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Pynchon From A to V

GERALD HOWARD ON *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

APPRECIATIONS by Don DeLillo, George Saunders, Joanna Scott, Percival Everett, Tom Robbins, Jeffrey Eugenides, Lorrie Moore, Andrew Hultkrans, Kathryn Kramer, Lydia Davis, Carter Scholz, Erik Davis, Trey Ellis, Robert Polito, Jim Shepard, Emily Barton, Jay Cantor, Richard Powers, and Steve Erickson

In 1973, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* landed on my brain and exploded there like, well, a V-2 rocket. It was precisely the book I needed at the time, which tells you something about my mental and spiritual condition. Hey, it was the '70s. The country was low in the water and so was I. Tar-black humor, crushing difficulty, rampant paranoia, accelerating entropy, jaw-dropping perversity, apocalyptic terror, history as a conspiracy of the conjoined forces of technology, death, and sinister Control—it was all good. I preferred having my spirit crushed by a great American novel to the everyday humiliations of my first year of postcollegiate life and the cultural and political demoralizations of the era.

The year before, I had graduated from Cornell, Pynchon's alma mater, with an instrumentally useless BA in English (at least in terms of gaining employment) and been redeposited, dazed and confused, in my natal neighborhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. If I tell you that I grew up on precisely the same street where Tony Manero lived in *Saturday Night Fever*, you may begin to grasp my plight. After six weeks of pounding the Manhattan pavement in search of "college graduate" positions—carrying with me, and I wince at this now, a remaindered hardcover copy of Nabokov's *Ada* as my downtime reading matter—I got a job as the most sullen and undermotivated advertising trainee in the history of hucksterism. Bluntly put, I was a big problem to myself (and my poor parents) and the world wasn't coming to the rescue.

I decided, in the absence of any other alternative, to read myself out of the slough of despond. Metafiction therapy in the outer boroughs—not the most promising of strategies. But I was lucky to find a superb guide and boon companion in a most unlikely place: a playground basketball court along the Narrows, to which I repaired evenings and weekends for my two other chosen anodynes, hoops and weed. It turned out that the skinny regular by the name of Peter Kaldheim not only had a highly effective bank shot but was a recent Dartmouth grad and aspiring writer who had a synoptic acquaintance with the period's advanced fiction, especially Thomas Pynchon. So began one of those transformative friendships, fueled by passionate reading and conversation and similar taste in drugs, that change a life. At least it changed mine. I draw on our shared literary tutorials to this day.

Our reading list, I sometimes joke, was based on three principles: nothing more straightforward than Donald Barthelme; nothing less gothic and desperate than Harry Crews; nothing more inviting and less dense than William Gaddis. Avid for stronger wine and madder music, we plunged headlong into the thickets of early-to-middle-American postmodernism, getting lost in the funhouse with Barth and Abish, Coover and Elkin,

Don DeLillo It was as though, in some odd quantum stroke, Hemingway died one day and Pynchon was born the next. One literature bends into another. Pynchon has made American writing a broader and stronger force. He found whispers and apparitions at the edge of modern awareness but did not lessen our sense of the physicality of American prose, the shotgun vigor, the street humor, the body fluids, the put-on.

I was writing ads for Sears truck tires when a friend gave me a copy of *V*. in paperback. I read it and thought, Where did this come from?

The scale of his work, large in geography and unafraid of major subjects, helped us locate our fiction not only in small anonymous corners, human and ever-essential, but out there as well, in the sprawl of high imagination and collective dreams.

Don DeLillo's most recent novel is *Cosmopolis* (Scribner, 2003).

Jeffrey Eugenides I have a coffee cup in storage in Berlin. It bears a fetching image of a V-2 rocket and the name of the touristic locale in Germany where I bought it: Peenemünde.

The most brilliant epigraph in the history of literature (I'm making a sweeping claim not out of omniscience but wild enthusiasm) comes at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.—Wernher Von Braun." When I first read those words, as a college freshman, I took them at face value—as scientific proof (very much in vogue at the time) of the reality of the spiritual realm. I had no idea that Von Braun, developer of the V-2, was Hitler's chief rocket scientist. Still less did I know of his salvation at the hands of American troops, as Berlin fell, or of his subsequent rehabilitation in the United States, where he became Nixon's chief rocket scientist and a member of the nasa team that put the first man on the moon (no wonder Von Braun believed in life after death).

Let's appreciate everything this epigraph accomplishes: It stems from, and summons, the historical period Pynchon writes about; it simultaneously inspires and lampoons religious sentiment; and, with savage irony, it comes out of the mouth of someone personifying the novel's central theme—that the Powers That Be operate behind the scenes, owing allegiance to no nation or ideology.

Twenty years after first reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, I rented a car and drove to the island of Usedom, which lies on the Baltic in what used to be East Germany. I didn't know much about the island and was heading for the beach resort of Heringsdorf when I saw the sign pointing to Peenemünde.

Immediately, I made the detour. But I wasn't desperate to see Peenemünde or the V-2 rocket on display outside the local museum. The mission I was on, in my rented diesel Mercedes, was one of pilgrimage. I wanted to visit a crucial setting in *Gravity's Rainbow* and, by doing so, pay homage (for here was a spiritual realm I did believe in) to the writer who, probably more than any other, set the example for my generation of what an American novelist should be. Pynchon's fiction made it clear that, if you wanted to write, you had to know everything: everything about history, science, politics, even calculus; you had to know everything while being funny at the same time, and lyrical, bringing into the novel a

Reed and Sukenick, Mathews and Sorrentino (a Bay Ridge boy!), Gass and Hawkes. A significant subset of our reading was concerned with the specifically male problem of surviving in our native land in the wake of the post-'60s crack-up; hence Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Fred Exley's *A Fan's Notes*, Tom McGuane's *Ninety-two in the Shade*, and Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* became our touchstones. We discovered the glories of early Don DeLillo, *American* and *End Zone* (football as a metaphor for nuclear war—precisely!), with almost ungovernable excitement.

We had, of course, little use for the standard-issue Big Names. Bellow had put himself beyond the pale with his churlish *Mr. Sammler's Planet*; Cheever and Updike were too suburban; Vidal wrote historical novels with plots, for God's sake (great essays, though); and Malamud was a downer but not our kind of downer. Only two Big Names escaped our scorn: Philip Roth, as a result of all the excellent trouble he caused with *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Norman Mailer, for his omnidirectional rage against the machine.

Dogmatic and hipper than thou, we were probably insufferable, but then again what rising literary generation isn't? We'd done the critical reading and so could sort through the often rebarbative yet always challenging works we favored. Roth had declared that American reality "stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination." So fiction had to go to extremes of content and technique. Susan Sontag had as much as proclaimed "Matthew Arnold, he dead" when she erased high/low distinctions and aesthetic moralism, and proscribed interpretation in favor of simple sensation. William Gass, the reigning philosopher-critic, focused our attention on the not always obvious fact that fiction was made of *language* and elegantly drew out the implications of that. Most famously, John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" propounded a theory and an aesthetic of ironic, parodic self-consciousness that felt appropriate to the tail end of the modernist period.

These ideas were our mental tools as we romped in the forest of first-growth postmodernism. What was strange and gratifying was how completely in sync this writing was with our educated baby-boomer sense of squalor and betrayal. Then, no less than today, a culture war was being fought—but the battleground was an interior one, within our minds and souls.

And then, enter Commandant Pynchon, a one-man government-in-exile, rumbling down from the mountains into the capital city of American consciousness with something like the ultimate weapon: *Gravity's Rainbow*. Peter and I had both read V. and *The Crying of Lot 49* with fanatic attention, reverence, and awe, and plenty of criticism to go with them as well. We could cite the second law of thermodynamics accurately; we knew that Herbert Stencil's third-person prose had been modeled on *The Education of Henry Adams*; phrases such as "the dynamo and the Virgin" sprang from our lips with practiced ease. Like a number of other '60s classics, these novels weren't mere reading experiences; they seemed to demand a radical change of attitude on the part of the reader. We tried to embody McClintic Sphere's dictum to "keep cool, but care"; like Oedipa Maas, we strove to find the resources to master our vertigo and panic over a world turned illegible. Among American novelists, only Pynchon seemed to have the resources to master the intricacies and inner dynamics of this strange new post-Enlightenment era.

So when I spied a notice in *Esquire* of the imminent publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I was in the bookstore like a shot to plunk down \$4.95 for Viking's original trade-paperback edition (clearly someone at that publishing house understood the impecunious nature of the Pynchon audience, I noted gratefully). Everything about the bright orange book appealed: the cover art; the minimalist approach to jacket copy (no promotional folderol, just that indelible first sentence, "A screaming comes across the sky. . ."); the dedication to dead folkie-hipster novelist Richard Fariña; the darkly ironic epigraph from Wernher Von Braun. Oh yes, this was going to be something.

And it was. Its portrayal of a world rife with mendacity, corruption, and geopolitical intrigue, of a history whose surface chaos masked plots within plots, of technology off the leash and in the service of death offered us purchase on the scary drift of American life since 1945. The book's antihero, Tyrone Slothrop, the map of whose fornications in London during the Blitz predicts the pattern of V-2 landings, was a classic schlemiel in

freewheeling, present-tense, colloquial-poetic American voice, in books that were like adventure stories and comedy routines, and where the characters were forever breaking into song.

I've never been temperamentally disposed to conspiracy theories, and the darker preoccupations of Pynchon's work weren't what got to me. But great writers don't only describe the past or the present; they predict the future. Pynchon's estimate, back in 1973, of the path the postwar American imperium would take only seems more acute, valid, and prescient today that it did at the time. The things he was trying to teach me at twenty I'm only now beginning to learn, another life later.

When I bought the souvenir coffee cup, I had the idea to send it to Pynchon. He isn't as hard to find now as in the old days. I could probably get it to him. But I ended up keeping it. Every summer, when I go back to Berlin, my Peenemünde cup comes out of its box and back onto the kitchen shelf. I never use it. I keep it there, untouched. It's a sacramental object for me, the tiny V-2 rocket on its side, like Shiva, no longer a destroyer of worlds, but a creator, too.

Jeffrey Eugenides's most recent novel is *Middlesex* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

Lorrie Moore Pynchon's mind is the steel trap of American literature: Nothing, large or small, has ever escaped it. Each "novel of ideas"—because Pynchon is arguably our brainiest novelist, this anemic and outputting label gets slapped on his books like an award sticker—is built detail upon detail, painstakingly, by a man with a tireless eye and appetite for the world. The narrative mosaic that emerges is strong and dazzling as a mirror, depthlessly reflective as a mirror, and, not unlike a house of mirrors, each novel manages to ensnare an entire era, its facts and wandering energies enticed and held captive there, though rarely without mercy. Delicious peanuts are tossed in to amuse and feed; for in art, even a mirror is a living creature.

Pynchon has a historian's sense of story (front and back), a musician's sense of line, a philosopher's sense of truth and woe, a hip vaudevillian's wit. His books keep unearthing a hidden America and reinventing the language in which we think and speak of it—or might think and speak of it, or will soon think and speak of it. His novels leap and trespass; they even violate the oft-repeated advice not to begin a story with a character waking up (*Gravity's Rainbow*; *Vineland*) and can be found to have applicable political currency when quoted virtually at random: "It is a universal sin among the false-animate or unimaginative to refuse to let well enough alone" (V.). Or, "'Why fire at Sideling Hill?' Dixon all innocence. 'Not at the Hill,' chuckles Capt. Shelby, '—at what's coming over the Hill'" (*Mason & Dixon*).

Pynchon's work is fearless, funny, questing, teeming with all manner of originality and surprise.

Lorrie Moore is the author of two novels and three story collections, the most recent of which is *Birds of America* (Knopf, 1998).

Richard Powers "Information. What's wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?"

"I thought it was cigarettes."

"You dream." (*Gravity's Rainbow*)

I remember the thing homing in, soundless, of course, on its parabolic arc, *that purified shape latent in the sky*. No clue, no advance warning until it hit. I thought I knew how fiction worked, what fiction did, the proper object of its only subject. Then those sentences, screaming across the page, each one skywriting: *You dream*.

For three decades, I've retraced that arc once a year, *that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return*. And every time. I'm thrown back on mute. wild surmise. The war

the mold of Nathanael West's Lemuel Pitkin and Joseph Heller's Yossarian. Here was Norman O. Brown's vision of Eros and Thanatos translated into brilliant novelistic terms. Slothrop was haplessly in the clutch of large, impersonal (or are they?) forces, yet he struggled with a sort of Mickey Rooney pluck to scry for some pattern of meaning in the phenomena of the world—like his Puritan forebears he had "a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky." No overmarketed-to baby boomer could fail to identify with the suggestion that Slothrop had been from birth the subject of a secret experiment in behavioral modification. So had we all.

The novel in which Slothrop yo-yo'd around seemed to sum up everything American fiction had attempted and achieved up to that point. It was polyvalent, polyphonic, and polymorphously perverse. Its contents were by turns phantasmagorical, hyperreal, surreal, and saturnalian. Like *Moby-Dick*, it made a complete hash of formalist or genre distinctions, obviously mixing high and low. Pynchon shuffled scenes of horror and sexual obscenity with music-hall burlesques, with Busby Berkeley production numbers in prose, with historical tableaux of virtuoso authenticity, with anachronistic, pun-besotted humor of the sort more often found on comedy albums by Cheech and Chong or Firesign Theatre. The latter was fine with us; we were usually smoked anyway, and floating free from linear thought was a fruitful frame of mind in which to approach *Gravity's Rainbow's* labyrinthine complexities.

You could glean a tremendous amount of fresh and pertinent information from this book—about the Zoot Suit riots and Maxwell's Demon, the Kirghiz Light and the Herero uprising, Ufa Studios and the history of expressionism in German film, the psychedelic properties of the rye fungus called ergot and its effect on European history, August Kekulé's discovery of the structure of the benzene ring in a dream, and especially the physics and technology and analytical geometry and calculus of the process whereby a multi-ton package of steel, fuel, and explosives could be sent special delivery from thousands of miles away with lethal accuracy to a spot just above *your* head. We duck-and-cover kiddies took this sort of thing seriously. As the narrator says of Slothrop, "He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it—if they're really set on getting him." Indeed.

Pynchon's vocabulary was fantastically recondite, and I still have the notebook in which I jotted down the meanings of *oneiric*, *abreaction*, *runcible spoon*, *hebephrenics*, *Antinomian*, *rachitic*, *velleity*, *preterite*, and a couple dozen other words impossible to use in ordinary conversation. To readers adrift in the spiritually rudderless '70s, the bold willingness of Pynchon's narrator to tell us What It All Means, in eloquent homiletics, was a tonic, a lifeline, a sign, and a revelation:

Don't forget the real business of the war is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. . . . The true war is a celebration of markets . . .

Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World those vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time.

It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . . by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake," but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more.*

The man was channeling Randolph Bourne, C. Wright Mills, Max Weber. I damn near got whiplash from nodding my head in furious assent.

Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* was admittedly a slog. Many pages at a time would pass with only the dimmest comprehension of what the welter of character, event, and implication actually meant. But at reliable intervals I would encounter something that left me gasping with amazement. There was the virtuoso comedy of the two old biddies virtually asphyxiating Slothrop with vile British candies; the shocking act of coprophagia between

every time, in the form of nuts, and carrots. The war is everywhere and real, our terrors threatening to perfect us, the technologies of our desire extending into networks too complex for anything but unhinged and macaronic fiction even to hint at.

For thirty years, early each winter, as the newspapers roll out their end-of-year obituaries and take to listing the year's proudest, most achieved disasters, I've read out loud, to myself or to anyone who will listen, a passage from that book that ruined me for science and made me think of writing as a life. Nine pages: that battery-ringed evensong service, set somewhere in Kent—the closest thing I have to a private religious ritual. I do it to remind myself of the size of the made world, of what story might still be when it remembers itself, of the look of *our maximum reach outward*, of the devastating charge of words. I do it to remind myself of our only real medium of exchange.

Richard Powers is the author of eight novels.

George Saunders I don't think anyone has gotten closer than Thomas Pynchon to summoning the real audacity and insanity and scope of the American mind, as reflected in the American landscape. I read Pynchon all out of order, starting with *Vineland*, and I still remember the shock of pleasure I got at finally seeing the America I knew—strange shops and boulevards, built over former strange shops and former boulevards, all laid out there in valleys and dead-end forests, heaped on top of Indian cemeteries, peopled with nut jobs and hustlers and moral purists—actually present in a novel, and present not only in substance but in structure and language that both used and evoked the unruly, muscular complexity of the world itself.

In Pynchon, anything is fair game—if it is in the world, it can go in the book. To me there is something Buddhist about this approach, which seems to say that since the world is capable of producing an infinity of forms, the novel must be capable of accommodating an infinite number of forms. All aesthetic concerns (style, form, structure) answer this purpose: Let in the world.

This is why Pynchon is our biggest writer, the gold standard of that overused word *inclusiveness*: No dogma or tidy aesthetic rule or literary fashion is allowed to prefilter the beautiful data streaming in. Everything is included. No inclination of the mind is too small or large or frightening. The result is gorgeous madness, which does what great literature has always done—reminds us that there is a world out there that is bigger than us and worthy of our utmost humility and attention.

I have often felt that we read to gain some idea of what God would say about us if someone were to ask Him what we're like. Pynchon says, through the vast loving catalogue he has made, that we are Excellent but need to be watched closely. He says there is no higher form of worship than the loving (i.e., madly attentive) observation of that-which-is, a form of prayer of which Pynchon's work is our highest example.

George Saunders is the author of the novella-length fable *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, forthcoming from Riverhead Books.

Lydia Davis A rather appealing specimen of early Pynchon is the last story in his collection *Slow Learner*. The story, "The Secret Integration"—first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* more than forty years ago (three years after *V.* appeared)—involves a gang of young practical jokers and a rich childhood setting of an old town with a new development, a sprawling estate with a derelict mansion, and a downtown, complete with seedy hotel. In one deftly described scene, the boys coast on their bikes down a long hill in the early evening toward the hotel, "leaving behind two pages of arithmetic homework and a chapter of science" and, on the TV, "a lousy movie, some romantic comedy." Because all the televisions in town receive only one channel, the boys, as they fly by, are able to follow the movie's progress from house to house, through doors and windows "still open for the dark's first coolness."

Katje Borgesius and Brigadier Pudding; the plainsong-inflected epiphany of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake's Christmas visit to a country church; the shattering emotional impact of Slothrop's "Tantivy . . ." when he learns of his friend Mucker-Maffick's demise, which my friend the critic John Powers calls "the most poignant ellipsis in all of fiction." Most unforgettably, there is the immortal scene in which Slothrop, hooked up to a sodium Amytal drip, hallucinates dropping his harmonica down the toilet of the Roseland Ballroom, a nightclub where Red, aka Malcolm X, sells gage while Charlie Parker is onstage laying down some very advanced changes on "Cherokee." Down the shitter Slothrop goes, into the murky, fecal depths of white America's racial imagination, in an inward journey that reads like a cutting session with Ralph Ellison, James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, and Leslie Fiedler. Astounding.

As Peter and I raced to the chilling finish, the rocket poised to obliterate a movie theater in Los Angeles, managed by a Nixon surrogate named Richard Zhubb, we confirmed for each other the conviction that this was the finest novel by an American—hell, by *anybody*—that we'd ever read. It was *our* great book, in our time, a visionary and instructive text which summed up all that could possibly be said about the meaning of postwar history. In this belief the wider literary world provided plenty of support. To this day I have not seen a more impressive *Anschluss* of critical praise. Richard Locke raved about it in a splashy front-page write-up for the *New York Times Book Review*, brilliantly edited in those days by the irreplaceable John Leonard. An even more extraordinary effusion appeared in the daily *New York Times* from Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who famously concluded, "If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take only five books along, this would have to be one of them." Most important, Richard Poirier wrote an eloquent essay for the generally middlebrow *Saturday Review* that firmly placed the book in the wider context of Western literature—*Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*—and correctly predicted that Pynchon's effort to renew that literature by drawing his material from such nonliterary realms as parapsychology, statistical analysis, and film would get up the noses of certain of the Authorities: "If literature is superior to any of these things, then it takes a book as stylistically wide-ranging as *Gravity's Rainbow* to prove it." Poirier's piece remains the single best work of criticism on the novel yet produced, the takeoff point for all commentary to come.

Gravity's Rainbow received the National Book Award for fiction in 1974, alongside, in a strange split decision, I. B. Singer's *Crown of Feathers*. At the award ceremony, to the audience's perplexity, the professional baffleleg artist Professor Irwin Corey accepted the award for, or maybe as, Pynchon, and launched into a semicoherent leg-pulling speech that began, "However . . . accept this financial stipulation—ah, stipend in behalf of, uh, Richard Python for the great contribution and to quote from some of the missiles which he has contributed. . . ." *Und so weiter*, and it being the '70s, there was also a streaker. That sublime stunt may have been on the minds (and I use the term in its loosest possible sense) of the idiots on the Pulitzer Prize advisory panel when they decided to ignore the unanimous recommendation of the fiction jury—consisting of (for God's sake) Benjamin DeMott, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Alfred Kazin—that *Gravity's Rainbow* get the prize, and instead awarded it to . . . nobody. It was decades before anybody could trust the Pulitzer Prize again as anything other than a dish for dullards.

Meanwhile, back in Bay Ridge, I began to pursue my Pynchonmania at a higher energy level. I reread *Gravity's Rainbow* six months after first finishing it. I made murky photocopies at the New York Public Library of uncollected early stories in *Epoch*, *New World Writing*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* (!), and a superb nonfiction piece, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," in the *New York Times Magazine*. I was seized by the conviction that Stanley Kubrick *had to* bring *Gravity's Rainbow* to the screen and that somehow I could be involved in this task. I did nothing at all about it, but I still think it was a damned good idea. And I continued to read and read and read, but now in a vaguely postcoital mood. If literature was exhausted, a dying star, then *Gravity's Rainbow* was the inevitable supernova, compacting all that was exciting and explosive into a spectacular end-time display. William Gaddis's *JR*, which won the National Book Award in 1976, felt like the last aftershock of the whole imperial novel enterprise. Pynchon's novel took up residence in my head as the peak of posthumanistic achievement, a work finally adequate to the beauty and terror of a world utterly transformed by science and technology. The human imagination could still avail, but it had to adapt radically to do so—a great solace wrapped in a bold challenge. And somewhere along the way, I got my first job in

In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon, who somewhat preempts our reactions to the story, remarks that he likes it more than he dislikes it. In fact it is so likable that one envies the boys their comfortable society and the fields, streams, and town of their games. Their collaboration and apportioning of assignments is charming (to develop an arsenal for sabotaging the railroad; to enlist malcontent first-graders to destroy the boys' latrine; to infiltrate PTA meetings); the elaborateness of their schemes, and the number that succeed, is impressive; and the animation of the central character, Grover the boy genius—with his enormous vocabulary, fund of information, and flights of hilarity—is particularly savory. The pranks the boys plan are potentially devastating to the community, yet, as Pynchon says in a lovely bit of writing, the boys would never actually take "any clear or irreversible step," because "everybody on the school board, and the railroad, and the PTA and paper mill had to be somebody's mother or father, whether really or as a member of a category; and there was a point at which the reflex to their covering warmth, protection, effectiveness against bad dreams, bruised heads and simple loneliness took over and made worthwhile anger with them impossible."

There is a lyrical humanity in this story, an almost unapologetic gentleness, inviting and inclusive, that contrasts with the weightier, complex pessimism and bravura of Pynchon's later works, in which perhaps it is more difficult for the characters to go home and be comforted at the end of the day.

Lydia Davis's collection of stories *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* was published by McSweeney's in 2001.

publishing, which led to a position as an assistant editor at Viking Penguin, which brought me, by a commodius vicus, to my first meeting with Corlies M. Smith, Pynchon's longtime editor.

* * *

One Friday in summer 2004, I spent a memorable afternoon in the half-deserted offices of Viking Penguin going through the thick editorial file for *Gravity's Rainbow*. There was in this experience the poignance of office technologies past (carbons, telegrams, memos typed on manual typewriters) and the names of the distinguished departed—from Malcolm Cowley, Viking's longtime literary adviser, to other colleagues, mentors, and friends. But there was also the sheer fascination of peering behind the curtain like Dorothy to discover how the levers had been pulled to launch one of the most consequential novels of the twentieth century.

As most Pynchonians know, Corlies Smith—universally called Cork—was Pynchon's editor from the very start of the author's career. A tall, handsome, casually aristocratic publisher of the old school (tweed jackets, unfiltered Pall Malls), he was idolized by the younger set at Viking for his staggering achievements, his impeccable literary taste, and his dry and sometimes startlingly profane wit ("It does, however, have the best horse-fucking scene I've ever read," he deadpanned memorably about a novel at one sales conference). A kinder, more honest, more straightforward man you never met. Cognoscenti of the art of fiction editing put Cork at the very top of the heap. Authors he has worked with besides Pynchon include Muriel Spark, Robertson Davies, Jimmy Breslin, William Kennedy, Harriet Doerr, Madison Smartt Bell, Gloria Naylor, and Carolyn Chute. About three hours after I got to Viking Penguin in 1980, I was in Cork's office, which led to a small but excellent Pynchon adventure. Loyal Big Red alum that I was, I deplored the fact that Richard Fariña's great (well, pretty good) Cornell novel, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, was out of print, and maybe his pal Pynchon would like to contribute an introduction to a Penguin reissue? He did, writing a piece of surpassing grace and affording me the opportunity to talk to him on the phone—his voice reminiscent of late-night beatnik DJs in the early '60s—on some issue of Spanish verb tenses. Heaven! Cork told me that when the Fariña novel had been submitted to him in 1965 he had rejected it, telling the agent it struck him as (ouch!) "imitation Pynchon."

Cork had been a young associate editor at the Philadelphia-based publishing house of Lippincott in 1960 when he bought one of Pynchon's first short stories, "Low-lands," for the literary magazine *New World Writing*. A contract for an untitled novel on an unspecified subject was signed around the same time, the legendary Candida Donadio serving as agent. I have—I'll never tell how—photocopies of some twenty editorial letters between Cork and Pynchon about the novel that would eventually come to be called *V*. But not before some simply awful alternative titles were at least briefly considered: *The Yo-Yo World of Benny Profane*, *The Quest of Herbert Stencil*, *World on a String* (all Cork's ideas), and *Blood's a Rover*, *Down Paradise Street*, *And His Ass Falls Off*, *Footsteps of the Gone*, *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails*, *The Republican Party Is a Machine* (Pynchon's). How they settled on the perfectly obvious title of *V*., the letters do not say. Early on, Cork visited his new author during a "scouting trip" to Seattle, where Pynchon worked as a technical writer for Boeing on such projects as the Minuteman missile—perfect research for the future bard of the V-2 (interestingly, the late poet and teacher Richard Hugo, a veteran of the bombing campaign against Germany, worked in the same department at that time). The tone of their correspondence is serious, affectionate, and droll, by turns. A lot of close-in editorial work got accomplished on both ends, and Pynchon comes across as a young writer not in the least resistant to advice ("I do not, frankly, know dick about writing novels yet and need all kinds of help") but confident enough to stand his ground when he had to. One small shocker is that Cork somehow thought the McClintic Sphere material angled the book unhelpfully in the direction of a "Protest novel" on "the Negro Problem" and suggested it be cut. Pynchon, thank Monk, thoughtfully but firmly demurred.

They did pretty good work. *V*., published in 1963, is now generally considered one of the finest first novels of the twentieth century. Three years later, Lippincott published *The Crying of Lot 49*, regarded at the time as something like an elegant coda to *V*., but really more like an elegant overture to the operatic production to come. By that time, Cork had left Lippincott for the Viking Press, and, as editors do, he arranged to bring his star

discovery along with him.

On January 24, 1967, Pynchon signed an option agreement with Viking in the low five figures for an "as yet untitled novel," the final terms, including advance and royalties, to be agreed on upon delivery. The delivery date was optimistically scheduled, heh heh heh, for December 29, 1967. This would seem to imply that Pynchon had already written a significant part of the book, although nothing in the file indicates whether anyone at Viking had read anything as yet, or even if anyone knew its subject matter, let alone its projected length. My publisher's guess is that Pynchon and Cork had had some very general conversation or correspondence about a novel dealing with German rocketry at the end of World War II, and given Pynchon's blue-chip status and how badly Viking wanted him on its list, that had been sufficient.

Time passed. On January 21, 1969, Cork wrote to Edward Mendelson, perhaps Pynchon's most astute and devoted academic critic, that "we have been expecting a manuscript of his new novel momentarily for some months. . . . I don't know what Pynchon is doing in Los Angeles of all places, but I like to think he's writing a novel." On October 20 of the same year he wrote again to the eager critic: "Sorry, nothing new on Pynchon's novel." On March 5, 1970, Pynchon wrote to Cork to apologize that he was not going to make an April 1 deadline and asking that it be moved to July 1, 1970. He thanked him for his forbearance and ended by expressing his worry, with what degree of irony only he can say for sure, that the novel "could be the biggest piece of shit since *The Crying of Lot 49*." More time passed. Then, on January 27, 1972, Cork wrote to Candida Donadio: "It is with an inordinate amount of pleasure that I enclose our check for \$ _____, the amount due Thomas Pynchon on delivery of his novel." Untitled novel had arrived; the "Brief Description" on the contract signing notice reads, "Free-swinging, wide-ranging story of numerous far-out characters in England and Europe at the end of World War II and immediately after—most of them haunted by the V-2 rocket bomb."

And what a big untitled novel it was! The first read alone took quite a while. Alida Becker, Cork's assistant in those days, told me that one day not long after delivery, Pynchon called the office to speak to Cork. He was out, however, so Pynchon asked Becker what *she* thought of the book. Cautiously she replied that she was enjoying it very much, but that it was very demanding and she hadn't yet finished it. "It's quite long," she explained, to which Pynchon replied proudly, "I typed it all myself, you know." The editorial file I examined has some obvious lacunae and is very thin on letters *from* Pynchon (someone probably filched them, alas). There is not much at all of an editorial nature in there, especially in contrast to the V. letters. On the other hand, not much large-scale editing was actually done on the book. I'm told there were some weak initial noises made to Pynchon about the desirability of cutting, but he refused to consider it. Speaking as a book editor myself, I would not know where to begin or where my cuts might be severing important subterranean connections of plot and symbol, and apparently neither did anyone at Viking. So the untitled novel that Pynchon delivered—which at some point acquired the working title *Mindless Pleasures*—is at least 99 percent the book that readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* encountered.

The task of close-in, line-by-line editing was assigned to Edwin Kennebeck, Viking's head copy editor, who emerges as one of the undersung heroes of this saga. His letters to Pynchon are warm, chatty, and exceptionally meticulous—he obviously "got" the book, and he and Pynchon clearly got on. I remember Ed Kennebeck from my time at Viking Penguin as a pleasant, mild figure. In addition to his fine wordsmithing skills, he brought an exceptionally useful qualification to this important job: In World War II, Kennebeck had served in the Eighth Air Force as a radio operator on B-17s and made thirty-five bombing runs over Germany, including the Dresden mission. He was able from firsthand knowledge to correct a number of technical mistakes (Spitfires were fighters, so they did not carry bombs; B-17 bombing runs took place so early in the day that the planes would never have been seen flying east in the afternoon). In one letter he shares his memories of London during the V-2 attacks of 1944–45 and reassures Pynchon: "I must say though that, except for the most meager things like the slang, your evocation of the scene is totally convincing."

Kennebeck's letters solve one mildly important interpretive question, sort of. It is generally thought that the line of seven squares that serves as a graphic device to separate

the unnumbered chapters in the novel is meant to suggest the sprocket holes in film reels, indicating that the book is to be "read" cinematically as a kind of film in prose. Wrong. In one of his letters Kennebeck refers pointedly to the "oblong holes" in censored correspondence from World War II soldiers, then termed *V-mail* (there's that letter again), and in a letter to Donald Barthelme accompanying a finished copy of the book, Kennebeck makes jocular mention of the sprocket-hole theory, first floated in the Poirier review, and comments, "I little knew what I was contributing to the history of literature." Sometimes a rectangle is just a rectangle—or maybe a censor's mark.

The copyediting of the novel was done by Faith Sale, a Cornell classmate of Pynchon's and the wife of the social critic Kirkpatrick Sale, who appears as a character in Fariña's book. Sale, who at the time was also working as an editor at *Fiction*, a metafiction hotbed, was an early reader of Pynchon's work and did a superb job of addressing the stylistic, orthographic, and punctuational complexities of the massive manuscript. I have heard that her editorial involvement went much deeper than the average copy editor's, but there is no written proof of that, and Sale, who went on to a distinguished editing career herself, died in 1999. I would certainly have loved to see her style sheet.

Then there was the thorny question of the title. *Although Mindless Pleasures* was used in Viking's original announcement to the press, no one at all seemed pleased with it (it comes from a phrase that occurs twice in the book), and Kennebeck floated, with the air of semidesperation one feels in these situations, such duds as *Powers That Be*, *Angel of the Preterite*, *Control*, and *Slothrop Dodging* (well, you try it). I'm guessing that Pynchon came up with *Gravity's Rainbow*, which was perfection. But Kennebeck was the one who hit on the minimalist-jacket-copy approach, which had the effect of making the book's first sentence the most famous since "Call me Ishmael."

Now the real problem presented itself: How to publish a seven-hundred-plus-page book at a price that would not be grossly prohibitive for Pynchon's natural college and postcollegiate audience. *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* had each sold more than three million copies in their Bantam mass-market editions. (Let us pause here to contemplate what these numbers say about the extent of literacy in the America of the '60s. Then I suggest we all commit suicide.) According to a letter from Cork Smith to Bruce Allen (who reviewed *Gravity's Rainbow* for *Library Journal* but wrote to Viking complaining about the novel's price), Viking would have had to sell thirty thousand copies at the then unheard of price of \$10 just to break even. By comparison, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* had sold about ten thousand copies apiece in hardcover. So how to reach even a fraction of the cash-strapped Pynchon-loving millions? Cork himself hit on the then unique strategy of publishing an original trade-paperback edition at \$4.95 and "an admittedly highly priced hardcover edition" at \$15, each identical in paper stock and format, differing only in their binding. The gamble: "We also thought that Pynchon's college audience might, just *might*, be willing to part with a five-dollar bill for this novel; after all, that audience spends that amount over and over and over again for long-playing records." The other gamble was with the reviewers, who rarely took paperback fiction seriously, but as Cork wrote, "We feel—as, clearly, you do—that Pynchon *cannot* be ignored."

Thus locked and loaded, Viking proceeded to do what it did as well as any American publisher in those days: generate high-end literary anticipation and excitement. The advance galley and complimentary copy lists in the editorial file offer a vividly detailed snapshot of elite American literary culture circa 1973. Bound proofs were sent for possible blurbs and general buzz generation to the likes of Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, Frank Kermode, Ken Kesey, William Gaddis, Benjamin DeMott, Paul Fussell, John Updike, John Cheever, George Plimpton, Lionel Trilling, Richard Ellmann, Kurt Vonnegut, and similar folks. In the file there is a memo, in Cork's hand, in which are written the names Heller and Puzo, both Donadio clients, and alongside them the annotation "still trying to get through *V.*" Richard Poirier was sent a very early photocopy of the manuscript by Elisabeth Sifton, the superb editor just then starting out at Viking. There is a much longer list of people who received complimentary copies, which spreads an even wider net among writers and review editors, and included as well a great many publishing figures, some still around, some sadly gone (I had not thought death had undone so many). It also includes, amusingly enough, the recently departed actor Jerry Orbach and the society bandleader Peter Duchin. One complimentary copy is so puckishly hilarious that its accompanying letter, from Kennebeck, needs to be quoted in full. It is

addressed to Fairchild Industries in Germantown(!), Maryland, and reads, "Dear Dr. Von Braun: I am sending you herewith a copy of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, with the compliments of the author."

That's how the thing was done three decades ago. Even if Pynchon hadn't been the reclusive man he was, venues for author readings were largely nonexistent, and the idea of discussing a book of this length and difficulty on Carson or Cavett was laughable. The dark arts of author publicity were in their infancy; it was the reviewers who had to do their job. And did they ever. The publication date of *Gravity's Rainbow* was February 28, 1973. By March 9, a Viking press release was crowing that the house was receiving seven hundred orders *an hour* as a result of ecstatic lead reviews everywhere. After a first printing of 23,000 copies, a second of 12,500, and a third of 25,000, the publishers rushed through "an order for paper for 50,000 more copies"—a perfectly astonishing number even in retrospect. Viking had an awfully hot hand that year; two other commercially significant books it published at the same time were Frederick Forsyth's *Odessa File* and Peter Maas's *Serpico*. I'm sure you could have cut the giddy joy in the halls of 625 Madison Avenue with a knife. Thomas Guinzburg, Viking's president and publisher, was in London in early May, and there are two marvelous telegrams to him in the file. One, from Rich Barber, Viking's shrewd publicity director, says simply, "PYNCHON DELIGHTED FREDDIE LUKEWARM MAAS ENRAGED ." The other, from Pynchon himself, reads, "DEAR TOM GUINZBURG , WHEREVER YOU ARE, I THOUGHT YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW I'M NUMBER EIGHT AND MY FRIEND FREDDIE IS NUMBER TWO." In other words, by some accounts the most difficult American novel of the twentieth century was selling as well as or better than a high-octane assassination thriller and a high-profile copper as-told-to—an amazing feat of publishing prowess. *Gravity's Rainbow* went on to spend four weeks on the *Times* fiction list, selling some 45,000 copies in paper and cloth combined. Its Bantam mass-market edition, published one year later, sold about 250,000 copies over the course of ten years.

The award nominations were inevitable, of course. In those days the National Book Awards were announced before the ceremony, so Viking knew ahead of time that *Gravity's Rainbow* had won half of the fiction prize. There was no expectation that Pynchon would actually show up, but his publisher was nervous that he might simply refuse to accept the award—as indeed he was to do a year later, for somewhat tortuous reasons, when he declined the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was Guinzburg who hit on the inspired wheeze of smuggling in Professor Irwin "The World's Foremost Authority" Corey as Pynchon's alter ego. Corey could be seen in those years from time to time on the late-night talk shows, a manic figure in a frock coat, half-knotted bow tie, and mad-scientist haircut who tied the English language into knots with mock erudition. Poor Ralph Ellison got saddled with the job of presenting the award ("My apologies if we're as . . . if you were as confused as I was") to the man he thought was Pynchon. Remember, *nobody* knew what Pynchon looked like, so the disheveled being who leapt to the podium from the audience *could have been the guy*. Oh, the delicious perplexity there must have been in the room as Corey launched into his priceless speech, the text of which can be easily found on the Web. When the streaker raced through the place, Corey ad-libbed brilliantly, "I want to thank Mr. Knopf, who just ran through the auditorium."

The Pulitzer Prize episode was by contrast a distinctly unfunny joke. John Leonard summed it up best in a *New York Times Book Review* column. He pointed out that the advisory committee, in deciding simply not to give an award that year, had ignored such plausible candidates as Vonnegut, McGuane, Vidal, Singer, Cheever, Malamud, and Gardner. He concluded his scathing piece thus: "What was laughable or boring about the behavior of the Pulitzer people in the past is now scandalous. Either the advisory panel and the trustees of Columbia University should take a crash course in remedial reading or they should get out of the awards business altogether." Pynchon readers everywhere simply concluded that our hero had told the truth about things in so definitive a fashion that the Authorities couldn't handle it.

* * *

Thirty-one years later, a very different person inhabiting a radically altered literary landscape, I undertook to reread *Gravity's Rainbow* but not without trepidation. It might be no country for middle-aged men. Did I have the mental stamina to go the distance, to

keep its fissured and forking narrative scheme, dozens of oddly named characters, daunting thematic, scientific, and symbolic materials, and baroque syntax straight in my head? Had a professional life devoted to the service of clarity and linear development in the written word unfit me for this magical mystery tour? *Suppose I didn't like it?* I read in the spirit of a thought experiment—no recourse to the criticism and companions and concordances and crib notes that have proliferated from the academic Pynchon industry in print and on the Net. Mano a mano, me against the text, just like in 1973, minus the drugs.

My first reaction: Jesus, this is a tough book. The prose was gorgeous, with a density of allusion and implication and hyperalertness that almost no one writing today would even attempt, let alone pull off. If you did not pay maximum attention and, paradoxically, avoid, Keats-like, an "irritable reaching after fact," you were going to be lost. And as a fifty-four-year-old with responsibilities rather than a feckless twenty-two-year-old luftmensch, I had stuff to do that confined my reading to the 10 PM –midnight slot. I'd stumble off to bed, my brainwaves commandeered by Pynchon's insinuating narrative voice, to a night of uneasy dreams that fed off some of the most disturbing latent content modern fiction can provide. It was a strange six weeks, and I had the sense that I was leading a kind of secret life in my own Zone.

I got impatient more than I had in 1973. I certainly never felt that I was reading gibberish, but there were stretches of the book that felt so private and hermetic I decided that Pynchon was mostly talking to Pynchon. Some of the puns and other humor were so silly as to be regrettable ("I Ching feet"), and the anachronisms bothered me a bit. I believe that the me who read *Gravity's Rainbow* back then was a more flexible and generous, less peckish reader than I am today. I also think that kid was faking it a lot.

But in the end (and the middle), *Gravity's Rainbow* impressed me even more than it did three decades ago. There is simply no work in all of American literature that approaches its staggering intellectual reach and erudition. And the cosmic drama of the thing! Pynchon is our Melville and our Blake, our epic poet of good and evil, innocence (the American variety) and experience. Vidal, in a dissenting essay on what he termed the "R and D" novelists, has hard things to say about Pynchon's ear for prose, but I disagree. His quicksilver shifts of register—from the lyrical to the scrupulously historical to the scatological (he is also the poet of shit) to the ontological/hysterical to the goofball to the vatic and prophetic—are the work of a virtuoso. It seems to me now that Pynchon's great achievement was to create a narrative voice that is supple enough to say and do anything. The narrator is almost premodern in the freedom he exercises to comment on matters large and small. *Gravity's Rainbow* is not, I finally realized, a novel in the generally accepted sense—it is a text, intended for moral instruction. This is fitting from a writer whose Puritan ancestor William Pynchon came to this country on John Winthrop's fleet and wrote an anti-Calvinist tract, "The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption," so controversial that it was banned in Boston. Far from being the nihilistic work some lazy critics have accused it of being, *Gravity's Rainbow* contains a superabundance of meaning, of signs, portents, and pedagogical occasions.

It is also farsighted. It is no more valid to judge *Gravity's Rainbow* on the accuracy of its predictions than it is to rate Orwell on how close he came to describing the real 1984, but from the perspective of the present there are a number of startlingly proleptic moments in there. A German engineer in the Zone foresees the mass commodification of guilt: "Extermination camps will be turned into tourist attractions, foreigners with cameras will come piling through in droves." This is exceptional, as is Pynchon's drilling down into the history of such German concerns as IG Farben and their scummy wartime activities—and the disturbing connections they had to American business. Even more exceptional is the book's prefiguring of a digital world and an information-based economy. Here, after all, is a book obsessed with the human tendency to reduce all phenomena to "the zero and the one." Uh-huh. In Zurich, a Russian black marketeer complains to a Slothrop in search of information, "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?" and predicts, "Someday it'll all be done by machine. Information machines. You are the wave of the future." Quite true—the hypersurveillance of Slothrop's precognitive erections and all else anticipates our lives today, every keystroke noted by spyware, every transaction transmitted to a data bank. Slothrop's ego decay and psychic dispersal can easily be regarded as all our eventual fates in the real kingdom of the zero and the one.

Gravity's Rainbow has, in my view, only gained in stature and pertinence in the intervening decades. But what has been its wider effect on American fiction? To begin with, it has no real rival among the novels published since. Certainly not in either of Pynchon's subsequent novels, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, each of which has its many excellences, but neither of which anyone is planning to take with them to the moon. William Gaddis's *JR* is a virtuoso turn, and a highly predictive one, but it has the air of a formal stunt, while his subsequent books were marred by his ultra-Swiftian disgust with human stupidity. Then there is the special case of Don DeLillo, the other giant figure in postwar American fiction, who, like Pynchon, has used the novel as a vehicle of inquiry into the uniquely unsettling state of being a late-twentieth-century American, with all its attendant terrors, mysteries, and absurdities. As definitive a summing-up of the meaning of the cold war as *Underworld* was, the scope of DeLillo's achievement is best grasped by considering that book in the company of its three great predecessors, *Mao II*, *White Noise*, and *Libra*. Like *Gravity's Rainbow*, those books comprehend American life as mediated by science and technology, and the vast systems that underlie and are made possible by them. They show how the dream of perfect safety and control breeds paranoia, and how free radicals like Lee Harvey Oswald can wreak havoc in such a world. In temperament and style DeLillo is Apollonian, a secret sharer with his technocrats and obsessives, whereas Pynchon is chthonic, in touch with darker gods. In the end one is relieved not to have to choose between the two, secure in the thought that a century from now, people will read these authors' books to understand the contours and nature of our odd lives.

What about the question of *Gravity's Rainbow's* "influence"? Certainly its effect can be seen in what I think of as the "high-IQ wing" of younger American novelists. The brainy, cyber-savvy Richard Powers has learned from Pynchon the art of structuring his novels along metaphorical pathways drawn from the realms of science, mathematics, genetics, and music. William T. Vollmann, with his ambitious and polymathic reach, is the most Pynchon-like of his generation, but he has yet to solve the problem of form. David Foster Wallace may be the only certifiable genius in American fiction besides Pynchon, and his massive *Infinite Jest* was published as if it were the second coming of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with some justification. But where *Gravity's Rainbow* looks outward and seeks an escape from the tragic neuroses of Western history, *Infinite Jest* burrows inward, its antennae tuned to the psychic frailties we all harbor and our culture's tendency to mesmerize itself into a fugue state. Finally there is Jonathan Franzen, who married a Pynchonian sensibility to the family novel to explosive effect in *The Corrections*, but who should have done a Pynchon in another sense when Oprah came calling.

I do worry, though, that *Gravity's Rainbow* may be turning into an undervisited monument. In a poll of sixteen assistants and assistant editors under the age of thirty at my publishing company, a marvelously well-read group, I discovered that only two of them had read the book and only five had read any books at all by Pynchon. The comments from those who had read Pynchon suggested that they found him slow going stylistically and that his concerns were in general alien and irrelevant to them. This makes sense. Pynchon is a pure product of the cold war and the arms race and the adversary culture that opposed them, whereas these young people came of age after the fall of communism, in a time when technology is viewed as the royal road to imaginative and personal freedom. In a very real sense, then, *Gravity's Rainbow* is turning historical—an inevitable fate. Three decades on, it has acquired something of the "aura" that Walter Benjamin ascribed to works of art produced before the advent of mechanical reproduction. The question that remains is whether the book will come to seem dated in the years to come, or if it will pass the Poundian test of being news that stays news. Who can tell? What I do know about *Gravity's Rainbow* for absolute certain is this: There is nothing to compare to it now.

* * *

Life is a haunting thing. In preparation for this piece, I made a lunch date with Cork Smith for October 14, 2004, to catch up and to interview him. Two days before, his wife, Sheila Smith, called to say that Cork was in the hospital for observation with what looked to be a case of congestive heart failure. He had not been well the past couple of years; he'd had successful open-heart surgery but suffered from an emphysema that was getting worse. Still, three weeks later Cork called to say that he was feeling "okay" (translation: not well at all, but what the hell can you do?), and we rescheduled lunch for the Monday after

Thanksgiving. Two days before the holiday, I opened up my e-mail to find a message with the subject heading "Cork died last night." Now I would never have the chance to talk to him about the triumphant publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or about anything else.

Cork . . .

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