

On the Phrase “Ass Backwards”

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Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon, by Stefan Mattessich. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002. 292 pp. \$64.95; pb \$21.95.

There are many lines of flight in actuality: the ellipse of a boomerang, the zigzag of a bluebottle, the deadly vector of a bullet. Pynchon’s parabola, the trajectory of the rocket, is another such abstract diagram: a meniscus tethered by gravity. The title of Stefan Mattessich’s *Lines of Flight* refers to that famous example, but it also draws attention to his own theoretical trajectory through a philosophy of abstract forms. As a “line of flight” is one of the principal concepts in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the allusion should alert us at once to the critical thrust of Mattessich’s approach. Mattessich assumes the reader’s knowledge of Deleuze and Guattari’s post-1968 philosophy, but only as part of a “welter of French theory” (2) with which the book is saturated. *Lines of Flight* is no undergraduate primer.

For Mattessich, the conjunction of Pynchon and Deleuze and Guattari is political at base: the synthesizing metaphor of flight identifies Pynchon’s rocket with an escape (*fuite*)—countercultural, political, textual—into abstraction. In the millenarian revision of poststructuralist theory presently under way—Terry Eagleton’s recent *After Theory* is a prominent example—the foremost criticism of such theory’s flight into abstraction is that it abdicated its responsibilities, failed to deal with the major business of philosophy’s obligations, ignoring metaphysics, the nature of truth, death. Disregarding for a moment the validity or otherwise of these revisionists’ moral arbitrations, their question remains—which is why Mattessich’s book ought to be a timely one. Deleuzian philosophy’s political obsessions—subjectivity, social representation, the actualization of the real—sharply intersect those of Pynchon. By choosing a Deleuzian methodology to conduct a reading of Pynchon, Mattessich should be forced to test poststructuralism’s shibboleths against its *bêtes noires*; for however true those revisionist allegations concerning theory, one cannot avoid the presence of death or the re-evaluation of truth in Pynchon’s work any more than in the postmodern American novel in general. Think of

death, and DeLillo, Vonnegut, Heller, Mailer, Burroughs . . . and more recently Palahniuk, Danielewski, Auster all come to mind, not as novelists merely interested in a theme, but as specialists, aficionados of oblivion.

However, titles of books sometimes conceal more than they reveal. Mattessich is a long way from being what could be described as a Deleuzean, and although Deleuze and Guattari are the most prominent philosophers in his arguments, it seems that he is of a broader church. At the heart of his thesis is a notion of subjective displacement which permits him to argue that *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular is less a historical novel than one about the time of its writing and the counterculture of late-sixties America. Mattessich chooses to “theorize with a vengeance” (12) partly for personal reasons delineated in a brief and comically inconsequential sketch of his teenage and graduate years, yoking with breathtaking effrontery Pynchon’s experience of the counterculture to his own. The more persuasive rationale he gives is that belonging to a period undermines analysis of that period, necessitating a “performative” strategy. Furthermore, this is “especially true when one is interested in the postwar ‘period’ of American cultural life” (12). What has to be performed in order to approach an understanding of these novels is an analysis of the “politics of form.” As *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular preempts all political responses by including them, we must avoid being made “complicit” in the “groundless ground” of an already anticipated reaction: “To stop short of such an inquiry is to consign the text to a kind of pessimism from which no redemption is possible, and it is significant that many critics of Pynchon’s work do not get much farther than this, which is why Pynchon criticism has always been vexed over the question of his political viability” (127). It seems that Pynchon critics have been barking up the wrong tree all this time, blind to the “genuinely transformative desire” (46) of *The Crying of Lot 49*, unaware that “[t]he time of the novel englobes us in its metalinguistic immanence . . . and demands a performative theorizing to be understood” (13). In Mattessich’s world, we Pynchon critics (largely) are a bad old analytic *They*, and Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Lefebvre, Baudrillard, de Certeau, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze and Guattari will be along shortly to sort us out.

As a card-carrying Deleuzean, I find this all a bit implausible. For a start, “French theory” is not, *pace* Mattessich, some sort of undifferentiated hodgepodge of homogeneous ideas. To group all the above-mentioned together, when some are philosophically oppositional, is bound to end in tears. This theoretical gambit—a sort of Scrabble played with concepts instead of letters—might have paid off where the

frictions between opposing ideologies generated a spark of synthetic insight; but more often it results in the opposing positions cancelling each other out. Worse, given the fact that the book advertises itself as Deleuzian, it is guaranteed to infuriate the very philosophers to whom it appeals.

What Mattessich is actually seeking is to uncover a "preterition . . . at the level of expression" (231). As he claims of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "the text's politics can be determined not at the level of content, where a radical uncertainty prevails, but at the level of expression, where that uncertainty becomes a political strategy, a form of deconstructive parody in which the novel's preterition perfects itself" (189). So is it that *V.* manifests a "parodic refusal to mean" (25). So, too, "the basis for any escape" in *The Crying of Lot 49* "is precisely the novel's refusal to mean" (57). This indeterminacy is a familiar notion, and one which Mattessich binds to his desire for countercultural resistance, asseverating that *Gravity's Rainbow* resists the tyranny of phallogocentrism whilst at the same time recognizing that it, too, is complicit in that very system, aware of the fact that it is compromised by its commodification and textuality. The first problem with this reading is implied by Mattessich's attitude to the postwar period, as outlined above. In finding that there is something intrinsic to the times which resists analysis, an "essence of the postwar period defined as a *field*" (12), Mattessich rests his assertion of indeterminacy on a traditional act of historical judgment, an assumption which generates its own type of causal relations. To then propose a performative reading of Pynchon's novels, duplicating the metalanguage but within the framework of "theory," is to propose a strategy subject to the same stricture, hoist by its own petard.

More promising is Mattessich's suggestion of parody, or "metaparody," and he is persuasive when he proposes that the language of *Gravity's Rainbow* parodies description itself. The excessiveness of the third-person narrative, the overstuffing farce, the strained humor all seem to fall into a determinate category. But when the same idea is applied to *Mason & Dixon*, the claim is extended too far. The idea that *Mason & Dixon's* "parodic and displaced character . . . makes it a [specifically] late-twentieth-century work" (231) misses the fact that parody usually is temporally displaced. As a form of burlesque, parody is still categorizable as satire, but Mattessich's terms are undifferentiated, and hence too blunt to make his metaparody add up to anything more than a loose form of reflexivity. One wonders where, in the midst of all this theory, is an awareness of the theorization of parody? Perhaps Bakhtin and Hutcheon aren't French enough.

When Mattessich engages in more traditional types of reading, *Lines of Flight* attains lucidity. He chases up (and reproduces) the whole of the Remedios Varo triptych, showing how the painting provides a model of metalepsis. Elsewhere, several prominent sections of *Gravity's Rainbow* receive close readings, though a tendency to attribute to all of them a metonymic quality devalues them individually. Mattessich claims metonymic status for at least eight separate passages (73, 80, 93, 94, 96, 126, 176, 196). Notably, the "Counter-revolutionaries. *It is our mission to promote death*" (GR 720) section is taken out of context to outline its "legitimate metonymic claims on the narrative as a whole" (73); yet this deliberate ignoring of its diegetic status gives it a privileged significance that is in fact unjustified. Mattessich seems unaware of Steven Weisenburger's work since *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* (1988), and his ignorance of Weisenburger's structural exegesis of the novel by theorizing hyper-embedded narration is a damaging oversight. Elsewhere he reads Peter Sachsa's transcribed narration as a "sub-subplot" (97), leading to the idea that the "text" is being read within the text, by Psi Section. Lacking the precision of Weisenburger's tools from narrative theory, his conclusion that "layering . . . is what accounts for the density of Pynchon's prose" (98) seems curiously banal in its generality. Mattessich reads *Gravity's Rainbow* as a "'broken' textual form" (74) which spins itself into a Baudrillardian "Ecstasy" (75) of senselessness—a reading which pales next to Weisenburger's painstaking and illuminating structural analysis. It is difficult, given this nebulousness, to distinguish between Mattessich's *jouissant* reading and a reactionary one which sees *Gravity's Rainbow* as unstructured, chaotic nonsense.

Yet Mattessich argues his way out of such *culs-de-sac* with a conventional appeal to textual transcendence. The "textual desire" of *Gravity's Rainbow* "is coded as male" (172), set up against an attempt to deconstruct "'phallogocentrism'" (170); hence Pynchon presents us with a critique of male desire by at once depicting and undermining male fantasy and its pornographic stereotypes. Slothrop's scattering mirrors the novel's "de-volition" (157); his desire for escape is represented in a stereotyped, parodic language of escapism, showing him drifting into nostalgia. Gravity is the demon which pulls all away from transcendence, and so Slothrop is a conduit from gravity, his textual scattering a kind of "internal sabotage" (188) of the novel's meaninglessness. In the end, Mattessich suggests, Slothrop becomes an "avatar" (196) of Klossowski's intentionless man, an icon of transcendent freedom.

But what of the Deleuzian component, bruited so loudly from the cover? Well, Mattessich certainly talks the talk. In *V.*, characters are in

love with, or are becoming, machines, a category which Mattessich allies with the inanimate and the constructed. Oedipa is “essentially a machine, a kind of information-processing computer” (48). “The Rocket is also a desiring-machine” (203). This is all useful stuff to know, but entirely incommensurable with Deleuze’s concept of the machinic, which is nonmetaphorical, decidedly nonanthropomorphic, and a virtual category of matter, like an engineering diagram. The Rocket, for example, being actualized, cannot be a desiring-machine, although desiring-machines probably played a part in its actualization, so that it might be described as a machinic assemblage, at least in part.

This confusion of terms stems from an essentialist viewpoint, as is clear from Mattessich’s repeated use of “essence.” His world is made of language, not matter, an anti-Deleuzean ontological stance equivalent to social constructivism; machines are as constructed as everything else, like texts. He takes “‘matter’ in both a physical and a semantic sense” (45), rendering all of the Deleuzean terms he uses semantic ones, rather than epistemic tools. The Body without Organs becomes a sort of woolly transcendental orgy of nonsense-as-sense. *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* are all described as “broken machines,” on the purely semantic grounds that they undermine their own meanings, whereas Deleuze, following Reuleaux, defines a machine narrowly as a coupling/interruption, or system of interruptions, in a flow—like an electric-light switch. At its worst, this conflation of ontology and epistemology generates a glutinous mélange of jargon, especially when blended with terminology drawn from entirely distinct philosophies; at its best, the habit of weak analogizing produces grandiose statements of unintentional hilarity: “*Gravity’s Rainbow*, one could say, is a ‘broken machine’ that thrives on a certain entropy, a breaking down or burning out (a dying) that conditions its appearance (the best physical model for this would be the sun)” (72). Yet one of Mattessich’s readings—of the orgy on the *Anubis*—seems to fall into a successful Deleuzean mode as if by accident when he comments on the closed ouroboric circuit of oral, anal and genital machines described in the long circular sentence on *GR* 467 which starts and ends with the waiters. I wished here, against my better judgment, that Mattessich had read *more* Deleuze, for in treating the sentence purely textually, he misses the camera-eye focalizer, the point of view which mimics a 360° pan shot—think of Godard’s *Weekend* or Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. This cinematographic framing produces what Deleuze would call (in *Cinema II* [1985]) a time-image, a complex nonstatic image functionally distinct from the pornographic Bayeux tapestry of Mattessich’s reading.

Why then, if his position as a linguistic relativist is so fundamentally opposed to Deleuze’s materialism, does Mattessich use Deleuze at all?

For most Deleuzeans, the proximity of Deleuze and Guattari and Pynchon is a rational one: a shared focus on engineering which suggests a future epistemology based on what one might call a behaviorism of matter. Mattessich, however, reads Deleuze and Guattari—particularly *Anti-Oedipus* (1972)—as a postmodern “textual performance” (142) constructed to negate itself and intended precisely “to thwart one’s ability to apply it” (261). As a “text that in effect doesn’t want to be understood” (139), *Anti-Oedipus* is “scarcely intelligible unless it is seen within a larger strategy aimed at discourse, at language, at modes of thought as they are caught up in a process of metalinguistic abstraction” (137). Hence for Mattessich *Anti-Oedipus* can be interpreted, like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, only as metaparody, a “travesty of theory and its enchantments” (144). Both works are countercultural *tours-de-force*; both are “visionary reconfiguration[s]” (134), sharing a historical moment of transformative potential; both are performative, concerned principally with expression, the “scene of writing” (122). As Mattessich sees it, “[t]he fiction of desiring-production is precisely its genius” (199).

Deleuze is employed elsewhere in *Lines of Flight*, supplying a theoretical context for a close reading of the Franz and Leni Pöckler strand of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Mattessich uses Deleuze’s long essay on Sacher-Masoch, “Coldness and Cruelty” (1967), to suggest that Pynchon’s style is not akin to the irony of the sadist, but can be described more precisely as a masochist’s coldness. This is a reasonable enough assertion, relying on the Deleuzean idea that the masochist can observe his desire only in writing, as “textual performativity” (121); but Mattessich’s account of Deleuze’s theory is remarkably opaque. Its applicability could have been illustrated more clearly had Mattessich stated just what form this textuality takes in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*: a contract. Indeed, the Deleuzean masochist reduces all social transactions to the mechanism of the written word; he too is a linguistic relativist, of a sort.

What becomes apparent as one trudges through *Lines of Flight* is that other philosophical powers are at work, defeating the Deleuzean concepts by undermining their referentiality. Essentialism surfaces occasionally, in the guise of Heidegger’s blandly reductive “essence of technology, *Gestell*” (203). Derrida is usually lurking, asserting that “[t]here is nothing outside the text in *The Crying of Lot 49*” (59), or deferring *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s “preoccupation with the idea of origins” (85) by appeal to the indeterminacy of the trace. The dominant style is one of intellectual incontinence: “I return, then, to a notion of discursive time that is cyclical, englobing itself in a structure of return, rewriting, or writing over that crosses out, erases, or effaces itself” (8–9)—a

characteristically Derridean way of “reflecting” on palimpsest, with all the attendant frustrations of thirty words where one would do. In reading the endless vacillations marked by the uncontrolled use of “or” —less as an antioedipal strategy than as a mask for inchoate thought—I was reminded of Ezra Pound’s sound advice to Eliot, scribbled on the manuscript of *The Waste Land*: “Dam per’apez,” “Make up yr mind.” The urge to include *everything*, all theories, makes *Lines of Flight* a mere spectacle; it might be described as Panthe(or)ism.

Mattessich mounts his defence in a short chapter on *Vineland*, much of which concerns the “turn against theory” (209). He regards theory as a practice which should remain expressionist and “symptomatic,” in fidelity with its 1960s origins, in order to retain its revolutionary potential. A short account of the burden of Jameson’s *Political Unconscious* does little to help, other than to categorize *Vineland* as a nonperformative exception to Pynchon’s corpus, espousing Jamesonian virtues of detachment and historical judgment.

If Mattessich’s use of Deleuzean concepts is elastic, to say the least, his transcription skills are equally accommodating. Quotations tend to be approximate: words are eliminated, or replaced with others; punctuation is altered; page numbers are partial. One long quotation from *Anti-Oedipus* (148) inserts an ellipsis, without square brackets, to eliminate the phrase “or schizzes,” depriving the text of the specific link it makes with the schizophrenic logic of cuts. Another (150) replaces the definite article with the indefinite. Pynchon suffers in the same way, with words omitted, punctuation changed, the “Oder River” becoming the “Oder Haff” (178), the “days’ targets” becoming the singular “day’s targets” (183). Diacritical marks are haphazard: Pöckler and Möbius retain their umlauts; Schwarzgerät and Säure lose theirs. Acute and grave accents are altogether absent, with one most telling exception: *différance*. If an author’s priorities can be read through the accuracy of his transcription, then Mattessich’s Derridean allegiance is clear.

What is perhaps most worrying is that the conclusions at which *Lines of Flight* arrives hardly merit any use of theory at all. History gets distorted in the telling; Oedipa is trapped in repetition of empty symbolism; *Gravity’s Rainbow* is also “enmeshed in this logic of the sign” (90); its many “networks of symbolism” (177) add up to an exhaustion of meaning; we have an “ethical focus on reading the texts of our lives well” (132); we can only understand what Pynchon says if we look at how he says it. All these observations have been made before, and without the wilful obscurantism of expression one finds wherever the circus of “theory” sets up shop.

In his concluding chapter, Mattessich seems adrift in the world, seeing the need to question everything in a reflexive mode as an

inevitable reaction to a “radical devaluation of one’s sovereignty” (246). Specialist fields of study are so complex that one can only get results in a very confined set of problems. Involvement is detachment; opposition is orthodoxy . . . Such a Babelian confounding of opposites necessitates the focus on the origin which Mattessich sees as characteristic of our time, so that he is obliged to read *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a “meditation upon writing,” a “Heideggerian turn” (84) exemplified by “the novel’s ‘ass backwards’ structure” (85). He compares Heidegger’s “most celebrated formulation” of this “turn”—“‘The essence of truth is the truth of essence’” (84)—to Säure and Bodine’s debate over the semantic question of whether “ass backwards” = “backwards ass” backwards = forwards. Leaving aside the point that the former is merely a (semantically logical) essentialist dictum whereas the latter is a (semantically paradoxical) description of “‘machinery connected wrong’” (GR 683), we might recall Pynchon’s use of the phrase elsewhere: “The problem here is like the problem with ‘Entropy’: beginning with something abstract—a thermodynamic coinage or the data in a guidebook—and only then going on to try to develop plot and characters. This is simply, as we say in the profession, ass backwards” (SL 17–18). Good advice—for novelists and critics alike.

Mattessich’s confusion is born of precisely this approach, starting with the abstraction of undifferentiated theory. In forcing all concepts—*différance* and the Body without Organs alike—into the Procrustean bed of “preorigin” (248), he eradicates for himself any possibility of using those tools productively. What becomes clear, as Mattessich bemoans this “bewildering acid trip of a life-world” (253), where he ingests metaphysics and materialism and processes all alike into pluralistic, reductive slurry, is that the one word used in an uncomplicated and determinate sense in *Lines of Flight* is “welter” (2):

welter¹ . . . —*n.* 1 a state of general confusion. 2 (foll. by *of*) a disorderly mixture or contrast of beliefs, policies, etc. (*Compact OED*)

—Oxford University