

Baedeker to Pynchon

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A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow. By Douglas Fowler. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Press, 1980. 297 pp. Cloth, \$18.95, Paper, \$10.00.

Just as Gravity's Rainbow generates inevitable comparisons with Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, a reader's guide to Pynchon's novel must stand comparison with such monuments of Joyce criticism as Stuart Gilbert's James Joyce's Ulysses and Campbell and Robinson's A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake. In its introductory chapters (the length of a short book), A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow compares favorably: the first-time reader of Pynchon's encyclopedic novel will find handles with which to heft the giant package, and the more advanced reader will find new trails into and out of the labyrinth. Douglas Fowler's attitude toward his subject, however, is a far cry from the reverence of most Joyce critics, and unfortunately he falters at times with detailed annotation. Unlike the exhaustive information in, say, Gifford and Seidman's Notes for Joyce, the running glosses here are sometimes inaccurate or thin. For example, the comment on an allusion to Tchaikovsky, "Tchaikovsky offers yet another musical reference," doesn't really provide a reader much help. Similarly "Si me quieres escribir" is translated but not identified as a song from the Spanish Civil War, and Utgarthaloki is placed in Norse mythology, but without an adequate explanation of the particular appropriateness of a character's having this name. Readers with special interests will notice their own categories of thin commentary; I found the discussion of film--Abbott and Costello are repeatedly invoked as a universal standard of the comic in movies--particularly sketchy. But however disappointing the commentary, one finds the broader critical features of the book stimulating and challenging.

Before we proceed, a few fulminations for Ardis Press. Years ago, desirous of catching all the jokes in The Crying of Lot 49, I made the mistake of asking a middle-aged Hispanic woman, proprietress of one of those "Cuban-Chinese" restaurants frequently seen in

New York City, if chingado was a Spanish word. She nearly threw me out. I was asking, of course, about K. da Chingado and Company, publisher of Oedipa Maas's paperback anthology of Jacobean plays, and I'm afraid Emory Bortz's response to that book ("Misprints. Gah," he sputters) came to mind as I read A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow, for the printing here is also distressingly chingado. The misprints are numerous and distracting. One becomes involuntarily fascinated with the little transpositional dance executed by the "e" and the "i" in various appearances of the name Weissmann. By contrast, the "e" and the "i" don't dance at all in Freida, Speiler, Kreigsmarine, and Festspeilhaus, though the second "u" in Lünebürg is as likely to appear as an "e" as not. The opera by Rossini turns up now as Il Baberia di Sivile, now as Il Barbier di Sivillia, but never as Il Barbiere di Siviglia. At a certain point one begins neurotically counting: I found about a hundred such misprints in the last half of the book.

The oversights of the proofreader adumbrate those of the copy editor, who fails to rescue the author from the kind of minor mistakes that will crop up in any book labored over, as this one was, for a period of years. Alpdücken, for example, is translated "Nightmare" on one occasion and "Nightmares" on another; Penelope is now Jessica's niece, now her sister; and Hugh Godolphin, the Antarctic explorer in V., finds Vheissuvian spider monkeys at the wrong pole. But at a certain point--when the errors mount up, and the carelessness becomes increasingly reprehensible--it is the author who must be taken to task. When Pynchon's famous opening line, "A screaming comes across the sky," is glossed "The rocket is falling ever closer," one wonders at the failure to consider the possibility that the rocket has already fallen, since it travels faster than the speed of sound and strikes before it is heard. Even if the rocket, at this point, figures only in a dream, the dreamer has recently been briefed on the characteristics of this weapon. Indeed, a case can be made for the novel's beginning seconds after the impact at hand on the last page. Gravity's Rainbow would thus be an elaborate version of Kekulé von Stradonitz's dream of the serpent devouring its tale--an oneiric meditation, in

other words, comparable to HCE's Viconian dream in Finnegans Wake.

Other mistakes are minor but persistent. Don Giovanni is by Mozart, not Rossini. Tancredi is not opera buffa. Elizabeth, in Tannhäuser, does not commit suicide. The word "necropolis" is not Pynchon's coinage. Morra is not an Italian card game (it is played, like "Scissors, Rock, Paper," with the fingers; because of the violent altercations it causes, it is outlawed in Italy). The "alb" in which Byron the Bulb is wrapped is a clerical vestment, not a dawn song. Moira Shearer, not Norma, starred in The Red Shoes. There is, finally, no German expressionist movie entitled Attila. The Attila Pökler sleepily watches appears in Lang's Die Nibelungen, and this is the movie that runs four and a half hours, not Metropolis.

The translations of Pynchon's many foreign phrases are also occasionally a bit suspect. Though one is impressed by Fowler's resourcefulness in translations from the Herero, the translations from other languages tend toward the heteroclitite and sometimes the dead wrong. The name of the Toiletship, Rücksichtslos, means "Inconsiderate," but Fowler translates it "Lack of Hindsight." Such a reading is possible if presented as an explication of etymological wordplay--not, however, as translation. Less excusable is the neglect of the wordplay in "Säure" and "Morituri" or the rendering of Gruss Gott, an alpine greeting, as "Great God." Sinverguenza, which can be congratulatory (before intercourse) or reproachful (after), comes out as the tortured "Outrageously depraved one!" Hier, in "hieropons," is glossed but not the equally important pons. "Mille-Feuilles à la Fondue de la Cervele," surely no more than a joke at the expense of pretentious cuisine (like S. J. Perelman's "Isle Flottante de Ma Tante Leonie"), is surmised to be "a Genoese pastry made with hearts of palm ('Cervele')." "Brain Fondue" would be closer.

Elsewhere Fowler makes a point of not bluffing: "I don't know who the 'Kenosha Kid' is," "'Little Pard' baffles me." But some of these shrugs could have been dispensed with--and other glosses could have been fuller--if the author were more up-to-date on Pynchon criticism. He could have cited Richard Poirier's

plausible suggestion that the Kenosha Kid refers to Orson Welles (born in Kenosha, Wisconsin), and he could have explained the term "175's" for homosexual detainees as a reference to Article 175 of the criminal code that dictated their incarceration. These oversights would scarcely matter, except that they seem to reflect a somewhat overly selective bibliography. Although it includes Jules Siegel's scandal-mongering in Playboy, it omits Mark Siegel's Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (1978)--the only book, before this one, to take the single novel as its subject. Joseph Slade's Thomas Pynchon (1974) appears, but not William Plater's The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (1978). These omissions cannot be blamed on the publisher's taking an unconscionable time in bringing out the book, since the bibliography includes items as late as 1979. The point here is not that the secondary bibliography in a book such as this one ought to be comprehensive, but that Fowler has neglected some aspects of the critical background on Gravity's Rainbow to the detriment of his own critical performance.

Yet notwithstanding its errors and omissions, Fowler's book is an important contribution to Pynchon criticism. Its virtues lie chiefly in the general introduction, in which the author argues (1) that Gravity's Rainbow is a gothic novel, (2) that the technique of its creator must be understood as something closer to modernist poetics than to traditional canons of narrative, and (3) that meaning and value in the novel inhere in "polarized codes." According to Fowler, Pynchon has assembled Gravity's Rainbow with an eye to the effects of juxtaposition and without much concern for the shibboleths of fiction-writing: action that grows out of character and plot that relies on organic development rather than coincidence. Where the growth and interrelation of characters occupy the foreground in a conventional novel or play, it is the relationship between speaker and audience that counts in a poem, and Gravity's Rainbow is in effect a vast, intricate poem whose departures from novelistic decorum are calculated. Related to this thesis are the observations in a subsection entitled "Style, Motif, Structure," in which the author explains that "the nervous system of

Pynchon's novel is . . . composed of webs of meaning interwoven into each other to create complex structures of suggestion, symbolism, and coded value, and we must be attentive to these chains of meaning as we read." Fowler's idea here--that "the essence of Pynchon's style is the use of polarized codes"--is a helpful formulation, though to my mind it tends to be invoked reductively. We sometimes lose sight of the webs and complex structures as Fowler's hermeneutics becomes mere labeling: "Bounce's IG Farben Award signifies he's a bad guy," "Säure is a good guy," "Bloat's sobriety marks him off as a bad guy," and so forth until one is reminded of 1066 and All That, the popular burlesque of the schoolboy's examination essay ("the Protestant Reformation was a Good Thing because . . .").

Fowler's description of Gravity's Rainbow as a gothic novel provides a challenging and stimulating explanation for aspects of that work that have occasioned some controversy. One follows Fowler's impressive cataloging of supernatural features with increasing amazement that Pynchon could ever have been read as a glum empiricist, a chronicler of the deprivations of entropy. Fowler differs implicitly with critics who see Pynchon's supernaturalism as evidence of a refusal on his part to eschew transcendental mythologies and explicitly with those who see his sensationalism as a device in the service of a humanistic literary purpose. "The sensational and lurid nature of [this] writer's work has been reflexively diminished by our fixation with regarding serious art as being intrinsically beyond violence and grotesquery for its own sake"; moreover, "a glance at the astonishing amount of sensationalism in Pynchon's fiction tells us a good deal about his sensibility and leads us toward conclusions very difficult to explain within the humanistic clichés and unconvincing pieties of contemporary criticism." One senses, behind statements like these, the Nabokovian notion that ideational content somehow spoils art. "Remember that mediocrity thrives on 'ideas,'" Nabokov once told an interviewer. "Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories." Though Fowler points out the prominence of sensational, gothic elements in the most

serious literature (a passage on the gothic features of The Waste Land is particularly illuminating), he seems finally to want us to see Pynchon as a gothicist whose sensationalism is, as entertainment, its own justification, rather than as the serious artist whose gothicism serves higher ends. In support of his argument that Pynchon is less earnest than is commonly thought, Fowler adduces the author's attention, in a novel ostensibly about World War II, to fictional grotesquery like Blicero's sadism and Brigadier Pudding's coprophagy--instead of to real, historical horrors like Auschwitz. Emphasizing Pynchon's adeptness with the gothicist's bag of tricks, Fowler casts doubts on the ultimate seriousness of a book like Gravity's Rainbow.

Fowler's ideas will generate some interesting discussion, for they are fascinating, forcefully argued, and surely controversial. I for one am intrigued by what Fowler has to say, though I feel that, carried away by his argument, he has erred in attempting to expel Pynchon from the august company--that of Melville, Cervantes, and Rabelais--in which recent criticism has placed him. Fowler's revisionism seems at times disingenuous, as if he means, under the mantle of Nabokovian iconoclasm, to end up characterizing Pynchon as little more than a sleight-of-pen artist, an entertainer incapable of the mythic depths of a Coleridge, a Melville, or a Mary Shelley. One of the reasons Fowler's book gives this impression may be the tendency of the author to patronize his subject. Fowler starts by frequently drawing our attention to what, by common critical standards, are flaws in Pynchon's technique: characters are introduced briefly and abandoned for hundreds of pages (or for good); situations are developed, then abandoned. These "flaws," he explains, are in fact features of a novelistic technique that is original, not to be judged by ordinary standards (it is, as explained above, "poetic," rather than conventionally narrational). But then something odd happens. As he continues to point out technical problems, he seems less and less willing or able to explain them. Eventually he abandons the attempt and starts merely complaining about aspects of the book he finds inferior, or thinks others will find inferior. Thus we hear about "the

most ridiculous scene in the entire novel," "signs of author's fatigue," Pynchon's "indecisiveness, his revisions, his second thoughts," "the poverty of Pynchon's resources," "Pynchon's weaknesses," and "the queer singularity and arbitrariness of the motives he visits on his creatures, the psychological murkiness of individual impulses, the fancy talk that leads nowhere." And we've merely scratched the surface of what seems more and more like contempt masquerading as critical tough-mindedness ("in learning to read his work," says Fowler at the outset, "we should never forget his limitations or confuse a lack of interest or discipline on his part with a failure of perception on ours"). Statements like the following are everywhere in the book: "Pynchon closes out the scene with a weak joke," "Pynchon evidently can't think of anything much for him to do," "Pynchon is emptying his notebooks," "Boredom and irritation . . . clearly vitiate a good many scenes in GR," "now and then we have to be a little patient while [Pynchon] rummages around for another other-worldly effect," "No editor ever seems to have asked this writer to take anything out," and "My guess is that the detailed and bookish information about Argentina . . . may once have been the preliminary notes for a novel or story that Pynchon intended to write. . . . it stinks of the lamp. . . ."

No one will accuse Fowler of being a Gravity's Rainbow Kultist. I suppose a certain amount of skepticism is healthy, since many of Pynchon's readers do tend toward hero-worship, but Fowler overdoes it and eventually generates more doubts about his own resources than about Pynchon's. Nevertheless, the book deserves attention and will, I think, spark a good deal of profitable debate. Its introductory essay can and should be read for its valuable insights and stimulating arguments. Although the page-by-page glosses that follow are too riddled with errors and oversights to be strongly recommended, the Pynchon tyro who wants quick and easy information about some of Pynchon's esoterica will be reasonably well-served if occasionally misinformed. Not that some of the entries aren't quite good, for Fowler is a master of the concise, even epigrammatic definition: "A mantra is a prayer that intensifies and extends

the edges of consciousness," "a 'ratchet' is a gear that can advance but not reverse." The little essays on Manes, the Cathari, and Samuel Maharero are filled with concise information, and I learned a great deal from the explication of the wind-motif that figures in all of Pynchon's books. There are also good definitions or discussions of Gödel's Theorem, the delta-t, the naif-hero in Pynchon, the Tarot, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival. In short, a book in which much is to be disputed, and much is to be learned.

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