

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW AND IHAB HASSAN'S »CATENA« OF POSTMODERNISM

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What is assumed in the paper is that traditional strategies of reading do not enable a satisfying approach to Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. The author proffers an interpretation of the text that relies on Ihab Hassan's catena of postmodernism which comprises the following elements: 1. idetermination, 2. fragmentation, 3. decanonization, 4. self-less-ness, 5. the unrepresentable, 6. irony, 7. hybridization, 8. carnevalization, 9. performance and 10. constructionism/immanence. Appending the concept of post-history to the list, the author examines the implications it has for the status and practice of Pynchon's novel as a literary text.

Every so often, although without any discernible regularity, there appear texts that baffle, that incapacitate habitual reading praxis, causing anxiety, if not outright hostile irritation. If the reader sets out into these books using for compass established critical theories and tries to decode them with his wonted interpretative skills, the venture will prove frustratingly irksome, apt to occasion more perplexity than it yields insight and knowledge. Thomas Pynchon's »magnum opus of science and imagination, technology and myth gone paranoid«,¹ his maddening novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)² indubitably belongs to this order of writing. An acknowledged event in American fiction, »the *Ulysses* of the seventies«,³ *Gravity's Rainbow* has, since its appearance, flabbergasted the imagination of readers who have, as a rule, spoken of its retentiveness, its unyieldingness to their search for a meaningful significance and coherence. Hence, Williams M. Plater in his »reconstructive« investigation of Pynchon states that the novel »is almost chaotic – noise or sferics – which demands that the reader impose his own meaning«. ⁴ Collating Pynchon's labyrinthine plot with the

¹ Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1980, p. 149.

² All further citations from the book refer to the following edition: Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Bantam Books, New York, 1980.

³ Fredrick R. Karl, *American Fiction 1940–1980*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p. 444.

⁴ William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix reconstructing Thomas Pynchon*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1978, p. 14.

»sense of relativity that informs contemporary philosophy«,⁵ Robert D. Newman has this to say:

The text of the novel coalesces around its refusal to coalesce. The implication inherent in this is that interpretation as a stay against confusion fosters entropic and delusory patterns in its effort to harness the flux of life.⁶

I readily avow that the experience of reading Pynchon's »magnum opus« has both puzzled and fascinated me with a promise of richness and historical relevance that have (perhaps masochistically) repeatedly driven me back to it. I think it would not be overpretentious to say that the experience has been similar to the one Ihab Hassan describes when he finds himself in front of an innovative postmodern text: »It has been on my desk for some time, but my critical theory remains silent«. ⁷ Voicing a plea for a criticism that will rethink its premises and be cognizant »of the evolving character of life literature«, Hassan believes it is all too obvious that »contemporary letters can be judged as little by the standards of pure formalism as, let us say, Romantic poetry can be evaluated by the strict conventions of neo-Classicism«. ⁸ In a sense, Hassan's critical opus might be summed up as a personal effort to come to terms with the contemporary situation in literature, as a provisional definition of postmodernism.

In an article that appeared in the Spring 1986 issue of *Critical Inquiry* Hassan lays out what he calls his »catena« of postmodern features, »a paratactic list, staking out a cultural field«. ⁹ What I intend to do in this paper is to apply this list and use it as a sort of tentative model for a reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. As a preliminary step let me just give a rundown of Hassan's catena: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, self-less-ness, the unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance, constructionism/immanence (although Hassan treats these last two separately, for reasons I will give later, they are conjoined in the following analysis). As Hassan uses his catena it relates to the postmodern situation as such (if it is agreed upon that such a condition exists) and not primarily to literary texts, so when I apply it to Pynchon's work there will necessarily be simplifications, modifications, a selectivity that is due to the restricted field of interest and, of course, to a biased understanding of the catena itself. The catena does not possess the rigour customarily associated with critical analysis but then are not scientific rigour and consistency incompatible with the postmodern ethos? Hassan has stated his position in clear terms: »if we need a literary theory at all, it is a

⁵ Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, University of South California Press, 1986, p. 91.

⁶ R. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁷ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1984, p. 23.

⁸ I. Hassan, *Paracriticisms*, 13-14.

⁹ Ihab Hassan, »Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective«, *Critical Inquiry*, 12, Spring 1986, p. 504.

theory of playful discontinuity«¹⁰ *Gravity's Rainbow* is a paradigmatic case of a text not only evidencing the full justification for this conception of theory but. I would argue, demanding it.

I doubt that the proffered reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* will bring into the open a structured narrative, a sense of wholeness or sequence. It was the very impossibility of arriving at such patterns of signification that prompted me to use Hassan's catena in the first place. The references I make to the text are selective, personally biased, but the approach is legitimized and facilitated by the fact that *Gravity's Rainbow* lacks a totalizing thread of story, a privileged Jamesian consciousness or a closure, all of which liberates its segments to the free play of interpretative will. Readings of the text become performances of which the following play of Hassan's catena on Pynchon's score is only one. Here are the results:

1. *Indeterminacy*. Hassan catalogues a parade of thinkers from different realms whose works sound this note of indeterminacy, but for the purpose at hand it suffices to foreground ambiguity, rupture and displacement as constitutive elements of this feature of postmodernity. From the methodological point of view, in order to make out what is meant by indeterminacy it would be helpful to consider its antipode. Therefore, for the present purposes, the realist/modernist text should be conceived as embodying the determinacy that is displaced by the Pynchonian kind of writing. In very general terms, *Gravity's Rainbow* would exemplify a challenge that upturns traditional narrative practice, that undermines its plot structures and its proclivity of closure, writing against our notions of character (perspective), setting, time and sequence.¹¹ In addition to subverting these general novelistic procedures, Pynchon produces indeterminacy in more concrete, marked and, I would say, more disturbing and perplexing practices as far as his readership is concerned. Let us glance at some of them.

Recalling the dictionary definition of ambiguity (hesitation, doubt, uncertainty, double meaning, equivocality) I find it an apt description of at least my own response to Pynchon's text. Postmodern textual strategy consists in part precisely in foregrounding its ambiguous nature. For example, if doubtful classification/positioning partakes of ambiguity then Pynchon's haphazard interpolation of material having heterogeneous ontological status equivocates his text. Let me here instance the »Pavlovia« section (266) where he intermixes scientific information and facts with a flawed pastoral that is rendered by the lab specimen's bizarre singing. The reader is at a loss to decide whether he is participating in a paranoia (more will be said of this in the next section), a hallucination, in »history«, whether he is following the threads of the narrative's provisional reality or is he a victim of a spoof by a master trickster. The absence of metalingual comments

¹⁰ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 24.

¹¹ I have dealt with these issues in an earlier article, »Thomas Pynchon in the Maze« published in *Cross Cultural Studies*, Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana, 1988, p. 215-221.

when these shifts between ontological levels occur, Pynchon's erasure of evidence for this sleight of hand, only heightens the indeterminacy. The kaleidoscopic avalanche of names, initials, technological esotery and such, dissolves the divisions indispensable for a discerning taxonomy and equivocates our reading of the text. Names float above a questionable referant as though the signifier has broken loose off the signified:

He lost Gettfried, he lost Bianca, and he is only beginning, this late into it, to see that they are the same loss, to the same winner. By now he's forgotten the sequence in time. Doesn't know which child he lost first, or even . . . even if they aren't two names, different names, for the same child . . . Gottfried and Bianca, *are the same* . . . (782-83)

The predatory presence which looms throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, the pull of gravity and death, is denominated with the indeterminate anonymity of the third person plural (»they«). To use Pynchon's words, the practices described here

are unique to the Zone, they answer to the new Uncertainty . . . here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love and search for now has grown ambiguous and remote. (353)

Just to add that the Zone, in a ploy of selfreferentiality, is, if my reading is correct, a metaphor for the book itself.

Hassan speaks of rupture in the sense of a break, a cleft, a fissure in a surface. What lies at the back of this phenomenon is the postmodern suspicion of wholeness. Returning to literary texts, this might be illustrated by ruptured narrative developments, the cleavages apparent on the level of spatial/temporal representation, but I choose to use two less apparent, nevertheless textually relevant instances. Consider the episode describing Pirate taking leave of Scorpia Mossmoon at Waterloo Station:

He left her at Waterloo Station. A gala crowd was there, to see Fred Roper's Company of Wonder Midgets off to an imperial fair in Johannesburg, South Africa . . . Scorpia's talc-white face, through the last window, across the last gate, was a blow to his heart . . . (42)

This fragment is by means an exception. Pynchon revels in disrupting his text with extraneous information which he dwells upon at length, cajoling the reader into surmising about its truth-value or relevance, but then pulling the carpet from under his feet. A modernist writer would introduce this kind of information to have it eventually integrated into an unfolding synthesis. Here nothing of the sort takes place: the intrusions/excursions dangle like loose ends, rifting the text into fractured segments, deceiving the reader into false leads.

Something similar can be asserted if one looks at Pynchon's adjectival descriptions. If prose descriptions tend to rely on a field of linguistic possibilities that are semantically related, what is the reader to make of the following passage:

It's a Sunday-funnies dawn, very blue sky with gaudy pink clouds in it. Mud across the cobblestones is so slick it reflects light, so that you walk not streets but these long sleeky cuts of raw meat, hock of werewolf, gammon of Beast. (343)

Simply said, the signifiers (Sunday-funnies, raw meat, hock, gammon) have ruptured with the signifieds (cloud, street) and render a kind of schizophrenic split. The functionality of language is deferred in favour of an indulgence in its surplus.

Displacement, a shibboleth of contemporary cultural discourse, is used here as simply denoting a shifting, a putting out of a proper place. It has obvious ties to both ambiguity and rupture, so that I will restrict myself to pointing out how Pynchon displaces the categories of history and fiction. Aside the fact that *Gravity's Rainbow* can be read as an allegorical statement on America today (the post-industrial world), the novel incessantly problematizes the relation between reality and fiction. In addition to being contextualized in a historico-geographical setting (post-War Germany), Pynchon's »characters« bungle into »real« events (Slothrop sees Mickey Rooney at the Potsdam conference (444)) and participate in issues of historical significance (the Pavlovian controversy). Throughout the novel there are numerous references to actual historical figures which destabilize the categories of reality/fiction: F. D. Roosevelt (435), Errol Flynn (289), Heisenberg, whose principle of »uncertainty« is, incidentally, evoked by Hassan (405), Teilhard de Chardin (627) and many others. These strategies subvert the hierarchy of orders of reality with which we habitually make sense of world and self.

Pynchon's novel is one of uncertainty, cleavage, disjuncture. Unlike the customary procedure of erecting a meaning-giving frame to encode the disparate parts, in this text the discourses of technology, myth, history vie for supremacy but no single discourse achieves a consistent and stable interpretation. Each is undercut by the others it sought to suppress. In the words of Hassan, *Gravity's Rainbow* creates »the language of Nightmare«: »of confusion and multiple reference; it creates a world in which all is necessary, all significant; everything is there at once«.¹²

2. *Fragmentation.* Hassan propounds that indeterminacy is consequential to the postmodernist's disconnecting practice, his persuasion that only fragments are to be trusted and his »ultimate opprobrium« of totalization/synthesis. In my opinion as far as the novel is concerned, its most resourceful means of totalization is the establishment of a coherent narrative sequence. There is little of this coherence in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Quite the contrary: the four large chapters of the text are subdivided into shorter sections between which very often there is no connecting thread. To illustrate this I will cite the section describing Slothrop and Greta in the spasms of sexual climax /cut/ the next section which begins with the imprecation »yes bitch

¹² Ihab Hassan, *Paracritisms*, p. 67.

– yes, little bitch« (462). The reader's understandable reflex is to connect the two scenes, to see them as continuous, but Pynchon soon reveals that the new section focuses upon another party: Pöckler and Lena. The same is true of the narrative voice. Pynchon discards the unifying point of view and replaces it by fragmented units, by a sort of ventriloquism, that results in a pluralistic narrative, a medley of perspectives and voices.

Speaking of fragmentation, Hassan lists a number of postmodern preferences, two of which I will emphasize and show what bearings they have to Pynchon's text. According to him postmodernism prefers the paratactic over the hypotactic. I find the paratactic quality in Pynchon most emphatically expressed in the rambling run on sentences where minimal order of dependence is discernible, where little hierarchy exists and where, very often, the constituent parts of the sentence are not presented as being subordinate to and determined by others. This results in a kind of word-indulgent, inclusive mode of perception. The paratactic mode seems to be congenial to a way of world appropriation where no readymade perspectives dominate and where the influx of information is not hampered by ossified structures. On a different level of discussion, the structure of the novel as a whole may be considered paratactic because, as was stated above, the relations between its different sections are indeterminate, whereas a sequential organization would require that the episodes be motivated by the unfolding whole. All of this contributes to what Hassan has put very well as the »openness of brokenness«.

Paranoia is one of the most frequently occurring words in *Gravity's Rainbow*: »it's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in« (219). How does this accord with Hassan's contention that the postmodernist prefers schizofrenia over paranoia? First of all, *Gravity's Rainbow* is not constructed around one paranoia but is fragmented into a number of them. In a sense this paranoid multiplication incapacitates the urge to connect, the need to seek »orders behind the visible«. As though paranoid frames were stacked upon one another, perhaps temporarily crisscrossing but without conjoining in a supra-framework. What Pynchon does, wary as he is of the totalizing facet of paranoia, is to write its antidote into the text:

If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is. (506)

If *Gravity's Rainbow* were truly paranoid in structure it would be decipherable, it would show pattern behind its seemingly incoherent textures. However, as is evident from the passage quoted above, Pynchon deconstructs this possibility by incorporating the other pole, where nothing coheres, into his novel. The above quoted passage can be taken as a very adequate metacomment on the reading experience of the novel: as readers we

duplicate the paranoid's need to connect, to search out meanings, but the text resists, goes against the grain of our ready strategies, and our interpretative constructs are constantly undermined and shattered to fragments.

3. *Decanonization*. In order to show how this feature of Hassan's catena figures in Pynchon's novel I choose to focus on the following elements: decanonization of conventions, delegitimation of the mastercodes of society, derision of authority and the demystification of knowledge. As the privative prefix *de-* in all of the above indicates, the common thread running through these four exercises is one of undoing. This should come as no surprise if it is kept in mind that the postmodern ethos is subversive, to a large extent of negative provenance.

One of the ways that *Gravity's Rainbow* decanonizes the novel itself as a genre is by exploiting elements that were customarily excluded from »high« literature (vaudeville, fairy tales, the cinema, popular culture). If traditional plot structures mirror a bourgeois order, if they provide a kind of stay against the flux of a dynamic reality, Pynchon's textual strategies, in comparison, prove radically subversive, destructive of the conventions which to many have become second nature. As one of the »fabulators« Pynchon suspends realistic illusion »in some significant degree in the interests of a freedom in plotting characteristic of romance or in the interest of an explicitly allegorical manipulation of meaning, or both«. ¹³ According to George Steiner this is a constant running through much of American fiction: »the classic contrast between the American tradition of the novel as romance, as dark fable and philosophic allegory, and the English norm of social fiction«. ¹⁴ However, the process of decanonization works in a more specific fashion in Pynchon's novel.

Writing of Slothrop's first American ancestor William, »a peculiar bird«, Pynchon expounds his heretic tract *On Preterition* which was committed to the flames by Calvinistic Boston because

Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for those »second Sheep«, without whom there'd be no elect. You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. (647)

Established religious lore, the canon, is undermined, loosens its universality if its tenets are approached and examined from an altered (other) perspective: »He saw it from the lemming point of view. Without the millions who had plunged and drowned, there could have been no miracle« (646). Besides lending his voice to the silent victims of history Pynchon reveals how the canonized narratives lose their validity if the habitualized perspective is exchanged for a way of knowledge that recognizes its provisional nature and repressed foundations.

¹³ David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p. 19.

¹⁴ George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, Faber, London, 1985, p. 319.

Taken as a whole, *Gravity's Rainbow* might be said to play out the dichotomy of what Pynchon calls the »they« and the »we«. The nature of this dualism comes to a head in the following passage:

It's a little bewildering – if this is a »We-system« why isn't it at least thoughtful enough to interlock in a reasonable way, like They-systems do? »That's exactly it«, Osbie screams, belly-dancing Porky into a wide alarming grin, »They're the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements«. (744)

The polarity is between the anonymity of power systems that like Calvinism engage »in abstract distinctions that negate the vitality of the fluctuating middle ground that it excludes«,¹⁵ and the decanonizing challenge of communal spontaneity, the »we«, what Pynchon calls the »counterforce«. Needless to say, the many allusions to the 60ies (as they were, for example, described by Charles Reich, *The Greening of America*) give the novel a recognizable political charge.

The world of *Gravity's Rainbow* is victimized by totalitarian systems, mastercodes, worldwide cartels, »wands of enterprise« (481) that stretch their omnivorous tentacles into every pore of life. Note the anonymous power in Pynchon's description of »Shell«:

with no real country, no side in any war, no specific face or heritage: tapping instead out of that global stratum, most deeply laid, from which all the appearances of corporate ownership really spring. (283)

In the same vein the war is deheroized (decanonized) and presented as a conspiracy of technology and commerce, undertaking tasks conducive to the »Firm«: »that we are meant for work and government, for austerity« (206). Pynchon delegitimizes the master codes by unveiling their origins in material interests and by idealizing behaviour and people disruptive of their aims and values. What this amounts to is a movement of deconstruction if we accept Terry Eagleton's definition of the word:

to reverse the imposing tapestry in order to expose in all its unglamourously dishelved tangle the threads constituting the well-heeled image it presents to the world.¹⁶

By this reversal John Dillinger becomes a cult figure of the counterforce: »He went out socked them right in the toilet privacy of their banks« (865). Pynchon inverts habitual value judgements, inverts the codes on which authority is found, ridiculing its pretensions and bringing to light its repressed components: »Shit, money, and the Word« (31).

Pynchon's obsession with technological development and scientization is dosed with both fascination and repulsion. Through the character of the Pavlovian Pointsman and the »White Visitation« institute as a whole, he mocks the pretentiousness of scientific knowledge and accentuates its latent

¹⁵ Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain*, Verso, London, 1986, p. 80.

madness (cf. the masochistic disorder that haunts Brigadier Pudding, head of the institute (268-75)). An illustrative section is the exchange between Pointsman and Mexico, »the young anarchist«, concerning the virtue of scientific analysis. Mexico contends:

once you've taken it all apart, fine, I'll be the first to applaud your industry. But other than a lot of bits and pieces lying about, what have *you* said? (102)

Pointsman replies that Pavlov's »faith ultimately lay in a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche« (102). Mexico's retort, which is sceptical of scientific enterprise, is that the »next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely« (103). (Paul Feyerabend would surely recognize Mexico as a fellow »flippant Dadaist). Scientific knowledge is deconstructed as a dogmatic set of presumptions, impeding more than fostering perception. Through decanonization Pynchon speaks out for desire in the teeth of verities, encoded reality: he focuses on repressed energy and reckons its potency for transformation.

4. *Self-less-ness/Depth-less-ness*. Hassan points out Nietzsche who had proclaimed the subject »only a fiction«, a »conceptual synthesis«¹⁷ to be the thinker who had prefigured this postmodernist feature. In *The Right Promethean Fire* he cites contemporary thought and its emphasis on the

dissolution of the »subject«, the annihilation of that hard Cartesian ego or consciousness which distinguished itself from the world by turning the world into an object. The Self, structuralists and poststructuralists insist, following the intuition of Nietzsche, is really an empty »place« where many selves come to mingle and depart.¹⁸

How this is reflected in the novel is apparent in the writer's refusal of depth when portraying characters, in a certain flatness where no seam divides in/outside, where no synthesis of consciousness encodes the input of information. Put very simply the character is without priority and becomes a textual function.

Pynchon's handling of Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* substantiates these claims. Although seemingly the central »character« in the book, Slothrop's »presence« is problematical. Like the other characters in the novel, Slothrop is »disembodied« amid the debris of the outer world, he is not a privileged consciousness but splintered amidst a profuse world of things, processes, events of which he is unable to make sense. This is what is probably meant by Robert Newman's observation that *Gravity's Rainbow* »presents a protean protagonist who eventually disappears from the novel«.¹⁹ Referring to Pynchon's novel, Patricia Waugh instances the »dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obstrusive names«.²⁰ Unlike

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, pp. 199, 200. It is fascinating how great a part of the postmodernist discussion derives from the work of this the greatest of deconstructors.

¹⁸ Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*, p. 202.

¹⁹ Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, p. 6-7.

²⁰ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 22.

the more traditional narratives that labour at resolution/individuation, the postmodernist text works its way towards the erasure/fragmentation of its protagonists. A chart of Slothrop's trajectory through *Gravity's Rainbow* will bring this out.

Very early in the book the reader is informed that Slothrop's »Minnesota, Mul-ti-pha-sic Personality« is »always in fa-vor of, the psycho-pathic, and the un-whole-some« (93). (I believe it is justifiable to read »unwhole-some« here as meaning both noxious and, more significantly, not-whole). At the Casino Hermann Goering Slothrop is robbed: »Leave papers, ID, everything, taken« (234), »every last bit of paper and clothing connecting him to what he's been, have just, fucking, vanished« (239). The series of his disguises/costumes begins on page 298: »He is now an English war correspondent named Ian Scuffling«. I draw attention to the use of the copula which conveys the sense that this is not a disguise but a definite transformation. In Zurich, after pawning his »zoot«, »a less visible Ian Scuffling goes back outside« (304). In the Mittelwerke he climbs into coveralls, combs down his hair and clips his mustache: »You look like Hitler now« (359). Within the Zone Slothrop soon comes to be known as the Rocketman (418). On his dope-smuggling mission the name on the special pass is Max Schlepzig, »vaudeville entertainer« (438). Throughout Slothrop is »only half aware of being extinguished« (435), »clutching in terror to the dwindling white point of himself« (445), he feels »a general loss of emotion, a numbness« (572), and Pynchon notes that »he has begun to thin, to scatter« (593). He next dons a Red Army uniform (597), stripping it of its insignia, »trying for less visibility« (642), succeeding to the point of not being recognized by his chief pursuer, Major Marvey. His next impersonation is of Plechazunga at the pig-hero festival (662); then we read of him naked on the mountain (725) knowing »He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking all the albatross of self now and then« (726); »he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection« (728); »he has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell-stripped. Scattered all over the Zone« (830); finally he is no more than a story, sent into the Zone to be assembled but »is broken down instead, and scattered« (860), difficult to hold together even as a »concept« (864). What has taken place, and Pynchon himself gives away the clue, is that »everything has flowed away but the name« (373). Like the other Pynchonian characters, undifferentiated and mirrored *ad infinitum*, Slothrop is little more than a cipher of a progressive, irreversible dematerialization.

5. *The unrepresentable/unrepresentable*. As far as my paper is concerned I understand this feature of Hassan's catena to comprise two components: a) the unnameable, that uncanny something staving off efforts to express, body it forth, and b) the challenge to the notion of representation as such, the incrimination of the mimetic legacy in the arts. Very early in the novel the reader finds the following differentiation between Pointsman and Mexico:

But in the domain of zero to one, not something to something, Pointsman can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive anywhere in between . . . But to Mexico belongs the domain *between* zero and one – the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion – the probabilities . . . (63-4)

Playing with »these symbols of randomness and fright« Mexico »wrecks the elegant rooms of history« (64) which I interpret to mean that once man apprehends the unrepresentable (once he has felt Nietzsche's tiger move) all known systems of representation are found to be inadequate. A later passage purports to voice the same caution regarding the adequacy of representation:

that history as it's been laid on the world is only a fraction, an outward-and-visible fraction. That we must also look to the untold, to the silence around us, to the passage of the next rocks we notice. (714)

The major narratives of our culture are shown to be provisional, surface emplotments of the totality of life whose complexity continually eludes them. All of which contributes to postmodernism's subversion of itself »in forms of articulate silence« (Hassan).

Throughout the text Pynchon indicts representation, painfully conscious of the limits of his writing (»entertaining its exhaustion«). Brigadier Pudding's throes of writing the mammoth study of the European balance of power may be taken as an autoreferential comment on the self-defeating nature of language artefacts: »'Never make it', he found himself muttering at the beginning of each day's work – 'it's changing out under me. Oh, dodgy – very dodgy'« (89). At one point Pynchon writes of the presumption of those who desire to say »what« the war was (i. e. precisely what he himself is undertaking in the novel), it being »so vast and aloof«, »so absentee« (152). Writing turns upon an absence, foraging for meaning, presence, a content, but the aims are unattainable. This is exemplified by the Seven Rivers episode, »medvezhy ugolak« (393), where Tchitcherine had come to give the tribesmen an alphabet but the project is marked by skepticism: »The great silences of Seven Rivers have not yet been alphabetized, and perhaps never will be« (396). The synecdoches of the alphabet and the river focus sharply the whole futility of representation/signification.

The very quest for the Schwarzgerät (»its serial number had been removed, and five zeros painted in« (503)) proves no more than a search for a nameless blank. Still on the same problem, Pökler, in face of the horrors of the crematoriums, ruminates: »While he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside« (504). I think that here we have a case of what Hassan means by the »liminary« nature of postmodern literature: its knowledge of boundaries, limits, its exhaustion in the face of the impossible task of rendering reality.

Hassan contends that all of these elements contribute to the irrealist (hard, flat surfaces) quality of postmodern art. As was shown in the discussion of character portrayal, postmodernism bears little resemblance

to mimetic representation. As an additional illustration let me here recall the hilarious episode where Slothrop and Schnorp, flying a balloon into the Russian zone, engage the »beer-sodden« Marvey's Mothers' »recon plane« (387-91). In the ensuing battle they hide in a »big white slope of cloud« pursued by the plane (its motor off) where they wait each other out. Slothrop succeeds in bringing the plane down by hitting it with a custard pie and they float quietly away. There are no indications that we are dealing with dreams or hallucinations; the text is »continuous«. What Pynchon achieves is to explode the reader's notion of representation, although the depicted scene would cause little surprise if it appeared in a comic book or a cartoon, in modes that make no pretensions at mimesis.

According to Hassan these five features constitute the deconstructive tendency of postmodernism, its negative boundary. The subsequent elements make up its reconstructive tendency:

6. *Irony*. Irony, perspectivism and reflexiveness, terms which Hassan uses synonymously, express »the ineluctable recreations of mind in search of a truth that continually eludes it, leaving it with only an ironic access or excess of self-consciousness«. ²¹ The affirmative content of irony appears to reside in this surplus of self-knowledge, exploding each act of creation by incorporating a critique of its medium, in that self-reflexivity through which works doubt their own possibility. As a postmodern text *Gravity's Rainbow* includes this »reflexive irony which mocks the realistic claims of artistic significance and truth«. ²² Lacking a unifying pattern, surrounded by fragments, Pynchon reverts to play, to the ludicrous, the parodic, deflating the claims of narratives to render a significant reality. However, this does not prevent the comic from resounding with a deeper strain of dread and the horrific. In his excess of power, Pynchon is an ironist, manipulating his material as he deems fit: consequently the indeterminacy, the haphazard temporal/spatial structures, anonymity, doubtful levels of representation, etc . . . Hassan seems to imply that many of the deconstructive features of his catena originate in this play of ironical excess.

If the trope of irony as Hayden White writes

provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language²³

Pynchon's text is a novelistic embodiment of this critique. From one point of view the text provides ironic (alternative) readings of science (The White Visitation, Peenemünde), history (colonization, the war as a burlesque), economy (international cartel conspiracies), America: Benjamin Franklin identified as a Mason »and given to cosmic forms of practical jokesterism,

²¹ Ihab Hassan, »Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective«, p. 506.

²² Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional muse*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982, p. 5.

²³ Hayden White, *Metahistory*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973, p. 37.

of which the United States of America may well have been one« (773). In a simpler vein Pynchon is a master of straightforward irony: of Ernest Pudding:

His greatest triumph on the battlefield came in 1917, in the gassy, Armageddonite filth of the Ypres salient, where he conquered a bight of no man's land some 40 yards at its deepest, with a wastage of only 70% of his unit. (88)

Irony becomes evident as an effect of the unreliability of the narrator in that there is no fixed vantage point but each layer of stability is undermined by further questionings. On another level, the text disables the reader, giving him no opportunity to combine the reticulations of the text and to enact closure. Pynchon's search, his reconnoitering of the zone meets no final verity: like the Rocket, that figment ever receding amid delusory cues, the truth of *Gravity's Rainbow* eludes us. Signifiers that could have, beyond irony, perhaps brought us to the certainty of referentiality, constantly slip, are undone, leaving the reader in a zone of play. What keeps the reader plodding through the text is the ironic surplus, the pleasure of the journey.

7. *Hybridization*. This feature of Hassan's catena stems from a twofold operation: its negative pole marks the de-definition/deformation of cultural genres, while its positive side affirms new modes of representation, crossing hitherto separate elements, undermining the hierarchy of inherited forms: »In that plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other«. ²⁴ Having dismantled sanctioned norms, postmodernism disdains to suppress perspectives previously excluded from the high arts and incorporates them as being of equal, if not more poignant, value. For subsequent reference let me quote Hassan on his concept of »intermedia«: »the fusion of forms, the confusion of realms. An end to traditional aesthetics focused on the »beauty« or »uniqueness« of the art work«. ²⁵ In a later article in *Paracriticism*, devoted to an analysis of *Finnegans Wake* which to him is the »crucial« anticipatory text of postmodernism, Hassan celebrates Joyce as having broken down the dichotomy of high and low art:

Finnegans Wake carries the tendencies of high art and popular culture to their outer limits, there where all tendencies of mind may meet, there where the epiphany and the dirty joke become one. ²⁶

To what use can these ideas be put in our reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*? In line with Hassan's evaluation, Pynchon can be seen to be writing an interplay of languages that transgresses established hierarchies and modes. Let me just instance the section that describes a masochistic orgy (269-72),

²⁴ Ihab Hassan, »Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective«, p. 504.

²⁵ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

of pornographic provenance, and interpolates it within a sequence dealing with the antics of science.

Throughout the text Pynchon celebrates figures of popular culture. During the Potsdam treaty episode, for example, Mickey Rooney makes an appearance and »girls are singing« Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree«, and if it ain't the Andrews Sisters it may as well be« (444). The tone is undoubtedly charged with parody, but the effect of this citation, like his tapping of other sources (scientific, military, economic jargon, historical dates, fairy tales, slang), contributes to make *Gravity's Rainbow* a discourse of variegated fragments, somewhat of a pastiche. To illustrate this let me draw attention to the vaudevillian nature of his use of song:

OH . . . thur's . . .
Nazis in the woodwork,
Fascists in the walls,
Little Japs with bucktooth grins
A-gonna grab yew bah th' balls. (365)

The satirical, burlesque intent of Pynchon's use of popular culture is evident. More oblique is its role in his overall subversive strategy that questions the privileged status of not only elitist art but of all orders of power. By citing elements from the subculture and the paraphernalia of a consumerist society Pynchon undermines the elitism and exclusiveness of high art. This is further pronounced by the employment of »unreceived« constructions, slang, obscenities, etc.

Hybridization is effective on another level of the text. If one metaphor is signaled out as being essential to *Gravity's Rainbow* than it is the metaphor of the cinema. Whether Pynchon names specific films (124), mentions particular genres (»westerns« (287)), or the glamorous stardom (Flynn, Crosby . . .), his practice of contaminating the text by other modes of representation, of implicating it in a multimedia civilization, inevitably leaves traces on his work. For example, there are entire sections written as though they were part of a scenario. The following will suffice:

A shadowed plain at sundown. An enormous flatness. Camera angle is kept low. People coming in, slowly, singly or in small groups, working their way across the plain, in to a settlement at the edge of a little river. (449-50)

Rethinking his experience of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* the reader will notice to what extent it duplicates one's experience of the cinema. The quick change of scene, sudden cuts as though a zooming camera glides over a series of sets is only the most evident indicator.

The cinematic quality of the text contributes to the depth-less texture of the text: the reader, caught in its roll of scenes, is unable to connect, to make interpretative links. Because the cuts are often too drastic, the unfolding text is fractured. The speed at which scenes change surpasses the power of cognition to decode and process: swamped by information/stimuli, the reader becomes a registering eye caught in the surface play of images. Although at one point Slothrop exclaims »this ain't the fuckin'

movies now« (614) (is Pynchon bluffing?), the novel ends like a broken down projection:

The film has broken, as a projection 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. (887)

It is symptomatic that the film is said to end with a breakdown, a rupture that leaves it uncompleted. This facilitates Pynchon's ultimate sleight-of-hand where he has the »bright angel of death«, the Rocket (that last image on the screen), falling »above the roof of this old theatre« (887), so that, although the novel is re-fictionalized into film, the Rocket reassumes a threatening presence, demolishing again the orders of reality we thought had put the text into a decipherable key.

8. *Carnivalization*. In the description of this term Hassan readily acknowledges his debt to Mikhail Bahtin.²⁷ If carnivalization is seen »as the collapse of hierarchic distinctions« by which »our notion of power and convention«, »stable identities and fixed character traits«²⁸ are undermined, then it becomes clear that carnivalization »riotously embraces« most of the elements that have already been discussed. Lena Szilárd subsumes all kinds of misalliances, revocations of prohibitions, the establishment of a system of profanation under Bahtin's term.²⁹ If by this last is meant the desecration of what is sanctioned, the jubilant flaunting of the body/sexuality, a liberating from norms of etiquette and decency, then *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds in these carnevalesque movements.

For a start let me call to mind Pynchon's explicit use of sexuality both as a sort of »antisystem« to the hegemonic pretensions of the ruling mastercodes and as a ludic space of pure energy. This is my reading of one of the Blitz episodes where Slothrop and Darlene are copulating while »the rocket's rush comes swelling«: »but they're fucking now, and what does it matter, but God's sake why shouldn't this stupid Blitz be good for something?« (139). In his article on Bahtin, M. A. Bernstein writes of the »festive licence of the Saturnalia« which according to him embodies »a permanent utopian longing, a glimpse of a prelapsarian world free from

²⁷ Mikhail Bahtin, *Sivaraštvo Fransoa Rablea*, Nolit, Beograd, 1978. Bahtin's conception of the carnevalesque has more width than I find in Pynchon's novel. Put very simply it can be reduced to a twofold movement. On its negative pole it critically evaluates and deconstructs existing hierarchical structures (cancels ruling principales, laws, conventions, etc.). However, it also has a highly charged positive, affirmative tendency because it recognizes the inevitability of change, the surety of renewal and the inexhaustible energy of the people. Pynchon's carnivalization points more to the negative pole because he implies that liberation is only a temporary letting go, of short breadth. His final image is one of entropy which, on the social level, is manifested by the fact that the ruling codes have a way of coopting the liberating potential of rebellion, using it for their own ends and blunting its critical edge.

²⁸ Michael André Bernstein, »When the Carnival Turns Bitter«, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 10, Dec. 1983, p. 283.

²⁹ Lena Szilárd, »Karnevalizacija« in *Pojmovnik ruske avangarde*, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb, 1984, p. 57.

cast and cant«. ³⁰ My contention is that *Gravity's Rainbow* posits sexual energy, the orgasmic carnavalization of all normally inflexible distinctions as partaking in this utopian longing.

An analogous function is assigned by Pynchon to what he calls »drug epistemologies« (678). This is often coupled with a sense of postlapsarian loss that the liberating, hallucinatory 60ies have departed for good: »And I dream of the days back in Doperland/And I wonder will I ever go free?« (430) In the concluding section of the paper I will show that this sense of futility is a distinguishing mark of Pynchon's writing. As an additional element of profanation I will mention Pynchon's readiness to use scatological references. What this shows is that the artefacts sanctioned by the master-codes sprang out of a »mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street« as Yeats would put it but that the fact has been artfully repressed. Pynchon is a debunker and, to take an example, I read Slothrop's journey »down the toilet« (73-77) as an initiatory rite giving Slothrop a genealogist's (in the Nietzschean sense) keenness of perspective.

Although Pynchon's views on colonialism are very complex, some of them are pertinent to the present discussion. Consider the following passage from the novel:

Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit . . . Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair on his own forbidden genitals . . . Christian Europe was always death . . . death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil those cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts. (368-69)

To read this as satire would miss the point. The resonances of the text are too numerous to reduce it to a political lampoon. As a matter of fact, Pynchon apostrophises Marx, »that sly old racist«, for his reductionist explanation of the problem (»Cheap Labour and Overseas Markets« (368)), and conjectures that the colonies, alongside their economic function, were a desired venthole for the repressed libidinous energies of the European burgher. According to Lena Szilárd, satirical laughter divides the world into two poles one of which is affirmed, while Bahntinian carnevalesque laughter knows no absolute negation or affirmation, parmeated as it is by ambivalence.³¹ My point is that Pynchon indulges the utopian potential of colonialism to the extent of going over the border of his political commitments. The carnevalesque cannot be contained but its surplus of play and energy runs over consciously ordered distinctions and systems of preference.

Gastronomic debauchery, another joy of the body, constitutes an additional feature of the antisystem. From Pirate Prentice's banana breakfast

³⁰ M. A. Bernstein, »When the Carnival Turns Bitter«, p. 289-90.

³¹ Lena Szilárd, »Karnevalizacija«, p. 53.

in war-famished London, Raoul de la Perlimpinpin's extravaganza, the wild feast aboard the »Anubis« and, especially, Pig Bodine's (»anarchist slob«³²) counterforce menu (834), all of these – underscored by the hilarity of language that conveys them – represent carnevalesque modes of liberation. Through food, gastronomic indulgences, Pynchon accentuates the mendacity of all abstractions and idealisms that camouflage the fact that they are befouled by the earth and the profane body.

One final remark here: it should come as no surprise that carnivalization constitutes a feature of what *Gravity's Rainbow* delineates as the counterforce, that subversive alternative to the hegemonic totalizations of the dominant codes. This is readily seen in that hilarious episode where Roger Mexico storms an Oil Parley and starts urinating over the tables, documents, »poker-faced« executives who »are still not quite willing to admit that this is happening, you know, in any world that really touches, at too many points, the one *they're* accustomed to« (741). (One is immediately reminded of the wedding-party scene in Foreman's »Hair«). This defiantly anarchistic gesture embraces both the ludic and the subversive side of Bakhtin's anti-system. The same is true of a later »counterforce traveling song« which starts by listing the knaveries of the anonymous »they« and concludes

And there's shit you won't be eating any more –
They've been paying you to love it,
But the time has come to shove it,
And it isn't resistance, it's a war. (745)

In the conclusion of this paper I intend to show that Pynchon did not harbour any illusions concerning the outcome of this war. What I stress as being of particular interest is the way this demystification of the utopian potential of the counterforce relates to the practice of writing and the status of Pynchon's novels as literary texts.

9. *Performance*. Performance, or the synonym Hassan offers, participation, is evidently more indigeneous to the performing arts (for instance the Living Theatre, happenings, rock concerts) than to the written word, but the indeterminacy of postmodern literature, the need to fill in the gaps, elicits and requires the reader's response. (What this paper essentially amounts to is one such performance). I have already cited William Plater who has remarked that *Gravity's Rainbow* enjoins the reader to partake in the process of textual production. Patricia Waugh has theorized about the changed role of the reader in contemporary innovative fiction:

The 'Dear Reader' is no longer quite as passive and becomes in effect an acknowledged fully active player in a new conception of literature as a collective creation rather than a monologic and authoritative version of history.³³

³² Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, p. 26.

³³ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 43.

From what has been said up to this point it should be obvious that *Gravity's Rainbow* encompasses so many lines of development, such complex relations and processes, shifting perspectives and evasions of definite closures, that it becomes futile to attempt to apprehend it once and for all. This sort of a text engages our powers to recreate/reconstruct so that each rereading turns out to be a distinct performance. The reading eye must reinvent, read pattern and significance into a cinematic procession of images, narratives and structures that generate multifarious paradigms of meanings.

Throughout the novel Pynchon, using the you-address, invites the reader to join in his masquerade. A number of examples will bear this out: »Perhaps you know that dream too. Perhaps it has warned you never to speak Its name. If so, you know how Slothrop'll be feeling now« (334). Pynchon here bids the reader to replenish the empty »it« with what he has brought to the reading experience. Some other instances: »Did you ever go on holiday to Zwölfkinder?« (464) The parenthetical remark on page 685 (»Check out Ishmael Reed. He knows more about it than you'll ever find here«), detracts from the authority of Pynchon's utterance and taunts the reader to seek additional information in another text on his own. When the implied author comments, »I am betraying them all . . . the worst of it is that I know what your editors want, *exactly* what they want« (862), he flaunts the illusionary nature of the text and scoffs at the reader's credulity. By the end of the novel Pynchon seems to have transplanted the reader into the text itself and made of it a communal offering, a collective event: »There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs« (887). The very last words of the novel (»now everybody-« (887)) summons the reader to join the song while the final dash indicates a circularity, an open invitation to share once more in the text. This explicit appeal to the reader can be designated as an aspect of what Fredrich Jameson considers the »populist« facet of postmodernism.³⁴ Unlike the elitist neglect of the recipient that I believe characterizes the poetics of high modernism, **whit its bias towards the self-sufficient artefact, the reader is here enticed to indulge his creative abilities and to engage the text on his own terms.**

10. *Constructionism/Immanence*. Although Hassan treats these as distinct domains, my position is that both partake of a common postmodernist bent. The first refers to the postmodern tendency to construct reality in post-Nietzschean »fictions«, while immanence refers to the insight that languages reconstitute the world, that a patina of thought, signifiers and fictions lies over and obfuscates reality. Both of these elements I consider to go into the making of what Hassan, in *The Right Promethean Fire*, denominates as the »new gnosticism«:

³⁴ Fredric Jameson, »Postmodernizam ili kulturna logika kasnog kapitalizma« in *Post-moderna*, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1988, p. 219.

by which I mean that tendency of mind to dematerialize reality, to gather more and more mind in itself, to turn nature into culture, culture into language, language into immediate consciousness.³⁶

To what extent does *Gravity's Rainbow* partake of this condition?

In a revealing passage there appears what I read as a metacomment on the text itself:

Or has he by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Croatian finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination. (455)

Pynchon is candidly aware of the text's inability to touch bedrock reality, of the fact that he is caged within his constructs. In another passage, the text expresses an elegiac longing for a situation where knowledge is transparently immediate, uncontaminated by constructed fictions (the metonym of paper):

Slothrops in those days were not yet so much involved with paper, and the wholesale slaughtering of trees, They were still for the living green, against the dead white. Later they lost, or traded away, knowledge of which side they'd been on. (312)

A set of antithetical pairs: green – white
life – death
nature – trade

summarizes a number of broader themes: ecological considerations; the written text as a lapse of knowledge; and the economic implications that the transformation calls forth. To return to my main line of argument, what is implied is that »paper illusions« blur and unsettle the boundary between fact and fiction, life and death. This is made clear by the dilemma surrounding the Schwarzkommando (are they real or byproducts of »Operation Black Wing« (320)). A similar note is sounded by the unsettling nature of the world of Blicero: »he was seeing the world now in *mythical regions*: they had their maps, real mountains, rivers, and colors« (566). The novel as a whole makes no pretensions of reliably registering a pre-existent reality, knowing full well that the latter is no more than a construct. From its ironic distance it sees the very presumption to truth to be ludicrous.

The »emergence of the language animal« (Hassan) pervades the pages of Pynchon's novel. Reality shows a tendency to evaporate into linguistic signs:

big globular raindrops, thick as honey, begin to splat into giant astericks on the pavement, inviting him to look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all. (238)

³⁶ Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*, p. 60.

Needless to say the anchoring footnotes are missing. No final certainty can decode the redundancy of information which turns upon itself in its selfproductivity: »Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?« (300)

Something has already been said about Pynchon's propensity of dematerializing his »characters«; this is further emphasized when he locates their origins in language. Thus Slothrop's ancestors are the »word-smitten Puritans« (241). Rummaging through his family tree Slothrop finally alights on the initials »T. S.« : »Well, holy cow, Slothrop reckons, that must be me, huh« (333). In a moment of nostalgic hankering for an undefiled sense of presence, Slothrop listens to trees and sees through the insanity of his family's business »grinding them to pulp, bleaching that to paper and getting paid for this with more paper« (644). Slothrop himself (a possible metonymy for the fullness of meaning) is no more than a »pretext« (861). Pynchon fields the possibility that the rocket is a »holy text«: »to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop« (606). Of course the same description can be applied to the novel itself, with the reservation that I doubt whether it can be squeezed of this last drop.

Such is Hassan's catena. Mine has been a revisionist reading because the catena was not primarily intended for literary criticism, so that I have manipulated it for the purpose of the project at hand. This leads to a more fundamental question. Simply stated, does not the application of the catena as an ordered system go against the grain of postmodernist readings and in a sense contradict Hassan's paracritical strategies:

Criticism should learn about playful discontinuity and become itself less than the sum of its parts. It should offer the reader empty spaces, silences, in which he can meet himself in the presence of literature . . . Not a form strictly imposed but the tentativeness between one form and another.³⁶

The catena seems to dispute this program and to have filled up the empty spaces of which Hassan speaks. His paratactic list highlights the contradictions inherent in an undertaking which seeks to debunk traditional discourse but is still imprisoned (inevitably) in its mode of articulation. One is tempted to say that it shows the absurdity of attempting to construct a postmodernist theoretical apparatus as such. ,

Rereading what has been written so far I feel I have barely skimmed the surface of Pynchon's work. It jealously continues to be retentively silent, engaging the reader's curiosity and need for significance, submitting to foreplay yet evading consummation.

³⁶ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 25.

II

As a preliminary starting point, it is necessary to state that the ingenuity of the textual *tour de force* of Pynchon's novel invalidates all dismissals of the work as resulting from a lack of compositional organization and competency. Rather, *Gravity's Rainbow* is an indicative challenge against the complacency of the modernist imposition of aesthetic order and discernible signification. What I mean to say is that *Gravity's Rainbow* is no gimmick, or wilful aberration, but a historically relevant performance that bears witness to the decentered, patchwork nature of our reality. This brings me to an issue which Hassan does not incorporate in his catena but which I find very pertinent to Pynchon's text: post-history. What is meant by this is the sense that the great narratives that had emploted time into dramas of progress and liberation have been deconstructed, and that contemporary man stands hopelessly within a museum housing shards of the antiquated visions, knowing change will not come.³⁷ In these conclusory remarks I will attempt to show several ways in which this feature of the postmodern situation has bearings on *Gravity's Rainbow*.

First of all there are explicit references to »winter anxieties about the End of History« (322). In the same vein, Pynchon writes of »the last summers of peacetime that once holidayed the old world away« (156) and of unwitting populations »hauling along the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order« destroyed forever (641). Unmasking the »prevalent notion« of time that postulates an original fragmentation which eventually gathers »back to home« (milleniarism), Pynchon sees through this delusion and perceives history as no more than »an aggregate of last moments« (173). In addition to this evidence it is necessary to mention all the various embodiments of what Pynchon names the »preterite«: »preterite clan, relentlessly, beyond their own history« (116). Of these it will suffice to recall the dissipated crew upon the »Anubis«: »who've lost the way, blundering across one another's flotsam, the scrapings, the dreary junking of memories« (777).

On a more significant level, posthistory figures as the outcome of the internecine interplay of the counterforce (»we«) and the anonymous power structures (»they«). As I have shown in the preceding analysis, the text can be said to dramatize an attempt at the destabilization and delegitimization of the dominant codes of power. However, the text's ironic surplus undercuts the possibility of realizing this utopian craving, and it ultimately does not lead to an excess of innovation and play, but forebodes an unregenerative catastrophe, the ultimate Pynchonian symbol of entropy. It is at this point that we see how Pynchon will not opt for ready closure: he shows the susceptibility of the counterforce, how it is implicated in and eventually used by the very system it sought to overturn. Going back to

³⁷ See Gianni Vattimo, »Popstmoderno doba i kraj povijesti«, in *Postmoderna*, p. 73-83.

the novel, in the heyday of the Zone (when conventions and laws are subverted), the counterforce is capable of hewing out a clandestine alternative identity. However, the »catch« is that the endangered structures have a way of coopting the threat/other, there exist complex modes of transactions (scientific, economic, military) that safeguard them:

Roger must have been dreaming for a minute here of the sweaty evenings of Thermidor: the failed Counterforce, the glamorous ex-rebels . . . cameraworthy wherever they carry on . . . doomed pet freaks. They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though, They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical . . . (831)

This is where the pathos of *Gravity's Rainbow* comes to a head. It is the point whereat suspicion creeps in that the whole task of debunking, of deconstruction, is no more than an implement of legitimizing what one desires to subvert. If the novel may be said to trace the trajectory of the counterforce, this resigned regret (»they will use us«) attests to the fact that the ruling powers have at their disposal a whole arsenal of strategies that blunt the thrust of rebellion, that reintegrate it into their networks of exchange (»another dividend for them«). The counter-culture is assimilated as an addition to the body of goods to be expended by consumer society. (Pynchon must have been aware of the irony of the market success of his book).

Where does this leave Pynchon? Intervention in history seems futile and self-defeating. Alternative practices are assimilated by established power structure. Nevertheless, the text itself, as I have shown, demarcates a space of erotic play, an ecstatic production of language (Barthes) that, however tentatively, questions dominant codes and brackets itself off from the tentacles of hegemonizing forces. This aporia leads to the final considerations of this paper.

Gravity's Rainbow embodies a fundamental paradox of postmodernist literature. While flaunting the exhaustion of narrative structures and pronouncing its scepticism in regard to language, it is nonetheless given to what Terry Eagleton calls »the exorbitation of language«. ³⁸ To return to Hassan's dualities, Pynchon's novel does not espouse »reductive, minimalist« forms, but must be classified as a »lavish extravaganza«. ³⁹ It is here that begin my misgivings about the claims of postmodernist literature: i. e. the paradox of proclaiming the death of literature while continuing to write it. To coin a phrase of our own it would be possible to describe *Gravity's Rainbow* as a sort of garrulous silence. This oxymoronic structure encompasses both its linguistic virtuosity and its self-questioning exhaustion. Needless to say the term makes no pretensions to analytic universality or consistency being no more than a metaphor resulting from a particular reading.

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain*, p. 91.

³⁹ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 58.

To generalize, it appears that the postmodern predicament can call forth either an affirmative liberating joy or an abdication in silence. *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to override this antithetical duality. The very prolixity and bulk of its rich-flowing texture does not bespeak a literature of exhaustion, a Beckettian withdrawal. Yet (and here is the crux) although it revels in its textuality, it incorporates an undercutting ironic self-awareness of the provisionality, the ultimate futility of its production. How legitimate is it to ask why the text was not abandoned if the author knew that it will inevitably be co-opted into alienated exchanges of power? But, in a manner of speaking, Pynchon's novel, is paradigmatic of the world we inhabit: a world that has seen mainstays, traditions and stories go bankrupt, yet that goes on creating, ravaging with its fierce enterprising zeal. In a state of production bliss it quantitatively develops an ever-spreading reified space unmoved by considerations of justification or purpose. The gargantuan text of the novel mirrors this will to power, knowing quite well that its fabric stands on no firm ground, atop a void.

The exuberance of *Gravity's Rainbow* counteracts the sense of futility characterizing one strand of postmodernism. However, a prosaic fact about Pynchon testifies to his self-knowledge of standing on an endangered brink that keeps pulling him towards the pole of silence: since 1973 no new work of fiction has appeared so that it is appropriate to speak of *Gravity's Rainbow* as his third and perhaps his final work. It might be said that what Beckett (for-example) writes into his texts, Pynchon has radicalized into a life stance. This does not mean that his eventual reappearance would prove us wrong (and there have been continuous rumours of a new book). What that would signal is that he had again felt the urge to come to grips with the postmodern paradox: the impossible task of rendering the unrepresentable, of reconciling the impossible, so powerfully expressed by the title of the novel we have been considering and which might very well be the text Pynchon leaves as his final legacy.

Stipe Grgas: GRAVITY'S RAINBOW I IHAB HASSANOVA KATENA
POSTMODERNIZMA

Sažetak

Ovaj rad počiva na pretpostavci da tradicionalne strategije čitanja ne omogućuju zadovoljavajući pristup Thomas Pynchonovom romanu *Gravity's Rainbow*. Autor nudi jednu interpretaciju teksta koja se oslanja na Ihab Hassanovoj kateni postmodernizma, a koja se sastoji od sljedećih elemenata: 1. indeterminacija, 2. fragmentacija, 3. dekanonizacija, 4. bez-ja-stvenost, 5. nepredočivo, 6. ironija, 7. hibridizacija, 8. karnevalizacija, 9. izvedba i 10. konstrukcionizam/imanencija. Pridodajući ovom spisku pojam post-historije, on razmatra implikacije koje iz njega proizlaze u pogledu statusa i prakse Pynchonovog romana kao književnog teksta.