western to help tell this particular fairy tale. They are part of my attempt to take historical reality—the new, unpytting era of the economic boom—and blend it together with the fable. (qtd. in Frayling, 256)

Leone had hired Bernardo Bertolucci and film critic Dario Argento to help write the treatment for the film, and the three spent several months in Leone's home in Rome, studying classic westerns and selecting themes, places and images and dialogue which is conflated in Leone's epic depiction of the West. As a result, *Once Upon a Time in the West* is not merely an elegy of the American West but of the Western genre itself.

The specific clip from Leone's film that seems to have the most important bearing on the Crutchfield episode is the scene where Henry Fonda, playing a hired gunslinger called Frank, is first presented to the audience. Provocation was one of the key elements of the poetics underlying *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Leone's use of Fonda, completely against type, results in one of the most memorable moments in the American Western canon. Previously Fonda had played heroic noble characters including Wyatt Earp and the young Abraham Lincoln. In an exceptionally clever and somewhat cynical ploy on the part of Leone, Fonda's character is revealed as the mastermind behind the massacre of the McBain family at their Sweet Water ranch. Even more shocking is his callous execution of a defenseless red-haired boy. Looking closely at *Once Upon a Time in the West*, we see considerable evidence to suggest that Pynchon's characterization of Crutchfield may be closely based on Fonda's character in the movie. The way Crutchfield is portrayed in the extended first paragraph closely resembles Fonda's legendary first scene in the film.

"Sweet Water" is the name McBain, an Irishman with flaming red hair, has given to his ranch situated in what is depicted as a desolate desert valley, surrounded by low-set limestone mountains. Having discovered that, far from being barren, the valley conceals an underground stream or water source, McBain has bought and settled the land, biding his time until the railway arrives on his doorstep, when his family will become rich overnight. Just as the laying of the railway line approaches McBain's valley, he and his family are massacred by Frank (Fonda) and his accomplices. Throughout the

scene, the color red predominates—from the McBain family’s hair, to the reddish brown wood of their home, to the gorse which is the only shrubbery visible.

A close reading of Pynchon’s text reveals definite parallels between the Crutchfield episode and Leone’s film. Crutchfield and Fonda are both browned by sun, wind and dirt. Both are first visually portrayed against a wooden background and a barn or stable. Playing against type, Fonda is very much “wood of a different grain and finish.” And both are grotesque loathsome solid-set characters of a nonetheless good-humored disposition. The gradual introduction of the harmonica theme in both Leone’s film and Pynchon’s text is equally well synchronized. The two loci are also similar settings, desert valleys surrounded by mountain ranges, with rivers running through them. In light of the McBain family’s flaming red hair, “Red River Valley” can be interpreted as a simple codified reworking of McBain’s Sweet Water.

When the character of Crutchfield is first described, it is against the background of a barn and stable wall. He is “wood of a different grain and finish,” “good-humored,” “solid-set against the purple mountainslope, and looking half into the sun” (68). This description is strikingly similar to how the viewer first sees Fonda enter movie. After killing McBain and two of his family, with the sun to the back of the killers, Fonda and his accomplices approach the McBain family homestead. The last remaining child lingers petrified, his eyes fixed on Fonda’s character. The men dressed in brown dusters get closer. They stop, and gradually the camera swings around to slowly reveal Fonda’s identity, first against the wooden background of the homestead, then against an outbuilding, and finally in full profile against the backdrop of sky and a far off purplish mountain slope. Fonda smiles at the little boy, until an accomplice accidentally reveals his identity, after which he momentarily grimaces, smiles once more and finally executes the defenseless child. The scene is played out to the tune of the harmonica constantly repeating the same five-note, three chord motif.

If *Once Upon a Time in the West* is being reworked by Pynchon, and Crutchfield is indeed loosely based on Henry Fonda’s character, is Leone’s film then the key frame of reference that Pynchon prompts the reader to recognize when Crutchfield is first introduced?: “Here now is Crutchfield or Crouchfield, the westwardman. Not ‘archetypical’ westwardman, but *the only*. Understand, there was only one. There was only one Indian who ever fought him. Only one fight, one victory, one loss. And only one president, and one assassin, and one election” (67).

Once again, comparing Leone’s film and Pynchon’s text presents some curious and suggestive parallels. Not only could Fonda’s casting be described as “not archetypical” but the level of cruelty and brutality of Frank’s character was in itself a departure from the norm. The reference to the westwardman could also represent a pun on the name of Clint Eastwood, the star of Leone’s

previous westerns. Carrying the analogy between Fonda and Crutchfield further, it is possible to identify Bronson as the Indian who fights him. Bronson's previous credits in Westerns had seen him typecast as an Indian, which made him a natural choice to play Harmonica, an anonymous Indian. The fact that Fonda's character is finally killed in a shootout by Harmonica, an Indian in a red shirt, suggests clear parallels between sets of antagonists: Crutchfield and his nemesis Toro Rojo (Red Bull), Frank and Harmonica. Both Pynchon's text and Leone's film move toward the same climax. There is only one showdown or "fight" between Harmonica and Frank, in which Harmonica prevails. Although Leone declines to specify an exact year when his film is set, the background story of the ongoing construction of the first transcontinental railroad across America points to the 1860s. Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, some four years before the ceremonial completion of the railroad on May 10, 1869, provides a clear context for Pynchon's reference to "one president," "one assassin" and "one election." The earlier reference in the episode (65) to the future President JFK who was assassinated on November 22nd 1963 in Dallas Texas, further demonstrates the multiple signifying possibilities presented by Pynchon's text.

While there are several other potential signifiers, scattered across the text in an apparently haphazard fashion, which suggest a link between Leone's film and Pynchon's text, the most notable connective occurs in the earlier reference to "contacts" Slothrop recognizes, "People he knows," sitting around "worn flagstones," transacting "something vaguely religious" (66). "Flagstone" is the name of the town that features prominently in Leone's film, reinforcing the notion that Pynchon may be drawing heavily not only on American Western myths and tropes in constructing Slothrop's dream vision, but also on specific texts. Today, Leone's film may seem a somewhat obscure source, but it is worth remembering that for *Gravity's Rainbow's* first readers in 1973, Leone's film was only five years old and would have been fresh in the minds of many cinema goers and most certainly aficionados of the Western. One suspects that just as Leone expected cinema goers to recognize his own debt to John Ford and others, Pynchon would have expected his readers and critics to consider his postmodern Western setting in the context of well-known Westerns.

The importance of identifying Leone's film as a potential source and framework for the extended initial paragraph of the Crutchfield section, however, may be not so much the connection itself, but the fact that Pynchon draws attention to his text's structure and content. While the act of reading provides the means of establishing a possible external frame of reference, one also has to take into account the reader's store of knowledge. A reader who has never seen Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*, or heard its music, would be unable to recognize any possible allusions to the film. Hence, if Pynchon is trying to draw attention to the mythmaking strategies underpinning his own

work, it stands to reason that the myths or texts he draws on should not be too obscure or too difficult to recognize.

3. The Grapes of Wrath

On presenting his close reading at the recent Pynchon conference in Granada in June 2006, Steven Weisenburger noted that the paragraph immediately following the parody of “Red River Valley,” which mentions “okies,” “Red” and “FDR’s little asshole buddies” might allude to another movie in which Fonda starred, Ford’s 1949 adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*⁴:

Oh, it’s the Red River all right, if you don’t believe it just ask that “Red,” wherever he may be (tell you what Red means, FDR’s little asshole buddies, they want to take it all away, women all have hair on their legs, give it all to them or they’ll blow it up round black iron in the middle of the night bleeding over Polacks in ay caps okies niggers yeh niggers especially . . .) (68)

This intuitive insight proved judicious as Pynchon’s text does indeed seem to echo and allude to Ford’s film. Here Fonda is cast in the lead role as Tom Joad, a convicted killer with a good heart, who sets out from Oklahoma with his extended family for California, upon his release from jail. After numerous setbacks and being victimized and exploited owing to their poverty and situation on the margins of society during the Great Depression, the Joad family eventually arrive at a “Farmworkers Wheat Patch Camp” in California, run by the Department of Agriculture. This camp provides a place of refuge and a degree of autonomy for the displaced Okies, and is run by a central committee of workers, which is free from the outside interferences of the corrupt police. The scene from the film which seems to have a direct bearing on the text quoted above occurs when a group of Okies including Tom Joad are working for a local farmer called Thomas. Sympathetic to their plight, Thomas warns them that locals in collusion with the police force intend to try to close down their camp by causing a fight at a forthcoming barn dance. The farmer reads an excerpt from a local newspaper which states: “Citizens angered at Red agitators burn another squatter’s camp and order agitators to leave the County.” At this point, Fonda’s character interjects: “Listen, what is these Reds anyway? Every time you turn around somebody calls somebody else a Red. What is these Reds anyways?”

Pynchon’s play on the word “Red,” in conjunction with the reference to Okies and FDR, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the American President during the Depression, is in itself extremely suggestive. There is, however, an even stronger link between these two texts, as the music that constantly plays in the background, right through Ford’s film, is the tune “Red River Valley.” Crucially, at one stage, just prior to the showdown between local

troublemakers and the Okies, Tom Joad, asks Ma Joad (Jane Darwell) to dance, whereupon he sings to her:

Come and sit by my side, if you love me,
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the Red River Valley,
And the boy who will love you so true.

Thus, two of Henry Fonda's most famous films seem to provide the building blocks for the first two paragraphs of the Crutchfield section. Rather than engaging in a generic parody of the Western, Pynchon seems to be engaging in a symbiotic activity, reminiscent of cinematic montage, where two distinct images or visual representations are brought together to form a new image and effect. The bridge that links these two allusions to Fonda's movies is the song's title, followed by a comic parody of its traditional lyrics. I have already suggested two different contexts in which to consider the phrase "Red River Valley," the first a cryptic allusion to McBain's Sweetwater in Leone's film and the second an explicit reference to the musical melody that haunts Ford's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. When one considers Pynchon's complex narrative structures, the question also arises as to whether the reader should take Pynchon's parody of the song "Red River Valley" at face value. Could the narrator's suggestion to "light up and set for a spell" also be directed to the reader? Should the reader then stop a moment and take note of the "shit (which) hereabouts shore is swell"?

Red River Valley

Down this toilet they say you are flushin'–
Won'tchew light up and set for a spell?
Cause the toilet it ain't going nowhar,
And the shit hereabouts shore is swell. (68)

The notion that the "shit" contained in the toilet world may have some intrinsic informational value or cryptic significance is, as we have seen, the first thing that Slothrop observes following his dive into the toilet world (65). Noting that the relationship between the word and shit constitutes one of the "most significant semantic contraries" of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Weisenburger, 43), "shit" can then be seen as a scatological metaphor signifying the word or information. The use of the word shit in 1960s contemporary slang to signify unwelcome or unexpected news or information (i.e., "that's bad shit") is equally suggestive. The notion that the "shit," around the shore of the toilet world is "swell" implies that there is plenty of information in the immediate textual environs for the reader to absorb or assimilate. This "shit" or information seems to point to

two allusions to Henry Fonda films, linked literally and cryptically by the phrase and song title “Red River Valley.”

When seen in hindsight, the allusion to Ford’s film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* is relatively straightforward. One might even ask whether this relatively explicit allusion was inserted in the text to help the reader establish the more opaque link with Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West*? In the rest of the Crutchfield episode, there may indeed be allusions to other actual movies, involving famous Western actors or directors, such as Howard Hawkes’ *Red River*, as Moore has suggested (66–67). Or it may be the case, as Herman argues, that there are no specific textual targets in these surreal, perverse and comic closing sections. The clear and careful presentation of allusions to both Leone’s and Ford’s films stands in stark opposition to the rest of the Crutchfield section, which is confusing and disorienting. This in turn implies that the recognition of these allusions may form part of a larger metafictional project at work in the episode, and that there is no single key to the mysteries of the text.

4. An Allegorical Reading of the Episode

Pynchon’s practice of consciously drawing on textual sources extends beyond simple intertextuality into the domain of literary symbiosis, and the kind of manipulation of myth advocated by modernists such as Eliot and Joyce. The author’s recourse to pastiche in the above instance to provide the scaffolding for an extended section of his text might be considered as a modernist strategy or technique, in the spirit of Eliot’s mythical method. This particular use of myth is, however, intricately bound to the author’s attempt to actively engage his readers in metafictional discourse. This suggests that while Pynchon has taken on board the central tenets of modernist poetics, he moves beyond them to formulate a postmodern poetics in which metafiction plays an extremely important role.

That Pynchon should seek to lay bare the tools of his craft for alert second-level readers and draw attention to the way in which he uses myth to structure his fictional world is particularly intriguing and worth exploring. As noted earlier, the key symbol that dominates the episode is the harp. In a literal context this is Slothrop’s harmonica, the musical instrument that he carries everywhere with him. Reading Slothrop’s dream vision purely in a literal sense, though possible, is somewhat limiting, not least because it discounts the possibility of seeing Slothrop’s journey from an allegorical perspective. As I mentioned earlier, Slothrop’s downward descent to the toilet underworld, although extremely bizarre, does fit within a recognizable tradition of metaphysical poems, such as Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia*, in which allegory is central to interpretation.

Here I am considering the prominence given to both Charlie Parker

and Sergio Leone in the episode and most specifically the manner in which Pynchon homes in on the key moments when both artists broke with tradition and redefined and reinvigorated their respective artistic mediums. Pynchon's exposure of the tools of his own craft, by directing the reader to uncover his engagement in symbiotic mythmaking in the Crutchfield episode, seems highly significant and far from coincidental. Indeed, the episode can also be read as a complex allegory of the creative process and how artists strive to reinvent their own craft while paying tribute to their predecessors—the kind of agonistic process whereby the artist removes the burden of tradition from his shoulders and places it firmly under his belt.

There are important parallels between the specific instances from Jazz and cinema that Pynchon chooses to include in his own work, and it is worth considering these within a historical and artistic context. Pynchon's extended discussion of Charlie Parker's track "Koko" in the Roseland Ballroom section focuses not only on the musician whose 1945 recording of "Cherokee" revolutionized modern jazz, but specifically, on how Parker took a standard tune, and through extreme improvisation, made the familiar strange and the old new. As mentioned earlier, Pynchon paraphrases Parker's own description of this key moment in his artistic development, remaining remarkably true to his original source, implying that this incorporation is more neutral pastiche than loaded parody.

This theme of reinventing what has gone before is also the defining feature of the poetics underpinning Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which can be considered as a massive enterprise in cinematic symbiosis. Thus the specific re-enactment of Fonda's entrance in Pynchon's text alludes to the cinematic moment when Leone turned the Western genre on its head. Pynchon's own recourse to Leone's and Ford's films when structuring consecutive paragraphs of his narrative seems to support the idea that Pynchon himself advocates the kind of symbiotic act that defined Parker's and Leone's artistic achievements. The fact that he draws attention to this symbiosis may indicate a desire for his art's inherent complexity be appreciated in full. Equally, however, it can be seen as a response to those who had forecast the demise of the novel, an affirmation that literature, music, and art will always find ways to perpetuate themselves.

This reading would suggest that the Kenosha connection with Orson Welles may not be purely coincidental and could be intended to have a similar allegorical significance. Welles's stature as a revolutionary film maker who pushed back the boundaries of his own craft is generally acknowledged. That the figure of Welles should undergird a narrative that seems to celebrate the works and craft of similar groundbreaking artists as Parker and Leone seems highly suggestive. The idea that Pynchon may be consciously and publicly engaging with tradition, by identifying with certain cultural predecessors and internalizing them so as to evolve his own

individuated voice, evokes comparison with Harold Bloom's theory of the "Anxiety of Influence."

5. Thomas Pynchon and the Act of *Authorial Kenosis*

When one considers Pynchon's penchant for punning and word games, it is tempting to make a link between the third stage of Bloom's theory of influence, Kenosis, and Kenosha. Originally a Greek word denoting "emptiness," the term Kenosis was first used in a theological sense in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:5-8. Christian theologians use the word to explain the process whereby a god, who exists outside of time and space, could become human, incarnate: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us." In effect, Kenosis attempts to explain what the Son of God chose to give up in terms of his divine attributes in order to assume human nature—described by Bloom as, "the humbling or emptying out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status" (14). The changes that Jesus undergoes when he becomes incarnate are temporary, and God assumes the divine attributes that Jesus "empties himself of" till he ascends back into Heaven following his resurrection. Within the context of Bloom's theory of poetry, Kenosis is a type of "breaking device" which represents "a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor" (14). Somewhat paradoxically, the later poet or writer comes to terms with an artistic precursor by internalizing his work within his own. According to Bloom, this is done in such a way that the precursor's work is "emptied out," without the later poet's work being deflated (15). The relevance of Bloom's conception of Kenosis is clear when one considers how Pynchon internalizes and incorporates fragments of Leone's, Ford's and Parker's artistic legacies into his own writing. These three artistic precursors are in effect "emptied out" into *Gravity's Rainbow*, yet in such a way that their presence adds to, rather than subtracts from, Pynchon's text. *The Anxiety of Influence* was published one year after Pynchon's novel in 1974, so it is unlikely that Pynchon was aware of how Bloom intended to use the concept of Kenosis in his impending publication. While Bloom's theory of the "Anxiety of Influence" provides an intriguing context in which to view the mythmaking strategies underpinning Pynchon's writing, if Pynchon is engaging the reader in complex word play through punning, it is most likely that he is playing around with the Christian concept of Kenosis.

The instance of authorial intrusion discussed earlier details how Pynchon engages in metafictional discourse to address his readers directly. This authorial technique and strategy succeed in temporarily reducing the traditional distance between the author and reader, and this technique and strategy introduce an important analogy with Christian doctrine. By addressing the reader directly from inside his own text, Pynchon effectively makes himself incarnate in the text. The author temporarily abandons his Joycean god-like

role, standing above and at a remove from the fictional world he is responsible for creating and abandoning aspects of his divine status. This act of *authorial kenosis* parallels Christ's descent from Heaven, whereby Christ temporarily took on human form, while retaining divine status. It is also interesting to note how in the episode in which this authorial intrusion takes place, Pynchon effectively "empties himself," exposing the tools of his trade and demystifying his divine craft. Whether or not Pynchon intended his readers to consider his employment of the name "Kenosha" as a possible pun on the Christian notion of Kenosis, the theological term does seem highly appropriate in describing this kind of authorial intrusion.

The above reading suggests that Pynchon's text is constructed to be read on several levels and needs to be read not just literally or from a historical perspective, but also figuratively. There have been many suggestions as to the identity and function of the Kenosha Kid in Pynchon's text. In light of the act of authorial intrusion identified earlier, the possibility that the Kenosha Kid may actually represent Thomas Pynchon himself, taking on a role analogous to that of Christ, needs to be considered. The representation of the Kenosha Kid is by no means a straightforward authorial self-depiction, however. In this case, he is perhaps best described as a fictional demiurge or avatar of the author.

Such a reading effectively attributes god-like (authorial) qualities to the Kenosha Kid and provides an interesting context for considering the curious epistolary dialogue that takes place at the beginning of the episode, when Slothrop writes to the Kenosha Kid and asks: "Did I ever bother you, *ever*, for anything, in your life?" (60) The Kenosha Kid's response is brief and unsympathetic, and it suggests that Slothrop's request will not be granted: "You never did" (60). The tone of Slothrop's request is that of a defensive plea and implies that Slothrop is asking for a special favor, wish or request to be granted. The italicization of the word "*ever*," where one might also reasonably expect the addressee's name to appear can be interpreted as merely reiterating that this is the first time Slothrop has ever requested anything from the Kenosha Kid. It might also be interpreted, however, as signifying that the Kenosha Kid harbors eternal or immortal qualities, through his identification as "*ever*." The Kenosha Kid section (60-61) presents the reader with numerous interpretive difficulties, in part due to its fragmented nature, but equally due to the confusion surrounding the identity of the Kenosha Kid. One thing that is made clear, however, is that the Kenosha Kid exists in a superior position to Slothrop, as the following passage, which is decidedly biblical in tone, suggests:

At the end of the mighty day in which he gave us in fiery letters across the sky all the words we'd ever need, words we today enjoy, and fill our dictionaries with, the meek voice of little Tyrone Slothrop celebrated ever after in tradition and song, ventured to filter upward to the Kid's attention: "You never did '*the*,' Kenosha Kid!" (61)

Slothrop's attempt to make his voice "filter upward" intimates that the Kenosha Kid exists above him and at a distant remove. The description of Slothrop's voice as "meek," an adjective used throughout the New Testament to refer to the faithful, is equally suggestive. Reinforcing the religious subtext inherent in the text, the Kenosha Kid section seems to close with an explicit allusion to the Christian feast of Easter Sunday, which marks the resurrection of Christ following his crucifixion, an end to Lenten fasting, and the return of meat after forty days of abstinence: "The day of the Ascent and sacrifice. A nation-wide observance. Fats searing, blood dripping and burning to a salty brown" (61). This possible allusion to Christ's crucifixion and his Ascension into Heaven is particularly noteworthy, as Christ's Ascension effectively marks the moment when he resumes his divine status and reverses the process of kenosis that he underwent to become human.

This analysis of the Kenosha Kid section suggests that this most slippery and enigmatic character is portrayed as having god-like qualities. That is not to say that he represents Christ, but rather that his characterization is analogous to that of a God. Pynchon's subsequent engagement in authorial intrusion, effectively coming down and making himself incarnate in the fictional world that he has created, therefore gives rise to the possibility that the Kenosha Kid may also represent Pynchon himself. As the creator of both Slothrop and the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon plays a role that is not unlike that of a god. This might explain why Slothrop is constantly taunted throughout the opening section that "he never did the Kenosha Kid." As a fictional character, the act of kenosis is quite simply beyond Slothrop, as he will never be able to transcend his fictionality and exist outside of the text. This privilege is reserved for gods and authors alone, and though Pynchon is indeed creator of both Slothrop and the world in which he exists, this is one request that no author could ever grant.

The kind of close comparative and semiotic reading that I have carried out here identifies and asserts the metafictional possibilities presented in Pynchon's text. The various connectives identified suggest that the technique of intertextuality is a key element in Pynchon's writing and that he values and makes use of diverse cultural texts in codifying sections of his narrative. Pynchon's engagement in metafictional discourse through the technique of *authorial kenosis* adds an extra dimension to his symbiotic mythmaking, as the reader gets two stories for the price of one, an historical narrative and the story of the making of that narrative.

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Notes

¹ Steven Weisenburger points out how "Red River Valley" is a parody of a traditional Western lyric, and, amongst other details he translates various Hispanic names, providing contexts for terms such as *little pard*, *Rancho Peligroso* and *Toro Rojo*. He also identifies

geographical points plotted in the narrative, such as Eagle pass, a border town on the Rio Grande and how "Los Madres" refers to the Sierra Madres range of Northern Mexico (47).

² For Thomas Moore, Crutchfield's world represents "a country under the toilet" and sees in the characters of Crutchfield and Whappo, ghost overlays of John Wayne as Dunson and Montgomery Clift as the boy Matthew Garth in the classic John Hawkes Western *Red River* (67). David Cowart sees Slothrop's fantasy as only becoming cinematic in the later part, calling Crutchfield a decadent cowboy, whose relationship with his "pathetic sidekick" Whappo symbolizes that of colonizer and native (50-51).

³ Thomas Schaub identifies an over voice that "retains the advantages of the intrusive, visible guide, but undermines the stability commonly associated with it, for his knowledge of the world is fragmentary" (131). Molly Hite contends that Pynchon's narrator "is a Proteus who can change tone and attitude so completely that his utterances appear to emanate from separate personae" (142). Hite's notion of the narrator as a slippery Proteus, constantly shifting form and changing perspective provides a flexible context in which to view *Gravity's Rainbow's* narrator or narrators. Neither Hite nor Schaub, however, considers the possibility of authorial intrusion in the course of their analyses of Pynchon's narrative.

⁴ I am extremely grateful to Steven Weisenburger for this helpful suggestion as I had not seen Ford's film and might otherwise have overlooked this further significant allusion to a character played by Henry Fonda.

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