

‘Begin at the beginning, the King said, very gravely’: Serious Openings and Subversive Epigraphs in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon

People often think that reading a novel is a very linear activity. You start at the start and proceed through the text. As in most media forms, though, the beginning of any novel is really not truly its beginning.

The American author, Thomas Pynchon, the focus of my paper today, is famed, it could be argued, mostly for three things. The first is the extreme lengths of his novels and the bewildering numbers of characters and plotlines in said books. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, his 1973 work that remains unfinished by most who own a copy, contains over 400 characters for example. The second, and the point to which I will return, is the famous *opening* to that novel, which most readers do reach, the howl of the V-2 rocket that soars at supersonic speed above the landscape: “a screaming comes across the sky” it reads. The third is that this novel was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize but denied the prize at the last minute on the grounds of being “turgid, overwritten, and obscene”.

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Yet perhaps what many readers do not consider is that this beginning is not really the start of the book. Indeed, the first line of a text is never truly the beginning of any novel. Before we reach page one of Pynchon’s novels – and novelistic texts in general – we are always confronted by several paratextual phenomena. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this “opening” sentence is preceded, immediately, by seven squares, indicative of 35mm film sprockets and meant, presumably, to signal the novel’s affinity to the mode of screen, despite its own unfilmable nature. Indeed, a substantial portion of the text is devoted to a fictional filmmaker, Gerhard von Goll, who believes that his work on screen and in film engenders and inspires reality. This, in turn, was based on the fact that the countdown for rocket launches was derived from the filmic context of Fritz Lang’s 1929 *Frau Im Mond*. But it is likewise a familiar experience of reading *Gravity’s Rainbow*; to encounter bizarre situations that seem invented only to learn that they have a real grounding in history, such as the extensive and almost unbelievable grimness of the Herero genocide. *Gravity’s Rainbow* fits with today’s primary visual mode because it is not a novel in the conventional sense, but rather a film-like montage procedure of increasingly horrendous imagery.

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In this paper, I want to argue for the significance of the paratextual phenomena that surround Pynchon’s openings, while also suggesting, in general, that too little attention is often paid to such epigraphic material. It’s easy to ignore the roaring lion of Metro Goldwyn Mayer as the movie opens, but it signals a very particular brand affiliation with funding implications that inform our reception of such films. Likewise, even the copyright page of *Gravity’s Rainbow* must go through all the formalities of acknowledging re-use, even of works by Emily Dickinson that were far out of copyright; so much for a work that radically plays with notions of original and copy. Opening copyright declarations signal a work’s conformity with legalistic and copyright norms. They signpost a deeply conservative stance towards the fictional construct of intellectual property.

Indeed, the particular focus on such publishing apparatus frames the fact that while *Gravity’s Rainbow* is an *unusual* – even downright bonkers, at times – text, it was not so far from the bounds of publishing normality that it was turned down. The foundations of publishing change engrained in the Modernist small-magazine and Press movement earlier in the century had laid the groundwork for the radically experimental novel to feature in mainstream channels (although Melville’s *Moby-*

Dick could also be argued to be operating in such a channel). The book is, in many ways, much worse behaved than its very conventional paratextual framing would signal. However, *Gravity's Rainbow* is loaned an air of official sanction and mainstream acceptability by its encasement within the formal publishing apparatus of the copyright declaration and ISSN frontmatter or cataloguing page of Viking Press.

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Yet the text is not done with this oscillation between seriousness and frivolity. It then swerves once more; it is dedicated, in the opening pages, “To Richard Fariña” – Pynchon’s countercultural folk singer-songwriter friend who was killed in a motorcycle accident at the tender age of 29. This epigraph serves several different purposes at different diegetic levels, all of which can be read within the context of the novel itself. At the most basic of these levels, it expresses a very personal bond of friendship; the redemptive kind of brotherly love that comes to dominate the penultimate chapter of *Gravity's Rainbow* when two brothers set on killing each other simply pass each other by, enchanted by the spell of love; “This is magic. Sure—but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of evening, often forever, without knowing it”. At another level, it signifies the hold that death has over each and every one of us. After all, as the novel tells us, “it is not often that death is so clearly told to fuck off”. Finally, though, in Fariña’s role as a countercultural icon, the text appeals to his public image as anti-authority – buckle up, it’s going to be a wild ride, this citation says. And, indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow* has a most unusual narrative structure, punctuated by musical song interludes throughout. Hence, across even these different registers, the appropriateness of the dedication to *Gravity's Rainbow* manages, metaleptically, to capture different angles on the book, all of which overlap with each other. As Pynchon writes, early in the novel, “this is not a disentanglement from but a progressive *knotting into*”.

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Gravity's Rainbow's epigraph is an even more complicated matter of interpretation, though. Ascribed to the first head of NASA and previous German Nazi rocket scientist, Werner von Braun, the epigraph reads: “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.” In the very first instance, it is not clear that we should take seriously the author of this epigraph. Von Braun clearly benefited from the slave labour of the concentration camp and was then rescued from a war crimes trial thanks to Operation Paperclip, the Allied mission to bring German scientists on board after the war. Yet throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, figures such as von Braun are darkly satirised in the form of the sinister sadomasochist Lieutenant Weissmann (white man). Hence, from the get-go, the book asks us to consider the weight we should accord to the philosophical pronouncements of a potential mass-murdering war criminal. As I argued in my first book on Pynchon a good decade ago, now, it matters who is speaking at any particular point in the text and from where they speak.

The interstitial space of the epigraph is also important for this placement. An epigraph is not inside the text; it sits just outside it, yet still somehow within. The figures usually cited in an epigraph – outside the works of Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco – have real-world referents. They are ways of bringing extra-textual historical or thematic frameworks to bear on the novel and its world. In this light, the epigraph to *Gravity's Rainbow* is incredibly dark, foreshadowing the many atrocities presented by the novel. Yet how are we to read Von Braun’s statement? In one of the most obvious contexts, he managed to effect his own transformation after the end of the Nazi rocket programme,

moving in a new life-after-death context to the US's NASA. Yet, when taken in a literal context, such spiritual beliefs are not generally belittled in *Gravity's Rainbow*, which favours the spiritual and religious over the mechanised industrialised death of contemporary science (which, in the vein of Adorno and Horkheimer, blames the holocaust on enlightenment reason's untrammelled progress). That said, specific forms of occult afterlife contact are associated with Nazi evil in *Gravity's Rainbow* when a group of Germans, at one point in the text, seek to contact the spirit of Walter Rathenau via a séance. Rathenau is their perfect figure; a foreign minister in the Weimar government, the novel describes him as "prophet and architect of the cartelized state" – the state under the supervision of the market, as Michel Foucault would later describe it. Yet, notably, after the Nazis seized power in 1933, all commemoration of Rathenau was banned. The epigraph and the séance context here link pre-war liberal democratic theory with Pynchon's own thesis that "the real business of the war is buying and selling" and that "The true war is a celebration of markets". In Pynchon's novel, thanks to the epigraph, the Nazi conquest of Europe and extermination of supposedly undesirable groups is connected to a post-war world of market-driven economies and violence via economics.

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Thinking even earlier in the novel's beginning, the various cover images that have constituted the title have struggled but to give a reductive view of the novel's sprawling landscape. While the vast majority focus on the London Blitz and the V-2 rocket that forms a definitely key part of the narrative, others attempt to delve into the Nazi arcana or the narrative itself, with a skeleton contorted into a swastika. Another, that I haven't here pictured, goes further than this and gives a schematic diagram of the V-2 rocket – a blueprint, in blue – thereby unveiling the scientific rationality underneath the V-2's design and trajectory. Another design – the first edition that I owned, the 1995 Viking imprint – merely opts for a star in a circle. It's catchy, visually appealing, but has little to do with the contents of the book.

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However, by far the least appealing of the covers for *Gravity's Rainbow* is the more recent Vintage/Penguin edition that tries to depict some of the strange events in the text. We can see Grigori the psychic octopus mid-way up the left hand side of the cover, various pigs running around for the moment when Slothrop takes on the guise of the pig god Plechazunga. It also gives a sense of overload, accommodating both the novel's incredibly serious themes and its light-hearted custard-pie-fight type slapstick comedy scenes. But the overall effect is so diluted by this attempt to cram every single aspect of this madcap novel into a single frame shot. It's simply not effective as a piece of graphic design – although one might argue that, in that case, *Gravity's Rainbow* is not effective as a novel, exceeding, as it does, the frame of most readers' short-term memory by... overload. This cover is a little like trying to illustrate the cover of an encyclopaedia with something about every entry.

Hence, the covers for *Gravity's Rainbow* – particularly the ones that work better – tend to stick to simple abstractions or reductive thematic motifs centred around the seriousness of the V-2 rocket. But they contrast dialectically with the many, many absurd scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Or the 20-page setup for the joke about Cecil DeMille that "For DeMille young fur henchmen can't be rowing", which sounds a little bit like "forty [or fifty] million Frenchmen can't be wrong", the title of Herbert Fields and Cole Porter's 1929 musical comedy. But Pynchon takes 20 pages to setup a scenario in which DeMille is directing a film that requires hoax fur salesman to take up oars. As Steven Weisenberger puts it, "Note that Pynchon has fashioned an entire narrative digression about

illicit trading in furs, oarsmen in boats, fur-henchmen, and De Mille-all of it in order to launch this pun”. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is both a very serious and very silly book and the multiple layers of its paratextual and pre-textual contents play with this oscillation. But if you want a set of images that do justice to the book’s range and scope, you would be better to consult Zac Smith’s *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow* than this cover art.

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Why is this attention to paratextual design features worthwhile? Well, as Samuel Cohen has pointed out in his “*Mason & Dixon & the Ampersand*”, there was a persistent rumour that “Thomas Pynchon was heavily involved in the graphic design of his 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon*, inside and out”. Hence, in paying attention to a feature that “by design” is “superficial”, “we are given space to think about its significance by the fact of Pynchon’s attention to its detail”.¹ This degree of logic has even been extended by Tore Rye Anderson in recent days to note that the three different palimpsestic fonts on the front cover of *Against the Day* correspond to each of Pynchon’s historical epics: “The back layer is written in a sans-serif font, like the original cover of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The next layer is a serif font, corresponding to the cover of *Mason & Dixon*. And the upper layer is another sans-serif font, which corresponds to *Against the Day* and the period it depicts.”²

These three of Pynchon’s historical epics – *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day* – are linked in other ways, clear just from examination of the covers and epigraphic material/opening. *Mason & Dixon*’s opening line, “Snow-Balls have flown their arc” is, as Cohen again points out, a “humorous allusion” to the opening of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s “a screaming comes across the sky”. The missiles, of course, are suitably downgraded for Pynchon’s historical epic of the 18th Century and the conflict considerably less consequential.

Just the name of Pynchon’s novel – *Mason & Dixon* – tells us, historically, of the significant events that the novel implies. Indeed, American slavery is a core theme of the text and the stakes could not be higher; “The Driver’s Whip is an evil thing”, writes Pynchon. And, indeed, *Mason & Dixon* is the only one of Pynchon’s three historical epic novels not to carry an epigraph. This is not to say that epigraphs are not important in *Mason & Dixon*. In Chapter 35 there is a highly significant epigraph about the nature of history and historiography, apparently written by the novel’s dubious narrator, Wicks Cherrycoke. History is, apparently, “not a Chain of single Links... rather a great disorderly Tangle of Lines” – conveniently Pynchon’s very own brand of historiographic metafiction.

How so? *Against the Day*’s very first sentence, after paratexts and epi-texts, is the naively optimistic: “now single up all lines!” *Against the Day* signals in its opening that the naive stance would be to expect synthesis and resolution; a “singling” up of “all lines” into an overarching singularity of history. It’s shown as naive because the context is in a sub-plot involving turn of the century dime novel fictional characters, the “Chums of Chance”, a set of sky-faring balloon adventurers who represent, in many ways, early twentieth-century positivism.

Against the Day returns to Pynchon’s phenomenon of epigraphs with a tribute to Thelonius Monk: “It’s always night or we wouldn’t need light” – a line that at once plays with the very theme of the whole text since a photographic shot “contra jour” – *Against the Day* – is one in which the foreground is silhouetted against a bright background. Given the specific optical qualities of Iceland

1 Samuel Cohen, ‘*Mason & Dixon & the Ampersand*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48.3 (2002), 264–91.

2 Tore Rye Andersen, *Planetary Pynchon: History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 205–6.

Spar – the rock that plays a key role in this novel – which causes doubling and strange refractions, it is also clear that light and optics have a strong centrality for the text. Yet perhaps the assignment here – Thelonius Monk – is more important than the actual words. Signalling a specific mode of jazz improvisation – bebop – the text indicates its own unconventional narrative structure and desire to “play” with the traditional structures of the novel. Pynchon had made such a move before. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* there is a scene where Charlie Parker is learning his rapid “demisemiquaver” style and the text, itself, also breaks down into rapid fire short staccato sentences with interjections that mirror the musical scene.³

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To return, however, for some closing remarks on epigraphs, covers, copyright pages and so forth and it is actually the back page that holds some of the most significance for the beginning of a novel. It is a rare occasion, I would venture, for a reader to encounter the back cover as the last thing they visit in a novel’s topography. Most people read the back cover – the end – when they seek to appraise a text, *before reading it*. In other words, there is a distinctly non-linear way to the methods by which people approach the start of novels and the physical binding of the book. The Red King may instruct the White Rabbit to “Begin at the beginning” and to “go on till you come to the end: then stop” but this is not, actually, the way that we read novels. For reading is not simply an activity of linear digestion, but is also enmeshed in principles of time management and appraisal (“do I want to spend my time reading this novel?” “how can I judge whether this novel is worth my time, without reading it?”) – indeed, a precursor to any kind of reading is a form of “not reading” in which the paratextual apparatuses are used to ascertain whether it is possible *not* to read this text and to allocate time elsewhere. The old adage that one should “never judge a book by its cover” may have some truth, but it is also a truth that most readers *do* make such judgements and that we have few other or better such “reading-saving devices” for working out whether something should be read.

In any case, it has been my contention today to show that, in the novelistic space, a lot happens before you even get to page one. So-called “opening lines” are hardly the first things that we encounter and it is possible for novelists to setup elaborate dynamic tensions for their novels just by using epigraphic irony to undercut their own messages.

3 Martin Paul Eve, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 164–65.