

Pynchon and Visible Language: Ecriture

Remapping and paranoia have been a growing national preoccupation ever since the assassination of John Kennedy. Each scandal from the Warren Report to the Energy Crisis spawns its official discourse of disconnection: one assassin, no plot, no foreign collusion followed by the counter text of maze and web, unthinkable conspiracy connecting seemingly separate and adversary power centers. In monstrous *bricolage* we try to make a model of our cage as, reduced from citizens to consumers we are relocated and distributed as controlled substances so as never to be able to draw the wiring diagram of the power grid behind the TV tubes, the rocket tubes, behind the backs of our heads.

This is all in the spirit of Thomas Pynchon's work in which whole regions have been annexed to the novel that extend the notion of comparative literature to the French concept of intertextuality. This is especially true in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).¹ Technology, mathematics, chemistry, and economics coexist with the most impudent and shrill texts of popular culture not to mention the marginal ones of pornography and sado-masochism. This list does not begin to account for the colors in *Rainbow* which is an aggregate, a conjunction of particulars more complicated than the rocket mechanism or multinational corporate plots described in its pages. The conventional signs of the literary: the hero, the quest, meditations on the human condition although present are no longer at the center but are pushed to the side, scattered and bracketed by the machining energy of things and systems, the glimmer of silver screens.

The silent moment of inscription comes faster than the speed of sound, before it, a phenomenon noted by Londoners during World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The difference between the V-1 and the V-2 rockets was that the noise of the arrival of the V-1 preceded its strike and the V-2, traveling faster than sound, was heard incoming after its impact. So it is with the displacement of the subject in recent French texts: the anteriority of the symbolic realm, the code, makes the speaking subject's arrival in language always too late, an instant replay masquerading as presence. Pynchon's world dramatizes the idea of systems programming a human reality in an iconography of comic book vividness, as arbitrary as it is grotesque and terrible.

This street level semiotics manifests itself as paranoia in which signs of plot are everywhere, everything is connected, no message is wasted, no logo, acronym or graffito goes unread. The whole world becomes the visible language, signs of invisible structures, images projected in a darkened theater. The suspicion grows that the most gripping realities and issues are a montage of systematic illusion on the sprocket wheels of a projector that rachets away our lives in the service of one rocket state or another.

The rocket functions in Pynchon's text as does the phallus in the work of Jacques Lacan: it designates the tyranny of a signifier taken for the thing itself.² The rocket struggles against the force of attraction by which terrestrial bodies tend to fall towards the center of the earth, as if in the orgasm of burn-out it could break through into the void of the absolute. The trail of its components scattered on impact, or from in-flight explosion, provides a spoor of hardware, a text to decipher, leading at the end of the war back to the points of assembly.

Gravity's Rainbow disintegrates and scatters like its rockets falling back not to the earth but the page. The rocket's promise of bliss and oblivion, freedom from a life exiled in signs is not kept. The dissemination of the

rocket in the text reminds us that to be obsessed with death is not to realize that we are already on the other side; it suffices to turn the page, death is in life the very possibility of the imagination.

"The "Evacuation proceeds, but it's all theater," Pynchon tells us on the opening page of *Rainbow* and on the last we are in an old movie theater, "Come-on! Start the *show!* Come-on! Start the *show!* The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we) to tell which before the darkness swept in." Not everyone is at the movies, however, and the centrality of the rocket as the spearhead of the Western death trip is displaced by attention to marginal debris. Pynchon takes us from roadsides to desk drawers, sifting bits and pieces, naming, noting, cataloging and caring as if the wasted, the scattered and passed over prevailed. Rocket cosmology, on the other hand, is the sign of the erect elect, triumphant technology, the global reach of corporate muscle pushing aside the impotent, the wasted and weak. As a tyrannical signifier the rocket/phallus connects the oedipally triangulated private person with a dream of transcendental omnipotence without his ever having to leave the shadows of the theater.

The paranoia produced by this direct line between the cave of private lack and guilt and dreams of aggression and destruction characterize the fragmented societies of late monopoly capitalism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *L'Anti-Oedipe (The Anti-Oedipus)*, shows how capitalism and the middle class have promoted the abstractions of computability, equivalence of exchange, and scientific objectivity. Communication in the capitalist state does not signify something that must be believed but indicates what is going to be done.³ The information needed to run the market place is stripped of its signifying and ideally becomes efficient point signs of no figurative value, the invisible memories of computers and tapes.

Visible language is the calligraphy of the world before it is discarded as a waste of time in the name of computability and objectivity. Visible language is not a nostalgic attempt to bring back the sacred or to re-invent magic. It is the revolutionary schizophrenic answer to official paranoia. In Pynchon's novel there appears to be a struggle between the language of cause and effect and one of meandering nomination of the things of the world without priority of hierarchy. *Mindless Pleasures* was to have been the first title of *Gravity's Rainbow*, suggesting a zest for doing needless things, punctuating the flux of life, forgetting the anxiety of the race for profit and advantage. It is visible language finally because there is no higher transcendent meta-language, no invisible signified. The real obscenities in *Gravity's Rainbow* are those visions of supreme values outside the text of life for which the rocket reaches and strains leaving in its wake evacuation, waste, and destruction not only of the landscape but of the intimate territories of the embattled paranoid private citizen in his theater of shadows.

In this respect Pynchon's novel can be read along with *L'Anti-Oedipe* as the making visible of an oppressive ideology, of the destructive myths that make us ignore signs of life as we remain enslaved to a vision of unscrambled and unscrambled redemption. The Pynchon themes of remapping, paranoia, and rocket/phallus fixation parallel roughly the vision Deleuze and Guattari have of capitalism decoding and deterritorializing all codes and signs except those of wealth and power and then recoding the flux with images to colonize the consumer with symbols of the property and properties he must serve to be

free of guilt and want. The authors extend the Oedipal triangle to sum up those reactionary formations that produce an individual obsessed with an unlimited need for self-consolidation, to be one of the elect and not one of the dispersed and passed over. This theater of guilt and bad conscience is eloquently evoked by Deleuze and Guattari and parallels Pynchon's demonstration of how men are colonized in their most intimate thoughts. Reality is increasingly not objective and natural but arranged—by whom and for what?

Pynchon's characters become one dimensional images spliced together on the cutting room floor of the text and then projected on the walls of the Oedipal cave where our attention is riveted on an unbearable catalog of the myths that have screened us from a full range of life and possibility. The damage of intimate rocketry is assessed in an extraordinarily eloquent passage at the end of the novel:

"The Oedipal situation in the Zone these days is terrible. There is no dignity. The mothers have been masculinized to old worn moneybags of no sexual interest to anyone, and yet here are their sons, still trapped inside the inertias of lust that are 40 years out of date. The fathers have no power today and never did, but because 30 years ago we could not kill them, we are condemned now to the same passivity, the same masochist fantasies *they* cherished in secret, and worse, we are condemned in our weakness to impersonate men of power our own infant children must hate . . . So generation after generation of men in love with pain and passivity serve out their time in the Zone, silent, redolent of faded sperm, terrified of dying, desperately addicted to the comforts others sell them, however useless, ugly or shallow, willing to have life defined for them by men whose only talent is for death." (747)

The way out is the way in, "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*," Pynchon tells us in the beginning and, whether it be the odor of bananas frying for breakfast or the life of a lightbulb, one almost needs peripheral vision to keep track of all the activity going on in the margins, all the loose ends and debris. These do not add up to any mass nor any statistical significance nor even serve any symbolic end. As it goes along, and as long as it goes along, without goal or purpose, this pulse of desire pushes back the tyranny of limit and expression. This is of course the activity of the *machines désirantes*, the desiring machines described by Deleuze and Guattari, and can as well account for the seemingly inexhaustible collection of odd objects, excursions, puns, and distracting asides leading nowhere, that have no purpose to instruct, but as visible language become visible delight. The tactile experience of *écriture* is one in which we take our place neither before or after the text but in-between to enjoy the word not as messenger but as a found object which we collect and caress because it fits like a pebble in the hand.

The temptation, and may have succumbed to it, is to read Pynchon as part of what Michel Pierrssens called in another context, "A network of semiotic surveillance . . . progressively extending itself to remote, sign resistant areas."⁴ Pierrssens's resistance to the all encompassing pretensions of semiotics, "its potential evolution towards a totalitarian language,"⁵ is certainly echoed in Pynchon's work where it becomes the comic and frightening spectacle of paranoid systems spiraling out of control appropriating all phenomena in a frenzied quest for the truth. Jean-François Lyotard in a recent article entitled "De L'Apathie Théorique" (On Theoretical Apathy), says that the moment has come to interrupt the terror of theory. He reminds us that desire for the truth is inscribed in even our most uncontrolled use of the language to the point

where all discourse seems to deploy naturally its pretention to say the truth by a sort of irremediable vulgarity. Lyotard hopes that the theoretical will become again a genre among others, displaced from the position of mastery and domination that it has occupied at least since Plato. "Let the truth," Lyotard says, "become an affair of style."⁶

In Pynchon's text theory abounds but it occupies the same plane as the collections of spare parts, the comic book characters, the found objects by the roadside. The radical egalitarianism of Pynchon's embrace displaces the literary and the theoretical as well as the private and proper. We don't know what country we are in anymore, what zone, but in the waste of our vaulting dreams life spring up among the ruins, meandering and prevailing in the imprint of the rocket's passage.

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NOTES

¹*Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking Press, 1973); all future references will be given in the text.

²*Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

³*Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1972).

⁴"Introduction," *Sub-Stance*, No. 10 (1974), p. 1.

⁵"Introduction," p. 1

⁶"De l'apathie théorique," *Critique*, No. 333 (February 1975), p. 254.