

## **Slothrop Unbound: Shelley's Prometheus and *Gravity's Rainbow***

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Alfred North Whitehead remarked that Shelley could have become a Newton in chemistry. And Pynchon, we want to say, could have become a, well, Pynchon—in physics. Shelley and Pynchon both use science extensively, and indeed *Gravity's Rainbow* would be an apt subtitle for *Prometheus Unbound*, and vice-versa. But Prometheus's fire-theft and Slothrop's rocketry also have much more than combustion in common. The poetic drama and the novel mythologize the loss of unitary reality in the rise of consciousness, and herald the recovery of that reality in the birth of imagination. Shelley's remarks in his essay "On Life" can serve as a reference point for both:

Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and ourselves! . . . We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt, from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who, in this respect, are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie, feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede, or accompany, or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up this power commonly decays and they become mechanical and habitual agents.<sup>1</sup>

Mechanical and habitual agents abound in Shelley and Pynchon, but they are everywhere opposed by those who are always children and always in the state of reverie, members of sundry subcultures of revisionaries, such as the Spirits and Hours in Shelley, or the dulcimer-strumming Rilkean *Wandervögel*, river harpmen and Kazakh singers in Pynchon—counter-agents of the "one mass" that can still be faintly heard in planetary fugue in Shelley and glimpsed throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* in various apparitions of light—*Brockengespenst*, Northern, Kalahari and Kirghiz lights, and ultimately the Rainbow, auroral shimmerings from the old aquifers under words, the area of the incubating unconscious into which Reason's dottering categories, like

the tyrant-ego Jupiter in Shelley's drama, will collapse. And both writers, late romantic and early postmodern, use similar images to symbolize a new embryonization of imaginative wonder and oneness—a child cradled in a sphere, a boy tucked into a rocket. Initially, Pynchon's preparation for "interface"—the *Berührungspunkt* where outer and inner or "the world and ourselves" coalesce—is distinctly Shelleyan:

In harsh-edged echo, Titans stir far below. They are all the presences we are not supposed to be seeing—wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods—that we train ourselves away from to keep from looking further even though enough of us do . . .

Suddenly, Pan—leaping—its face too beautiful to bear, beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky—into the sure bones of fright—<sup>2</sup>

*Volte-face*, in Shelley it is Panthea's lyrics that sound like Pynchon's prose in their conjunction of scientific imagery and mythic motif announcing the stirring, whirring, and emerging from far below of buried presences that begin the process of toppling seigneurs and syntax alike:

And from the other opening in the wood  
Rushes, with loud and whirlwind harmony,  
A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,  
Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass  
Flow, as through empty space, music and light:

.....  
Within the orb itself,  
Pillowed upon its alabaster arms,  
Like to a child o'erwearied with sweet toil,  
On its own folded wings, and wavy hair,  
The Spirit of the Earth is laid asleep,  
And you can see its little lips are moving,  
Amid the changing light of their own smiles,  
Like one who talks of what he loves in dream. (4.236-68)<sup>3</sup>

Opposites also begin increasingly to meet and intermingle, notably death and love and life, in the approaching renewal, as delta-t nears Zero—*Brennschluss*: "those few seconds of absolute mystery" (752)—in Pynchon's technological nativity:

When something real is about to happen to you, you go toward it with a transparent surface parallel to your own front that hums and bisects both your ears, making eyes very alert. [. . .] At last: something real.

Here in the tail section of the 00000, Gottfried has found this clear surface before him in fact, literal: the Imipolex shroud. Flotsam from his childhood are rising through his attention. He's remembering the skin of an apple, bursting with nebulae, a look into curved reddening space. [. . .]

He has found a shallow bend in a pipe where he can rest his cheek as he gazes into the shroud. He feels his hair tickling his back, his bared shoulders. [. . .]

The soft smell of Imipolex, wrapping him absolutely, is a smell he knows. It doesn't frighten him. It was in the room when he fell asleep so long ago, so deep in sweet paralyzed childhood . . . it was there as he began to dream. Now it is time to wake, into the breath of what was always real. Come, wake. All is well. (754)

*Prometheus Unbound* in the lyrical mode of the early nineteenth century and *Gravity's Rainbow* in the Tachist technique of the later twentieth thus converge through two images which literally and figuratively encapsulate the mutual concern of Shelley and Pynchon symbolized by the child in the sphere and the boy in the rocket. In his study of the sculpture of Henry Moore, Erich Neumann writes: "it has always been the aim of great art to conjure up and give shape to this unitary reality underlying the polarized world we ordinarily know."<sup>4</sup> Shelley and Pynchon certainly conjure—whether the instrument be a romantic high-strung lyre or a postmodern K-Mart kazoo—and what they conjure up has comparable shape in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds., *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 6 (New York: Gordian, 1965) 195–96.

<sup>2</sup>*Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 720–21. Cf. C. G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," *Man and His Symbols*, ed. C. G. Jung et al. (New York: Dell, 1974) 91:

There are no longer any gods whom we can invoke to help us. The great religions of the world suffer from increasing anemia, because the helpful numina have fled from the woods, rivers, and mountains, and from animals, and the god-men have disappeared underground into the unconscious. There we fool ourselves that they lead an ignominious existence among the relics of our past. Our present lives are dominated

by the goddess Reason, who is our greatest and most tragic illusion. By the aid of reason, so we assure ourselves, we have "conquered nature."

<sup>3</sup>*Complete Works*, vol. 2, 251-52.

<sup>4</sup>*The Archetypal World of Henry Moore*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Harper, 1965) 65.