

Charles Clerc, ed.

APPROACHES TO GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

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Reviewed by: Sanford S. Ames

It has been ten years since the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*; its formidable reputation and that of its author, Thomas Pynchon, are now internationally established and continue to grow. We reread *Gravity's Rainbow* today with particular urgency; the novel speaks to our vision of nuclear Armageddon and to its origins as no other text does. Pynchon makes the most of the present peril to read telltale signs embedded in our always threatened time.

The eight "approaches" in Charles Clerc's collection benefit from the critical apparatus now in place, his introduction reminding us of the demands Pynchon makes on his readers and critics alike. The notes following each essay, and the index of names concluding the volume, are a valuable indication of the vast range of scholarship and intellectual controversy *Gravity's Rainbow* solicits, not to mention the liberal education we wish we had had. The practical necessity of dividing this challenging research into the categories of science, film, humor, and philosophy, among others, leads to startling documentation. But no matter how selectively each topic is framed, it inevitably becomes a mini-encyclopedic inventory of the subject. This daunting information may distract the reader from the crucial importance of the novel's devastating indictment of the rationalization of the world by science and technology, in concert with multinational economic interests.

Khachig Tololyan (coeditor of *Pynchon Notes* since 1979), speaks to this issue in "War as Background," which Charles Clerc chose as the first essay in this tenth-anniversary volume. Professor Tololyan shows how what came to be known as the "military industrial complex" evolved in Germany to reach a peak at the end of World War II, with the development of the V1 and V2 rockets. This concentration of energies, the real war, has never stopped spreading. It was relayed to the United States and the Soviet Union in their specular emulation and rivalry. The arms race to develop nuclear warheads and missile delivery systems began with the scramble for German rocket hardware and scientists in 1945. The cycle of obsolescence and state of the art superiority is continuous scrapping and building, in search of a perfection which pushes aside all that is not useful. There is no compassion for the aleatory and the perishable, even as all life becomes more so. The unspeakable invisible power grid, the machining connections behind the diversionary theater of history can be seen, momentarily laid bare, says Tololyan, in the upheaval of war.

Joseph W. Slade is the author of one of the first books written on Pynchon, *Thomas Pynchon* (Warner Books, New York, 1974). His essay, "Religion, Psychology, Sex and Love in *Gravity's Rainbow*," is the longest and most ambitious, occupying the central position in the volume. Slade studies the importance of the Protestant tradition in Pynchon's indictment of the secularized world economy, the ravishment of nature for profit, and the elimination of mystery. Emphasis on order and control, signs of success and wealth, have behind them the Protestant notions of "election and preterition." Longing for the certainty of predestination would seem to have evolved today into an obsession with death as the deepest desire of Western man. Attempts to escape cause and effect programming for success and security lead to the concept of the romantic self, which cuts off individuals from their fellowmen, from the flow of life. Isolation and paranoia result, but are useful to the "system." The character of Tyrone Slothrop is seen by Slade to embody America's potential for breaking out of this crisis. For Slade, it is Pynchon, influenced by Marcuse, who demonstrates how sexual fantasies are exploited and distributed by the corporate state, not to liberate but to keep erotic power from weakening control. As a natural phenomenon, a singularity, Slothrop could be a bridge between the world of nature and the world of information: "Slothrop is America: innocent yet ignorant, miraculous yet mundane, generous yet uncommitted. America was the land of promise, of second chances; she has failed her mission, as Slothrop fails his, not because of corruption, but because of indifference" (p. 177).

Raymond Olderman's "The New Consciousness and the Old System," reminds us of *Gravity's Rainbow's* debt to the sixties, the conflict between freaks and straights, authoritative systems of explanation vie with revelation, outside pieces of information. Freed from bondage to a single perspective, freak consciousness shoots light through the threats of totalitarian control. Olderman notes that this "light of revelation" is present from the very first pages and bears the tidings of a new planetary consciousness that may yet have time to flower.

It is by now clear that the text of *Gravity's Rainbow* is itself a zone of intertextuality made possible by war, and by wars for information, which reveal that man has constructed systems of development and destruction far more terrifying than the chaos of the world before human civilization. The menace of this "ordering" is studied in Charles Russell's "Pynchon's Language: Signs, Systems and Subversion." Russell makes the point that, "The initial step toward freedom is to view all institutions and behavior as concealed languages, as systems of signification. It is necessary, in effect, to discover the ideology of everyday life, to recognize the patterns of control that we live by" (p. 265). The danger, of course, is that this attention itself becomes routinized in the pressing need to trace all the connections before it is too late.

The apparent agreement we have made with society regarding the conventional reality display is brought into question during any reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. As these essays demonstrate, Pynchon takes writing out of the academy, away from literature itself as we have known it. He calls attention to that which is intended to disappear in the consumption of products and values. This is the knowledge that we are signs among others. We can perhaps never know who controls the system, but that is because power is everywhere, that is to say in the sign, whether it be the formulae of science or the codes in the street. William S. Burroughs, to whom Pynchon owes so much, evoked this paranoid alertness to everything by: "So I am a public agent and don't know who I work for, get my instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation I snap out of the air the way a vulture will tear entrails from other mouths" (William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, [New York: Evergreen, 1967], p. 31).

Knowing in time has become a grotesque computability, finally the countdown to launch, and the dreaded desire for the convulsive beauty of the spasm war. Absolute violence and absolute security merge and are, in fact, death itself. The yearning felt in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the need to break out of the murderous man-made fascination with our ability to self-destruct, which separates us from union with the world. Order, frozen in eternity, or the tuning in and dropping out of the freak both avoid the pulse of inscription and erasure, the palimpsest testifying not to our debt to nature, but rather to the signifying activity without which there is no green world or "crippled keeper." Outside of the academies and museums of values to be expressed is writing itself. Pynchon's "encyclopedia" is one of writings, the graffiti of the systems which produce human consciousness and upon which our collective memory depends.

Ten years have seen everywhere the effort to rationalize and catalog the scandal of Pynchon's "Zone," his clearing a space in literature, in the tight weave of meanings, which exposes frayed ropes, a net full of holes, and fantastic possibilities. He makes us look at, and knot into, the graphic precondition of human life and death. *Gravity's Rainbow* has changed the way we look at the world, putting into question the progress of our institutions, history and technology. Charles Clerc and his colleagues remind us of Pynchon's most timely warning: not to accept a reality which promotes as literature that which it excludes, but to pay attention to the fictions we live, lest the end of the story be that of the world as well.

Gabriel Josipovici *WRITING AND THE BODY*

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Reviewed by: Harold E. Lusher

In his preface, Mr. Josipovici informs us that his book is fundamentally a printing of the four Lord Northcliffe Lectures which he delivered at University College in London during the