

Of Rockets and Sprockets, History and Mystery,  
Philology and Technology

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Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow. Ed. Charles Clerc.  
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The essays collected here, all previously unpublished, provide a multitude of contexts for interpreting Gravity's Rainbow. The contexts include history, science, technology, film, religion, psychology, metaphoric systems generally, philosophy, language, comedy. Despite the variety of approaches, though, the essays touch on a common theme: the necessary tensions between the System and anti-systems --between Newtonian and quantum physics, between straight and freak, between determinism and free will. The essays, generally persuasive readings of Gravity's Rainbow, often cover ground that has been covered elsewhere. And it might have been better to cover more new ground (more on that later). But the virtue of the volume is that it is a convenient compendium of these diverse contexts for Gravity's Rainbow.

Charles Clerc opens with an introduction that places Gravity's Rainbow in the history of the novel. And he briefly discusses such novelistic elements as character, voice, and tone--and how Pynchon violates our expectations.

Khachig Tölölyan's fine essay, situating Gravity's Rainbow in history, includes a chart of dates and places in the book and historical background on World War II. He touches on some of the same details as Steven Weisenburger in a 1979 essay in Twentieth Century Literature, but is less concerned with finding sources and more concerned with providing a historical backdrop to help the reader to appreciate the epic qualities of Gravity's Rainbow. My one quibble is that I had trouble figuring out Tölölyan's aim; he doesn't make it explicit. Instead, he addresses such issues as why Pynchon downplays our usual associations with the war--Hitler and the Holocaust--to focus on the creation of the military-industrial complex, "the real disease of our century" (56).

Alan J. Friedman provides an eminently readable account of the history of science and technology since Newton, expanding on ideas in his 1974 essay in Contemporary Literature by demonstrating how Pynchon incorporates three stages in the history of science: Newtonian mechanistic physics and the clockwork universe, nineteenth-century statistical physics and entropy, and twentieth-century quantum physics and uncertainty. Friedman also discusses the functions of scientific metaphors, including the interrogation of reality through presenting fantastical details that turn out to be factual, such as "a chemist devising the structure of benzene from a dream of a snake"(97).

Charles Clerc discusses the impact of film on Gravity's Rainbow, including cinematic techniques and metaphors, the power of the film industry, and the interpenetration of illusion and reality. His catalogue of film references covers much of the same ground as Scott Simmon's 1978 essay in Literature/Film Quarterly.

Joseph W. Slade presents a rich consideration of religion, psychology, sex, love, expanding on ideas in his 1977 essay in Critique. He touches on Calvinism, Weber, the power of language, imperialism, thermodynamics, Freud, Marcuse, Jung. He suggests that, for Pynchon, the desacralization of nature may be followed by technological remystification: though technology may be suspect, a tool of rationalization, its uncertainty restores a sacred sense of mystery and paradox. Slothrop fails as a messiah, yet characters do achieve "minor illuminations, limited victories, small mercies," compassionate moments of love (192).

Raymond M. Olderman explores the interactions between what he calls straight and freak in Gravity's Rainbow. The straight world view is that of the System, while freaks, trapped in the System, want Out. Olderman also notes that since reality ultimately eludes any system, all systems--art, politics, science--are metaphoric. But since metaphors are constantly literalized and Systematized, freaks must seek revelation, a new consciousness, continuously. Olderman's argument is sound, yet I would have appreciated more conceptual clarity: sometimes his freaks seem to be

opposed to the straights, outside the System, and sometimes, as inside-outsiders, they are themselves between inside and outside.

James W. Earl examines Pynchon's portrayal of free will and determinism, of rational and intuitive knowledge, of dissolution as a "solitary return into freedom" (244). His discussion is generally sensible, but he occasionally oversimplifies, as when he classifies Blicero as simply behavioristic, mechanistic.

Charles Russell explores the paradoxes of language, and meaning systems generally, which can rigidify perspectives but also overcome rigidification; words both point to the thing named and intervene between us and the thing. He situates Gravity's Rainbow in the context of self-reflexive, self-deconstructive postmodernism, in the Counterforce to the literary System.

Roger B. Henkle provides an illuminating study of the uses of comedy in Gravity's Rainbow, likewise situating the book in a literary context. Comedy allows a "balance between Pynchon's seriousness about paranoia and the control mechanisms of modern corporate existence, and the objectivity he must have, as an artist, in order not to be victimized by his own material" (274). The Zone, in fact, becomes a kind of green world. And early in Gravity's Rainbow, comic metaphor discharges the tensions of rigid ordering; later, comic improvisation becomes an ordering gesture in response to manic disorder. Occasionally Henkle misinterprets details: he implies, for instance, that the Hereros all participate in the cult of the Empty Ones, and thus he ignores the distinction between Enzian and Ombindi. Still, such lapses do not nullify Henkle's thought-provoking comments on comedy.

Each essay thus offers a useful context for Gravity's Rainbow. But not the only contexts. And now I'll play the reviewer's game of what-else-could-have-been-included.

One omission--and here I get on my soapbox--is the lack of a feminist perspective. When I first glanced through the table of contents, I thought, "Oh. No women critics." And that lack is symptomatic of a

larger lack. True, some of the included critics touch on feminist concerns. Olderman, for instance, identifies the System with Patriarchy and notes how men characters are more identified with the System and how women can be agents of change (and he also uses the least sexist language). Yet more can be done. Early feminist critics like Catherine Stimpson and Marjorie Kaufman have noted that Pynchon portrays some sympathetic women characters, such as Geli and Leni (curiously--significantly--I find Leni more positive than Slade and Henkle do), though the women tend to fulfill stereotypic roles. And the System Pynchon wants to overcome is clearly patriarchal. But in addition, might Pynchon be in a position analogous to that of many women authors? In countering patriarchal plots (both literary and conspiratorial), does Pynchon, like many women authors, attempt new forms that the literary establishment is reluctant to accept? Or does Pynchon attempt forms that are acceptable because they are postmodernist, tending toward self-reflexiveness rather than alternate plot lines (Russell's catalogue of postmodernists significantly includes no women)? . . . Does Pynchon, like many women authors, stress the importance of non-logical connections? Or are women writers more likely to stress enabling, human connections, rather than threatening, paranoid ones?

I know, I know. That's another book, not this one. And this one is not significantly worse than most other books in omitting a feminist perspective. In fact, it's a fine book, providing lots of helpful perspectives. I've waited this long. I can keep waiting. But not too long.

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