

Strobe's Stimulus

Stuart Moulthrop

According to Brian McHale, the postmodern difference in fiction entails a passage from epistemological uncertainty to ontological plurality: characters and readers are no longer primarily interested in how they can know a fictional world, but question instead what sort of world, among many alternatives, they have entered.¹ Our attention shifts, as Jean Baudrillard has it, from pursuit of the signified to exploration of "the code"--the broader, ontological implications of language as system.² Word games open into world games.

We come upon a paradigmatic case of this transition in *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa Maas hears the fatal lines: "No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow, / Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero."³ As Pynchon elsewhere explains, "names by themselves may have no magic, but the *act* of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern"⁴--that pattern being some deep-lying tendency in the arrangement of words and things which the "creative paranoid" seeks to elucidate. "Names by themselves may be empty, but the act of naming," Oedipa discovers, is the essence of informational alchemy. The word "Trystero" itself holds no cosmic potency, but its invocation in the Tank Theatre inaugurates a series of un-free associations which transforms Oedipa's understanding of her world.

The name "Trystero" is a pointer, gesturing beyond itself (like the Divine Finger Tchitcherine envisions in *Gravity's Rainbow*) toward the possibility of a densely interlocked, "cartelized" Trystero System. When Oedipa goes looking for a printed trace of the magic name, she finds only another pointer: "Cf. variant, 1687 ed." This note appears in pencil, a medium characterized by its tenuousness, its open invitation to erasure. The point is not the pointer, we realize, but the train of linkages it indicates. Names by themselves may be empty or erasable, but the act of inscribing implies a Hand to hold the pencil. Having reached that stage of enlightenment, our next step is to emulate Mucho Maas and "do the dinosaur bone bit," running history's film backward to infer the Man from the Hand, the Conspiracy from the Man, the Technologique from the Conspiracy.

As Molly Hite, Thomas H. Schaub, and others have warned, this task carries with it the risk of delusion. None of Pynchon's novels admits a full resolution of its quest problems. The primary ontological

given in Pynchon's fictions is the unattainability of the Holy Center.⁵ But the world a fiction evokes need not be confused with the world it inhabits. The limits imposed on Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, and Tyrone Slothrop do not necessarily constrain readers who (presumably) operate at the same level of reality as Thomas Pynchon. It may be, as many readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* have concluded, that that novel contains no "Holy Center," no anchor in metaphor for its chain of metonymies. But we do well to recall Oedipa's warning that excluded middles are bad shit. For readers, this translates into Schaub's postulate that the "experience of ambiguity in the reading of Pynchon is essential" (Schaub ix). In Pynchon's novels, contradictory positions are not mutually exclusive. Tony Tanner suggests that *Gravity's Rainbow* actually contains two opposed narratives, the saga of the Rocket ("Gravity's Rainbow") and the escapade of Rocketman (for which the book's original title, "Mindless Pleasures," is more apt).⁶ According to Tanner, Slothrop's scattering over the Zone is the only source of value in the book, and the various mystery tours organized around the Rocket are little more than occasions for burlesque. The reading I propose here is more skeptical. It attempts to locate not a Holy Center but an axis around which the two subtexts array themselves.

The incitement to this reading, appropriately enough, was the discovery of a suppressed textual variant in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the original Viking edition and in the Bantam paperback (1974) based on it, a discussion of the "Infant Tyrone" experiment contains the following line: "Suppose, Pointsman argues, that Strobe's stimulus x was some loud noise, as in the Watson-Rayner experiment" (86). Anyone who attempts to check this line in later printings of the Viking Compass trade paperback (such as the fifth printing, dated April, 1973) may find a hint of paranoia filtering in, for there the line reads: ". . . Jamf's stimulus x. . . ." Evidently Pynchon or his editors corrected the text at some time between the third and fifth Compass printings,⁷ removing the erroneous "Strobe," a name that occurs nowhere else in the novel. It seems likely that "Strobe" was either an alternative name for Laszlo Jamf or the name of another character who was later amalgamated into Jamf.

The detection of this variant is good for at least a brief hermeneutic thrill, providing as it does a glimpse into the forbidden wing of Pynchon's creative process. Certain paranoid possibilities immediately present themselves, but they should probably be resisted. Unlike Oedipa's "Trystero," the "Strobe" line is doubtless nothing more than a slip. But it is a difficult error to pass over, not just because it

reveals another textual order behind the visible, but because it raises implications for the revealed text of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Laszlo Jamf is an especially luminous figure, being the third iteration of a crucial Pynchonian archetype, the dead father or absent demiurge (compare Sidney Stencil and Pierce Inverarity). But Jamf, architect of Slothrop's *Schwarzphänomen* and grand old man of the Raketentstadt, is both more sinister and more seminal than either of his precursors. The German scientist's name seems to come up whenever lines of conspiracy converge on a central trunk. Jamf invented "Emulsion J," the special film stock with which Gerhardt von Göll can "dig beneath the skin," as well as "Kryptosam," the invisible ink that reveals itself "in Negro brown" at the touch of Pirate Prentice's semen. These details suggest that Jamf's arch-project (whatever it might be, if it exists) might have thematic links to the black-white dialectic of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Jamf also synthesized those two curious chemicals Oneirine theophosphate and Imipolex G, one an indole alkaloid that allows the mind to modulate time, the other the first aromatic polymer that is "actually erectile." These inventions tie Jamf to virtually all the novel's major concerns: organic chemistry, psychedelia, industrial cartels, and the V-weapons. But above all, of course, Laszlo Jamf (né Strobe?) is the man who applied "stimulus x" to Infant Tyrone, catalyzing the primary plot interest of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

It is in this last connection that the name of Laszlo Jamf acquires its enormous resonance in the text. After he decamps from the Casino Hermann Goering, Slothrop acquires a copy of IG Farben's dossier on Jamf, which reveals Slothrop's identity as the Schwarzknabe (Infant Tyrone), the unlucky child who was "sold to IG Farben like a side of beef," and who has been under constant scrutiny since. This revelation triggers in Slothrop a most unpleasant hallucination: "A smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom edge of his memory. He can't see it, can't make it out. Doesn't want to. It is allied with the Worst Thing" (286). The smell, Slothrop feels certain, belongs to Imipolex G. He does not consciously elaborate on "the Worst Thing," but its nature can be inferred from the nightmare described shortly afterward:

Then there's this recent dream he is afraid of having again. He was in his old room, back home. A summer afternoon of lilacs and bees, and warm air through an open window. Slothrop had found a very old dictionary of technical German. It fell open to a certain page prickling with black-face type. 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. Perhaps you know that dream too. Perhaps It has warned you never to speak Its name. If so, you know about how Slothrop'll be feeling now. (286-87)

Slothrop's phallus ("The Penis He Thought Was His Own") has been appropriated by Dr. Jamf and the IG. The "Worst Thing" is not literal castration (a fate They have reserved for later) but the alienation of sexual signifier from signified. In the presence of the "mystery stimulus," Slothrop's erect "I" becomes an other, an extension of the will of "JAMF." This alienating name manages to combine oral aggression (cartoon onomatopoeia for biting-off: yomf!) with a parody of the ultimate Name (a tetragrammaton that suggests "I AM"). "Jamf" resonates so strongly through Slothrop's consciousness (and the text) because, like "Trystero," it is a magic pointer. "Jamf" stands metonymically for that which "has warned you never to speak its name," the final bare fact which Slothrop cannot face.

At this Unholy Center might lie homosexual desire (the orthodox Freudian answer), or Slothrop's lust for "his, and his race's, death," or the subversion of human flesh by inanimate prosthesis ("[w]hat has actually grown itself a skin of Imipolex G"), or some other subject of repression. The identity of the Repressed hardly matters, since we know that Slothrop's approaches to it will always end in avoidance. Pynchon's quest plots are not purgative but abreactive: they do not bring the searcher closer to the truth; rather, they cause her or him to suffer repeatedly through a course of symptoms. On first thumbing through the Jamf file, Slothrop finds that "[t]he absence of Jamf surrounds him like an odor, one he knows but can't quite name, an aura that threatens to go epileptic any second" (269). Slothrop's affliction here will be familiar to readers of *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Oedipa's Tristero epiphanies are described in very similar terms:

She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals . . . as the epileptic is said to-- an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure. Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers. Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (CL 95)

Oedipa's and Slothrop's attacks of "epilepsy" constitute dramatic enactments of Pynchon's anti-hermeneutic. To seek patterns and connections within the world of his fictions--to read or interpret--is to invite cerebral overload. The truth is not unavailable; it is simply too enormous or too alien for humans to process, caught up as we are in our "front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences." We may have been in the presence of the truth repeatedly, as Oedipa suspects she has been, but on each occasion the information would "blaze out,

destroying its own message." "Creative paranoia," Pirate Prentice advises, is the only way to survive in a world organized against us. But paranoia is elsewhere glossed as the discovery that "*everything is connected* . . . a secondary illumination--not yet blindingly One, but at least connected" (703). Hints, clues, and connections trigger our paranoid "auras" and motivate the search for next higher assemblies. But we will inevitably find the highest assembly to be blindingly One, a unity that devastates the sense channel through which it is perceived.

Even if the ultimate radiance does not bear looking into, however, there remain certain "secondary illuminations" we cannot ignore. "[T]here's Jamf, the coupling of 'Jamf' and 'I' in the primal dream" (623), the narrator reminds us as Slothrop drifts into negligence. More to the point, there is the coupling of "Jamf" and "Strobe" in the first edition--a connection that sheds considerable light on the "epileptic" limits to knowledge in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The associations of the name "Strobe" are potentially far more sinister than any of the horrors for which "Jamf" comes to stand. The name no doubt derives from "stroboscope," a device that operates on the flow of light to a camera or eye, cutting off the light source at regular intervals. The OED mentions two applications of the term. The first definition, referring to a "scientific toy," cites the biography of James Clerk Maxwell, a figure who looms large in the Pynchonian imagination. Maxwell's stroboscope, a toy given him in boyhood, was a rotating disk holding a series of painted images which came briefly into view through a moving aperture. The young Maxwell created a number of stroboscopic animations, experiments that may have contributed to his later work on spinning color wheels and his refinements of the "zoëtropé," a precursor of the peep show.⁸ The OED's second definition of stroboscope is "an instrument for observing the successive phases of a periodic motion by means of light, periodically interrupted." This technical apparatus is akin to the theodolite films the engineers at Peenemünde use to break up the A4's trajectory into successive Δ 's--and to the sadistic game Major Weissmann plays with Franz Pökler, presenting him each year with a girl who may be his daughter ("*Isn't that what they made of my child, a film?*" [398]).

Weissmann's successive "framing" of Pökler and his daughter suggests a type of stroboscope not mentioned in the OED: a device which does not organize the stream of visual data in the service of analysis but which instead directly affects the mental functioning of the perceiver. The "strobe" in this sense is an optical analogue of the metronome, a mechanism Pavlov used in his experiments on the

"auditory analyzer" in dogs.⁹ But as we know from the Story of Byron the Bulb, the usefulness of this stroboscopic stimulus extends beyond the test stand:

. . . he's already hep to the Strobing Tactic, all you do is develop the knack (Yogic, almost) of shutting off and on at a rate close to the human brain's alpha rhythm, and you can actually trigger an *epileptic fit!* True. Byron has had a vision against the rafters of his ward, of 20 million Bulbs, all over Europe, at a given synchronizing pulse arranged by one of his many agents in the Grid, all these Bulbs beginning to strobe *together*, humans thrashing around the 20 million rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy . . . (648-49)

As a light bulb, Byron's mission is to illuminate, providing the constant flow of energy humans need for vision, the primary sense channel by which we define our awareness. But Byron believes "Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light-energy alone." Bulbs can support subversive acts, like the growing of "illegal plants," or they can "penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men" (653). Byron seeks to become something more than an inanimate tool of human consciousness; he wants to modify that consciousness. His "Strobing Tactic," accordingly, is an act of cognitive terrorism.¹⁰ By breaking up the stream of perception into a pattern that duplicates the brain's own essential rhythm (synchronizing Outside with Inside), Byron hopes to create a pernicious feedback that will disrupt his masters' minds.

Given what we know about the "Strobing Tactic" then, the unextinguished trace of "Strobe" in the first printings of *Gravity's Rainbow* becomes something more than a textual curiosity. Laszlo Jamf is the nexus of virtually all major enigmas in the novel: Impipolex G, Oneirine, the Schwarzgerät, the Penis He Thought Was His Own, *und so weiter*. But if "Jamf" is in some way connected to "Strobe," then we must face the possibility that all the "Kute Korrespondences" and momentary revelations that drive these mystery plots may themselves constitute a Strobing Tactic, a cunningly contrived sequence of on/off flashes meant to induce hermeneutic seizure and mental paralysis--"Mindless Pleasures" indeed. This is not at all the same as declaring that the Holy Center of *Gravity's Rainbow* is empty or unavailable and that we must learn to look elsewhere. If the text conceals a "Strobe," then it does not simply resist interpretation, but actively seeks to subvert the act of reading. We are shunted away from the center, not because it is empty or irrelevant, but because the text has been engineered to produce a state of terminal perplexity. Leo Bersani suggests that the appropriate question for readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* is not hermeneutic but ontological. We need to ask not "what

does this text mean?" but "what kind of text is this?"--a question whose answer may prove disturbing:

It is as if we could know everything and still not know what kind of a text *Gravity's Rainbow* is. It would not exactly be a question of something missing, but rather of the text's "real" nature as a kind of superior intelligible double of the text we read. Pynchon's novel would signify nothing but itself, without, however, letting us move beyond the opaque surface of the signifying narrative itself. And that opacity would constitute Thomas Pynchon as the reader's They: he *is* the enemy text.¹¹

If we pose the postmodern question--not simply "how can we know?" but "how does this fictional 'zone' limit our knowledge?"--then we are obliged to consider that the truth of *Gravity's Rainbow* may not set us free. Bersani exercises considerable skepticism about "the sixties side of Pynchon," the tendency to read his novels as gospels of eros or anarchy. Yet for all these reservations, Bersani himself insists that *Gravity's Rainbow* contains, if not a means of salvation, then at least a postmodern therapy. Slothrop's scattering, he argues, constitutes "a loss that . . . must be sustained if we are also to disappear as targets, and therefore as conditions of possibility, of rockets and cartels" (Bersani 112). Bersani, like Tanner, Hite, Hume and others, seems to find in Slothrop's breakdown a reply to the epos of the Rocket (most likely, "fuck you"). As these readers have it, we must imitate Slothrop in embracing preterition, jumping ourselves off the linear tracks of identity and causality by cultivating a holistic, parallel-structured vision. Better to descend into "Mindless Pleasures" than go on living under "Gravity's Rainbow," the apocalyptic arc of Mutual Assured Destruction.

But the highest lesson of the Zone is that it comprehends nothing singular or final. "Once, only once" is one of *Their* favorite sayings; we should not expect a text like *Gravity's Rainbow* to express itself univocally. Ideas of the opposite tend to converge. So "Strobe's stimulus" introduces an ambiguity that casts salvation-through-preterition into doubt. To turn our attention from the sudden illuminations of Rocket-history and pursue Slothrop through the Zone may be an act of grace, but it may just as well represent a fatal submission to the Strobing Tactic. The brilliant narrative divagations that make up the bulk of *Gravity's Rainbow* do indeed plant the seeds of rebellion and Counterforce. But the last words of the text contain just as striking a vision of failure and extinction. The audience of William Slothrop's heretical hymn is separated by only one Δt from "the Word that rips apart the day." The text of that unsung anthem is full of doubleness:

There is a Hand to turn the time,
 Though thy Glass today be run,
 Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
 Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
 Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
 All through our crippl'd Zone,
 With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
 And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . . (760)

A "Hand to turn the time" may suggest the survival of the transcendent, invisible Hand which the theorists of synthesis and control thought to have abolished. The turning of the time may hint at a Re-turn, vindicating the cyclical message of the Serpent Ouroboros which Kekulé and the IG have perverted. But by the same token, "a Hand to turn the time" is a perfectly accurate poetic gloss on *stroboscope*, the wheel that breaks reality into frames that dazzle the eye and short-circuit the mind. We have always been at the movies, and perhaps some of us have indeed learned to see the secret film that persists in the apparent blankness of the screen--a true "projective test." But if the Hand that contrives this stimulus still belongs to a malevolent Strobe, then we must be very careful in our responses.

--University of Texas at Austin

Notes

¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 10-11.

² Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos, 1981) 198.

³ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; New York: Perennial, 1986) 75.

⁴ *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 322; cf. 366.

⁵ The most complete treatment of this position is in Hite's *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 34 ff. See also Schaub, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981), esp. chaps. 3 and 5, and Kathryn Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987) chap. 5.

⁶ *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Methuen, 1982) 78.

⁷ According to Clifford Mead, the fourth printing "contains corrections of some typographical errors" (*Thomas Pynchon: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials* [Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1989] 13). Like the Bantam edition, however, the Picador paperback (London, 1975) also contains the variant, so it seems probable that the original Cape edition (London, 1973) on which the Picador is based does too. Finally, it should be noted that the Bantam edition both contains some corrections and is fraught with misprints of its own: see Steven Weisenburger, *A*

Gravity's Rainbow *Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988).

⁸ Lewis Campbell, *The Life of James Clerk Maxwell*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1884) 23-24.

⁹ I. P. Pavlov, *Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes*, trans. W. Horsley Gantt (New York: Liveright, 1928) 120-43.

¹⁰ For further speculations on stroboscopic epilepsy as a terrorist weapon, see William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Berkeley, 1984) 62. Gibson cites Pynchon as a major influence on his work (Leanne C. Harper, "The Culture of Cyberspace: An Interview with William Gibson," *Bloomsbury Review* 8.5 [1988]: 16). See also Gibson's story "Burning Chrome," which presents the concept of "black ice," a "neural feedback weapon" designed to devastate the minds of cybernetic intruders.

¹¹ Leo Bersani, "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," *Representations* 25 (1989): 108. See also Richard Poirier's re-evaluation of Pynchon in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 103.