

# Textuality, actuality, and contextuality : the example of Gravity's Rainbow

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## Textuality, Actuality, and Contextuality: The Example of *Gravity's Rainbow*

Gregory T. Polletta

*Gravity's Rainbow*, whatever else we may make of it, is an example, a spectacular example, of what has become a commonplace in describing the text, the modern text — which is writing that makes no effort to conceal its processes of production; writing that does not disguise or dissemble its makings and workings but instead insistently calls attention to its fabrication, its fictionality, its rhetoricity, its verbal structurings and status, its textuality. Pynchon's work is . . . a *production*: self-consciously a production in the extreme.

As a novel it is the story, of course, not of literary production as such, but of the production, the invention, manufacture and deployment of the German V-2 rocket. It is a fiction, a phantasmagoric fiction, which turns about the factualities of the epic history of the V-2 — that superproduction of human engineering, labor, and intellection which took so many years of scientific research and development, untold manhours, to bring to the screen.

And the novel replicates that massive mobilization of resources, materials, techniques, and labor. Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* is like being on the scene of some gigantic construction site, with its forest of cranes, the bulldozers and trucks and shovels going full blast, networks of scaffoldings in various stages of erection — and that similar sense we have of not being quite able to tell whether structures are being built up or torn down.

Swarming over this vast site, the terrain of the novel's 760 pages, its expanse of some 400,000 words, are a crew, a cast, of 400 characters, though it's hard to count because many of the names are those of real people — such as that of one of the first names mentioned, Wernher von

Braun — and the people embedded in such historical allusions are past counting. The plots, the story lines, for this cast of characters are even harder to count and keep track of, not only because they are spun with such intricacy, but because the book draws its narratives from an immense array of histories and forms and fields of knowledge and discourse.

Pynchon alludes copiously to scientists, obscure as well as famous, and his fiction is packed with erudite information about thermodynamics, entropy, quantum mechanics, polymer chemistry, conditioned reflex psychology, statistical probability theory, cybernetics, and just about everything else in the sciences that contributed to rocket research and development. Pynchon constructs his narratives as much out of the histories of science as, to cite a rival production, Robert Coover makes *The Public Burning* out of political history. And he employs the similar practice of mixing actual events in the history of science or factual quotations from the scientific "literature" with wacky distortions and fantastic inventions — parodies, travesties, and burlesques of the real thing. He does the same with technology. Pynchon is as dogged as an investigative newsreporter in tracking down the labyrinthine involvements in the making of the V-2s by cartels and multinational corporations of German, Allied, and neutral industries. What Pynchon the newshound turns up, as instance, of the involvement of the Swiss chemical industry in the development of the rocket is unbelievable . . . sensational . . . but mostly true in its wacky way: wacky but true.

Besides these histories, these discourses of science and technology, *Gravity's Rainbow* draws its materials from an immense, a daffy, array of popular arts and culture. Pynchon makes abundant allusion to identifiably literary works, e.g. to the poetry of T. S. Eliot or Rilke, as well as to other works and forms of high art in painting and music. He also makes extensive use of so-called lowbrow literature, especially spy fiction and novels of intrigue. But the bulk of his materials come from popular culture: from comic books, hit songs, hip slang, the lore of clothes such as zoot suits or the getups in porno media, the gags and routines of strip joints, and like expressions of popular art and life before, during, and just after World War II.

Pynchon draws most lavishly from the movies, particularly from popular films like *King Kong*. *Gravity's Rainbow* is commonly classified in the genre of "encyclopedic narratives," and it is doubtless encyclopedic in

the use it makes of movies and movie-making, for by one count there are allusions to 25 movies, 9 directors, at least 48 actors and actresses, not to mention at least a dozen film studios.<sup>1</sup> And the permutations or exponential changes of these figures in the narrative interactions push us way beyond anything we can keep track of and tabulate.

That's the picture, then: *Gravity's Rainbow* is . . . *big*. It is stupendously intricate: a production of overpowering scale, mass, magnitude, and complexity — a megafiction. It is, as they say in the publishing trade, a *blockbuster*. By which, of course, the book trade means a book that has an explosive impact and is a terrific success.

I, too, believe that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a blockbuster of a book, but I am going to try to give the expression a different and altogether contrary turn. I shall be playing with words, obviously, but not just to be clever and "cute" (to borrow the novel's dated idiom), for there are telling significations in this expression, this figure. It is the language of power and technology that deeply implicates the activities of writing, publishing, and reading books.<sup>2</sup>

And what I shall be getting at is that in writing *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon has written a book that runs counter to and contends against the powers and prowess of his art. He has produced a book that runs counter to and contends against its own verbal intricacy and virtuosity. Pynchon knows full well the allure of the power that goes into the writing, the production, of a book of this scale and scope. Pynchon knows the lure of intricate structurations. And his book, *Gravity's Rainbow*, runs counter to its own manufacture. I don't mean that it simply undoes or subverts itself — how facile our talk has become of such disturbing notions — but rather that it directs its verbal powers and energies, its technology, away from its being in language, in fiction, to its being in the world.

That is how I read this book, that is how I want to read *Gravity's Rainbow*, even at the risk of overplaying its high seriousness and

<sup>1</sup> On *Gravity's Rainbow* as "encyclopedic narrative" see Edward Mendelson, "Introduction," *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 9. For a compendious treatment of Pynchon's use of movies see Charles Clerc, "Film in *Gravity's Rainbow*," in *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, ed. Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983) 103-51.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis in these terms of the comparable enterprise in art exhibitions see "Special Section: Museum Blockbusters," *Art in America*, 74 (June 1986) 18-37.

disfiguring its ludic gravity, but actually I am less intent on offering an interpretation of the novel than I am in a reading which engages the complex of issues in theory that are designated by the title of my paper.

These are the issues I propose to address by way of a reading of Pynchon's text: If, as one powerful formulation in contemporary literary theory asserts, "there is nothing beyond (or outside) the text," and if context is thereby construed as but a weaving together of diverse texts, postmodern writing is an art of "hybrid constructions" which carries the mingling of literary and non-literary textuality to extremes. Moreover, postmodern writing insistently engages the actualities of social, historical, and cultural praxis. To what degree, then, and in what ways does the practice of postmodern writing render problematic certain current and received notions of the relations between textuality, contextuality, and actuality? What kinds of contexts are germane to the reading of the postmodern text? How is postmodern writing altering our sense of what a context is and how it functions? How does the postmodern text intervene in the places where the discursive activities or "work" of reading get done? What conditions, imperatives, and exigencies does the postmodern entail for the institution of literary studies?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The formulation is Jacques Derrida's and of several places where he states "there is nothing beyond (or outside) the text" the most interesting for my purposes is in "But beyond . . . (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," tr. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (Autumn 1986) 155-70, esp. pp. 167 ff. This is his rejoinder to the piece by McClintock and Nixon, "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le Dernier Mot du Racisme'," (in the same number of *Critical Inquiry*) that took issue with "Racism's Last Word," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Autumn 1985) 290-99, a translation by Peggy Kamuf of "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme," which "was written for the catalog of the exhibition of Art contre/against Apartheid" in 1983. What is so interesting about Derrida's rejoinder is that he takes his critics to task for failing to consider "the context and the mode of his original text." This would appear to give *context* a different sense and status than that which he presents in "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 307-30. There Derrida expounds "why a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather in what way its determination is never certain or saturated," whereas in "But beyond . . ." he is concerned to show how a context determined or shaped the writing of a particular text. The upshot of the exchange is a sharper recognition than Derrida is usually credited with having of "the pragmatics of discourse" or, as I would put it, the actual contexts within which writing is produced.

In choosing *Gravity's Rainbow* as an example for my inquiry I should say at the outset that I am not particularly interested in ascertaining whether it is to be identified as a postmodern fiction as opposed to a modern or modernist fiction — the argument might go either way — for whatever the outcome of such a debate, there is no disputing that Pynchon's book exhibits one of the markings that is frequently advanced as signal to postmodern writing and about which a consensus seems to have been reached in determining the postmodern text. Pynchon's book is exemplary of the way the postmodern writer crosses freely between the borders of narrative and non-narrative, fiction and non-fiction, high art and low or non-art — the way postmodern writing effaces the so-called traditional boundaries, demarcations, and separations of genre, stylistic decorum, register, mode, and so on through virtually the whole anatomy of received literary structures and structurings.<sup>4</sup> To put the point differently, Pynchon's book exemplifies how discourses and discursive practices are permeable and migratory and mutative to extremes in postmodern writing.

*Gravity's Rainbow*, moreover, exhibits by its massive use of discourses of popular art and culture the most conspicuous specific feature about which a consensus seems to have been reached in describing or determining the postmodern text. In my overture I rattled off the array of discourses of this kind which Pynchon draws upon in constructing his fiction. Indeed, the claim for the novelty of Pynchon's practice was advanced immediately after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973, even before "postmodernism" was in circulation as a critical term. Richard Poirier, as instance, reviewing the book right after it appeared, remarked that the two books "that come to mind most often as one reads *Gravity's Rainbow*" are *Moby-Dick* and *Ulysses*, but Pynchon's work "marks an advance beyond either book in its treatment of cultural inheritances, an advance that a merely literary education and taste will either distort or find uncongenial."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Here and several places throughout I am repeating what I said in a paper on "Determining the Postmodernist Text" which was delivered at the last SAUTE Conference and printed in *The Structure of Texts* (SPELL 3), ed. Udo Fries (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987) 235-56, though it will be evident that I am taking a different slant and addressing a different set of issues.

<sup>5</sup> "Rocket Power," in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mendelson, p. 172.

And what we have had since is an industrious ferreting out of the allusions and references in *Gravity's Rainbow* to these popular cultural inheritances, especially to its encyclopedic use of movies such as *King Kong*. The terms on which this activity is performed, presumably to make it a serious scholarly inquiry rather than endless anecdotes recalling the good old flicks we grew up on, come under the heading *intertextuality*, the argument being that postmodern writing and art rely more, massively more, on films and the like for intertextuality than on so-called literary texts.

This notion of intertextuality is worth pausing over a bit because it is one way both old and new, traditional and anti-traditional, of conceiving of contextuality. It is one way of placing a literary text in context.

I should say straight away that I do not find most of the scholarship on Pynchon's filmic intertextuality, say, particularly apt or incisive. It is mostly the sort of thing we were doing in the institution of literary studies well before the postmodern text came along. The postmodern text has merely altered the field of reference or allusion of our institutional scholarly practice. I do not see any decisive difference between the treatment of an intertextuality that refers to literary texts, as in Nabokov's *Ada* — to cite as an example a text that can be bracketed chronologically with *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Public Burning* — and a treatment of intertextuality that labors at identifying the movies or the comic strips referred to in the novels by Pynchon and Coover. Most of this work is, to quote a phrase from Pynchon's text,<sup>6</sup> "Kute Korrespondences" (590), and nothing like what might be done by probing the text's line that today we all lead "paracinematic lives" (388), or by following up a recent statement by Robert Longo, an identifiably postmodern painter, when he declared, "My work exists somewhere between movies and monuments."<sup>7</sup> Tracking down the allusions and references to *King Kong*, and other forms of "non-literary" intertextuality drawn from popular art and culture, will hardly suffice to establish a sense of contextuality that is distinctive to postmodern writing.

But there is a much stronger concept of intertextuality in force in contemporary critical theory and practice. Intertextuality, in this view, is only a specific form of the textuality that cannot reach outside of the

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from *Gravity's Rainbow* are cited by page numbers in parentheses and refer to the Viking Press edition, New York, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> *Robert Longo*, Text by Carter Ratcliff (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) 12.

boundaries of the writing which constitutes a text into any context that pretends or is presumed to be exterior and external. All texts are *inter-textual* in the sense that they exist in a common order of language and rhetoricity.

Michael Sprinker's treatment of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover" will serve to illustrate this strong concept of intertextuality. "The Windhover," Sprinker argues, does not refer to the actual kestrel or even to anything in Hopkins's theology the kestrel may be made to represent. "If the bird in the poem has a referent outside the poem itself," he asserts, "it is not so much the kestrel as all those birds so preternaturally present in the Romantic lyric: Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, Tennyson's eagle, Hardy's darkling thrush, Yeats's falcon and golden singing bird, and Stevens's blackbird."<sup>8</sup>

This is markedly different from any familiar or traditional species of intertextuality. Sprinker does not appeal to a principle of allusion or citation. Rather he is placing the Hopkins text in the context of other like texts — written before and after — in order to establish a claim about the ontological status of the text. His reading of the Hopkins, his placing, is grounded on the notion of "the linguistic turn" or "linguistic moment" which rests on the foundation of (and indeed may be only catchy names for) the vast edifice of contemporary theory encompassed by Roland Barthes' theory of the text and Jacques Derrida's theory of writing.<sup>9</sup>

And one way of summarizing what this grounding comprises is to cite Paul de Man's position that writing, once it gets on the page, "has forever taken leave" of the world.<sup>10</sup> In fiction, any novel, as in poetry, any poem, its language has already and forever taken leave of reality, of the world, as soon as writing begins, once the words are on the page. It removes itself from any real place, referentially speaking, it leaves the world behind. In

<sup>8</sup> "A Counterpoint of Dissonance": *The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1980) 6. I have chosen this illustration because I treated the issues involved in "Hopkins and Modern Poetics," in *On Poetry and Poetics* (SPELL 2), ed. Richard Waswo (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1985) 63-91

<sup>9</sup> For an exposition of these theories see "Determining the Postmodernist Text," pp. 237-38.

<sup>10</sup> "Criticism and Crisis," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 17. For de Man's definition of "rhetoricity" see pp. 136-37 of the same volume.



this respect, then, there is nothing beyond the text, nothing outside the text, to which our reading of the writing can appeal for veracity or validation or valorization, for the only actuality is what is in the text, the textuality of the writing, and context, contextuality, becomes the condition of rhetoricity within which all texts are inscribed and take their being.

The congeries of theory which turn about these convictions have had so powerful an influence on the institution of literary studies as to have effected a revolution, nothing less than "a paradigm shift," as the claim goes, in the way we go about our work. The power and cogency of the critical discourse, the discourses of criticism, this theory of the text and theory of writing have produced are incontestable. There is nothing in theory that matches, let alone, surpasses, "deconstruction" or "post-structuralism" or "the linguistic turn" — whatever the name we give to this body of contemporary theory and however important the differences are among its practitioners. The institution of literary studies has changed for good under its sway. But a number of questions have been left open or left aside as well as left behind. And there is resistance, growing resistance, on its own terms, its own grounds, and not just from those who have some kind of prejudice against theory or a vested interest in whatever it is we mean by "traditional" literary studies. Edward Said, as instance, addressing himself to the limits of the power of what he was one of the first to label as "textuality," has been arguing for the "worldliness" of the text. And right now we are hearing much about "the new historicism," which has set its sights on moving beyond textuality by re-contextualizing literary studies; in the words of one of its advocates, the new historicism seeks to "reinscribe" any particular text within a "psycho-social context."<sup>11</sup> What such developments evidence is a felt need to return the text to the world and to the contexts within which writing and reading take place — but with a full awareness of the enduring power of contemporary theories of textuality and the exceedingly problematic issues they pose for any return or reinscription.

My own interest in these questions of theory springs from a desire to comprehend what writing is actually and what writers actually do: a desire to determine whether the present theory of the text is commensurate with and comes to satisfying terms with what writers actually write, and

<sup>11</sup> Howard Felperin, "Canonical Texts and Non-Canonical Interpretations: The Neohistoricist Rereading of Donne," *Southern Review*, 18 (November 1985) 244. Felperin discusses "the paradigm shift" to "post-structuralism" on p. 235.

further, to determine the degree to which our institutions of literary study and critical discourse respond to the actualities of artistic production, dissemination, and consumption. I have become preoccupied with what we have taken to naming postmodern writing, not only with how we come to terms with what is being written or performed now, but with the uses to which the postmodern is being put, or should be put, in the making of literary history and the practice of critical discourse within or in opposition to the institution of literary studies. More specifically, I have become preoccupied with the question of whether the postmodern constitutes a distinct conceptual category and practice of writing – with the question of whether the postmodern constitutes something more or other than a style, an identifiable ensemble of distinct stylistic markings, a program, a movement, a trend: something more or other than a periodizing concept, and all the other familiar moves by which we do or used to do literary history. I have been trying to determine whether the postmodern constitutes a distinct imperative or condition, a distinct *exigency*, for writers and writing. And finally, given what Paul de Man has defined so exactly as the modern, I have been concerned with the question of whether we need yet another conceptual category, the postmodern.<sup>12</sup>

The turning point in critical discourse of the postmodern, the juncture at which the discourse became something more than trend-spotting or keeping up with what's new, came, to my view, in the clash between Jürgen Habermas, who delivered an address in 1980 that was published with the title "Modernity Versus Postmodernity," and Jean-François Lyotard, who took sharp issue with the piece in an essay of 1982 entitled "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?"<sup>13</sup> Habermas indicted

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of de Man's conception of the modern see "Determining the Postmodernist Text," pp. 246-47. In 1983, when an interviewer remarked that de Man didn't "look interested at all" in "the debate about the notion of 'postmodernism'," he responded: "The difficulty for me is that the 'postmodern approach' seems a somewhat naively historical approach. The notion of modernity is already very dubious; the notion of postmodernity becomes a parody of modernity" (Stefano Rosso, "An Interview with Paul de Man," in De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986] 119-20). I believe otherwise, obviously, but I have tried to follow the example of de Man's discourse of the modern.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this debate, along with a listing of bibliographical details, see "Determining the Postmodernist Text," pp. 242 ff.

postmodernity as a pernicious betrayal of "the project of modernity," for the artistic experiments undertaken in its name are an expression of the shattering of a vital relationship among the three structures, the three discourses or discursive practices, he calls cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive rationality, i.e., discourses of science, theories of morality and jurisprudence, and discourses and practices of art. Postmodernity, he charged, has become an anti-modernity. Habermas made a plea to reunite that which had been split apart and torn asunder — by returning to the energies of art, culture, and society inaugurated by modernity, by resuming and reinvigorating the project of modernity: "The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism."

Lyotard launched his rejoinder by querying "what sort of unity Habermas has in mind." Far from mourning any loss of unity in what he calls "the postmodern condition," he celebrates the endeavors of postmodern writers and artists at "presenting the unrepresentable." The "emancipatory effect" Habermas lamented as lost by postmodernity is precisely what Lyotard adduces in the search for "new presentations":

A postmodernist artist or writer . . . the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.

There is little doubt to my mind that Lyotard is more persuasive and compelling than Habermas was in his arguments, not simply because he favors the postmodern and its modes of artistic experiment, but because he attempts to establish the postmodern as a distinct conceptual category and practice of art. The question remains, however, as to whether this concept of the postmodern, this method of theorizing postmodernism, provides a concrete enough sense of how a text or work relates to praxis, not only to whatever it is that Habermas means by "everyday praxis," but to the actual situation and practice of writers and writing, as well as to the institutional contexts within which we actually practice our discourses of

reading texts. The issues may be posed even more pointedly: What are the specifically political as well as the general cultural implications of postmodern writing?<sup>14</sup> What are the politics of the theories we practice in literary studies? And how does postmodern writing call into question our sense of what constitutes a context in the institution of literary studies?

These are issues that confront all of us, the profession at large, rather than only those of us who practice deconstruction or post-structuralism. And they have not gone unnoticed, in fact, just as there has been no lack of sympathetic attention to postmodern writers and texts in literary studies. Of the two most powerful and productive bodies of recent critical discourse of the postmodern, one has been applying the concepts and methods of post-structuralist or deconstruction theory to postmodern writing as exemplifications or actualizations of the post-structuralist theory of the text and writing; the other, which has been called "oppositional," has been claiming that postmodern writing insistently engages the actualities of social, historical, and cultural praxis, and does so as an act of opposition to the controlling ideological discourse formations. For this second grouping of critics, the postmodern text is a critique of, in an adversative relation to, the cultural contexts within which it is produced, distributed, and consumed. This position is open to question on theoretical grounds, and Lyotard himself is to the side of, and implicitly critical of, both positions in discourses of the postmodern. But what should not be lost sight of in adjudicating the cogency of any of these as theories is the ways in which postmodern writing may constitute a *crisis* in the "reading contexts" of the institution of literary studies.

Paul de Man, writing in 1970 of the crisis in literary studies precipitated by "recent developments in Continental criticism," whereby "well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of

<sup>14</sup> In 1934 when Bertold Brecht felt menaced in his work by the strictures against formalism that were being promulgated by Georg Lukács and colleagues in Moscow, he protested to Walter Benjamin, "They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what's going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat" (in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* [London: New Left Books, 1977] 97). While this statement is more expressly political than Lyotard's "new presentations" the principle is much the same.

criticism have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse," hailed this as salutary and perfectly in keeping with the condition of radical self-scrutiny that he took "crisis" to signify. "Is criticism," he asked, "indeed engaged in scrutinizing itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin? Is it asking whether it is necessary for the act of criticism to take place?"<sup>15</sup> If we think of that crisis as a particular historical event (de Man, on the contrary, thought authentic criticism exists only and always in a state of crisis), we would have to conclude that literary studies survived and indeed were revitalized. The institution, the *discipline*, of criticism remains intact. My question is whether postmodern writing has precipitated, or should precipitate, a like sense of crisis in the very notion of the discipline of criticism, a crisis in where and how we do our work at the discourse of literary criticism. Postmodern writing, discourses of the postmodern, should be compelling us to scrutinize the status and place of the institution of literary studies; to scrutinize the relations of this discipline and institution to reality and to the world in which postmodern writing takes place and finds its being.

So I should like to turn now, to return, to *Gravity's Rainbow* as an example of what is at stake in critical discourse of the postmodern. The easiest thing to do would be to apply the notions I have been expounding in the interval to a reading, an interpretation, of Pynchon's text. It would be fairly easy, as instance, to apply Lyotard's notion that the postmodern text is a distinct form of the sublime: writing which "presents the unrepresentable." A persuasive reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* might well be as a fiction of the technological sublime, and this interpretation would not be difficult to match up closely with the concept of the sublime which broods over and informs Lyotard's discourse of the postmodern.

What would be even easier, and ostensibly more pertinent, would be to read *Gravity's Rainbow* as an example of the post-structuralist perspective on the postmodern text, by which I mean the post-structuralism that has become institutionalized in literary studies and discourses of criticism. Pynchon's novel is manifestly decentered, dispersive, disjunctive, disintegrative, and all the other "d's" in one of Ihab Hassan's playful lexicons of contemporary criticism. Pynchon's novel

<sup>15</sup> "Criticism and Crisis," pp. 3, 8. I have followed de Man's example by employing his sense of the word and downplaying any apocalyptic *frisson* attaching to the notion of "crisis."

works the dissemination — the dissemination rather than the polysemia — Derrida makes so capital in deconstruction. It is overloaded, supersaturated, excessive and overdetermined; it is profligate in the unrestricted economy of its writing.<sup>16</sup>

To put this differently, Pynchon's novel is a production of continuous assemblies and *disassemblies*. Tyrone Slothrop, the leading man in the main story line, the male lead of all its footage, is a dropout. He drops right out of the story and vanishes. After a dizzy succession of surreal picaresque adventures, after a surfeit of narrative quests and trials, Slothrop simply dissolves. He is, as the text says, "broken down and scattered" (738) — disassembled and dismantled and dispersed. He isn't around at the end in person. Like everyone else in the story he leaves the scene in a "dissolve" as a decentered, disintegrated subject. He is literally, shall we say, deconstructed.

It would be easy, then, the easiest thing in the world, I believe, to read *Gravity's Rainbow* as an example of the postmodern text as determined by post-structuralist terms. But I would want to argue that *Gravity's Rainbow* is and should be read as a *counter* example of the concept or the figure of the postmodern text which has become institutionalized under such auspices and in the name of the theories of Barthes, Derrida, or de Man. Setting aside the question of whether this is a misprision, what matters in the case at hand is that our institutional practices have contrived to defuse and disperse the oppositional energies incited by Pynchon's book, its writing, and the postmodern conditions or contexts of its production. *Gravity's Rainbow*, I would want to argue, is closer to being an example of the "oppositional" discourse of the postmodern. It is closer to the conception of postmodern writers and writing as oppositional — as engaged in a critique of the social and cultural contexts within which art is

<sup>16</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* is also in places unabashedly overwrought and overwritten. Moreover, like postmodern writing at large, it makes capital of recycled cultural waste, debris, dreck, trash. Deconstruction may have a problem in coping with such writing — with writing that isn't entirely meaning-ful or meaning-imbued in the senses assumed by Derrida's concept of dissemination. In his "unrestricted economy" everything in the writing means something more than we can say or determine; there is always more left over to say or produce, a surplus. But in the unrestricted economy of postmodern writing "trash" is allowed to circulate freely; flotsam is carried along in the dissemination; cultural products and verbal expressions that are meaning-less, that mean less, consort and disport freely with the production of writing that is meaningful, brimming over with meanings.

being produced, the actualities of our discursive practices and discourse formations.

Consider, in this respect, the way plots are constructed and used in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's plots, his narratives and story lines, are, like everything else about his writing, superabundant, in excess, overdetermined. They are so, not simply because he is writing replays of spy stories and parodies of Superman, Plastic Man, Batman, Spider Man, and other comic strips, but because his plots are plottings: incessant and voracious plottings. The book's networks of plottings are spun with such powers of reticulation and dissemination that they *total* everything in sight, everything that moves. The plottings are, in fact, a drive for totalization.

Pynchon's fictional world is a world of conspiracies, cabals, cartels, combines: a world of connections, where everything seems to fit. As the text remarks about a paranoia induced by a certain drug, there was nothing remarkable about this: "Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the outset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation" (703). The state is a specific form of, as the text says, "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia" (188), but it extends to all the machinations of the capitalized agencies – the System, the Firm, They – who are out to get Slothrop and every other suspect. There is also the vertiginous possibility of an unfathomable series of plots behind any visible plot, endless They's behind the They, or every alternative to the System being itself a System. Pynchon does allow for a contrary state, an anti-paranoia, "where nothing is connected to anything" – but this is "a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). There seems to be no surcease or escape because "*everything is some kind of plot, man*" (603).

But while the plots of *Gravity's Rainbow* are so overwhelmingly narratives of plotting, they don't get anywhere, so to speak, because of Pynchon's *counterplottings*: his narratives, his stories, of counterplots and, more significantly, his counterplotting against narrative itself. I underscore the word because Pynchon's practice is not only the manipulation of narrative devices, a technical feature, but a political position. And it is a position that he articulates less by what is represented and told in the stories of the counterplots than by his writing counter to what narrative is and does as a structuring practice.

This is what I meant by saying at the outset that *Gravity's Rainbow* works counter to its own manufacture — disowns the technical virtuosity of its own production, dispels its intricate structurations and masterful concatenations. Having avowed its process of production, *Gravity's Rainbow* disavows and disowns its intricacy and virtuosity by working deliberately to dismantle *any totalizing structuration*. Pynchon does not merely deconstruct and undo what he has wrought, tearing down the structures he has erected as a master-builder. Rather he disperses and deflects and displaces his constructions, his narrative structurings, to assemblies that counteract and subvert any totalizing power. He works against cohesions that are coercive by structurations of adherence rather than coherence: allegiances and alliances of resistance or opposition rather than conspiracies, cabals, cartels, combines, conglomerates, or connections where everything is made to fit. *Gravity's Rainbow* is constitutively dispersive or decentering as well as convoluted and complex in its writing.<sup>17</sup>

Politically speaking what I have been saying may appear to be little more than romantic anarchism — the jejune anarchism that is so frivolous, so dangerous, a diversion from any serious political critique and effective political action. I may have made *Gravity's Rainbow* sound like an expression of the heady old counter-culture days of '68. I do believe, in fact, that the book is very much in the spirit of '68 and written in response to what was actually unfolding at that time and followed in the wake of

<sup>17</sup> Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984) 68, expresses mixed feelings about the "post-modernism — that ultra-leftism of the spirit" which "rejects all narrative." What he has reference to is Lyotard's argument in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiii-iv, where he poses the postmodern against the modern "in the context of the crisis of narratives." The modern he takes "to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." The postmodern Lyotard defines "as incredulity toward metanarratives" — a rejection of belief in such grand or master narratives and a dispelling of their use as instruments of legitimation, control, and subjection. Barker urges the need for "fabricating other narratives which will counter-value the dominant story" — a "radical counter-narration operating athwart the master-text." My comments on Pynchon's narrative structurings might be taken as working the common ground between these two positions.



the events — this history is demonstrably one of the book's contexts<sup>18</sup> — but I do not believe that we read it now for nostalgia, but rather with an acute sense of the actualities of, as Ihab Hassan would say, our clime. And in order to explain what I intend by this claim, I shall close with some reflections on the postmodern condition and the relevance of postmodern writing, the postmodern text, this postmodern text, *Gravity's Rainbow*, to the postmodern condition at large.

I spoke earlier of the term "hybrid constructions." In a sequence of *Gravity's Rainbow* where a minion is transferred from committee work on a typically wacky project, the New Turkic Alphabet, to a committee on molecular structure, the voiceover on the soundtrack tells us:

How alphabetic is the nature of molecules. One grows aware of it down here: one finds Committees on molecular structure which are very similar to those back at the NTA plenary session. "See: how they are taken out from the coarse flow — shaped, cleaned, rectified, just as you once redeemed your letters from the lawless, the mortal streaming of human speech. . . . These are our letters, our words: they too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in worldwide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences, like the seen parts of a tapestry" (355).

This may be taken to be a self-reflexive observation on the technique, the stylistic feature, that is so commonly attributed to the postmodern text, to postmodern writing: its effacing of traditional boundaries of discourse. But if we think of the figure in the phrase, "hybrid constructions," and if we reflect on the drift of this passage, and many like passages, from *Gravity's Rainbow*, what we come up with, I believe, is not that discursive boundaries are broken but that they become porous and permeable in the extreme. The structurations which used to be confined within boundaries are turned loose to crossbreed or co-polymerize one to the other in

<sup>18</sup> The numerous episodes of "a floating celebration" (602) memorialized in the novel, as well as Pynchon's evocations of "post-Beat" and "New Left" sensibilities in the autobiographical Introduction to the collection of his early stories *Slow Learner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), would serve as evidence, but we would need to rethink and repoliticize that context in order "to construct the story of this past," as Barker puts the general problem of historiography, which would make the history of '68 something more than a mood piece.

worldwide chains: furiously crossbreeding; irrepressibly, uncontrollably, wildly proliferating; changing all the time. They become utterly protean and radically mutative: mutative, mind you, and not simply like the cultivated permutations or concatenations or metamorphoses we are accustomed to in textual production and comfortable with in literary studies. Which is to say that the discursive practices, the textual or artistic productions, everywhere in the culture — the discourses of science, politics, movies, comic strips, rock and roll — anything and everything can float or pour into a novel and out again, gathering or dispersing energies, significations, valences, or whatever, as they stream through.

This may be it, the postmodern condition, our "everyday praxis," our quotidian condition; this may be what makes writers and writing postmodern. And whether one finds it exciting or disquieting, terrific or terrifying, it is decidedly, decisively, unsettling. I would concur with Michel Foucault's characterization of postmodernity as "enigmatic and troubling,"<sup>19</sup> for I, too, find the postmodern enigmatic, in the sense of being perplexing to any certainty of understanding, and I certainly find it troubling: troubling if for no other reason than that the postmodern throws, or should throw, our institutional practices, our very institution of literary studies, into crisis.

Returning one last time to Habermas's quarrel with the postmodern, the problem, in my view, is not so much that our discourses and discursive practices have been split asunder, as Habermas laments, thereby giving rise to all the chatter about "fragments" and "fragmentation" being the putative distinguishing marks of postmodernism, as that our discourses have assumed a totalizing power by exactly the process of permeability that Pynchon depicts and articulates so massively, and with such overpowering effect, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Admittedly, this may be the dark underside and menace of the postmodern condition: its exponential proliferation of energies, information, knowledge — the plurability of discourses, to borrow one of Joyce's coinages, their pluralizing abilities. The plurability of postmodern discourses may be deeply troubling because they obey no restraints, know no limits; because they are interminable — not so much indeterminate, i.e. yielding an incalculable number of diverse significations and interpretations, as interminable. There is no end to their production and dissemination and proliferation.

<sup>19</sup> "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 39.

Lyotard has no anxieties about the postmodern condition, and indeed he rejoices in it, because to his mind postmodern art, postmodern writing, postmodern science elude any systematic control. The plurability of discourse, the diversity of discursive practices in postmodern art, undo any totalitarian control or social consensus which oppresses in the name of unity. And this, I believe, is the "emancipatory effect" of *Gravity's Rainbow*, this is how its dispersive modes of narrative resist and oppose totalizing plots and plotting. To read *Gravity's Rainbow* in such a perspective is to place the text, its writing, within the contexts where writing now is being produced, within the actualities of our discursive practices and the singularities of what is actually happening in our time and place.

But if that is the case, if the text of *Gravity's Rainbow* opposes totalizing structures and is thereby an example of postmodern writing at large, there is an aspect of the present situation in literary studies and the discourse of criticism that is perplexing in the extreme, and either worryingly troubling or perturbingly comical. What I have reference to is that the technology of reading now in force in the institution of literary studies under the auspices of textuality, and underwritten by the theories of deconstruction or post-structuralism, has become itself a totalizing discursive practice, which encompasses the postmodern text as much as any other kind of text. What we have in force is a "machine" — the term is one from which practitioners do not shrink in employing — for critical textual production, for producing discourses of criticism. This would hardly be all that noteworthy or odd, for it might be said to be the familiar consequence of institutionalizing any critical theory, except for what the theory on which that critical practice is founded professes in particular. The post-structuralist theory of the text and theory of writing are resolutely and scrupulously concerned with *aporias*: the aporias that attach so intractably and enigmatically to language, literature, and discourse. So how is it that we are never at a loss for words in discoursing about such aporias? How is it that we have suffered no loss of power, no loss of fluency or facility, no loss of mastery? How is it that the institution of literary studies, the discipline of criticism, is so little changed, so apparently unperturbed in its cultural role and status, by what is being professed or by what is being written now?

The postmodern text, postmodern writing, is, I believe, constitutively that kind of text which will not allow us to de-contextualize and de-

historicize its writing, which will not allow us to remove it from its play with and against all the other discursive practices in the culture at large. Postmodern writing refuses to be confined to literary studies, however enlarged a sense of what literary studies comprises we have come to accept. Postmodern writing simply doesn't inhabit our places of textuality, our institutions of literary studies. Postmodern writing doesn't find its proper home or resting place there. Postmodern art, postmodern writing, delivers into the discourse of art a diversity of discursive practices which are positively at odds with, in opposition to, what we can comfortably live with in our institutional domains.

But if all of this is true, why is it that we are able to take the oppositional energies of the postmodern text so easily in our stride? How does it happen that we can accommodate anything or everything that is being produced? For the fact of the matter is that *Gravity's Rainbow*, far from having to fight its way into the institution of literary studies, won instant acceptance and applause. And the same accommodation would appear to be the case for any other postmodern text. Or is it rather the case that we have not yet really come to terms with the postmodern text? That we have yet to discern and begin to take the measure of the crisis in our institution and practice of literary studies which is produced by postmodern writers and writing?