

"Trapped inside Their frame
with your wastes piling up":

Mindless Pleasures in Gravity's Rainbow

Terry Caesar

It is well known that Gravity's Rainbow was initially entitled Mindless Pleasures. What is not so well known is how this fact has been assessed by the considerable critical industry which has already grown up around the text. "It is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read," writes Roland Barthes, "that creates the pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, War and Peace, word for word?"¹ Possibly not. But many have read Gravity's Rainbow this way. It is already one of the most massively explicated narratives of the century. Not only does it have a reader's guide; chronological errors in the dating of certain movies have been noted, mistakes in the German have been identified, and textual sources for such matters as the imaginative recreation of Peenemünde or the semantics of Herero have been traced. There may be pleasure in the enterprise, but finally it is pleasure of a quite familiar, academic kind. Concerning one of the sequences in the Zone, Douglas Fowler writes: "some of the references in this scene's last paragraph escape me."² These words are the very voice of critical consternation, if not despair: something in the text has escaped, and cannot be located in terms of either knowledge or elucidation. An intellectual rhythm has been disrupted which ideally seeks to process every word. What is potentially mindless in the text must be converted into mind. The title of one of the first books of Pynchon criticism discloses the energies of what continues to sponsor it as well as how thoroughly the earlier title of Gravity's Rainbow has been transformed: Mindful Pleasures.

In this essay I want to consider not so much the pleasures of mindlessness in Gravity's Rainbow as the condition of mindlessness itself. Mindless pleasures: I will argue, are wasted ones, and they appear according to the logic of the textual figure of waste, or

more specifically, shit. The pleasure is in the elimination, but the mindlessness which is its condition has a more urgent participation in the procedures by which things get produced: waste. Gravity's Rainbow is full of waste. 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--only to constitute it as meaning-full yet again. Mindfulness is no more indispensable than mindlessness. Each, indeed, is inscribed in the other, and to privilege the former is to deny the relationship of the textual body to what it excretes, or what it figures forth as excretion.

Roger Henkle is one of the few critics to confront the mindlessness of Gravity's Rainbow, but he confronts it with the same criteria by which the rest reject it. "Pynchon's commitment to a metaphoric reconstitution may signify an inability to achieve a total imaginative transmutation of his material," he writes, and again: "Much of Pynchon's writing toward the end of Gravity's Rainbow is consciously surrealistic--an involuted configuration of the pattern that seeks to 'control' dehumanization through comic play with some of the forms that dehumanization has taken."³ There is a firm hierarchy established by such comments: a presumed "totality" according to which what Henkle terms "the image of explosion" (one of his examples is defecation) is wholly transformed into organic calm and a putative control under whose auspices the indulgence of any sort of play ought to be conducted. Elsewhere Henkle speaks of Pynchon "toying" with acausal patterns--the same ones, he states, that come to dominate the narrative as "the plots that circulated within it break down and randomness prevails."⁴ Nowhere does Henkle entertain the notion that the randomness (a narrative correlate for waste) is always and everywhere present, from the very first page of the text, whose second word is mindless "screaming," even before the "progressive knotting into" which grimly begins to structurate the sound and provide it with a context.

Of course the structuration is a constant, totalizing activity, and the context is not only carefully built up but remorselessly explicated. But it is equally apparent that structure in Gravity's Rainbow breaks up and that context becomes evacuated. So there are times,

at least beginning with the Kenosha Kid, when Fowler is baffled, or later times when Henkle is censorious. Or there are ubiquitous times which can prompt Edward Mendelson to write the following: "Pynchon's own buffoonery, the puns and pie-throwing that occur whenever matters threaten to become too serious, is a way of insisting that Gravity's Rainbow not be confused, even locally, with the world it illuminates."⁵ Always the assumptions are the same: not only is there an author (that is to say, authority) present, but this author proceeds under the probity of ultimate seriousness and by means of conscious control. Mendelson employs the invariable critical trope of light dispelling textual darkness. His own rhetoric begs the question of what sort of text he would be dealing with if it were one which nurtures confusion rather than clarity.

Few critics, indeed, deal with passages where the narrator exclaims, "It is difficult to perceive just what the fuck is happening here."⁶ Everyone knows what is going on, or what ought to be going on. One of the things which is going on in Gravity's Rainbow is images, "flowering, in and out, some lovely, some just awful" (123). There is a consensus in the criticism about which images are which, but few pause to ask about the necessity whereby there has to be either, much less whether or not there might be a logic whereby each is convertible into the other. Somebody says, "jeepers"; a dog Roger Mexico is coaxing asks him if he was expecting Lassie; Slothrop's flabby cells pipe up; the hand of Providence gives Slothrop the finger--and, in the face of such mindless "explosions," critics remain firm, sober, and rational, like Pointsman writing in his journal after his dream of a monstrous Slothrop: "We must never lose control" (144). Even if suddenly aboard the Toiletship or (like Pirate Prentice) newly arrived and chewing taffy at Beaverboard Row, it seems essential to the critical response to the text that it always know where it is, what it would take in, what it would get rid of, and why.

A recent discussion by Jeffrey Stout, "What is the Meaning of the Text?", draws upon W. V. Quine's notion of explication as elimination and at one point states the following: "What does seem wrong, or silly, is discarding some readings because they fail to grasp the

real meaning of the text. Meanings, if they exist, could turn out to be the least interesting thing about texts. . . . We can always get on to this question rather quickly simply by treating the interpreter's explication of meaning as a rule for prompt elimination of the troublesome term."⁷ It is my contention that readings of Gravity's Rainbow work precisely this way. In order to "mean" at all (and surely readings of the text so far have produced some of the most excessively theme-ridden results of any in recent decades) troublesome terms must be eliminated, and ones which have to do with mindlessness have proved to be the most troublesome of all. The trouble (in turn) with such readings is not so much (as in what might be termed the standard deconstructionist account) that they repress always again the repressed term by which the text gets generated. After all, we read in Gravity's Rainbow itself of the imperative to "bring" each Deeper Significance "together, in their slick persistence and our preterition . . . to make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste. . . ." (590) Instead, the trouble with most readings of the novel is that the text is working more openly according to the same eliminative logic, trying to get rid of the same ideas or "meanings" (e.g. preterition, or "sense" here) that it needs to retain in order to get rid of them in the first place. (One has only to imagine a Reader's Digest condensation of Gravity's Rainbow to see how the text's eliminative logic obtains.) This activity is, I think, the most basic property of the structure of Gravity's Rainbow, even if (and here the standard deconstructionist account seems to me quite in order) it cannot itself be structured, only replicated.

Mindlessness, in other words, is crucial to the text because it is so full of its own mindfulness, and seeks both relief and release. Of Roger, and the possibility of either "living on as Their pet, or death," we read: "It is not a question he has ever imagined himself asking seriously. It has come by surprise, but there's no sending it away now, he really does have to decide, and soon enough, plausibly soon, to feel the terror in his bowels. Terror he cannot think away" (713). Here Terror is presented as something which seeks bodily elimination because it cannot be mentally effaced, even

as it becomes the substance of thought. Mindfulness cannot be eliminated, only temporarily eased--though so insistently and pervasively that mindlessness can be equally well understood as but a special condition of mind. Criticism which ignores mindlessness in Gravity's Rainbow concedes to the novel the power of its intellectual energies while simultaneously appropriating its own power from those energies by eliminating their inherent urge to void themselves of that very power--to become again mindless.

I have said that the specific textual figure for such a textual logic is shit. Let me give an example, Slothrop on the day of his pig hero celebration:

Slothrop returns from the brown back room of a pipesmoke-and-cabbage cafe, and an hour's game of hammer-and-forge with--every boy's dream-- TWO healthy young ladies in summer dresses and woodsoled shoes to find the crowd begun to coagulate into clumps of three and four. Oh, shit. Not now, come on. . . . Tight aching across his asshole, head and stomach inflated with oat mash and summer beer, Slothrop sits on a pile of nets and tries, fat chance, to will himself alert.
(569)

The passage is subject to much excremental overdetermination, of course--"brown," "back," "coagulate"--and of course its explicit subject is Slothrop's need to excrete. He suffers, indeed, from a fundamental condition of the entire text: inflation. The interesting thing, however, is that his condition is presented as something divided against itself. He wants to shit but he can't. Therefore he has to will himself to do so, which only results in a hapless "alertness." In the next paragraph we read not of shit but of paranoia and hustlers "passing through."

So it goes in the textual body itself. The most quintessentially mindless occasions of the text become instead occasions for the exercise of mindfulness, and the need for the absence of something is transformed into the presence of something else, eventually if not very suddenly resulting in a reconstruction of flatulence which begins the process all over again. Insides are yielded up to outsides of which they were originally

a part, like food, only to be re-absorbed and then eliminated once more. An ordinary fullness expires into an ordinary lack which was in turn the product of that fullness. Such significations as that of "a textured darkness in which flows go in all directions, and nothing begins, and nothing ends" (661) are one of hundreds of variations upon an excremental trope, just as such asides as "Poor asshole, he can't let her go" (623) have the character of anal jokes. Shit is the figuration not only for such states as passage, passing out or passing through, and control or its loss. Shit is the property for the richly, almost costively mobilized displacements of heaping, sliding, sweeping, erupting, streaming, shuddering, rippling, scattering, blending, blurring, smudging, and oozing. Shit even provides the conceptual resource for law; as Gravity Itself speaks: "I am Gravity, I am That against which the Rocket must struggle, to which the prehistoric wastes submit and are transmuted to the very substance of History" (639). Shit is the sign in the text for everything in life which falls, or which has fallen, or which needs to be aware, like Slothrop inflated and aching, that it is subject to falling as a condition of being alive. This includes mindlessness, considered not only as the negative of mind but as its falling away.

Gravity's Rainbow is, I think, never more exalted than when it most exuberantly discards its most profound thoughts or carelessly throws away its more careful determinations. The text is so alive to what gives it life that at times it immerses itself in its own befoulment--by, for example, sending Slothrop down a toilet at the Roseland Ballroom, singing aboard the Toiletship, or explicating the meaning of "ass backwards" or "shit 'n' shinola." Yet for this reason Gravity's Rainbow provides an especially telling instance of the fact that no text can somehow "transcend" any account it might give itself because it cannot fully elaborate generative figures which must be suppressed so that they can generate. "Shit carries a very powerful double charge," writes Martin Pops, "positive and negative, and that is why it is the body's most magical substance."⁸ Inevitably, Gravity's Rainbow "routinizes" what might be termed the "charisma"

of its most fundamental figure by retaining the negative aspect only. With respect to "Shit 'n' Shinola," we read this: "Shit, now, is the color white folks are afraid of. Shit is the presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself inside the whiteman's warm and private own asshole, which is getting pretty intimate" (688). Such a discourse is also getting pretty intimate with its own anal priorities while at the same time getting pretty far away from how elsewhere these same priorities serve precisely discourses "abstract-arty" which elegize many other forms of waste or propound upon history. When Gravity's Rainbow thematizes shit, the substance loses its buoyancy, or, more generally, all that the body predicates. It loses, that is to say, a self-possession that it never quite had, and becomes too mindful of its own mindlessness. Or, death-ridden, it loses its own emblem, as Brigadier Pudding, whose own special horror is that he has to eat shit in order to nourish himself and live.

On his knees before Katje, Pudding is "bare as a baby" (233). The birth image here is significant because it is an instance of how Gravity's Rainbow refuses the scatological cynicism that Mikhail Bakhtin claims post-Rabelaisian texts cannot easily refuse. As himself representative of medieval folk culture as well as ancient literature, Rabelais, writes Bakhtin, articulates in the imagery of urine and excrement "the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare."⁹ In Rabelais, he writes elsewhere, excrement is conceived of "as both joyous and sobering matter, at the same time debasing and tender; it combined the grave and birth in their lightest, most comic, least terrifying form."¹⁰ There are examples of something like such a Rabelaisian conception in Gravity's Rainbow. Hovering over the prelaunch moments of Gottfried, the narrator intones, for example: "Blicero's seed, sputtering into the poisoned manure of his bowels . . . it is waste, yes, futility . . . but . . . as man and woman, coupled, are shaken to the teeth at their approaches to the gates of life, [. . .] there have to be these too, lovers whose genitals are consecrated to shit, to endings" (722). Yet even in passages such as these, what is fructifying about the "consecration" is but a function of what is terrifying about it: that

it will merely fall away, die, and be lost.

The most I think one can say of excrement in Gravity's Rainbow is that when it is conceived of, and conceived of as a specific substance, it is seldom either joyous or sobering and almost always debasing. There is no link with earth's renewal, but only with its putrefaction and decay. As a trope, on the other hand, shit does function as a fertilizing emblem; indeed, I have been arguing that there would be no textual fertility without it--because the text would lack a figurative means at once to void and re-nourish its own proliferation. Mr. Information rebukes Skippy for going off "on another of your senseless and retrograde journeys. Come back, here, to the points. Here is where the paths divided." Mr. Information holds out to Skippy a cartoon-Rilkean vision of Happyville, where the "right ones" don't survive: "Wouldn't it be nice if we could eliminate them completely?" (644-45). Once again it is the text's production of what gets constituted by what needs to be eliminated which is its motive force, just as mindfulness has mindlessness inscribed within it.

The problem with shit in Gravity's Rainbow is the problem with waste generally in the novel--and this is the real difference between Pynchon's text and Rabelais's: it keeps piling up. The textual body continually swells to flatulence because their frames--political, intellectual, scientific--enclose the most mundane actions of fertility and renewal and reduce them to waste as a function of eliminating them. So it becomes imperative to indulge these actions and try to retain them. (To the very conclusion we read of such matters as the siren ring of Pig Bodine, "cleverly arranged in his asshole so it can be operated at any time by blowing a fart of a certain magnitude." Its ostensible purpose? "a brand-new reflex arc, ear-brain-hands-asshole, and a return toward innocence too" [740].) But the effort to do so merely belabors the same oppositional logic which brought the effort into existence, and comes to signify in turn the ultimate detritus that is death. As we say in such common obscenities as "that doesn't mean shit" or "I don't give a shit," excremental logic is thought which uses its object in order to deny it, and dispel it as meaning-

less. Excremental logic is mindless logic which mocks the imperiousness of thought only to be mocked by it, because this logic does not have within itself any other principle than its own evacuation. The frame is Theirs, which is another way of indicating that They control whatever is emptied out, and reconstitute it for their own purposes, one term for which is "Bad Shit."

"Do you want to put this part in?" (739), Gravity's Rainbow asks at the end of a passage very near the end (it ought to be quite clear that a text of this kind is going to have a problem situating its "end"). Such a question speaks as openly as the text ever does about its equivocations concerning what to leave out and what to retain; the possibility of the reader consuming the "part" not only transfers the problematic of authority but displaces an ostensibly mindless portion under the possible agency of mind. Such second-person modes of address in the text always have this effect, and are part of the same seemingly contrary impulse to put instead everything in, such as the celebrated passage about the wasted toothpaste tubes, heaped, transformed, tessellated, and returned during the time Roger and Jessica attend church in Kent at Christmas. Both passages have to do with waste (potential and actual), and both express what I have been emphasizing as the same insistent, urgent textual logic by which the text expresses its own dissolution, thereby bringing into play an undifferentiated, non-categorical surplus of figuration taken up, or taken in, again. What accomplishes this redemption, or "return," is mind, but the prefigurative moment which enables mind cannot be allowed to exist as such because that moment is an evacuation of mind, as decisive as the body's own motion to evacuate its own wastes. The mindless moment is an excremental one because it is immediate, singular, and self-contained. In Gravity's Rainbow, on the other hand, there is very little which is self-contained, which is why the text appropriates the figure of shit but cannot be contained by it. At one point we read a "Partial List of Wishes on Evening Stars for This Period," one of which is the following: "Let me be able to take a shit soon" (553). But, though the text (so to speak) shits, and smears the results repeatedly, the action is as still to be produced as it is everywhere still

to be accomplished, reinscribed back into the condition of a wish, a possibility, an exemption from meaning, a fullness aspiring to lack, and a presence that cannot finally be pleasurable because too much has piled up either to economize or to get rid of.

Clarion University
of Pennsylvania

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 11.

² Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), 201.

³ Roger B. Henkle, "The Morning and the Evening Funnies: Comedy in Gravity's Rainbow," in Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), 276, 278.

⁴ Henkle, 286, 289.

⁵ Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, eds. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 183.

⁶ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 504. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁷ Jeffrey Stout, "What is the Meaning of a Literary Text?" New Literary History, 14, No. 1 (1982), 7.

⁸ Martin Pops, "The Metamorphosis of Shit," Salmagundi, 56 (1982), 50.

⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 148.

¹⁰ Bakhtin, 175-76.