

Deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow

Introduction

The number and variety of critical responses to Gravity's Rainbow have been extensive, yet often these responses have been traditional in their critical approaches. However, Pynchon wrote Gravity's Rainbow during the time "poststructuralism" and "deconstruction" were fast becoming forces in literary production and reception. Pynchon's novel posits and amalgamates endless structures (narrative, existential, scientific, historical, etc.) that often fall apart during the act of reading--unless the reader props these crumbling structures with an extratextual, totalizing structure. Most of the essays contained in this issue of Pynchon Notes do not seek to prop up particular structures; instead, they seek to explore some of the deconstructive narratives Pynchon has given play within the zone of his text. Whether Pynchon's sense of structures that come-and-go derives from some awareness of deconstruction is not the point, but as an activity of reading, deconstruction does offer Pynchon's readers a new perspective on the text.

In the first essay, "Thomas Pynchon and the American Dream," Louis Mackey reads Pynchon as engaged with other American writers in a struggle to free themselves from a Puritan heritage of depravity and determinism so that they may embrace an American dream of innocence and originality. Yet Mackey sees this opposition of heritage and dream as always already interpenetrated--the American dream as supplement to Puritan tradition. Gravity's Rainbow, however, deconstructs both views by highlighting each's belatedness, incompleteness, and inability to allow for the condition Slothrop finally discovers: "just feeling natural." Joel D. Black, in "Pynchon's Eve of Destruction," focuses on a different dialectic: extinction and transformation. He cites how each functions in fictions designed to rationalize history--history becoming a vast encyclopedia that reflects post-Enlightenment rationality and not necessarily truth. Gravity's Rainbow's metafictional project is to explore these other cultural fictions; however, Black sees Gravity's Rainbow perpetually displacing

its own assertions, denying its own encyclopedic project. In Black's view, the novel offers not an alternative rationalization of events but "a seriously playful challenge" to the will to rationalize and to control.

Terry Caesar turns his attention to the condition of "mindlessness," which he sees as a necessary condition of "mindfulness." To show how mindlessness permeates Gravity's Rainbow, "'Trapped inside Their frame with your wastes piling up': Mindless Pleasures in Gravity's Rainbow" examines how waste, particularly "shit," functions as a trope that seeks to eliminate itself from the text, yet is always also a constituent element of the text. In the novel, "Waste is the sign of what the text seeks to bring under the control of meaning as well as what it seeks to release from meaning." Mindless pleasures and mindful pleasures, then, are each inscribed in the other. Steven Weisenburger's essay, "The Chronology of Episodes in Gravity's Rainbow," is a plea (possibly embattled in context with the other essays) for a surface textual structure--that of a great circle. He sees the text as a "Mandala" structured by the chronology that can be extracted from the novel and by particular key dates that coincide with religious feast days. The evidence presented (and this is only a sample from a book-length study now in search of a publisher) is considerable, and Weisenburger's essay implicitly reminds us that Pynchon is capable of having his text both ways: structured and deconstructive.

Instead of reading Gravity's Rainbow with relation to some ordering system either inside or outside (or both) the text, Stephen P. Schuber questions the entire activity of placing the text in any "orbit" (context) when the text is already displaced from the presumed authorial authority that would privilege particular contexts for reading. As "Textual Orbits/ Orbiting Criticism: Deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow" suggests, the novel forces the issue of what constitutes the critical image of a unified text, but critics have yet to address Gravity's Rainbow's problematic textuality. In the review essay that completes this issue, I show how Molly Hite's new book, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, partakes of

poststructuralist and deconstructive activities of reading to explore how epistemologies seeking to order Pynchon's fictional worlds discover only a mass of "descriptive residue" that has no "Holy Center." Orders occur in Pynchon's texts, but Hite finds no single Order; instead, she traces the trope of the "absent insight" which motivates the quests of characters and readers alike.

It must be stressed that the following essays offer readings of Gravity's Rainbow that have been influenced by a current set of critical and philosophical ideas. Thus the claims made here are either focused or distorted by the lens of critical perspective. For what is, indeed, lacking in any deconstructive enterprise concerning Pynchon's writing is an established set of texts from Pynchon as to his intentions or philosophies of life and art. As readers we have only the novels. But the novels are not always consistent in their perspective, the characters are rarely singular in their assertions, and the narratives certainly exceed the boundaries of the genre. It might be that in the last analysis Pynchon's writing defies deconstruction just as it has defied other, more traditional, critical approaches.

I am prompted to make these qualifications after reading Pynchon's "Introduction" to Slow Learner, the recently published collection of his early stories. While dwelling on his novice mistakes in fiction writing and all but disowning the stories (warning the reader of "some mighty tiresome passages. . . juvenile and delinquent too"), Pynchon makes some statements about the function of literature with relation to life that seemingly contravene many of the assumptions regularly made about his texts. For example, Pynchon writes, "The problem [with "Under the Rose"] is like the problem with 'Entropy': beginning with something abstract--a thermodynamic coinage or the data in a guidebook--and only then going on to try to develop plot and characters. This is simply, as we say in the profession, ass backwards. Without some grounding in human reality, you are apt to be left only with another apprentice exercise." And he later brings this notion of "some grounding in human reality" closer to home: "Displacing my personal experience

off into other environments went back at least as far as 'The Small Rain.' Part of this was an unkind impatience with fiction I felt then to be 'too autobiographical.' Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. Moreover, contrary evidence was all around me, though I chose to ignore it, for in fact the fiction both published and unpublished that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live."

Granted, Pynchon is writing about his early stories and largely pointing out weaknesses in them, but the tone of these two passages suggests a current allegiance to a set of ideas that is strikingly traditional rather than postmodern or deconstructionist. On the other hand, Pynchon also dwells on his early attempts at projecting a writer's "pose," and could it be that this Introduction is also a pose--only better contrived? The only story in the collection Pynchon states he likes more than dislikes is "The Secret Integration." He describes this story as "a journeyman . . . effort." Yet one could also describe the Introduction to Slow Learner as journeyman work, particularly in its style and tone; indeed, Pynchon appears to be so forthcoming here that one almost has to conclude he must be putting us on again. I am hesitant to draw this conclusion exclusively because, on the one hand, I want to believe that Pynchon has finally dropped his guard here and given us a glimpse at the man behind the texts. On the other hand, however, I hear in the back of my mind "Proverbs for Paranoids, 3: If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers." Far from invalidating the essays that follow, the assertions in Slow Learner add to the ensemble of texts we designate as Pynchon and offer to his readers (possibly the real slow learners) yet another perspective for reading and interpretation.