

On Moral Fiction: One Use of Gravity's Rainbow

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John Gardner seems not to like Gravity's Rainbow very much, although how much he dislikes it, and exactly why, is difficult to tell.¹ In some places he seems to dislike it less, in other places more. Sometimes he links Pynchon's name with writers of whom he generally approves--Bunyan, Swift (OMF, 108)--at other times, with writers of whom he heartily disapproves--Barth, Gass (OMF, 130). I take my cue, however, from a fairly unequivocal passage:

We may defend Gravity's Rainbow as a satire, but whether it is meant to be satire or sober analysis is not clear. It is a fact that, even to the rainbow of bombs said to be circling us, the world is not as Pynchon says it is. That may not matter in this book--the reader must judge--but it would be disastrous in a book impossible to read as satire. (OMF, 196)

Gardner is improvising a bit freely here on Pynchon's rainbow motif--who says we are circled by a "rainbow of bombs"? certainly not Pynchon--but that is not the point I wish to take him up on. Neither do I mean to debate the propriety of reading Gravity's Rainbow as a satire. Rather, I wish to challenge Gardner's contention that Gravity's Rainbow cannot be read as "sober analysis," however it might have been intended, because "the world is not as Pynchon says it is." Gravity's Rainbow, we are told, is irresponsible toward the very least of the varieties of Truth which Gardner requires of fiction, namely, truth-to-context, truth-to-things-as-they-really-are. It is, of course, a cliché of criticism, and one which Gardner himself is not ashamed to repeat, that being untrue to things-as-they-are is fiction's way of being strictly truthful, indeed of being truer than the unvarnished truth. I mean to show that this is the case with Gravity's Rainbow, in very concrete and particular instances.

R. V. Jones' The Wizard War: British Scientific Intelligence 1939-1945 (in Great Britain: Most Secret War) is not a book which could conceivably appear in any bibliography of Pynchon's supposed sources for Gravity's Rainbow. The dates are wrong: published

in 1978, it could hardly have been consulted by Pynchon in preparing a novel already published in 1973. Nevertheless, it should be required reading for Pynchon specialists for the light it sheds on the whole nexus of war, intelligence, and seminal technologies which is Pynchon's theme, and not least for what it can tell us about the functioning (and malfunctioning) of real wartime bureaucracies. Now Professor of Natural Philosophy at Aberdeen, R. V. Jones in a sense was British Scientific Intelligence 1939-45. Jones, it appears, recognized earlier than almost anyone else the dangerous gap in Britain's wartime intelligence apparatus, improvised a Scientific Intelligence Service to close that gap, and maneuvered it successfully among the competing claims and jealousies of other intelligence-gathering agencies down to the end of the war, meanwhile helping to discover and counter the Germans' offensive and defensive radar systems and the V-weapons. The picture of the author-hero which emerges from this account is a sort of cross between Mr. Pointman and Roger Mexico, half dedicated positivist and half "30-year-old innocent. . . mak[ing] his way in the city."²

No surprise, then, that The Wizard War illuminates certain aspects of Gravity's Rainbow. What is surprising is that the converse is also true--Pynchon's supposedly fabulous and untrue-to-life fiction in its turn illuminates certain aspects of Jones' factual account. Now, so far as this reader can tell, Jones is as scrupulous a recorder of his times as could be hoped for, so it is not a question here of gross inaccuracies or outright fabrications. But he is also necessarily a limited observer, as he would be the first to admit, limited by the very things which make him such a well-qualified witness--the central role he played, his insider's perspective, his allegiances and animosities. Sometimes this results in astonishing oversights, a failure to draw obvious conclusions. Or perhaps they are only obvious from the perspective of someone free to speculate about the facts, an outsider rather than an insider, a fabulator rather than a historian.

Jones mentions a near-breakdown of Anglo-American cooperation over nuclear energy development, attributable to the Americans' suspicions that commercial in-

terests counted for more with the British than military interests did:

I could to some extent sympathize with American suspicions, for in the Tube Alloys [nuclear energy project] outer office the first thing that greeted a visitor was a large wall map of Britain divided up into the I.C.I. sales divisions, its presence in fact signifying nothing more sinister than that [Wallace] Akers and [Michael] Perrin [prominent figures in the project] were I.C.I. employees seconded to the Government.³

Signifying something very sinister indeed, if one happens to be predisposed to find in Icy Eye and its cognates (IG Farben, Shell, GE, etc.) the "model for the very structure of nations" (GR, 349), as Wimpey the V-Mann and his creator, Thomas Pynchon, are. From a paranoid point-of-view, for Jones to shrug off the Americans' justified queasiness so lightly appears unbelievably naive, but then again, the paranoid point-of-view is not one which Jones holds. For him, Akers and Perrin were trusted colleagues and only incidentally I.C.I. employees, and the Icy Eye itself was as disinterestedly dedicated to winning the war as any other institution in British society. One cannot help but wonder whether a dose of Pynchon's irresponsibly speculative paranoia might not have stood Jones in good stead, if not in his practical dealings with I.C.I. as intelligence chief, then at least in his capacity as historian thirty years after the fact. Wordsworth is supposed to have remarked that Robert Southey might have been a better poet if he had received a bite from the madman Blake. Something along the same lines might be said of the eminently sane R. V. Jones and the paranoid Thomas Pynchon.

Nowhere would such a bite have benefited Jones more than when he recalls how a Norwegian agent responded to a request for information about the German heavy water plant:

Yes, he would answer our questions if we could guarantee that our interest was genuine, and that it had not been inspired by Imperial Chemical Industries. . .

What does Jones make of his agent's strange proviso?

Nothing whatsoever. Does it even cross his mind that there is something queer about a Norwegian partisan's worrying more about I.C.I. than about the Nazis? Not for a minute; he only chuckles over the punch-line:

. . . for, he went on--and I loved him for this--
'remember, blood is thicker even than heavy
water!' (WW, 206)

As humor goes, this is pretty black, almost worthy of Pynchon himself. But Jones, not being Pynchon, that is, not being paranoid, fails to detect any pattern in all this, and we learn nothing further about this agent's paranoia, its possible justifications, whether it was shared by others--nothing except his name and the fact of his death in action.

Douglas Fowler has recently reminded us that Pynchon's conspiracy-obsessed characters are not actually paranoids after all, for the conspiracies they project are really out there.⁴ Just because you're paranoid (Proverbs for Paranoids, 6?) doesn't mean that people aren't out to get you. By the same token, just because Pynchon plays fast and loose with his facts, projecting patterns well in excess of what those facts will sustain, does not mean that there may not be an element of truth in his paranoid fantasies which "normal" observers, caught up in immediate events--even scrupulously honest observers like R. V. Jones--might miss. Granted that Gravity's Rainbow is at best a distorting lens, and not the clear pane of glass, transparent to things-as-they-are, which Gardner seems to require; nevertheless, we regularly use distorting lenses to correct our distorted natural vision, one astigmatism cancelling out the other.

If this does not qualify as "sober analysis," I don't know what does.

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Notes

- 1 On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978).
- 2 Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 637.
- 3 The Wizard War: British Scientific Intelligence 1939-1945 (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1978), 474.

4 A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), 16.