

Introduction: Approach and Avoid

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On December 14, 1944, twelve hundred people were watching a matinee performance of *Buffalo Bill* (starring William Wellman and Maureen O'Hara) in the Rex movie theatre in Antwerp, when a V-2 came down and killed 567 of them. This historical event inspired Thomas Pynchon to write the final episode of *Gravity's Rainbow*, except of course that he seems to keep what has by that time changed into the Bomb forever suspended instead of letting it come down on the Orpheus theatre in L.A. Interestingly, the proper noun "Rex" appears on page 546 of the novel in connection with Antwerp, not as the name of the movie theatre—which was in fact derived from a Parisian model—but rather as that of the Belgian Fascist party led by Léon Degrelle. Toward the end of the Antwerp paragraph on 546, Katje says that her little brother, Louis, had joined Rex, which she describes with a quotation as "the realm of total souls." The signifier "Rex" brims with hermeneutic possibilities: one could develop the link in *GR* between movies and Fascism, and thus see the Antwerp paragraph as a slightly veiled confirmation of Siegfried Kracauer's fundamental importance for the novel; or one could interpret the absence of the signifier's cinematic meaning from the Antwerp paragraph as the foreboding—for those who know Antwerp, and to be activated at the beginning of the final episode—of a potential apocalypse.

In 1983, Charles Clerc edited *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, still the finest collection of essays on Pynchon's intimidating historical novel about the end of the Second World War. The cautious term "approaches" in Clerc's title suggests that he and his contributors did not strive for exhaustiveness or totalizing interpretations. Instead they attempted to make strong and well-informed statements about crucial aspects of the novel like science and technology (Alan J. Friedman) and comedy (Roger B. Henkle). The result was an enormously useful book that continues to be required reading for every student of *GR*. The present set of contributions—*Approach and Avoid*—features a title that evokes the Clerc collection but is even more indicative of the frustration critics experience when dealing with *GR*. If anything connects these new essays, it is an awareness of the fact that *GR*'s mass and complexity make the book impossible to read and interpret in a conventional way. Each of the eighteen contributors to this volume

solves this problem in his or her own way. Some zoom in on details to enrich a historically plausible contextual reading; others investigate the book's ethical and political relevance in the face of the doubts which beset its interpretation; still others combine these two solutions or concentrate on the novel's reception.

The solution offered in the first paragraph of this brief introduction—including its glaring chauvinism—derives from the occasion for which these essays were first written, "*Gravity's Rainbow: The First 25 Years*," a two-day conference held at the University of Antwerp in June of 1998 as Part One of International Pynchon Week. A resident of Antwerp, I brought in my knowledge of the local situation to make the Antwerp paragraph on 546 a bit denser than it might seem—but really no denser than I still submit it is. The word "Rex" thus temporarily provided a royal answer to the challenge the novel inevitably poses. When trying to find that academically acceptable balance between stilling a hunger for overall meaning and "anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (GR 434), why not resort to "creative paranoia" (638), the unrelenting development of useful, textually motivated and yet partial links, and keep ourselves happy in the process? Although I agree that we must try to avoid the closure of the reading experience when confronted with *GR*, I believe that choosing a term from the book for an activity which it stimulates won't hurt.

A lot has happened in Pynchonland since the publication of the Clerc collection. First of all, thanks to the efforts of—among others—Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, *GR* has become an icon of postmodernism in literature. It is almost charming to notice that Clerc summarizes Charles Russell's contribution to his collection without using the term "postmodernism," whereas Russell himself uses it no fewer than nine times. But then he is the only contributor to use it, which may prove that the postmodernization of *GR* hadn't quite come about yet in 1983. Although the novel's status as an icon of postmodernism may have had too much influence on *GR* criticism—channeling our interests, as it were—it has been didactically useful in giving first-time readers and their teachers a concept to hang on to. Second, the publication in 1988 of Steven Weisenburger's reading companion has proved to be a landmark event. Although his background information is by no means complete—as he would be the first to concede—not only has Weisenburger succeeded in making *GR* accessible to an audience that might have shied away from it after a few pages, but he has also provided scholars with an indispensable instrument that continues to show up in their bibliographies. Third, the "Pyndustry" itself—Joseph Tabbi's term—has been taken to task by

two books which appeared in the early '90s. Both Michael Bérubé and that inimitable pair Alec McHoul and David Wills have shown that Pynchon fits late-twentieth-century research interests like a fashionable glove. While Bérubé stops at showing and perhaps indicting the role of the academy in Pynchon's canonization, McHoul and Wills go so far as to suggest that Pynchon criticism has in fact failed to respond to the challenges posed by Pynchon's novels. Fourth, the Cold War has ended. At first sight this may seem to deprive readers of a natural context in which to read *GR*, but in fact it may help to render more explicit the historical background against which the novel can profitably be seen. Finally, and perhaps most important, Pynchon has published *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, both of which call for a reconsideration of the earlier work.

Without wanting to be too causal about it, I would argue that the five developments sketched above have jointly resulted, for *GR* especially, in an evolution toward more critical awareness and therefore also tentativeness, of which this collection's title constitutes an illustration.

Just one more technical detail concerning the articles that follow: all page numbers from *Gravity's Rainbow* refer to the original Viking edition (1973) and so to the identically paginated Cape, Picador, Vintage and pre-2000 Penguin editions as well.

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