

## Rainbow's Light: Or, "Illuminations" in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

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### INTRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin suggests that World War I is all about silence. To be more precise, he suggests that the end of World War I is characterized by silence, if not the war itself. "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war," he observes in "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," "that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?" (84). What he means by "silence," then, has to do with the communicability of experience; in the context of the Great War, it means the incommunicability of its experience. One cannot tell a story about or share with others one's experience of a war that is unprecedented and unparalleled—that is, a war that is simply unbelievable. Thus "[w]hat ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books," he goes on to say, "was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth" (84). What became apparent after World War I to observers such as Benjamin is, in short, its incompatibility with the art of storytelling, or even its share in an ongoing process of coming to an end of

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the art of “exchang[ing] experiences” (83). Now, he is not alone in talking about World War I in terms not necessarily of “silence” but at least of a break in the way people “tell stories” about their experience. Paul Fussell, whose *The Great War and Modern Memory* examines exactly this point of contact between the war and narrative communication, sees Hemingway as exemplifying this break. Before the war, and even during the war, Fussell says,

Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant. It was not until eleven years after the war that Hemingway could declare in *A Farewell to Arms* that “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.” In the summer of 1914 no one would have understood what on earth he was talking about. (21)

This postwar fall in value of abstract ideas, coupled with the shortage of exchangeable experience pointed out by Benjamin, means that communicating one’s experience in such abstract terms was no longer an option; it necessitated a way of narrative communication that was as unprecedented and unparalleled, that is to say, as *new* as the war itself. It is no wonder then that such a break took the form of literary modernism—that literature responded to such a fall by becoming modern. For to be modern, as Fussell defines it, is to be “post-Great War” (222). Before the war, as he reminds us, “[t]here was no *Waste Land*, with its rats’ alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness. [. . .] There was no ‘Valley of Ashes’ in *The Great Gatsby*. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language” (23).

Fussell’s observation regarding the post–Great War birth of “modern” literature might lead one to wonder about postmodernism; at least, it prompts one to reread Thomas Pynchon, whose *Gravity’s Rainbow* Fussell discusses in ways suggesting that Pynchon’s World War II is best understood by treating it as if it is World War I. After quoting a passage where Ned Pointsman and Roger Mexico (not Tyrone Slothrop) walk down to a beach at Dover, Fussell says:

We recognize it as distinctly in the tradition. Yet it was written not in

1914, nor as a recollection in 1929, but in 1973. The war is not the First but the Second; and the two who walk on the beach and listen there to the guns of Flanders are Ned Pointsman and Tyrone Slothrop [sic] [. . .] of Thomas Pynchon's brilliant *Gravity's Rainbow*, in whose pages persists the Great War theme—already mastered by Hardy even before the war broke out—of the ironic proximity of violence and disaster to safety, to meaning, and to love. (69)

There is no denying that some elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* are “in the tradition” initiated by Hardy (who is exceptional in that he was both “traditionally moral” and “modern” even before the war), or that it concerns the theme of ironic proximity. But it is also true that not a few aspects in Pynchon's masterpiece go beyond “the tradition.” Take the theme of paranoia for example. Fussell is interested in Pynchon's paranoia only insofar as it seems to him a continuation of the delusionary mental condition one saw everywhere in the trenches: “Prolonged trench warfare, whether enacted or remembered, fosters paranoid melodrama, which I take to be a primary mode in modern writing. Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon are examples of what I mean. The most indispensable concept underlying the energies of modern writing is that of ‘the enemy’ ” (76). Every reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* knows, however, that what Fussell calls “gross dichotomizing”—“‘We’ are all here on this side; ‘the enemy’ is over there. ‘We’ are individuals with names and personal identities; ‘he’ is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible. We are normal; he is grotesque. Our appurtenances are natural; his, bizarre. He is not as good as we are” (75)—applies to it only in a limited way. Pynchon's dichotomizing is not as “gross” as Fussell takes it to be, since for him what must be undone more than anything else is the idea of the “sides”—“we” and “the enemy”—itself; his “gross” dichotomy between the Preterite and the Elect emerges only after the “ironic proximity” of the Allied and the Axis Powers is revealed (in this sense Fussell's “gross dichotomizing” is not “gross” enough). Pynchon's paranoia forces Fussell's “modern” irony to go a step further and tells us that it makes sense, after all, to call him postmodernist because, if to be “modern” is to be “post-Great War,” to be postmodern is to be post-World War II.

In apparent contrast to Benjamin's “silent” World War I, Pynchon's theater of war in *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds in sound. Beginning with a V-2's “screaming com[ing] across the sky” (3), it unfolds around the question of what happens when a rocket travels faster than the speed

of sound. What happens is that one cannot hear it when such a rocket comes in (one might say, in this respect, that silence also dominates in Pynchon's war). In other words, when a rocket travels faster than sound, it causes a "reversal": "Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! [. . .] [T]he blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning . . . a ghost in the sky . . ." (48). Remember, however, that in Pynchon's war speed does not mean that of sound alone: "Remember The Password In The Zone This Week Is FASTER—THAN, THE-SPEEDOFLIGHT" (726). Light plays an equally crucial role in *Gravity's Rainbow*: the novel begins not only with sound but also with light ("*But it is already light*" [4], we hear the inner voice of "Pirate" Prentice say as he wakes from a dream of an evacuation that resounds with the "screaming" sound), and the "rainbow" in its title refers to, among other things, the arched course of the rocket's flight ("breaking upward into this world [. . .] breaking downward again [. . .] the Rocket does lead that way [. . .] in rainbow light" [726]); it even contains the story of a rebellious light bulb ("the light bulb," it is said at one place, "has become one of the great secret ikons of the Humility, the multitudes who are passed over by God and History" [299]). My contention, then, is that one can see what makes Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* postmodern, that is, post-World War II, rather than "modern" or post-Great War as Fussell claims it to be, by looking at the ways in which he uses light—if not light itself, then at least the metaphor of light as it relates to waking, such as "Pirate" Prentice's: waking at daybreak, or in the morning, and opening one's eyes so that one can look, and then see.

### I. AT THE BREAK OF DAWN

One way to approach World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow* is to look at how Pynchon treats it in his preceding work. Not only does he mention Buchenwald and Auschwitz in *The Crying of Lot 49*, he already includes the V-2 missile as part of his narrative at this earlier stage. What calls our attention is the way in which he puts his reference to the war in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis. "Freud's vision of the world," Dr. Hilarius, an ex-Nazi psychiatrist who has turned Freudian in atonement for what he did to Jews at Buchenwald, tells Oedipa Maas,

had no Buchenwalds in it. Buchenwald, according to Freud, once the

light was let in, would become a soccer field, fat children would learn flower-arranging and solfeggio in the strangling rooms. At Auschwitz the ovens would be converted over to petit fours and wedding cakes, and the V-2 missiles to public housing for the elves. I tried to believe it all. I slept three hours a night trying not to dream [. . .]. (137–38)

He tries to do with as little sleep as possible so as not to dream because dreams—or more generally, the unconscious—are things to be analyzed, interpreted, and brought under control, and so the less one dreams in the first place, the better. Now, what Oedipa's Freudian psychotherapist is trying to do is to persuade her of the "vision of the world" implied by his master's theory: that the concentration camps and the V-2 are like dreams and the unconscious because they *are* their products, and that, if so, all that is required in order to deal with them is, as his Jewish master prescribes, "the light"—that all one needs to do to end such "nightmares" is to "let [it] in." This reasoning is based on the assumption, as the psychotherapist explains to his patient, "that the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in. That the dark shapes would resolve only into toy horses and Biedermeyer furniture. That therapy could tame it after all, bring it into society with no fear of its someday reverting" (135). His reference here is to Freud's famous remark in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, "Where id was, there ego shall be" (80), which he translates, as it were, quite aptly into "Where darkness was, there light shall be." Pynchon's "hilarious" psychotherapist reinterprets Freud's dictum concerning the struggle between the untamed in the psyche and the taming forces of the social which is to end up with the triumph of the latter (that is, of modernity) in terms of the similar dichotomous relationship between being in the dark and letting in light, or between "the dark shapes" and seeing them for what they are (they are "like any other"). Of course, it is light that eventually prevails in Hilarius's version of the struggle, as the ego and society do in Freud's original theory.

It seems reasonable to say that *Gravity's Rainbow* is all about this idea of World War II as a dream, as one of those products of the unconscious that one experiences when one is in the dark—an idea that the preceding work, not being a war novel, does not fully elaborate on but only hints at. Indeed, this seems so much the case that one is almost tempted to say that its "storyteller" is someone who is, as one minor character is said to be at one place, "dreamstruck" (346): it begins with a dream, as stated above (whether or not one wakes from this dream is the whole point of

Pynchon's war narrative, which I leave for later discussion in terms of his narrative style); quoting Dorothy's famous line in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more," he likens the "Zone," as an occupied Germany after V-E Day is called throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, to Oz (279), a land where the "wonderful" reigns; among innumerable stories he tells is that of Franz Pökler, a German rocket engineer, and his daughter Ilse, who are regular visitors to an amusement park, Zwölfkinder, that is called "this dream world, this lie" (429); and he tells of another important dream, "the primal dream," in which Slothrop finds the meaning of "Jamf," the name of the physiologist-turned-chemist who conditioned him as an infant, to be "I," a fact that "will not bear that much looking into, will it?" (623). If it is the case that *Gravity's Rainbow* is all about World War II as a dream, then it seems that the passage just cited, which is a portion of one of Slothrop's numerous interior monologues, can be seen as self-referentially exposing the way in which the novel treats its dreamlike war, since in it the war certainly bears no "looking into." If it had tolerated "a look into," that is to say, if light had been "let in" for the purpose of "the interpretation of the dream," the readers of this gigantic encyclopedia of a second world war would have seen the war for what it was—they would have seen the V-2 missiles reveal themselves as "public housing for the elves." They see no such thing, however, because that is not what the novel intends to do. They find "the dark shapes" still dark and untamed; they find that one of the missiles harbors within itself *das Schwarzgerät*, the "black" instrument. All they have is not the interpretation of a collective neurotic case in the form of a war, offered by a Freudian novelist (if there is ever someone like that) who is concerned with the ego's process of socialization, but paranoia, a paranoid vision of what the war looks or *feels* like, which, if necessary, has yet to undergo analysis. Vision though it is, it does not conform to "Freud's vision of the world": the dream that the readers are presented with knows no interpretation. Seen in this light, the novel appears to follow Hilarius's instructions rather than Freud's, for despite his master's teachings he eventually prescribes for Oedipa's paranoia or "fantasy" the exact opposite of what he has been saying as a Freudian psychoanalyst: "Cherish it! [. . .] Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear [. . .]" (138).

One cannot but be aware, however, of a paradox that such an idea of "not letting light in" implies: how can one see anything if no light is let in, and how can anything "look" (as in "what the war looks like") in the first place

if there is no light coming from without? One needs to look closely at how Pynchon makes it possible for his paranoid vision of World War II to be both visible and immune to “looking into” simultaneously. Here is how Enzian, the leader of the Schwarzkommando, finds the truth about the war:

There doesn't exactly dawn, no but there *breaks*, as that light you're afraid will break some night at too deep an hour to explain away—there floods on Enzian what seems to him an extraordinary understanding. This serpentine slag-heap he is just about to ride into now, this ex-refinery [. . .] is *not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order* [. . .] modified, precisely, *deliberately* by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both sides—“*sides?*”—had always agreed on... (520)

The “extraordinary” truth about the war he finally “understands” or *sees* is that “both sides,” or the Allied and the Axis Powers, are in collusion with each other as part of “a conspiracy between human beings and techniques” (521). “[T]his War was never political at all,” it occurs to him, “the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . .” (521). One might say that this paranoid vision, which is all but asocial as well as untamed because it postulates behind what is visible an “incalculable plot” (521) that connects those things never supposed to be connected, is a sort of dream; one might also say that it is more than a dream, since it is doubly untamed and doubly asocial: it is not only paranoid but drug induced as well (“Well,” the narrator admits, “this is stimulant talk here, yes Enzian’s been stuffing down Nazi surplus Pervitins these days like popcorn at the movies” [521–22]). Now, how does this “extraordinary understanding,” which clearly serves to show how what the narrator calls “drug-epistemologies” work (582), take place? It “dawns” on him, or to be more precise it “*breaks*,” just as day or light breaks at the break of dawn, or daybreak. Elsewhere in the novel Pynchon uses the word “illumination” (611) when he refers to the same paranoid recognition or anagnorisis that occurs in Enzian’s half brother, Tchitcherine: “*A Rocket-cartel. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it. [. . .] Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics [. . .] and the Rocket is its soul. IG Raketeten*” (566). Pynchon’s paranoid vision “illuminates” because it comes as a “flood” of light and glows by itself; it emits light as does a light bulb

like Byron, and it has no need for any outside source of light because it is luminous itself.

Paul Fussell maintains that the “overheated, melodramatic” and “half-paranoid” way in which Enzian meditates on the true character of World War II is characteristic of those whose experience has no alternative but to be “modern,” and this idea of “modern experience” is what leads him to assume the continuity between the first “modern” war and the second as Pynchon in his “half-paranoid” way depicts it in his novelistic encyclopedia (or “anatomy,” to use a term popularized by Northrop Frye and still useful for those who read Pynchon critically) of the war (187). It must be noted, however, that Fussell fails to do justice to the way in which the author attempts to undo the very idea of “the enemy” with his paranoid vision in which the “sides” are in collusion with each other, and thus to move beyond the “modern.” Nor does he perceive the important role that the metaphor of daybreak plays in Enzian’s “half-paranoid” illumination. In that illumination, he realizes that things are wedded together that are never supposed to be, in accordance with what the narrator says will happen at the moment of paranoid enlightenment: “the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected” (703). “Secondary” as it is, when it is discovered that “everything is connected,” the discovery is called “illumination,” in which there “floods,” as is the case with Enzian, “an extraordinary understanding.” Is it too much to say, then, that what this observation on the connectedness of everything in the Creation implies is that everything is surrealistic, “sur-realistic” in its possible sense of “extra-ordinary” or “out of the ordinary”? Indeed, at one point Pynchon, while clearly in astonishment, explicitly speaks of the war in terms of surrealism: “not to mention the Latin, the *German?* in an English church? These are not heresies so much as imperial outcomes [. . .] from acts of minor surrealism—which [. . .] the Empire commits by the thousands every day” (129). Even where he does not use the term, he suggests the same dominance of the logic of surrealism in World War II. Thus his main focus is on a multinational company, “an outfit like Shell, with no real country, no side in any war” (243), where, exactly as in the English church, both “sides” of the war are suspected of coexisting; he thinks of the tunnels down in the Mittelwerke in terms of “an interface between one order of things and another” (302); and the occupied German zones are “connected” in an ideal fashion because they are “blindingly One”: “‘There are no zones.’ [. . .] ‘No zones but the Zone’” (333). (But

perhaps the place where the most “extraordinary” sort of surrealism takes place in the novel is “the men’s toilet at the Roseland Ballroom,” where “Shit ’n’ Shinola do come together” [688].) It is no wonder then that this *Zone*, which might be thought of as every surrealist’s dream, the ultimate goal that every artist of the type aims for, has appeal for an anarchist as well, an Argentine named Francisco Squalidozzi, who longs for “a return to [. . .] that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky” (264). “Decentralizing, back toward anarchism,” he tells Slothrop, “needs extraordinary times . . . this War—this incredible War—just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it*. [. . .] In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless” (265).

It is no wonder either that this “extraordinary” sort of surrealism, which is the governing logic of Pynchon’s paranoid vision of World War II, has much to do with another of his favorite concepts, the “miracle,” partly because it is also an anarchist who finds himself fascinated by the concept in *The Crying of Lot 49*. “You know what a miracle is,” Jesús Arrabal tells Oedipa, “Not what Bakunin said. But another world’s intrusion into this one” (120). Obviously, this definition of “miracle” echoes in what the author says in his following work about surrealist illumination; the latter is precisely what enables one to realize that “another world,” where everything is connected, has intruded into, “touch[ed],” or “kiss[ed]” (Pynchon, *Crying* 120, 124) “this one” which is experiencing an all-out war for the second time (this “intrusion” can certainly be considered, to use a line from a fictitious Jacobean revenge play inserted in *The Crying of Lot 49*, to be “*A wedlock whose sole child is miracle*” [74]). But this leads to a question: is Pynchon telling us to question this idea of the “miracle” that, precisely as does surrealism, suggests the connectedness, collaboration, and even “oneness” of the “sides,” or does he believe in it? What is his attitude toward the idea? For, while it is undeniable that what makes *Gravity’s Rainbow* such a powerful war narrative is the voice raised by the author against the “miraculous connectedness” wrought by technology, elsewhere he treats the “miraculous” favorably. Not only does he speak in favor of the concept in relation to the aforementioned anarchist in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In his 1984 essay “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” he talks about the “deep and religious yearnings for that earlier mythical time which had come to be known as the Age of Miracles,” when “all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so” in the eighteenth century, or the Age of Reason. “All kinds of things” include “Giants,

dragons, spells,” “magic,” “God and afterlife,” and “bodily resurrection,” and each of these “miraculous” phenomena expresses, says Pynchon, the “profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing” (40–41). This inevitably leads one to wonder: what if the “technopolitical order” itself had become “miraculous”?

A picture of such an order that paradoxically defies “reason” is exactly what *Gravity’s Rainbow* gives us. Therefore, one way of answering the above question of whether the author believes in “miracles” or stands against them would be to say that he is ambivalent. This does not mean, however, that he is ambivalent toward the idea of the “miracle” so much as that he is so toward the “technopolitical order” because he seems to be, as it were, “fatally attracted” to it whenever it takes on qualities describable in “irrational” terms. Thus he says of the V-2 that what is “only an Aggregat [. . .] an Aggregat of pieces of dead matter” can be “alive” (362) like Frankenstein’s creature (in his “Luddite” essay he says that “[i]f there were such a genre as the Luddite novel,” *Frankenstein* “would be the first and among the best” [40]), and that “[i]t was impossible not to think of the Rocket without thinking of [. . .] growing toward a shape predestined and perhaps a little otherworldly” (416). “I think of the A4,” he even has one character, Miklos Thanatz, say, “as a baby Jesus [. . .] it really did possess a Max Weber charisma . . . some joyful—and *deeply* irrational—force the State bureaucracy could never routinize” (464). This association of the rocket with Jesus ought not to be taken as a mere hyperbolic way of stressing the “deep irrationality” or “miraculousness” of the former, since the latter plays a role that is by no means negligible in making the idea of “fatal attraction” relevant to the novel’s central theme: the Elect and the Preterite. “Without the millions who had plunged and drowned, there could have been no miracle” or Jesus’s “venturing out on the Sea of Galilee.” “The successful loner,” he is among the Elect, but his “shape had already been created by the Preterite” (554). Slothrop is taught this “Newtonian” way of looking at Jesus in terms of “action and reaction” by the ghost of his first American ancestor William Slothrop, the author of *On Preterition* and a pig operator who “must’ve been waiting for the one pig that wouldn’t die, that would validate all the ones who’d had to, all his Gadarene swine who’d rushed into extinction like lemmings, possessed not by demons but by trust for men” (554–55). Undoubtedly, Pynchon is on the “side” of the multitude or “legions” of drowned men and women and slaughtered swine—what he otherwise calls “the many God passes

over when he chooses a few for salvation" (555)—without whose death no exception such as Jesus or an immortal pig would be possible. But if such is the case, there is no reason why the same should not apply to the "technological order." "So, when laws of heredity are laid down," he says toward the end of the second part, "mutants will be born. Even as determinist a piece of hardware as the A4 rocket will begin spontaneously generating items like the 'S-Gerät' Slothrop thinks he's chasing like a grail" (275). If the Calvinistic view that divides everything into the Elect and the Preterite applies to the V-2, it is also, as is William Slothrop's herd of swine, to be grouped into two classes: one which consists of only one rocket, the elect 00000, that harbors within itself a "mutant" or the black device, and the other to which belong all the others, the "many" that have been passed over. Is there any reason why this should not be taken as an indication that Pynchon might also be on the "side" of, partly because he is "fatally attracted" to, the rest of the "hardware"?

Despite what Fussell has to say about Pynchon's "gross dichotomizing," which according to him is precisely what marks him as a "modern" writer, a careful examination of his text reveals that it has room for its own undermining (we have identified this "room" as his "fatal attraction"). To his ambivalence toward the V-2, we can add several instances from his other novels where we find at work the same "postmodern" undoing of Manichaean melodrama, the same attachment to the "enemy" who is supposedly on "the other side." In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Puritans called the Scurvhamites, who are believers in "the will of God," the "prime mover" of Creation, and who therefore see the rest of it as "[running] off some opposite Principle, something blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death," nevertheless somehow find themselves "looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinated horror," so much so that "this was to prove fatal. One by one the glamorous prospect of annihilation coaxed them over, until there was no one left in the sect" (155); *Vineland* closes with Prairie daydreaming of "flirting" with Brock Vond, a federal prosecutor (384); and in *Against the Day*, Kit Traverse, nose-diving in his Italian friend's modified triplane bomber and "approaching the speed of sound," can "see the appeal. Of course he could. Pure velocity. The incorporation of death into what otherwise would only be a carnival ride" (1070–71). This last passage, which offers a glimpse of Italy during the first war, tells us where to locate the prototype of the Rocket 00000, a special model for Gottfried, "the young pet and protégé of Captain Blicero" (484), a rocket to "[s]tuff him

in” so that “[t]hey are mated to each other” (750–51) as in a surrealist work of art. It also tells of the “appeal” of Fascism, of which Kit and his friend’s “nosedive” is “perhaps the first and purest expression in northern Italy” (1071). Pynchon’s ambivalence, or his capacity for “fatal fascination,” certainly suggests that there persists the theme that Fussell identifies as “ironic proximity” in his novels. What are so close to each other, however, as to make irony one of their principal rhetorical modes are not “violence” and “disaster” on the one hand and “safety,” “meaning,” and “love” on the other but “They” and “We,” whose eventual ironic proximity returns us to the fact that in *Gravity’s Rainbow* he is, besides being an ironist, a surrealist, that he is a man of “extra-ordinary illumination.”

## II. JUMPING INTO THE MIND OF THE NARRATOR

On his first morning on the French Riviera, Slothrop, soon after saving Katje Borgesius on a beach from an octopus named Grigori that was optically conditioned to attack her, suspects that something is going on. His suspicion is described as follows:

So it is here, grouped on the beach with strangers, that voices begin to take on a touch of metal, each word a hard-edged clap, and the light, though as bright as before, is less able to illuminate . . . it’s a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in. [. . .] Oh, that was no “found” crab, Ace—no random octopus or girl, uh-uh. Structure and detail come later, but the conniving around him now he feels instantly, in his heart. (188)

After this incident involving “no random octopus or girl,” he begins to “seek other orders behind the visible” like his Puritan ancestors who “heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn” (281). But he begins to do so not because he has faith in “the numinous certainty of God” (242) but because he senses “the conniving around him,” namely, because paranoia has “filter[ed] in” (although, as the narrator reminds us, “there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia” [434]). Now, what deserves particular attention in this scene of Slothrop’s awakening to paranoia or his loss of innocence—he now regards his friend Tantivy as “a messenger from [his] innocent, pre-octopus past” (188)—is that the inception of his paranoia coincides with the diminishing of the ability of “the light,”

though as bright as before, to “illuminate.” Here “illumination” does not refer to the way in which an “extraordinary understanding” or surrealistic paranoid vision “breaks” or “dawns” on one, as we have seen in the previous section. All that this “light” refers to is the morning light shining on the beach, and in this respect it has more to do, one might say, with Freud than with his former adherent Hilarius or Byron the Bulb—it has to do with “letting in the light” so that one can “look into” the dark corners of the world thus made visible, rather than with cherishing one’s vision and paranoically seeking another world “behind the visible.”

This Freudian (or Mediterranean, one should say) sort of “illumination” provides a counterpoint in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to its paranoid counterpart, the “extraordinary understanding” or surrealistic vision that, like a light bulb (and also a “projector at the planetarium,” as Randolph Driblette explains the role of stage director in *The Crying of Lot 49* [79]), glows by itself. This does not mean, however, that the novel succeeds in doing anything equivalent to analysis; as we have seen, “the dark shapes” have yet to be revealed for what they are, namely, “toy horses and Biedermeyer furniture,” and it is still uncertain whether or not the “room” called the unconscious is “like any other room.” But if the unconscious and dreams—in short, World War II—are the last thing to have light shed on them in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it does not mean that there is nothing in it that “bears that much looking into.” That which does are the minds of many of its characters. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye remarks that “the novelist is freer to enter his characters’ minds” (308) than the romance writer. The means by which he achieves this purpose is the “stream of consciousness” technique, which, according to Frye, “permits of a [. . .] concentrated fusion of the two forms,” namely, the novel and the confession: “the author jumps into his characters’ minds to follow their stream of consciousness, and out again to describe them externally” (307, 314). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon makes liberal use not only of this technique but also of another that also allows one to “jump into” or “look into”—that is to say, to throw light on, like the morning sun on a Mediterranean beach—characters’ minds, namely, free indirect discourse, although in many cases it is not easy to distinguish between the two techniques since the novel is narrated in the present tense. It may safely be said that one of his aims in writing the novel is to “illuminate” consciousness, which, “once light is let in,” exhibits to us whatever interiority it possesses, even if it does not do the same with the unconscious (that is why the book can be said to follow Hilarius rather

than Freud). Thus we have direct access to what is on Slothrop's mind ("Oh, that was no 'found' crab, Ace—no random octopus or girl, uh-uh" and "it will not bear that much looking into, will it?") as well as to Enzian's inner awakening, drug induced as it is ("'sides?"). Moreover, if this "entry" into a character's mind is intended as a satire on "the primacy of the 'conscious' self" that is said in the novel to be a belief held by "a Christian, a Western European," it makes sense that the novel allows us to peep into another of the self's constituent parts: its "memories" (153). So, as in a modernist novel, Pynchon enumerates Katje's memories of her days with Blicero with a particular focus on his "teeth," letting us know "that inside herself [. . .] she is corruption and ashes [. . .] remembering now his teeth, long, terrible, veined with bright brown rot as he speaks these words, the yellow teeth of Captain Blicero [. . .]. She recalls his teeth before any other feature [. . .]" (94).

If the paranoid or visionary sort of "illumination" is surrealistic, the other sort that leads us into the characters' minds might be called, for want of a better term, simply "realistic," in its epistemological as well as "ordinary" sense of showing us a character's stream of consciousness as it is. Of course, this way of using the term suggests that *Gravity's Rainbow*, commonly viewed as a model of postmodernist fiction, has close ties with realism and modernism in the novel genre. Yet, at the same time, it also clarifies how closely related Pynchon's "realist novel" is to the medium whose use of light enables one to take a "close look," not necessarily at someone's stream of consciousness, but at least at his or her "face." In *Vineland*, the power of the cinema as a means for throwing light is highlighted:

They particularly believed in the ability of close-ups to reveal and devastate. When power corrupts, it keeps a log of its progress, written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face. Who could withstand the light? What viewer could believe in the war, the system, the countless lies about American freedom, looking into these mug shots of the bought and sold? (195)

Of course, commentaries on the connection of *Gravity's Rainbow* with the cinema are numerous and as old as the novel itself. Fussell, too, touches on "Pynchon's identification, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, of war with film" and views the novel as an announcement that "modern life itself—equivalent [. . .] to modern war—is a film too" (221). In the present context, however,

what makes it uniquely cinematic—what makes it possible to rethink how we read it in terms of how we see a film (and also a play)—can be located in the manner in which it is narrated.

How, then, is it narrated? First, it is told by a narrator who is most likely the author himself and who, as Fussell stresses, repeatedly “steps to the front of his stage, and speaks in his own [. . .] voice” (277). This is done, however, without puncturing his paranoid vision, a fact that differentiates him from the narrators in those works whose distinguishing characteristic is their sustained use of romantic irony, such as *Tristram Shandy* and postmodernist metafictional novels (the intruding narrator’s function, in Pynchon’s case, is rather to reinforce his own vision). Second, it is narrated in the present tense, effecting the practical loss of our sense of temporal distance to the events being narrated so that a sense of immediacy prevails throughout the novel. What is the overall effect of this narrative style? In cinematic terms, it prevents us from “kick[ing] back and watch[ing] the unfolding drama,” or the author’s vision, as Frenesi is able to do in *Vineland* (237). In dramatic terms, it contributes to abolishing what Adorno calls “aesthetic distance” (34). “The traditional novel,” Adorno explains, “can be compared to the three-walled stage of bourgeois theater. This technique was one of illusion. The narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present” (33). What Pynchon does, to borrow Adorno’s words on Kafka, is that

he destroys the reader’s contemplative security in the face of what he reads. His novels [. . .] are an anticipatory response to a state of the world in which the contemplative attitude has become a mockery because the permanent threat of catastrophe no longer permits any human being to be an uninvolved spectator; nor does it permit the aesthetic imitation of that stance. (34)

There could be no better commentary on *Gravity’s Rainbow* than this, especially in view of the way in which it ends with “this old theatre” on which a V-2 is about to fall (760), thus removing the possibility of an “uninvolved spectator.” But this impossibility of “the contemplative attitude” or of “kicking back,” which is implied by the loss of our sense of distance, whether temporal or aesthetic, does not mean that we are to experience or “take part in what occurs” in Pynchon’s “theatre of war” in any literally immediate way (though something close to it is certainly achieved) but that we are “physically present,” like the reader of “the

traditional novel,” to witness the author-narrator’s paranoid vision, that is to say, his stream of consciousness. The entire novel might be read as an extended interior monologue by the narrator, and in that case it can be said to concern itself with throwing light on or “illuminating” his consciousness so that one can “look into” or “jump into” it (or at least its illusion). This is tantamount to saying that the narrative mode of the novel is “realistic,” and it has to be so, since, although the narrator’s paranoid vision of World War II is presented as a sort of dream, it has to make itself available to consciousness if it is to become narratable or communicable at all. To narrate one’s vision or dream means to adapt its spatial form to temporality in order to make it accessible to conscious understanding. In this respect, no better beginning of this novel is conceivable than “*But it is already light,*” which announces both “Pirate” Prentice’s waking from his dream and the onset or “dawn” of the narrator’s own dream, and which also marks the beginning of the process of “illuminating” the latter dream as it adapts itself to the temporality of his consciousness. This announcement, however, as has been pointed out, poses a problem as to its source: it is difficult to tell whether the voice belongs to the narrator, Prentice, or both as in free indirect discourse.

If *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be regarded as “realistic,” it differentiates itself from what Adorno calls “the traditional novel” in an important way: in Pynchon’s novel we “spectate” what happens not so much to the characters as to the author-narrator’s consciousness (this brings the book closer to what Frye calls the confession, a distinct prose form that was invented, according to him, by St. Augustine and whose modern type Rousseau established [307], and indeed Pynchon’s novel might be subtitled, “The Extraordinary Confession of a Paranoid Visionary”). Or, to be more precise, we see what “occurs” to him (in the sense of “to come into one’s mind,” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it), that is, a vision demanding to be communicated in narrative form and thus made communicable (but only barely, considering its practical unreadability), where we are permitted entry, as if having opened a Chinese box, into still other minds, namely, those of the characters. This *mise-en-abyme*, although such a common device among the postmodernists, is precisely what makes Pynchon unlike any other. Take, for example, Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is also a postmodernist war novel dealing with World War II. In it the author-narrator says: “There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One

of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters" (164). This impossibility of "being a character" is also implied by another postmodernist novelistic experiment (having nothing to do with war, however), Barthelme's *Snow White*, which directly asks the reader in a midbook questionnaire: "Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals?" (83). In direct contrast to these two contemporary examples, *Gravity's Rainbow* assumes the authenticity, at least to some extent, of the concepts of "character," "individual," and "consciousness," if for no other reason than to exploit them for satiric purposes. This uniqueness relates to Pynchon's use of light, which is made possible by an insight into how pertinent "illumination" is to one's longing to see World War II for what it is.

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