Gravity's Rainbow: A Folkloristic Reading

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In order to lead lives of personal meaning and value, the victims of economic exploitation and military oppression in Gravity's Rainbow must strive to band together into groups whose languages and structures have not been dictated to them by the purveyors of technology and the strategists of war. Similarly, in order to read Gravity's Rainbow in a meaningful way, its would-be interpreters must liberate themselves from some of the conventional constraints governing their reading behavior, thus enabling themselves to enter into a fresh dialogue with the novel. What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that for both characters and readers a "folk consciousness" must come to supplant what may be termed, following the language of the novel, a "firm consciousness." The rewards of the former and the ill-effects of the latter--within and without the novel--will be explored in this essay.

Gravity's Rainbow chronicles a time when what we think of as "knowledge" and what we think of as "reality" have become unmoored from one another, and "beliefs" have become imposed dogmas rather than felt convictions. The imposition of these dogmas and the maintenance of an outmoded manner of perceiving the world are in the hands of often corrupt magnates of war, science, and enterprise, those who promulgate conflicts for profit and mechanize men for greater efficiency. "The War, the Empire," says the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow, "will expedite [. . .] barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide this way, and to subdivide, though its propaganda will always stress unity, alliance, pulling together. The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not even of the sort the Germans have engineered, ein Volk ein Führer--it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity."[1]

"The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness." For a folk-consciousness is predicated upon the existence of a group of people bound together by

something more than received dogma, and who relate to one another not in strictly utilitarian, denotative ways, but one whose very communality is defined and made possible by the mutual production of and participation in shared connotative meanings and forms of expression. While a folk group is traditional, it is also dynamic. Because it is by its nature relatively small in size, its members may interact with great frequency. Thus, the symbolic content and formal properties of the rituals through which this interaction is conducted and membership displayed are subject to continual reinterpretation and redesign. Ironically, despite its common association with the status quo, therefore, it is the folk or "unofficial" culture of a people which often is more viable and organic than the comparatively static, permanently inscribed "official" culture.

There is a further irony here as well. Folklore typically goes unrecorded; it is registered in the hearts and minds of those who share it, and rendering it anew comes naturally. Official culture, on the other hand--whether it be in the form of literature, or laws, or creeds, or formulae--must be inscribed at least in part because it is so easily forgotten. It follows that it is from folklore that we derive our primary identities and not, as is commonly believed, from official culture, its profundity notwithstanding. It is for this reason, according to Milan Kundera, that totalitarian regimes accomplish their objective of conformity by obliterating the memories--particularly the folk heritages--of their citizens.[2] Destroying the living connective tissue of the past creates a vacuum which may be filled with the official dehumanizing ideology of the future.

Fortunately, it is not always easy to destroy a folk group. However, folk groups are not always easy to forge either, and they are susceptible to an evolutionary pressure through which they may be transformed into something quite different from their original nature. In other words, not all communalities are folk groups. It is often the case that a number of people share an affiliation, but fail to progress to a point at which that affiliation becomes the basis for further group activity. In Gravity's Rainbow, for

example, the engineers with whom Franz Pökler labors at Peenemünde to produce the rocket seem never to merge into anything other than a loose assemblage of isolated individuals, each of whom returns to his own monastic cell and private fantasies at the end of the day. At the other end of the spectrum are those groups whose traditions become so established as to be inflexible, whose size grows to the point where remote bureaucracies come to govern them, or which generally lose their intimacy and dynamism. Such has been the fate of many sectarian movements throughout history, as those counterforces which survive initial, likely ephemerality gradually are reshaped into the very kinds of societies which generated their existence in the first place. What was fresh all too often grows stale; what begins as a folk group all too often calcifies into a firm.

This dialectic between folk- and firm-consciousness is operative throughout Gravity's Rainbow, and Pynchon presents an array of characters who occupy every conceivable position between and even beyond these polar alternatives. Potential folk groups abound: the preterite DP's, on the move all over the Zone, seeking new seeds around which they might crystallize; Pointsman and his fellow worshipers of the Book, too intellectually preoccupied, too emotionally avid ever to commune with one another instead of individually resurrecting Pavlov, their mentor safely in the grave. A cruel, calculated parody of genuine communitas is erected out of the culture of childhood, that most unselfconscious of ages: "In a corporate State, a place must be made for innocence, and its many uses. In developing an official version of innocence, the culture of childhood has proven invaluable. Games, fairy-tales, legends from history, all the paraphernalia of make-believe can be adapted and even embodied in a physical place" (419). Zwölfkinder, an amusement park, is thus constructed to provide children and their parents with an artificial sanctuary from the chaos of war; they are allowed brief annual visits so that their productivity as pawns of technology and enterprise may be extended through therapeutic, albeit defunct, rituals.

Occasionally, folk-potential is realized as an aggregate of individuals is melded into a greater whole, however fleetingly. Pirate Prentice and his cronies assemble each morning for what has become a traditional breakfast, satisfying the needs of soul as well as stomach. Like the "living genetic chain" of the "musaceous" molecules of the bananas, the linkage of men is organic, and for the moment capable of denying the presence of death lingering outside the door. Roger and Jessica, too, achieve a state of intense, albeit fragile, communion. Already scientifically inclined toward recognition of the space between zero and one, Roger realizes that he and Jessica have begun to meet somewhere between their formerly neatly bounded selves: "I'm no longer sure which of all the words, images, dreams or ghosts are 'yours' and which are 'mine.' It's past sorting out. We're both being someone new now, someone incredible. . ." (177).

One of the most striking examples of the spirit which is the essence of folk groups and which so many of the characters in Gravity's Rainbow are in quest of is manifested by the Kirghiz tribesmen. These unlettered nomads are encountered by Colonel Vaslav Tchitcherine when he journeys out into the Central Asian steppes to disseminate the New Turkic Alphabet. "He had come to give the tribesmen out here, this far out, an alphabet: it was purely speech, gesture, touch among them, not even an Arabic script to replace" (338). Tchitcherine comes upon the Kirghiz during the performance of an "ajtys" or singing-duel. A young boy and girl trade improvised verses in time to the rhythm of stringed instruments in "a mocking well-I-sort-of-like-you-even-if-there's-one-or-two-weird-things-about-you-for-instance--kind of game" (356). At times the mockery assumes a biting edge, and the emotions of the singers and their friends and families are in danger of overflowing the boundaries of the game. But the spirit of play prevails, and the contest ends in a reaffirmation of its own power to ritually unite, as the girl sings:

> Did I hear you mention a marriage?
> Here there has been a marriage--
> This warm circle of song,
> Boisterous, loud as any marriage. . . .(357)

Tchitcherine recognizes that he is witnessing a folk performance; he also "understands, abruptly, that soon someone will come out and begin to write some of these down in the New Turkic Alphabet he helped frame . . . and this is how they will be lost" (357). This is ironic, for Tchitcherine himself promptly proceeds to transcribe--in stenography, no less--the moving performance of an Aqyn, a wandering singer of the steppes. When the withered but radiant bard begins to pluck his dombra, the Kirghiz revelers settle into silence to await what is for them a reenactment of the central truth of their lives, the numinous presence of the Kirghiz Light:

> For I tell you that I have seen It
> In a place which is older than darkness,
> Where even Allah cannot reach.
> As you see, my beard is an ice-field,
> I walk with a stick to support me,
> But this light must change us to children.
>
> And now I cannot walk far,
> For a baby must learn to walk.
> And my words are reaching your ears
> As the meaningless sounds of a baby.
> For the Kirghiz Light took my eyes,
> Now I sense all Earth like a baby. (358)

At the conclusion of the song, Tchitcherine says to his traveling companion, "'Got it. [. . .] Let's ride, comrade'" (359). Of course, he has not "got it" at all, for what "it" is cannot be captured in print: while it is manifested in lyrics, it transcends its medium of expression. What Tchitcherine fails to transcribe is an attitude towards life--a sense of the past in the present, a sense of the vitality of the surroundings, a sense of the immediacy of the community--to all of which the Kirghiz, the folk, sense of self is inextricably bound.

The plight of the unsuspecting Kirghiz tribesmen is the danger, in this increasingly mobile, instrumental, rationalized universe, facing all such groups which are of human (or animal) rather than corporate or mechanical composition: they are mortal, and thus have at best but a brief hold on life. The dodoes, who exist in a kind of pacifistic "society" on the

distant island of Mauritius, have the ill-fortune not to correspond to the prevailing Christian concept of beauty; since they also lack the capacity for speech (like the pre-literate Kirghiz, they do not possess the proper currency of communication), there is "no chance of co-opting them in to what their round and flaxen invaders were calling Salvation" (110), and hence they are exterminated. Because they do possess such a potentially compromising language, some members of the Schwarzkommando, the Empty Ones led by Josef Ombindi, choose instead to extinguish themselves rather than suffer assimilation into a way of life alien to their pre-technological folk philosophy. For them, not living is an alternative more attractive than living without dignity and integrity.

A comparable decision is made by the Counterforce, that group of disaffected individuals who band together and venture into the Zone in order to locate, and presumably save, the man whose exploitation they have facilitated. In seeking Slothrop, they seek as well to restore some of the humanity and worth which has been stripped from their lives. And although they never do find Slothrop (who in any case appears to be beyond retrieval), they do, in a sense, find each other: "Could it be," Prentice ruminates, "there's something about ad hoc arrangements, like the present mission, that must bring you in touch with the people you need to be with? that more formal arrangements tend, by their nature, to separation, to loneliness?" (620).

Ad hoc versus formal; contact versus separation; spontaneity versus rigidity. Here, again (from the point of view elaborated in this essay), is the essential issue, variously phrased, of Gravity's Rainbow: the opposition between an ethical life grounded in a compassionate, vigorous, albeit ultimately ephemeral community--best exemplified by the folk group--and the exploitation of this universal need by those who stand to profit from the desperate acts of lonely women and men. Thus it is that Slothrop, motivated by longing in a hostile world, enters into transient, depraved, solipsistic affairs with Katje and Margherita Erdmann and Bianca; and that Jessica and Pökler and numerous others, lacking the anarchic bravura of Squalidozzi

and Leni and frightened by the responsibility and--even worse--the unpredictability of love, allow themselves to be seduced by the insidious regularity and familiarity of life in a Firm. In a world where what is best does not last long and what is worst is often preserved (through inscription) longer than it should be, it is, according to Pynchon, only those who are willing to risk the moment for whom the moment will be worth experiencing.

This opposition between folk- and firm-consciousness is enacted within the text; it is also carried on "outside" the text as readers attempt to pin down this protean novel with a variety of strategic holds. First-time readers of Gravity's Rainbow almost always testify to their frustration with the book as it fails to conform to their expectations: their conventional questions--questions about characters, plot, the reality of the setting, narrative voice--are not easily answered. Nor would it necessarily be productive to answer them. For while Gravity's Rainbow is admittedly tough going, the difficulty here resides perhaps more with the reader than with the novel. In the fascinating interview cited earlier, Milan Kundera commends novels such as Don Quixote and Gravity's Rainbow which defy in this manner the irresponsible, even stupid, reader. In his bluntly stated opinion,

> The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything. . . . The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead. . . all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.[3]

There might seem to be a substantial gap between the apparently harmless expectation of readers on the one hand and "the noisy foolishness of human certainties" on the other; on the contrary, there is only continuity. Expectations are formed as recognizable patterns of

behavior emerge during the course of repeated interactions among a group of people. In the case of small, folk groups these patterns are called traditions. As noted earlier, traditions are subject to revision, since members of small groups interact on a regular basis: whenever they do so, and whenever they perform for one another, they are in fact modifying their traditions, however slightly and subtly, because every traditional performance is not merely a re-duplication of an ideal, prerecorded script, but also a re-creation of a shared construct.

With the expansion of groups and accompanying decline in the frequency of interaction of their members, artistic constructs are no longer shared equally, but are instead unevenly distributed, and traditions are transformed into codified laws. In more concrete terms, this means that selected individuals are granted privileged status as encoders and decoders of art, while others do the best they can to admire and understand aesthetic products according to the rules for their "proper" evaluation and interpretation. Practically speaking, readers are taught to ask certain kinds of questions, the responses to which are perceived as "knowledge." Outside the realm of literature this same process of preordained thinking leads to the production of "truth." And when this truth becomes non-negotiable because the society which upholds it has grown too bulky or arrested in its development, then this truth becomes "the noisy foolishness of human certainties." Such proclamations often have little to do with the rhythms of life as it is lived in neighborhoods, playgrounds, pubs, and homes, and indeed wherever a dialogue of many voices yields a rich and reflective tapestry of expression.[4]

In just this way, Gravity's Rainbow invites its readers to entertain new perspectives, to try out new voices to add to its own. In Barthes' formulation, it is a "text," "structured but decentered, without closure" and thus "experienced only in an activity, a production."[5] This reenactment ("rewriting") is carried on throughout (and sometimes beyond) one's repeated engagements with the novel. It occurs in an obvious way as the reader processes, with Slothrop, the variations of the passage "You never did the

Kenosha Kid" (60-61, 70-71); less obviously, but more relentlessly, as the reader attempts to define and locate the 00000 rocket, or work through the ramifications of the title of the novel (reminiscent of Joyce's similarly provocative title Finnegans Wake); or simply in the way in which he tries to get a handle on the myriad and shifting relationships between characters. The temptation, always, is to think in reductive terms. The more difficult task is to acknowledge our own "paranoia" (our predilection for pattern over chaos), and maintain a self-reflexive, critical awareness as it shapes and is reshaped by the patterns of the novel. What emerges then for the reader, as for the characters within the novel, is yet another pattern: "a moiré, a new world of flowing shadows, interferences. . . ." (395)

As it is precisely defined, of course, this emergent discourse is not folklore. Nevertheless, it is dependent upon openness to folk-consciousness as I have employed that term in this essay: a willingness, essentially, to fashion a new, more vital, and more intimate language sensitive to the unique requirements of the situation.[6] That this language may further be appropriated as the basis for actual folk groups outside (but continuous with) the novel is evidenced by the ongoing exchange of "Zone jokes," the playing of kazoos, and the sharing of bananas by several classes of students who have participated in the experience of reading Gravity's Rainbow together. At best, they leave the novel and the class only after having created something akin to the achievement of Old Tchitcherine and the solemn Herero girl: "By the time he left, they had learned each other's names and a few words in the respective languages--afraid, happy, sleep, love . . . the beginnings of a new tongue, a pidgin which they were perhaps the only two speakers of in the world" (351). This language, shared however briefly by the most fortunate characters in Gravity's Rainbow, is a language worth knowing.

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Notes

[1] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 130-31. All further references to this text are incorporated into the body of the essay. Bracketed ellipses are mine.

[2] Kundera's position is expressed throughout his novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (New York: Penguin, 1981), and stated more explicitly in an interview of the author by Philip Roth at the conclusion of that novel.

[3] Kundera, 237.

[4] A seminal discussion of dialogism appears in M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).

[5] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), 76, 77.

[6] For a more extensive theoretical discussion of the relationship between folklore and literature, see my essay "Reading: A Folkloristic Activity," motif: international newsletter of research in folklore and literature, 5 (1983), 1, 4-5.