

The Ellipsis as Architectonic
in Gravity's Rainbow

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Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (New York: The Viking Press, 1973) contains a huge number of ellipses. Of the novel's 760 pages, only 9.7% do not contain ellipses.¹ Some pages contain up to ten sets of ellipses. Such textual tactics in the modern novel probably find their origin in Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, which contains as many dashes as there are ellipses in Pynchon's novel.² Sterne's work is filled with asterisks, as in Vol. 5, Chapters 31-32, Vol. 6, Chapter 39, and Vol. 9, Chapter 20. The last two pages of Vol. 1, Chapter 12, are black, and Vol. 9, Chapters 18-19, are blank pages. Vol. 6, Chapter 40, contains a diagrammatic representation of the novel's non-linear structure which simply consists of a series of wavy lines. Yet one expects such textual distortions in Tristram Shandy because they are clearly part of its architectonic. Based on the frequency of its use in Gravity's Rainbow, we can speculate that the ellipsis is an architectonic for Pynchon, too.

Speculating about the motivation behind such a use of the ellipsis is the issue here. Pynchon uses it as a punctuation device in many of the novel's conversations to give the effect of vocal uncertainty. It is also used as a punctuation device in passages which show the workings of a character's mind, where it creates a type of interior monologue which is a series of meditative pauses rather than a stream of consciousness. (Mark Richard Seigel makes a similar claim in his work Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow.) Thomas H. Schaub stresses the deliberate inconclusiveness of Pynchon's aesthetic stance,³ showing how his prosody precludes the existence of binary choices, and the very ambiguity of sentences containing ellipses lends support to this idea. When this device appears as punctuation, a sentence can contain a whole array of meanings which are unspecified but which can enhance the content of a sentence to a

great extent, depending on the imagination of the reader. The reader, in a sense, "fills in the dots" with whatever information he desires, information which may or may not be applicable to the context of the sentence.

Perhaps the most important use of the ellipsis concerns its ability to create a dramatic pause. Gravity's Rainbow is a novel which is built around moments of dramatic tension, when one plane of existence is momentarily illuminated by another. Characters sense parallels between facets of existence which are not causally connected (in mathematical terms, as Douglas Hofstadter points out in his recent work Godel, Escher, Bach: A Metaphorical Fugue on Minds and Machines, this is called discovering an "isomorphism"). Used as this type of structural device, the ellipsis functions as an architectonic.

Douglas Fowler notes this aspect of the use of the ellipsis in Pynchon's work: "Ellipsis dots indicate a shift to a new series of images, and these appeal to our paranoia."⁴ He calls the architectonic of Gravity's Rainbow--based on moments of dramatic tension which are created by a frequent use of the ellipsis--"Gothic": "Gothic effects, especially gothic effects as perceived by witnesses whose sensibilities are too delicate or perverse to deal with them, are fundamental in Pynchon."⁵ Since all of Pynchon's work--as is shown by the elusiveness of his character V., by the desire of Oedipa Maas for hierophany, and by the gothic quality of Gravity's Rainbow--is concerned with the moments when our world of mundane reality receives communications from some "Other Kingdom," Fowler's use of the term "Gothic" to connote "supernatural" in reference to Gravity's Rainbow seems appropriate.

The ellipsis, used on 90.3% of the pages in the novel, is Pynchon's way of showing us how the imminence of revelation is omnipresent. In fact, as the ubiquity of the ellipsis makes so evident in its function as an architectonic, one can see how the potential for a vision of some Other Kingdom is Pynchon's aesthetic.

Notes

¹ For the sake of statistical purity, I list the following pages of the Viking Edition of Gravity's Rainbow as the ones not containing any ellipses: 9, 20, 26-27, 39, 45, 60, 75, 83, 85, 116, 187, 200, 212, 222, 245-46, 289, 293, 295, 305, 307, 313, 316, 337, 358, 363, 372, 387, 398, 427, 431-43, 445, 448-49, 480, 492, 504-05, 534, 550, 553, 557-59, 568, 581-82, 587, 589, 593, 604, 607, 609, 611, 614-15, 638, 641, 645, 651, 653-54, 657, 674, 680-81, 700-01, 706, 755.

² My source for Sterne is The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, ed. James Aiken Work (New York: Odyssey Press, 1940).

³ See Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1981).

⁴ Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), 27.

⁵ Fowler, 33.