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Author(s): Andrew Rowcroft  
Affiliation(s): University of Lincoln, UK  
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# Review of Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013)

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Andrew Rowcroft

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Fredric Jameson once argued that history is the ultimate horizon of literary and cultural enquiry.<sup>1</sup> With the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* by Luc Herman and Steve Weisenburger, Pynchon scholarship makes another welcome step into that important aspect of literary research: excavating the historical, cultural and intellectual currents that shaped and were created by Pynchon's great novel.

Weisenburger and Herman require little introduction. The former is Professor of English and Mossiker Chair in humanities at Southern Methodist University and author of the meticulously researched and invaluable guide, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (2006), now enjoying its second edition.<sup>2</sup> Herman is likewise an established Pynchon scholar, a Professor of American Literature and Narrative Theory at the University of Antwerp, and co-editor of the recently published *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2011).<sup>3</sup>

Herman and Weisenburger's project is ambitious, well-structured and clearly demonstrates the clear-thinking and solid historical research of two scholars long acquainted with Pynchon's oeuvre. They open their study with a declaration that the 'dialogue of domination and freedom, satire and seriousness [have] consistently shaped Pynchon's work' (3), with *GR* as the 'master text' (3) in Pynchon's output. Consequently, this is an account firmly focused on the one novel, and provides only passing remarks on Pynchon's other productions.

Reading 'a much darker and more cynical (but not despairing) *Gravity's Rainbow* than most of Pynchon's readers, and we ourselves, have been willing to see' (18), the book aims at a long overdue recuperation of the great novel, demonstrating some sensitivity to the normalising critical procedures

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exercised by professional critics and University departments. While Herman and Weisenburger are unpersuaded by arguments that strictly align the novel with the 1960s counterculture (14), they stress that Pynchon's novelistic exercises have too often been seized upon 'as [a] means to liberation', while they contend key cultural and historical debates of the period render the novel as 'a token[...] of an escapism that only enable[s] more supple modes of repression' (14).

The introduction begins with a narration of their selected fictional source material – the scenes most regarded, and often swept aside, as too 'off-the-wall' (3) to merit serious attention from Pynchon scholars. The content of these scenes immediately makes them stand out, although they have for some time been positioned as a kind of oasis-in-the-desert, a form of refreshment that makes Pynchon's dense and difficult passages more bearable.

Their ambition, then, is to explore the dialogue of domination and freedom in 'several of the novel's least likely moments, scenes of outlandish satirical fantasia too easily read as mere play, stoned mind-tripping, or pointless diversion' in relation to 'neglected and forgotten contexts' (5) surrounding the moment of its production.

*Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* attempts to draw on neglected source material to explore overlooked scenes in Pynchon's novel within the historical contexts of the long 1960s, a period roughly beginning with the civil rights battles and international crises of the mid-1950s up to the publishing of Pynchon's text and Nixon's Presidential impeachment in 1974. Such an examination is long overdue. As these critics contend, these 'vital cultural-historical context[s]' have often been passed over in Pynchon scholarship; a period of intense social, cultural and political change all too often sandwiched between the simple exploratory frameworks of global nuclear conflict and countercultural peace movements.

The book is elegantly divided into three main sections: 'Novel and Decade', 'Domination' and 'Freedom'. The opening section explores a new library of critical cultural and psychoanalytic texts circulating during the time of *GR*'s composition. Through an examination of the 'contentious, tumultuous historical context for reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, which Pynchon criticism cursorily acknowledges but otherwise leaves largely unexamined' (60), Herman and Weisenburger turn to a spate of newly available 'memoirs, editions, and histories [alongside] rare and ephemeral underground press materials' (60). Considering works by Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and

Norman O. Brown they seek to map the structures informing critical and literary accounts of the possibilities and foreclosures of radical political action, that 'we want to assume Pynchon read' (24).

The first section, 'Novel and Decade' conceives *Gravity's Rainbow* as 'a narrative both *of* and *about* its time' and sets out to 'rummage up a few new sources and reference points' (22). Herman and Weisenburger's emphasis here is Pynchon's art, particularly his satire, in relation to the unique dilemmas facing writers and intellectuals during the long 60s: nuclear holocaust, state power, technology, language and free expression, legal trials and the questions that surround literature and 'redeeming social value'. However, the thread is well spun, and these contexts never threaten to overwhelm the reading of the novel. Pynchon's text is given its immense due as a powerful synthesis: 'the towering achievement of that time' (22).

Such a trajectory seems comprehensive. It is disappointing, however, that their path into these debates begins with a consideration of how Pynchon's text connects German Nazism and American Puritanism, an engaging piece no doubt, but one largely familiar for most scholars. The novelty comes in the authors' demotion of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* (1905), an important source long cited in critical commentary, in favour of Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), with its psychological analysis of Protestantism, as a foundational text for Pynchon. These critics explore the relations between Fromm's analysis of the social construction of psychological forces and Pynchon's characters, helping expose a new source for consideration.

This then moves to a short discussion of Marcuse and the potentials and foreclosures for freedom in industrial society, and highlights the discussions and disagreements between Marcuse and Norman O. Brown within the pages of *Commentary* magazine. The final two chapters, 'Total Assault on the Culture' and 'The Law and Liberation of Fantasy' are the most rewarding of this section. They detail the historical contexts of literary fictions and underground publications as the mid-twentieth century political and cultural battleground, offering detailed scrutiny of the novel's most infamous scenes - which as the authors note, certainly wouldn't have made it past the publishers had Pynchon completed them some years earlier - coupled with the literary legacy of public censorship. A historical mapping is therefore in place. Pynchon's narrative practices draw heavily on the underground press and its attempts to keep the revolution going. In turn these publications expressed a logic indebted to the work of the anarchist thinkers and neo-Freudian radical left. The section closes with a reading of the pornographic scenes in the novel and how they explore aspects of control in various

cultural, ideological, sexual, social forms, to offer both a celebration of newly acquired speech freedoms and a 'fuck you' to the system.

Section Two, 'Domination', attempts to put an interesting spin on familiar ideas: indeed such a theme is the 'default condition of the novel's storyworld' (92). Therefore the focus is somewhat rehearsed, exploring the various mechanisms of control exercised to keep Slothrop in check: the emergence of the cartel projects, von Braun and the Nazi command, and the Dora Camps.

The section begins by referencing the key shifts in post-war recognitions of domination and violence, reading a number of theoretical texts which argue for cultural forms as conducive to coercion and force. These accounts lead to a much wider acceptance of structural, symbolic and subjective forms of violence, which the authors attempt to trace across the novel. For the most part, in seeking to examine the relations between these methods of domination and liberal ideas of the 1960s, the presentation of new source material is engaging. The section on von Braun's complicity with the Nazi rocket programme is fresh and interesting, drawing upon Michael J. Neufeld's exemplary biography *Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War* (Reprint 2008). A discussion of the failed Hollywood blockbuster, *I Aim at the Stars* (1960) – a title replete with humorous potential – is particularly engaging as the film charts a rather empowering, and resolutely false trajectory of Braun's life and work.

The 'Freedom' section is particularly innovative, focusing on the socio-political implications of the novel's presentation of 'tarot readings, astrological divinations, fantasist surrogacy, trance speaking, spirit possession, and out of body journeys' (166). Herman and Weisenburger claim that these aspects embody three core features of Pynchon's novel: 'a persistent suggestion that models for intersubjective communication and solidarity may exist outside routinized channels [...] the very apersonality and non-intentionality of the divinatory process of non-Western societies might have something to teach first world people [and, finally] people might also learn from [...] acausal, nondeterminist, and recursive ways of knowing what it is right and just to do' (166).

The closing remarks emphasize the dual contentions of the study: Pynchon's characters 'romanc[e] the idea of revolution but fail[...] to carry it through' (215), because the novel presents humanity 'in the grip of massive military-industrial power, relegating any resistance to experiences of helplessness, futility and death (217). Taking a dark view of

technology, capital and war, Pynchon's text is penned during bleak historical conditions that seemingly offer 'no way out from under the dominion of that trinity' (220).

Strong criticisms are hard to level here, but at times the book feels overly narrative; long sequences are given to recalling the dense plot of Pynchon's work. However, this isn't necessarily a negative. As the critics themselves realise, 'many great summaries of *Gravity's Rainbow* attest that readers may largely overcome problems of incoherence and uncertainty' (97). Reader frustration is of course high and the novel may well be one of the most 'popular' abandoned literary fictions produced during the twentieth century. In turn, Herman and Weisenburger's book of criticism is eminently readable, approachable and fun. Their arguments are lucid and the writing perspicuous; it possesses a rhythm and fluidity which make it enjoyable, while the authors certainly don't shy away from the more complex aspects of Pynchon's great novel.

This work thereby takes its place within a welcome trend in Pynchon studies, and literary studies more broadly, seeking to establish neglected or unrecognised cultural and historical contexts. However, to invert a phrase from the man himself, whether this book will single up all future lines of Pynchon enquiry - bringing scholars to consult, more thoroughly, the historicity of Pynchon's fiction - while certainly an important avenue, remains to be seen.

## End notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen 1981), p. 9.
2. Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (Athens: University of Georgia Press; Revised and Exp edition, 2006).
3. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, Brian McHale, *The Cambridge companion to Thomas Pynchon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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