

RITUAL RELUCTANCE:  
THE POETICS OF DISCONTINUITY IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

James Perrin Warren

In The Crying of Lot 49, as Oedipa watches The Courier's Tragedy, the narrator explains that in Act IV of the play "a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance."<sup>1</sup> The narrative discourse of Gravity's Rainbow enacts, on an epic scale, precisely this "ritual reluctance," and it does so, at least in part, in order to extend the possibilities of narrative language for representing non-temporal, non-causal, non-continuous aspects of human reality. The twin verbal chords of "continuity" and "discontinuity" are struck repeatedly in Gravity's Rainbow, beginning with the epigraph to "Beyond the Zero": "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death."<sup>2</sup> Lance Ozier has treated the figural calculus of continuity, and several critics have explicitly or implicitly treated the question of continuity, in discussing Pynchon's cinematic narrative techniques.<sup>3</sup> But while these various critical studies suggest the complicated terrain of the terms "continuity" and "discontinuity" in the novel, they do not explain how or why Pynchon focuses so much energy on the concepts of narrative continuity and discontinuity. Nor do they explain how narrative continuity and discontinuity relate to Pynchon's figurative uses of the terms "continuity" and "discontinuity" in the text. These are the twin objects of this essay.

Contemporary theorists of the novel provide a useful set of distinctions for the analysis of Pynchon's techniques of discontinuous narrative. The most basic of these distinctions, that between the story or diegesis and the narrative or discourse, provides a touchstone for interpreting narrative rhetoric. The distinction is readily apparent, for any narrative consists of a sequence of events, or story, and a sequence of sentences, or discourse. The same story can be told in an infinite number of narrative discourses.<sup>4</sup> One narratologist who has written extensively and persuasively on the subject is Gérard Genette. In addition to the work of Figures and Figures II, the recent publication of Figures III and its translation into English as Narrative Discourse have solidified Genette's position as the foremost French theorist of narrative poetics.<sup>5</sup> In all three of the Figures books, and particularly in the method advanced in Narrative Discourse, Genette scrupulously observes the fundamental distinction between histoire (story) and récit (narrative or discourse) as well as the distinction between these two levels and the third narrative instance, the narrating itself.<sup>6</sup> This strict observance of narrative relations allows

Genette to make a number of systematic advances in the analysis of narrative.

An exhaustive exposition and application of Genette's methods lies beyond the scope of this essay, though such a project would certainly be as productive regarding Pynchon as has been Genette's own project regarding Proust. Within Genette's three categories of narrative discourse—tense, mood, and voice—I will concentrate on the category of tense, which is synonymous with the narrative category of time. More specifically, Genette divides the relations of time in the story and "pseudo-time" in the narrative into three aspects: order, the relation between the temporal succession of events in the story and their pseudo-temporal arrangement in the narrative; duration, the relation between the speed with which events occur and the "pseudo-duration" of their telling; frequency, the relation between the occurrences of events and the repetitions of narrative. The temporal category of frequency and the other narrative categories of mood and voice could prove useful in an interpretation on a larger scale than this one. For the present, however, the categories of order and duration seem to me to shed the most light on Pynchon's discontinuous narrative.

Within the category of order, Genette treats "the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative" (ND 36), which he calls anachronies. These include the familiar techniques of flashback and foreshadowing, or analepsis and prolepsis, though Genette's systematic treatment of these techniques in Proust puts to shame the homemade, intuitive categories we usually employ. For instance, Genette distinguishes among external, internal, and mixed analepses, depending on the relationships of temporal reach and extent obtaining between the frame or "first degree" narrative and the flashback or "second degree" narrative. The "reach" refers to the temporal distance of the analepsis from the "present" moment of the frame or first degree narrative. The "extent" refers to the temporal duration of the analepsis. In Book XIX of the Odyssey, for example, the analepsis concerning Odysseus' wounding by the boar has a reach of several decades and an extent of a few days. Since the analepsis covers a period earlier than the frame narrative of the Odyssey, it is an external analepsis: its extent remains external to the extent of the first degree narrative (ND 48-49). Within the category of internal analepsis, where the temporal extent of the flashback lies within the temporal extent of the first degree narrative, Genette further distinguishes between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narratives. In the former, the story line (and thus the diegetic content) of the analepsis is different from that of the first narrative; in the latter, the analepsis treats the same diegetic content as the first degree narrative.

An extended example from Gravity's Rainbow shows the usefulness of Genette's detailed vocabulary. In "The Counterforce," while the reader's conventional expectations of narrative continuity, characterization, and plot resolution are continually being frustrated, the narrator reluctantly tells, in

a series of internal homodiegetic analepses, how Thanatz was washed overboard from the Anubis, how he was rescued by a Polish undertaker, how he encountered homosexual prison-camp inmates near the Oder estuary, how he became a member of the preterite, a displaced person, and, finally, how he remembered the firing of the 00000 rocket and reported it to the Schwarzkommando (663-73). This sequence of disparate events is as nearly linear and continuous as the narrative of Gravity's Rainbow becomes. And the narrator is extremely grudging in giving a plausible account of how we can know there ever was such a thing as the Schwarzgerät or the 00000 rocket: "You will want cause and effect. All right" (663). What ensues is hardly realistic in any conventional sense, but the analepsis prepares for Thanatz' remembering the rocket-firing. That is, the linear narrative of the flashback or second degree narrative sets up a further flashback or third degree narrative, an analepsis within an analepsis:

Little by little his memory of that last rocket-firing on the Heath grows clearer. The fevers fire-polish, the pain removes impurities. An image keeps recurring--a muddy brown almost black eyeball reflecting a windmill and a jagged reticule of tree-branches in silhouette . . . doors at the sides of the windmill open and shut quickly, like loose shutters in a storm . . . in the iris sky one cloud, the shape of a clamshell, rises very purple around the edges, the puff from an explosion, something light ocher at the horizon . . . closer in it seems snarling purple around a yellow that's brightening, intestines of yellow shadowed in violet spilling outward, outward in a bellying curve toward us. There are, oddly (not to cut this picturesque scene off, but) oddly enough, get this, no windmills on the Lüneburg Heath! (670)

A key technique in this passage is narrative ellipsis. In the first place, the entire analepsis concerning Thanatz is a completing analepsis, one which fills in the simple break in temporal continuity by rejoining Thanatz at the Anubis and tracing his progress toward the Schwarzkommando. But, second, even when giving us the completing "cause and effect," the narrative veers away from continuous temporal sequence. Thus we encounter the analepsis within the analepsis. Third, Thanatz' memory of the rocket-firing is anything but temporally sequential or causally clear. Instead of the rocket firing itself, the analepsis describes a non-existent windmill reflected in Blicero's "almost black eyeball." Contiguous to the windmill we find "one cloud . . . the puff from an explosion," but the points of ellipsis disrupt any presumed causal relationship between the cloud and the puff. Similarly, the points of ellipsis erase any trace of human agency: ". . . doors at the sides of the windmill open and shut quickly, like loose shutters in a storm . . ." These grammatical and figural ellipses

signal a movement away from direct, sequential, causal narrative and a counter-movement toward discontinuous, elliptically jumbled images. In sum, the grudging narrator wins out here, for he does not give us cause and effect. Rather, he gives us "only fragments, now and then" (670), ellipses within analepses, creating in the narrative discourse exactly the type of temporally discontinuous experience he describes in connection with the Polish undertaker:

Well, it's a matter of continuity. Most people's lives have ups and downs that are relatively gradual, a sinuous curve with first derivatives at every point. They're the ones who never get struck by lightning. No real idea of cataclysm at all. But the ones who do get hit experience a singular point, a discontinuity in the curve of life--do you know what the time rate of change is at a cusp? Infinity, that's what! (664)

The Polish undertaker passage raises the question of Genette's second temporal category, duration, where Pynchon's discontinuous narrative technique once again revolves around the use of ellipsis. In the analysis of duration, ellipsis creates the effect of infinite speed, "where a nonexistent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story" (ND 93).<sup>8</sup> For example, the opening of the novel gestures toward events which it does not narrate, and the effect of this beginning in medias res is to place the reader immediately in an aftermath: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre" (3). By placing us in a belated position, the opening sentences emphasize both the gap between past and present and the inability of narrative to close that gap. From the very first words of Gravity's Rainbow, then, an implicit ellipsis creates narrative discontinuity.

A second, more complicated example of Pynchon's elliptical narrative comes during the "War's evensong," when Roger and Jessica visit the church "Somewhere in Kent" (127-36). Part of the complication stems from the slowness of the evensong, an effect approaching the opposite of the ellipsis. This is what Genette calls the "descriptive pause," where "some section of narrative discourse corresponds to a nonexistent diegetic duration" (ND 93-94). In the evensong, the long description takes place while the choir sings the 15th-century macaronic. Indeed, we can interpret the meditation as occurring "between" the line "Alpha es et O" (129) and the line "O Jesu parvule" (136). Between the two "O's," Pynchon takes us "beyond the zero" in one of his most beautiful prose poems.<sup>9</sup>

Within this infinitely slow descriptive pause, the characteristic ellipsis asserts itself in moments of infinitely fast transition. The pause can be divided roughly according to the following topics:

- the Wrens melting scrap metal (130)
- toothpaste tubes (130-31)
- the schizophrenic patient (131)
- wedding dresses (131-32)
- returning British prisoners (132)
- Italian P/Ws (132)
- children and Spam tin toys (133)
- grandparents and the Radio Doctor (133)
- time and the Nativity (133-34)
- the church and "the path home" (134-36)

The ten topics and nine boundaries do not fully describe the passage, but they do suggest the rich variety of Pynchon's Whitmanesque catalogue. They also indicate the speed with which the narrative shifts ground through ellipsis. Although the initial effect of the elliptically transitive catalogue may be simple bewilderment, it appears upon re-reading that a degree of figural continuity underlies the apparent temporal discontinuity. As the narrator notes, regarding the fingerprints on the toothpaste tubes, "Yet the continuity, flesh to kindred metals, home to hedgeless sea, has persisted. It is not death that separates these incarnations, but paper: paper specialties, paper routines. The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives" (130).

Part of Pynchon's narrative strategy is to combat the Empire by thwarting standard expectations of causality and temporal sequence. During the descriptive pause, no diegetic time elapses. Indeed, we could term the entire evensong an "achronous" or atemporal catalogue.<sup>10</sup> The order of topics is, to a degree, random, and the style of the passage insists upon the collecting of disparate parts from the London area. Thus, for instance, there are only four paragraphs in the entire catalogue, and one paragraph, beginning "Advent blows from the sea," takes up the majority of the pause (131-35).

Of course, connections between and among the various topics do exist. The unused wedding dresses parallel the British prisoners returning to "the city addresses that surely can no longer exist" (132). The returning British prisoners at first contrast with the "Italian P/Ws," but then "both kinds of prisoner" recognize that "life has to go on" without them (132). The brief passage on the children's toys made of Spam tins moves fluidly into the children's grandparents and their insomniac awareness of the War's quickened clocks. From this partial list it would seem that one common thread holding together the disparate parts of the catalogue is the victimization of individuals by the Empire. Yet another thread is the idea of incarnation. Despite the apparent differences separating the parts of the catalogue, each part is an incarnation of the common hope symbolized by the Nativity:

There must have been evensong here long before the news of Christ. Surely for as long as there have been nights bad as this one--something to raise the possibility of another night that could

actually, with love and cockcrows, light the path home, banish the Adversary, destroy the boundaries between our lands, our bodies, our stories, all false, about who we are [. . .]. (135)

Within the catalogue of the evensong, figural continuity coexists with temporal discontinuity. Moreover, the infinite speed of elliptical transitions coexists with the infinite slowness of descriptive pause. Pynchon's narrative technique therefore combines logically incompatible, mutually exclusive categories. And it does so, in this passage, in order to escape the inevitable end of the temporal continuum, to "light the path home" if only for a brief, nearly timeless moment, between the two "0's" of the evensong.

These examples of how Pynchon distorts temporal order and duration demonstrate that ellipsis is one of the most important stylistic and rhetorical devices Pynchon employs in creating the discontinuous, atemporal narrative of Gravity's Rainbow. Another major device is paralipsis, or preterition.<sup>11</sup> Genette treats paralipsis as an extreme form of ellipsis, for both rhetorical strategies create gaps or discontinuities in temporal order (ND 51-52, 195). Thus we might expect to find instances in Gravity's Rainbow of the "omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation that the narrative does generally cover" (ND 52).

Not surprisingly, examples of paraliptic or preterite narrative abound. One major omission concerns the mystery plastic, Imipolex G. The plastic seems central to Tyrone Slothrop's sexual trajectories, but Pynchon never delivers the solution to the detective-story plot.<sup>12</sup> In "Some Characteristics of Imipolex G," the narrator comes close to stating a solution to the mystery of the "Peculiar Polymer." But, in the typically elliptical fashion of Pynchon's ritual reluctance, the scientific description of the erectile plastic is interrupted by a mystifying parenthesis:

(slowly gleaming in the Void. Silver and black. Curvewarped reflections of stars flowing across, down the full length of, round and round in meridians exact as the meridians of acupuncture. What are the stars but points in the body of God where we insert the healing needles of our terror and longing? Shadows of the creature's bones and ducts--leaky, wounded, irradiated white--mingling in with its own. It is entangled with the bones and ducts, its own shape determined by how the Erection of the Plastic shall proceed: where fast and where slow, where painful and where slithery-cool . . . whether areas shall exchange characteristics of hardness and brilliance, whether some areas should be allowed to flow over the surface so that the passage will be a caress, where to orchestrate sudden discontinuities--blows, wrenchings--in among these more caressive moments). (699)

The parenthesis proposes a series of figurative continuities and discontinuities. Examples of continuities: "the Void" becomes "the body of God," while the stars become acupuncture "points." As if the analogy were too clear, however, the narrative interrupts with "Shadows of the creature's bones and ducts" and "It is entangled with the bones and ducts." These fragmented statements resist translation into logical assertions or figural continuities. Who or what is the "creature," and what is "It"? One level of explanation may seem obvious: the two correspond to Slothrop and the Plastic. But the language of the passage omits this obvious reference in favor of "sudden discontinuities." The "It" cannot be the Plastic because its "shape [is] determined by how the Erection of the Plastic shall proceed." Is the "It" the "body of God," or is "It" perhaps the "Void" itself? Any of these answers appears possible, but none appears to be privileged over the others. Similarly, the narrator gives three possible modes of transmitting the stimulus to the plastic surface, but none of these is given special credence. "Some Characteristics of Impolex G" is an exercise in providing both "caressive moments" and "sudden discontinuities," for throughout the passage the narrative proposes multiple explanations while omitting the one explanation the reader wishes to insert. That one explanation, which would demystify the "Peculiar Polymer" and its continuous relationship both to Slothrop and to the "body of God," remains paralipic—gestured at, yet omitted.

A second instance of paralipic narrative once more demonstrates Pynchon's consciously self-reflexive rhetoric of discontinuity. Besides Impolex G, a major paralipic element of Gravity's Rainbow is the drug Oneirine, which is mentioned several times but never explained. Along with Oneirine, Wimpe, the "long ago IG Farben V-Mann," functions as a paralipic element. Wimpe appears briefly in dialogue with Tchitcherine before the two shoot up the "Oneirine theophosphate [...] indicating the Presence of God" (702). The two "run screaming all over the suite," but then the scene dissolves in another ellipsis. The narrator moves with infinite speed into a pseudo-scientific discussion of "the so-called 'Pöckler singularity'" and "Oneirine hauntings," noting that the hauntings "show a definite narrative continuity, as clearly as, say, the average Reader's Digest article" (703). The only clue to an Oneirine haunting is "some radical though plausible violation of possibility: the presence of the dead, journeys by the same route and means where one person will set out later but arrive earlier, a printed diagram which no amount of light will make readable" (703).

When Pynchon narrates "Tchitcherine's Haunting," however, the "narrative continuity" becomes considerably less clear than we might expect from a Reader's Digest article. Ripov and his two "olive-drab agents" appear, but Tchitcherine sees nothing remarkable:

This is, after all, an Oneirine haunting. Mellow, ordinary. The only tipoff to its unreality is--

The radical-though-plausible-violation-of-reality--

All three men are smiling at him now. There is no violation. (704)

The paralipsis in this passage is the combined mention and omission of the "radical-though-plausible-violation-of-reality." Tchitcherine recognizes the haunting because he perceives the absence of the violation, and this absence itself is a violation of reality. In other words, the scene with Ripov is too ordinary, too continuous, so that continuity becomes a contradiction of reality. We could interpret the smiles of the three men as the violation, but the narrator directly contradicts us: "There is no violation." So the fact that the smiles do not violate reality would seem to be the "tipoff to its unreality."

This second example of paralyptic narrative emphasizes the oneiric quality of Pynchon's novel as a whole. The premise of Gravity's Rainbow is, in fact, a "violation of reality," and Pynchon's method of developing that premise is to stress the discontinuity between the surface regularity of life's continuous, "sinuous curve" and the deeper irregularities beneath the surface. By violating the reader's sense of reality, the novel re-orders what Enzian calls at one point "their time, their space [. . .] the white continuum" (326). And the rhetoric of ellipsis and paralipsis is the fundamental strategy Pynchon employs to violate the narrative conventions of cause and effect.

Pynchon's oneiromantic propensities do not always content themselves, however, with pointing out causal and temporal discontinuities. As we have seen in the "War's evensong" and in the pseudo-scientific name "Oneirine theophosphate," the narrative continually gestures toward an atemporal, spiritual realm of significance. Several passages in the novel mention "the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1), "the continuity, flesh to kindred metals, home to hedgeless sea" (130), or "some continuity of sacrament" (372). Not all uses of the word are affirmative in tone, but these examples suggest an alternative to "the white continuum," one which would not be a simple negation of temporal continuity. The last use of the term "continuity" in the novel is the clearest instance of what I mean. As the Schwarzkommando near their moment of firing the 00001 rocket, Pynchon focalizes through Enzian a meditation on the parabolic rainbow:

But remember if you loved it. If you did, how you loved it. And how much--after all you're used to asking "how much," used to measuring, to comparing measurements, putting them into equations to find out how much more, how much of, how much when . . . and here in your common drive to the sea feel as much as you wish of that dark double-minded love which is also shame, bravado, engineers' geopolitics--"spheres of influence" modified to toruses of Rocketrange that are parabolic in section . . .



. . . not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it "rises from" and the Earth it "strikes" No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the peak that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world, violently (a jet airplane crashing into faster-than-sound, some years later a spaceship crashing into faster-than-light) Remember The Password In The Zone This Week Is FASTER--THAN, THE-SPEEDOFLIGHT Speeding Up Your Voice Exponentially--Linear Exceptions Made Only In Case of Upper Respiratory Complaints, at each "end," understand, a very large transfer of energy: breaking upward into this world, a controlled burning--breaking downward again, an uncontrolled explosion . . . this lack of symmetry leads to speculating that a presence, analogous to the Aether, flows through time, as the Aether flows through space. The assumption of a Vacuum in time tended to cut us off one from another. But an Aether sea to bear us world-to-world might bring us back a continuity, show us a kinder universe, more easygoing . . . . (726)

These two paragraphs are characteristic of Pynchon's elliptical style, which employs non-standard grammar, punctuation, and typography to violate temporal and causal continuity. More important, however, the meditation centers upon a central omission--a paralytic absence. The "lack of symmetry" between the "controlled burning" and "uncontrolled explosion" leads us to the idea of a "presence" flowing "through time." This temporal "Aether" becomes the counterforce to defeat the "assumption of a Vacuum in time," which "tended to cut us off one from another." The language recalls both "the Void" of "Some Characteristics of Impolex G" and the paper separations of "War's evensong." Thus the omission of controlled, continuous symmetry in the rocket's flight provides the paralytic possibility of a figurative return to "a kinder universe." This figurative return would create a continuity, for it would close the gap between an absent, innocent past and an absent, innocent future. Hence Pynchon's radical discontinuities of narrative temporality finally gesture toward an atemporal, quasi-divine type of continuity, or at least toward a somewhat nostalgic hope that such a continuity may become possible. But the narrative discourse of Gravity's Rainbow does not, in the final analysis, privilege one sort of continuity over another or one sort of discontinuity over continuity as such. Instead, the narrative discourse tends to hold these mutually exclusive axes--continuity/discontinuity, figural order/temporal order, presence/absence--in a rhetorical solution marked by ellipsis and

paralipsis. For each axis is necessary for both the construction and the deconstruction of the text.

--Washington and Lee University

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; New York: Perennial, 1986) 71. See also page 79 for an echo of the phrase.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lance Ozier, "The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow," Twentieth Century Literature, 21.2 (1975): 193-210.

Discussions of cinematic narrative include Charles Clerc, "Film in Gravity's Rainbow," in Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 103-51; David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980) 31-62; Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) 43-49; Scott Simmon, "Beyond the Theater of War: Gravity's Rainbow as Film," Literature/Film Quarterly, 6.4 (1978): 347-63. Pynchon's use of the cinematic concept of continuity emphasizes the absence of continuity between various "shots" in the novel; for a discussion of the illusion of continuity as developed by film pioneers like Griffith and Eisenstein, see Ivor Montagu, Film World (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) 93-184.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on this subject is vast; for a helpful introduction to the distinction, with bibliography, see Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 169-87.

<sup>5</sup> Figures (Paris: Seuil, 1966); Figures II (Paris: Seuil, 1969); Figures III (Paris: Seuil, 1972). The first two books have been selectively translated as Figures of Literary Discourse, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia UP, 1982); "Discours du recit," the major portion of the third volume, appeared as Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of these three narrative levels, see Narrative Discourse, 25-32. All further references to Genette's work use this translation and appear cited as ND.

<sup>7</sup> See Ozier's discussion of the figure of mathematics in this passage and its relation to the thematics of temporal/atemporal transformation, 202-04.

<sup>8</sup> Genette distinguishes three types of narrative ellipsis--explicit, implicit, and hypothetical (ND 107-

09). Molly Hite notes that Pynchon's use of ellipsis in Gravity's Rainbow is an innovation in his prose style; see her Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 138.

<sup>9</sup> The passage is summarized by Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980) 24-28.

<sup>10</sup> Genette terms this type of temporal autonomy, in which events are arranged by some atemporal logic or figure, syllipsis (ND 84-85).

<sup>11</sup> Louis Mackey discusses the rhetorical figure in his essay "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," Sub-Stance 30 (1981): 16-30.

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the ritual reluctance of Gravity's Rainbow is already contained in miniature in The Crying of Lot 49, and both novels display Pynchon's tendency to privilege discourse over story. For an excellent discussion of this point, see Hite, 13-45.