

The Vagueness of Difference: You, the Reader and the Dream of *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far
For one to intervene?

—John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in
a Convex Mirror" (ll 467–75)

Any response to Thomas Pynchon's fiction will likely be affected as much by what Pynchon withholds as by what he gives, so the dominant impression one of his novels leaves may be determined by what the reader considers the most significant unanswered questions. *The Crying of Lot 49*, for instance, refuses to answer many questions, but the question of how the story ends—what happens when the auctioneer announces lot 49—overshadows anything else that seems to be missing from the book. But it is hard to imagine the novel with this piece of information added. It is even harder to imagine *Gravity's Rainbow* with all its absences present and unsettling questions answered. As in *The Crying of Lot 49*, much of what seems to be missing from *Gravity's Rainbow* is basic narrative information. The answers a reader most often wants pertain to the simple question of who is doing what. Partly because of this lack of basic narrative information, the novel, as Leo Bersani puts it, "permanently infects us with the paranoid anxieties of its characters" (187).

If we submit to this tendency to focus specifically on the narrative information missing from *Gravity's Rainbow*, how do we approach the following passage, occurring after the novel has devolved into a series of disconcerting, discontinuous fragments? The narrator wonders if perhaps They have everyone believing each of us is surrounded by an eternal void in both time and space:

“He won’t bother us for a while,” They tell each other. “I just put him on the Dark Dream.” They drink together, shoot very very synthetic drugs into skin or blood, run incredible electronic waveforms into Their skulls, directly into the brainstem, and backhand each other, playfully, with openmouth laugh—*you know, don’t you* is in those ageless eyes . . . They speak of taking So-and-So and “putting him on the Dream.” They use the phrase for each other too, in sterile tenderness, when bad news is passed, at the annual Roasts, when the endless mindgaming catches a colleague unprepared—“Boy, did we put *him* on the Dream.” *You know, don’t you?* (697)

Besides the question of just what being put “on the Dark Dream” really involves, this passage presents at least two other problems. One of them—who, exactly, are They?—recurs constantly in the novel, and it is consistent with Bersani’s contention that the reader is likely to be as paranoid as Pynchon’s characters. The characters can never figure out exactly who They are, and, despite the proliferation of acronyms and other clues (which lead nowhere), neither can we. But in a reading of the novel which tends to ask questions concerning narrative information, the question of Their identity would be primary. Another problem here, however, is determining a specific referent for “you.” Does “you” refer to Slothrop, who seems to be the main character in this episode although he is referred to only as the Kenosha Kid? Does it refer to the reader? Does it refer to neither Slothrop nor the reader, but rather to some generic “you,” as if the question in which “you” occurs is rhetorical? No matter who we think They are, we can be sure They are not us, but we cannot be so sure about “you.” Bersani argues that the novel induces two different kinds of paranoia in the reader, and his distinction makes sense of the different responses elicited by “Them” and “you.” He writes that “the major anxiety provoked by *Gravity’s Rainbow* is ontological rather than epistemological” (187). Not knowing who They are is an epistemological problem; Pynchon simply does not allow us this information. Not knowing to whom “you” refers, however, when the reader and a character are both potential referents, is an ontological problem, insofar as the ambiguity places the reader on the same ontological plane as the characters. To see how Pynchon’s use of the second person contributes to the reader’s ontological anxiety, it is necessary to look at exactly what gets called into question by this feature of the novel. The anxiety itself is a symptom of, among other things, Pynchon’s effort to change our ideas about what a novel is, as well as about what a reader’s relation to a novel might be.

The function of pronouns in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is in part illuminated by the meditation on pronouns in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, in

which Barthes suggests that the freedom inherent in the absence of a specific referent for a pronoun divorced from its context is so great as to give pronouns the potential to effect liberation from almost any kind of restraint. Barthes describes “shifters”—pronouns as well as “all operators of uncertainty formed at the level of language itself”—as “so many social subversions, conceded by language but opposed by society, which fears such leaks of subjectivity and always stops them by insisting on reducing the operator’s duplicity . . . by the ‘objective’ memorandum of a date . . . or of a patronymic” (166). He then asks us to

imagine the freedom and, so to speak, the erotic fluidity of a collectivity which would speak only in pronouns and shifters, each person never saying anything but *I, tomorrow, over there*, without referring to anything legal whatsoever, and in which the *vagueness of difference* (the only fashion of respecting its subtlety, its infinite repercussions) would be language’s most precious value. (166)

Barthes calls this section of his book “Le shifter comme utopie” (“The shifter as utopia”), a phrase which emphasizes both the desirability and the impossibility of a language consisting only of words which could not stand as linguistic versions of unalterable differences, distinctions, states of being. Naming things would not be the equivalent of separating them. Barthes suggests that society normally values language precisely for its usefulness in distinguishing what it names from other things with other names—for its usefulness in maintaining order. Language usually functions much like the fences whose building Squalidozzi mourns in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; they stand against “that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky” (264) to which he hopes Argentina will return. A language of shifters, however, rather than pointing to the differences between things, would point to their similarities. It might make its users think of themselves less as separate individuals existing independently of one another than as a collectivity, and thereby make them less susceptible to control by systems which require certainty to function. Their freedom would emanate from and be reflected in the instability of this language.

In his elucidation of the subversive potential of pronouns, Barthes provides a way of looking at Pynchon’s use of pronouns in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Because Pynchon makes it a virtual proper noun in the novel, the pronoun “They” initially demands our attention more than any other. There is no escaping the desire to know who They are,¹ and, as Barthes notes, it is our tendency when confronted with a word that does not seem to signify a particular enough entity to demand another

word which does.² However, trying to figure out who They are is exactly what They want, as well as antithetical to the potentially liberating effects Barthes finds in the use of pronouns. Because it can take the place of an infinite number of common or proper nouns, a pronoun joins linguistically what would otherwise be separate, but the existence of Them as a definable group rests on nothing but the separateness of They and We. Given the fact that They are usually associated with repressive forces, this is perfectly appropriate. Instead of freedom, They represent the shutting down of erotic as well as every other kind of possibility predicated on ideas of sharing and similarity.

If Pynchon's use of "Them" and its inflections contradicts the liberating potential of pronouns Barthes describes, Pynchon takes advantage of this potential in his use of the second person. When "you" occurs in the narrator's language, it can refer to the reader, just as it would in any conventional second-person address by a narrator. Sometimes, however, "you" refers primarily to a character, even as its grammatical function insists that the reader be included as another possible referent. Even more ambiguity results when the identity of the character to whom "you" refers is not at first apparent. Emile Benveniste contends that "I" and "you" exist "only insofar as they are actualized in the instance of discourse, in which, by each of their own instances, they mark the process of appropriation by the speaker" (220). Pynchon seems to want to use these words without appropriating them, to have them signify without denoting singularity or opposition. What is finally most compelling about the function of "you" in *Gravity's Rainbow* is how little the word excludes. Its inclusiveness makes it an element of what Bersani describes as the novel's "dazzling argument for shared or collective being" (194), as opposed to a conception of identity as singular, determined by stable boundaries between self and other. Furthermore, Pynchon suggests that the fluidity inherent in the second-person pronoun is a natural property of dreams and, to the extent he is able to infuse language itself with it, a natural property of novels.

Brian McHale's chapter "'You Used to Know What These Words Mean': Misreading *Gravity's Rainbow*" (87-114) surveys the conventional uses of the second person in narrative fiction and describes how Pynchon's use of it leads to seemingly endless ambiguity. The chapter is especially instructive because it shows the degree to which almost every instance of the second person in the narrator's language is at least somewhat ambiguous. McHale cites numerous passages which at first glance do not appear ambiguous at all, after which he presents various plausible alternatives to the initial interpretation. He also points out the tendency of critics of *Gravity's*

Rainbow to easily accept a single interpretation of the second person, and he shows how these interpretations are often used to support a particular comprehensive reading of the novel which would be undermined by allowing the ambiguity McHale illustrates. Although he assails other critics for promoting arguments about the novel as a whole instead of recognizing instances of ambiguity, he seems content simply to establish the frequent ambiguity of the second person without suggesting what the point of this ambiguity itself might be, except for the idea that Pynchon “compels us to reflect on our own critical practices, inviting us to become metareaders” (113). Bernard Duyfhuizen also notes Pynchon’s ambiguous use of the second person, in “‘A Suspension Forever at the Hinge of Doubt’: The Reader-Trap of Bianca in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” Although his concept of the reader-trap³ created by the novel’s ambiguities encompasses those located in instances of the second-person pronoun, Duyfhuizen focuses on the blurring of identity among characters. He attends to the problems the novel poses of the relation between its characters and the reader essentially in terms of interpretive decisions the reader must make regarding relations among the characters, rather than considering the extent to which the reader in a sense becomes a character by virtue of the fluidity of referential boundaries.

Oddly, one second-person passage about which McHale has almost nothing to say shows just how many issues come into play in what at first appears to be a fairly straightforward scene. McHale notes that in situations in which characters address themselves, “the communicative circuit has been *internalized*, creating an *interior dialogue*” (92). He presents the following passage as “[p]erhaps the only completely unequivocal” example of “self-apostrophe” (99), his term for characters’ addressing themselves:

Slothrop’s dumb idling heart sez: The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that’s not what the G in Imipolex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero. The best you can compare with is Tannhäuser, the Singing Nincompoop—you’ve been under one mountain at Nordhausen, been known to sing a song or two with uke accompaniment, and don’tcha feel you’re in a sucking marshland of sin out here, Slothrop? maybe not the same thing William Slothrop, vomiting a good part of 1630 away over the side of that *Arbella*, meant when he said “sin.” . . . But what you’ve done is put yourself on somebody else’s voyage—some Frau Holda, some Venus in some mountain—playing her, its, game . . . you know that in some irreducible way it’s an evil game. You play because you have nothing better to do, but that doesn’t make it right. And where is the Pope whose staff’s gonna bloom for you? (364)

To describe this passage as Slothrop's addressing himself would not be inaccurate, but what else does the passage reveal about Pynchon's use of the second person? McHale notes that the Slothropian "sez" occurs in what would seem to be the narrator's introduction to Slothrop's interior dialogue (100), but he does not point out that the dialogue itself contains both words like "Ace" and "don'tcha" that are unmistakably Slothrop's and words like "irreducible" that Slothrop would probably never say either to himself or to another character. If what might be called the door between Slothrop and the narrator swings both ways, then the migrating vocabulary of this passage indicates the permeability of the boundaries which otherwise enable both of them to be identified as separate characters. In addition to this instance of instability, the fact that Slothrop's address to himself grammatically resembles an address to the reader causes the divisions among all three—Slothrop, the narrator and the reader—to become blurred.

Still, the simple idea that in this passage Slothrop addresses himself begs the question of whether "interior dialogue" might be a better term for what is conventionally called interior monologue; indeed, perhaps the latter term makes sense only within the belief that identity consists of a single, bounded self. Slothrop addresses himself in the second person, so the structure of a speaker and a listener, both of whom appear to be separate from the narrator, suggests a character divided in some fundamental way between that part of him which is representable in language and another part which is not, a part which is not only inaccessible to the reader for this reason but also inaccessible to Slothrop, a part which can be spoken to but cannot speak itself. However, is this same structure not implied in what is usually called interior monologue?

In "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," Derrida explains not only why "monologue" is an inaccurate term for Molly's soliloquy in *Ulysses* but also why it can never describe a voice in any context: "[T]he telephonic *technē* is at work within the voice, multiplying the writing of voices without any instruments, as Mallarmé would say, a mental telephony, which, inscribing remoteness, distance, *différance*, and spacing [*espacement*] in the *phonē*, at the same time institutes, forbids, and interferes with the so-called monologue" (271–72). For Derrida, this telephony is a property of language itself, and he sees it at work in all of *Ulysses*, as well as *Finnegans Wake*. It underlies the utterance of any word, whether vocalized or silent, including the word "I." Like Joyce, Pynchon demonstrates an understanding of this property of language, but his understanding manifests itself in different ways. That Molly is speaking to us as well as herself is only implied. By having a character address himself using the second person, Pynchon

underscores the presence of both of Slothrop's audiences—himself and the reader—while simultaneously emphasizing their inseparability.

Even the use of the second person in Slothrop's interior dialogue, however, is made relatively less complex by the facts that it undoubtedly involves Slothrop rather than another character and that it represents to some extent his waking consciousness. But as episode 17 of Part 1 begins, it is not clear in whose consciousness (among the characters) these thoughts occur, nor is it clear whether the thoughts are produced more as memory or as distortions rendered by the descent into sleep:

Paradoxical phase, when weak stimuli get strong responses. . . . When did it happen? A certain early stage of sleep: you had not heard the Mosquitoes and Lancasters tonight on route to Germany, their engines battering apart the sky, shaking and ripping it, for a full hour, a few puffs of winter cloud drifting below the steel-riveted underside of the night, vibrating with the constancy, the terror, of so many bombers outward bound. Your own form immobile, mouth-breathing, alone face-up on the narrow cot next to the wall so pictureless, chartless, mapless: so *habitually blank*. (136)

As so often happens in the transition between episodes, the characters in the previous episode have disappeared, replaced by new characters or others introduced earlier in the novel. In this example, the transition is extremely subtle. Roger and Jessica are at the center of the previous episode, but, over the course of its last six pages, they remain beneath the surface of the narrator's meditation on "the War's evensong" (130). In their absence, the narrator addresses "you" frequently, and there is little evidence to suggest Roger, Jessica or the reader as the pronoun's primary referent. The episode ends with this sentence: "Whether you want it or not, whatever seas you have crossed, the way home" (136). "You" here contains the reader as well as everyone present in the church, including Roger and Jessica. When "you" occurs at the beginning of the next episode, however, it has been detached from the churchgoers without having been clearly attached to anyone else in the novel. Furthermore, the sense of the reader as potential, if not primary, referent of "you" is strengthened by the fact that the narrator does not really seem to be addressing anyone, nor does a character seem to be addressing himself, as Slothrop does in the earlier example. After more than two pages of this episode, the narrator refers to Pointsman by name, but until then the reader has to look for other evidence in the scene of a referent for "you" to replace the churchgoers of the previous episode. The episode's first sentence is as indicative of Pointsman as

any other in this opening scene, although it is not specific; the paradoxical phase can at least be identified as one of Pointsman's concerns. A piece of paper on a nearby table with "*Time / Stimulus / Secretion (30 sec) / Remarks*" written on it might also be associated with Pointsman, but a dream begins right after this detail: "You slept, you dreamed: thousands of feet above your face the steel bombers passed, wave after wave. It was indoors, some great place of assembly. Many people were gathered" (137). Nothing in the rest of the dream lends itself any more readily to one particular character than do these first sentences. The dream is interrupted, however, by Gwenhidwy, who brings news of Spectro's death, so we might again assume Pointsman is the dreamer.

The problem this episode presents of locating within a single consciousness a dream, as opposed to a scene from the waking life of a character, exemplifies the blurring of ontological boundaries specifically associated with dreams. In the case of Pointsman's dream, it is only the difficulty in specifying the dreamer, rather than the content of the dream, which produces this effect. In one of Slothrop's recurring dreams, however, in which he sits at home reading a dictionary, it is the dream (or, more accurately, the nightmare) itself: "Reading down the page, he would come to JAMF. The definition would read: I. He woke begging It *no*—but even after waking, he was sure, he would remain sure, that It could visit him again, any time It wanted" (287). Slothrop's great fear, of course, is that this is not a dream, that he exists only through Jamf, that they are inseparable in terms of self-definition, and the novel never finally confirms or denies this possibility. Only in this dream, however, is the possibility spelled out so clearly, and in such a way that it gives the lie to the idea promoted elsewhere in the novel that what Slothrop should fear is somehow outside him and threatening to get inside. What really frightens him, if only subconsciously, is that he has no inside, but at this point in the novel, that possibility is only glimpsed as a terrifying dream.⁴

Why in Slothrop's dream does he encounter the word Jamf rather than the man himself? One answer might be that it is language, more than any other medium, through which self-definition occurs. Another answer, however, can perhaps explain the central role of dreams in the novel. Words, rather than images, are the elements of Slothrop's dream, and the episode which begins with Pointsman's dream ends with the transcript of an entry in Pointsman's journal. Many of the episodes follow a circular pattern, ending at a place somehow resembling where they begin; a particular event repeats itself, or the episode returns to the same point in the linear time of the novel at which it began. If the end of this episode concludes without some

obvious return to its beginning, perhaps its circularity lies in a connection between writing and dreams, a connection Pynchon begins to establish in the novel's opening pages.

The novel begins with a dream, one similar to Pointsman's in that it is rendered in precise details for which there does not seem to be adequate context. The first two disorienting sentences are followed by description which fails to illuminate anything:

It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre. There are no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere. Above him lift girders old as an iron queen, and glass somewhere far above that would let the light of day through. But it's night. He's afraid of the way the glass will fall—soon—it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing. (3)

"He" seems to be the central consciousness of this passage, yet "he" is less ambiguous than "you" only insofar as the word apparently excludes the reader by referring specifically to a male character in the novel. Unlike Pointsman's dream, however, in which the beginning of a dream is signaled despite the lack of certainty about whose dream it is, nothing in this scene indicates that it is, in fact, a dream. When the dream ends with the question of whether the light will come before or after whatever catastrophe is preceded by the screaming across the sky, the narrative shifts instantly to the dreamer waking: "*But it is already light*. How long has it been light?" (4). So everything before these two sentences is revealed as a dream, and "he" is revealed to be Pirate Prentice. But was it really his dream? This question must be asked once his "talent" is also revealed:

Well, hrrump, heh, heh, here comes Pirate's Condition creeping over him again, when he's least expecting it as usual—might as well mention here that much of what the dossiers call Pirate Prentice is a strange talent for—well, for getting inside the fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of *managing* them, in this case those of an exiled Rumanian royalist who may prove needed in the very near future. (11–12)

The exact wording of this passage is surely significant. The dossiers do not say who Pirate is, but rather what he is: he is his strange talent. And his strange talent is essentially his ability to be someone other than himself. So Pirate is less a distinct character than a medium for the dream life of others. How can the reader know, then, when Pirate is himself and when he is not? In light of Pirate's tendency to dream other people's dreams, his identity as the origin of the dream at the beginning

of the novel becomes suspect at best. The slightly more specific pronoun “he” turns out not to provide any more certainty than “you” does, since “he” in this instance is a character whose dreams are not necessarily his own. So if the dream which serves as an entrance to the world of the novel is not Pirate’s, whose is it? The dream is partly Pirate’s, partly Pynchon’s and partly the reader’s, but it does not belong completely to any of them. The effect of putting a dream into words is to complicate, if not completely undermine, the usual ontological boundaries among character, author and reader; a dream, like a pronoun, becomes something always shared.

If Pirate, as the manager of other people’s fantasies, can be considered a figure for the novelist, then the novel itself can be considered partly Pynchon’s dream, a notion supported by a repetition which, among others, lends a circularity to the whole novel. In relating the history of Pirate’s condition, the narrator notes the first strategically important fantasy Pirate had, one he took over from Lord Blatherard Osmo about a giant Adenoid. The dream is simply bizarre until it resonates over seven hundred pages later, when we are introduced to Richard M. Zhubb, manager of the Orpheus Theatre: “Zhubb suffers from a chronic adenoidal condition,” so “[f]riends and detractors alike think of him as ‘the Adenoid’” (754). The giant Adenoid as dreamed by Osmo and Pirate is clearly marked as fantasy within the reality of the novel. Zhubb and the events which occur at his theatre as the novel ends apparently exist within the novel’s reality, but Zhubb’s nickname returns us first to Osmo’s dream, then to Pirate’s condition. Are we to believe, then, that what seems to be the novel’s reality is, in fact, someone’s dream? In some conventional sense, it is Pynchon’s, but the fact that Pirate’s condition is part of the novel’s reality suggests that it would be wrong, if we approach the novel on its own terms, to say it is only Pynchon’s dream.

To what extent is the novel the reader’s dream? If the beginning of the novel appears only in retrospect to be structured to incorporate the reader as part of a fragmented central consciousness, the end of the novel clears a space for the reader without offering any way around it. With its final request to join in the song on the last page, “Now everybody—” (760), rather than once again incorporating the reader into itself, the novel withdraws altogether, leaving the reader alone. Reaching the end of the novel might be compared to waking up from a dream, with the sensation of having experienced something that seems unreal only after it is over. Unlike in a dream, however, the reader has the book as physical evidence of the experience. Like “you,” the word “everybody” refers to the reader, but it does so with much less ambiguity than “you” since it relies much less on its context for

definition. While it may be less ambiguous, "everybody" is more inclusive than "you" in its typical use, yet Pynchon by now has managed to make "you," at least in *Gravity's Rainbow*, no less inclusive.

After the unresolvable ambiguity so often accompanying the narrator's use of the pronoun "you," one has the sense that "everybody" has been waiting behind it all along, even that "everybody" is what is meant by "you." If this possibility is not made explicit in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is in *The Crying of Lot 49*, albeit in the form of Mucho Maas's LSD-inspired rant. Having obtained the drug from Dr. Hilarius, Mucho explains to Oedipa what happens to him now when he listens to something:

"Whenever I put the headset on now," he'd continued, "I really do understand what I find there. When those kids sing about 'She loves you,' yeah well, you know, she does, she's any number of people, all over the world, back through time, different colors, sizes, ages, shapes, distances from death, but she loves. And the 'you' is everybody. And herself. Oedipa, the human voice, you know, it's a flipping miracle." (143)

The fact that Mucho is speaking under the influence of LSD lets Pynchon throw out this idea as primarily a joke, although Pynchon demonstrates as well as anyone else how serious jokes can be. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, the idea that "'you' is everybody" does not seem at all like the product of a drug-addled mind; it is built into the very structure of the novel. This realization might make close attention to the ambiguity in Pynchon's use of the second person seem pointless. Yet only by sorting out the possible referents of "you" in any given instance can we see how inclusive a normally exclusive word can be. If "you" should be read as "everybody," realizing exactly who "everybody" is is nevertheless important, if for no other reason than to remind us that it refers to actual people, not merely to an abstraction.

Still, what conclusions can we draw from the fact that "you" in *Gravity's Rainbow* is made to mean "everybody?" In speaking about his poetry, John Ashbery offers an explanation of his use of pronouns which seems helpful in understanding Pynchon's use of them as well:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we"; sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the

poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism. (Bloom and Losada 89-90)

This description fits Pynchon's style in several ways. His pronouns can have many possible referents, but it finally does not matter if they remain ambiguous. What matters is that the words can serve as a bridge between one consciousness and another, that they exist—to use Pynchon's language—at an “interface,” or in the space between one person and another. Pronouns are especially effective insofar as they must be shared in the most literal sense. For both Pynchon and Ashbery, the very act of communicating with a reader is as important as anything that gets communicated, and their writing dramatizes this fact by not allowing the reader to maintain a fixed position outside the text. “Naturalism” may not readily come to mind as a word appropriate to Ashbery's poetry or Pynchon's novels, but it fits both insofar as both writers allow words all the fluidity of meaning they have in conversation, where words are spoken, heard, and remain only in memory, often without the context of their utterance available to determine their exact meaning.

As Ashbery invokes a mathematical metaphor in comparing words to variables in an equation, so Pynchon compares words to molecules:

How alphabetic is the nature of molecules. One grows aware of it down here: one finds Committees on molecular structure which are very similar to those back at the NTA plenary session. “See: how they are taken out from the coarse flow—shaped, cleaned, rectified, just as you once redeemed your letters from the lawless, the mortal streaming of human speech. . . . These are our letters, our words: they too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in worldwide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences, like the seen parts of a tapestry.” (355)

By characterizing the “mortal streaming” of speech as “lawless,” Pynchon leads us back to Barthes's contention that a language of pronouns separated from the specific information they usually require to be understood would be incapable of referring to anything “legal.” In this passage as well as in Squalidozzi's reflections on the history of Argentina, anarchy is equated with the complete absence of a written

language, but in his breaking, recoupling and redefining of words, especially pronouns, Pynchon seems to be trying to retain the mortal streaming of speech within the immortal and, insofar as it can be read repeatedly, static form of the written word. Pynchon breaks apart a word like “you” by not allowing it a single, exclusive referent; it must be shared, rather than appropriated, by the author, the narrator, the characters and the reader. Jamf would probably be as contemptuous of this kind of sharing as he is of the sharing of electrons by atoms of carbon: “That something so mutable, so *soft*, as a sharing of electrons by atoms of carbon should lie at the core of life, *his* life, struck Jamf as a cosmic humiliation. *Sharing?* How much stronger, how everlasting was the *ionic* bond—where electrons are not shared, but *captured*. *Seized!* and held! polarized plus and minus, these atoms, no ambiguities” (577). Against any repressive force, of which Jamf is perhaps the novel’s most sinister representative, ambiguities are the only hope, and this is why, despite the horrors it depicts, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is still hopeful. A sharing of words lies at the core of Pynchon’s novel. With such words between the reader and the characters, as well as between individual characters, the boundary between reader and novel becomes one among many boundaries whose dissolution the novel effects. The novel itself thereby becomes a potential map of the “route back” Slothrop imagines, back from the destructive era epitomized by the war to a world like that envisioned by William Slothrop, his first American ancestor, in which everyone and everything on earth was capable of “sharing the same gift of life”: “maybe that anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up” (555, 556). If the novel has cleared the space, erased the differences that otherwise shut down possibilities, its ending suggests that it still cannot do more than point the way toward a world in which sharing and similarity are at the heart of human interaction.

Looking at Pynchon as if he were a chemist, breaking apart and recombining words, perhaps casts a cold light on his project. However, if we return to the view of Pynchon as, like Pirate, a manager of other people’s dreams, and therefore *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself as a dream shared by Pynchon and the reader, a phrase near the end of the novel suggests that dreams inevitably transform words. In describing Blicero’s effect on the guards around him, the narrator notes how his “presence crossed the wall, warping, shivering into the fetid bunkrooms, with the same reach toward another shape as words trying to make their way

through dreams" (666). Just as "Jamf" and "I" reach toward another shape as they move through Slothrop's dream, so too do many of the words making their way through Pynchon's dream-novel change their shape to accommodate more than they would in the waking world and, to be sure, more than the laws of convention allow them to accommodate.

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Notes

¹Bersani writes that paranoia is grounded in "a primary, founding faith in the oneness of the Real. . . . In paranoia, two Real Texts confront one another: subjective being and a world of monolithic otherness" (189). Knowing who "They" are is necessary for knowing where subjective being ("I") ends and the Other ("Them") begins, at least in terms of the conventional "locatable identities" (189) Bersani sees as dominating our thinking about who we are.

²Brian McHale makes the same point about "you" in explaining why critics have moved so quickly to the most readily apparent interpretations of the second person without considering other possibilities: "Interpretation abhors a vacuum; where *Gravity's Rainbow* leaves an unspecified, free-floating *you*, we rush in" (102).

³Duyfhuizen defines reader-traps as "stylistic and thematic techniques that on the one hand court the conventional readerly desire to construct an ordered world within the fictional space of the text, but that on closer examination reveal the fundamental uncertainty of postmodern textuality" (1).

⁴Later in the novel, as Bersani notes, Slothrop's "scattering" (GR 742) is the end of any semblance of an interior, locatable self: "Slothrop is so glutted with otherness as to render superfluous the very notion of otherness. Slothrop is no one; he is a certain position on—to use another favorite Pynchonian term—the 'interface' between himself and the world" (195).

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