

Elliot Cooper

The Page and the Reader's Gaze

Abstract:

In his 2001 text, *The Crafty Reader*, Robert Scholes says,

There are virtuoso readers, who produce readings that are breathtakingly original, but the more original these readers become, the less they remain readers. Their readings become new works, writings, if you will, for which the originals were only pretexts, and those who create them become authors. (xiii-xiv)

But why should we assume that one reading has more value as writing than another? At what point does a reading become writing? This paper will look at what the reader actually experiences without making Scholes' unstated assumption that some readings are *not* writings. Using the work of Lacan, I will discuss the way in which the reader writes with their gaze. This discussion will focus on Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* to show how reader's gaze is inherent in the narrative of the text.

Keywords:

Reading – Writing – Psychoanalysis – Thomas Pynchon

Biographical note:

Elliot Cooper is a first year PhD candidate at the University of Canberra where he has been teaching for two years. In this period he has also been invited to give research seminars at the School of Creative Communications. Since 2002 he has published short creative works in both prose and poetry. Currently he is conducting archival research into the relationship between semiotics and psychoanalysis.

Recall the famous truism of Newtonian physics: What goes up must come down. Thomas Pynchon uses this idea in his novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, as a metaphor for reading and the space that is occupied by the reader. The metaphor is this: The World War II German V-2 rocket, which follows the parabola (called gravity's rainbow), has its referent in the reader who apprehends the signifiers in the text. The reader writes his or her own path through the text. It is this path that Pynchon sees as a parabola. The points of a parabola can be calculated with an equation. For Lacan, the process by which the reader grasps a signifier can be represented in an algorithm.¹ Novels make use of tools, or writing technologies, which prompt the reader to accelerate² or require the reader to dwell³ as a necessary part of the story's syntax. There are 'strictly syntactical games to be observed,' (1977b: 68) says Lacan. 'These games belong to the field that we call pre-conscious' (ibid). He is speaking about perception. Simply put, these syntactical games are the processes by which the reader arrives at their interpretation of the text. All these elements must be considered in relation to a locus or ideology, without which the story would be incoherent or counter intuitive. There are rules to be followed in the reader's re-writing of a text, but this practice of writing clearly belongs to the reader.

This paper will deal with four points of analysis. The purpose of these four points is to analyse the extent to which Lacanian psychoanalysis can account for the reader's interpretation and experience of the signifiers in the text. If we consider Harold Lasswell's famous definition, 'Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?' (1948), we can localise our objective around the 'with what effect' part of this algorithm. The text is a complex system of signs but the reader no more sees a complex system of signs than they do print on a page. I will show this in section one, which discusses the function of the eye. Signs apprehended by the eye appear signified in the reader's consciousness. I will discuss this process in the second section, which also sets out the function of the gaze. Sections three and four will focus on the novel *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, first by showing how this text plays with syntax and then, suggesting how the reader comes to an interpretation as opposed to an understanding. I call this, the book reading its reader.

Again, the four points of analysis are:

1. The reader's Eye.
2. The reader's Gaze.
3. The signs of the reader's gaze in *Gravity's Rainbow*.
4. *Gravity's Rainbow* reading its reader.

1

The eye is split from the gaze. Lacan defines this division as the split between consciousness reweaving itself and the return to the real (1977b: 70). The eye is the apparatus with which the reader looks, and the gaze is the projection of the reader's desire that is written into the text. It is by virtue of this split that we must explore the proposition that to read is to encounter a certain kind of blindness. The gaze is

selective. Some signifiers are perceived and others are missed. When glancing over words we do not experience any such phenomenon that might be described as 'glancing over words'. Richards states that 'we read [great authors] for the sake of the things their words – if we understand them – can do for us' (1961: 15). Though the approach I intend to take is different, I follow Richards up to this point. We read in a text what is relevant. That is, what it can 'do for us.' In a very general sense, the contemporary study of culture tells us that the blindness that is symptomatic of our selective gaze is not peculiar to reading literature. Similar delusions of reading are constant in our daily lives. In the specific case of literature, however, the effect is exemplary. To read literature is not only to exclude the empirical realities of the page as an object even as we stare directly at it, but also to imagine something else entirely. While the reader is engaged in reading, the elementary experience of viewing a white page with black print goes phenomenologically unperceived. The individual reader foregoes one reality by rewriting it with another.

To grasp this fully, let's return to the empirical realities of the page. Take a look at this page. Without engaging in the act of reading we have the elementary experience of viewing the page and we perceive that there is print on it. Or, at least that's what we might think, but that seems to be impossible. When I try to do this I cannot prevent myself from apprehending meaning. In trying to avert my eyes from one word I only see another. In addition to this trouble, the random strings of words start to make syntactical sense. My first attempt at this came up with the words, 'the – incomprehensible – nonsense – replaces – *Gravity's Rainbow*', a second attempt yields, 'nonsense – descriptions – traditions – on – squarely – particular – difference'.⁴ In these two examples, syntax is clearly evident even when I am trying to prevent myself from apprehending any categories whatever. This confirms Lacan's statement that '[s]yntax is, of course, preconscious' (1977b: 68) The reader perceives the furthest thing from, or the opposite to, the empirical (scientific) truth first because the syntax is already understood. The eye reaches out to grab the signifiers that the preconscious has, in a sense, already found a meaning for.

For Saussure, writing exists primarily as a means of representing speech. I argue instead that *Gravity's Rainbow* (I cannot think of a modern novel for which I could make the argument otherwise) has nothing to do with speech. We have long since left oral traditions behind, replacing them with new communication and writing technologies. In the case of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is not speech but written signs with written (rather than spoken) codes, conventions, forms, structures etc. that are represented on the page.⁵ To give meaning to this distinction from Saussure's thought, we must see how it has a bearing on the reader's subjective experience of the text.⁶ By using many different written forms Pynchon gives his readers an acute visual awareness that we are squarely in the realm of the written form and its technologies. We must be clear that we are dealing with a text that is strictly to be apprehended with the eye. Simultaneous with this apprehension, the gaze is finding in the text what the reader desires.

One reader who reads a particular novel will read exactly the same words posed in the same order, the same paragraphs, passages, chapters, as every other reader who ever reads that same novel. No two readers will experience a vast collection of words in

the same way. The various points of difference lie entirely with the reader, their psychology, the pre-history of their personal development, and every element that comes to constitute not only their complete understanding of the language (Richards 1961: 14-15) they are reading, but also their previous experience of the issues and ideas being addressed and whatever unconscious predispositions or aversions to the way in which these issues and ideas are being expressed. All these factors are, in the psychoanalytic sense, the dream of the reader and are therefore separate to the function of the eye. We would do well to take in one of Lacan's algorithms to define this split between eye and the gaze. Here we see the positioning of signifier and signified and the occurrence of what Lacan called *méconnaissance*. These factors I have stated above lie in the place of the bar between the I and the *s*.

$$f(S) \frac{I}{s}$$

Here⁷ we see the relation-function (*f*) of the Signifier (S) as the separation of the signified (*s*) from the Ego (I). We can understand the bar (–) that separates the Ego (I) from the signified (*s*) as a line that prevents full signification in the conscious. This bar is also the split between the eye (I) and the gaze. Specifically, what this algorithm asserts in relation to the reader's gaze is that the reader writes not by making something out of the signifiers, that there would be a signified text in the reader's consciousness. Rather, the reader writes the text through their selective apprehension of signifiers.

Already in Freud the similarities between creative writing and dreaming are exposed (1989: 439). Both are shown to be symbolic of the unconscious. The symbols of the text (whether novel or dream) are symbols representing its author's fantasy. If we take into account that a dream is like the relation-function articulated above, we can see that a reader is a dreamer. The reader's fantasy as it appears in the novel is manifested as signified. So, what is it that makes reading words, and in particular reading literature, more than the function of the eye? Within the signifying effect facilitated by, as Lacan suggests, syntactical games, is a cultural perception, which favours a category of 'real' over a category of 'imaginary'. But as Lacan shows us, this is part of the weaving of consciousness and it is the fantasy (or, imaginary) that we suppose to be real (1977b: 70) That is, it's only through imaginings shaped by syntactical games in the pre-conscious, that we may suppose anything to be real. The eye is the object that apprehends the signifier. Underneath this, and before this, apprehension is the play of syntax, forcing the signifier both to appear and not appear.

2

One might be moved to wonder how we ever understand anything through all the elements that are inhibiting signification. But we are not concerning ourselves with any ideal of pure signification. We are only interested in system and effect here. As we have already noted, the reader is not one who *looks at* the written representation of

language. At the outset I used the Lacanian term, to 'gaze' (ibid). The reader *gazes* into the text to draw another reality out of it. The point at which the reader's gaze is fixed, in the case of a novel, is the signifier. Here we find the point at which the reader bestows life upon the text as they see it and it is the signifier which can engage in this state of 'being read' as a 'read being' and *who* is thus able to return the gaze. The reader involved in the action of reading sees no such thing as the page or the written word. The phenomenon of reading allows the reader to be removed from their empirical surroundings and to engage with what they had, up to the point at which the reading began, perceived only as a netherworld.

Earlier, I discussed the blindness of the reader. With the introduction of the gaze, we can turn this around to see that the reader is not blind at all. It is the reader's gaze that allows for the reality of a conscious literary space. Instead of saying that the reader encounters blindness, we should say that the page, along with the written form of language upon it, is the one in this relationship that is not only blind but also deaf and mute. As Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 'you might suppose that [written words] understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again' (1973: 76-77). Written words will tell you nothing without the influence of your desire as a reader to find a meaning in them.

It is this determination that is the function of the gaze. A reader may find that their state allows them to look upon reality with a clearer gaze than before. Richards says, 'the reader...is not concerned with what as historical fact was going on in the author's mind when he penned the sentence, but with the words – given the rest of the language – may mean' (1961: 15). The reader experiences the progression of signifiers of the page much like an internal discourse which carries out a story, not simply as a related series of signifieds but as weaving of consciousness which might be phenomenologically perceived as closing up gaps in knowledge, or as opening the mind to inspiration. Literature differs from other written forms because in literature the reader engages not only with signifiers but also an awareness of grappling with language. We are actually aware, albeit sometimes vaguely, of the process of interpretation and the function of the gaze. I am all too aware of the many times that I have read something for a second time to realise that my original interpretation was only what I wanted the text to say. Of course, there is always the other side of the story to account for, by which I mean the text itself. It is fair to say that despite our best efforts as readers, there exist some novels in this world that have the potential to out manoeuvre us. *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of them. We will now look at this text with the reader's twofold view of the eye and the gaze.

3

Gravity's Rainbow is effectively one great big wet dream. Sex can be found, in some form, almost everywhere the reader looks. The characters of the novel are living in a war zone that is densely populated with phallic signifiers. They are soldiers who dine, in their barracks, on the specialty of absurdly oversized bananas provided by the ominously named mess hall attendant, 'Pirate'. There is of course the obvious

abundance of semiotic value in guns and their ejaculated bullets. The men themselves also reflect the phallic signifier by harbouring a general apathy as a reflection of the (lacking) parts of them that the war has already killed. This focus on the phallus is resynthesised most prominently in the form of the supersonic German V-2 rocket (itself a character) that our hero, Slothrop, lives in the fearsome shadow of. What makes this rocket so fearsome is its speed, which supplies the paradox that nobody will hear the rocket coming in until after it has killed them. These phalluses are inextricably tied up with the castration complex, which Lacan says has the function of a knot 'in the dynamic structuring of symptoms in the analytic sense of the term, that is to say, in that which is analysable in the neuroses, perversions, and psychoses' (1977a: 281).

Slavoj Žižek tells us that 'desire is the point at which the object looked upon, returns the gaze' (2007). By this he means that it is not the whole object that is desired yet within it there is a point which 'speaks' to the viewer and the connection with that point (or sign) allows them to see the whole object, without any conscious distinction, as desirable. We can understand this as a *méconnaissance* of the gaze because we are actively excluding possibilities of signification. The reader gazes at the page and, finds their gaze among the written signifiers and perceives that it is returned. We should say that, in this same way, Slothrop, who spends the course of the novel searching for the V-2 rocket (which is a metaphor for his death), has already been bugged by it. The phenomenology of reading is the same. These signs in the text penetrate the preconscious of the reader to fit with their own syntax. Before the reader knows it they are possessed by the text.

As we have established the point of Slothrop's desire, it is then no surprise that he takes every opportunity to simulate the object with 'little deaths'. At first he perhaps does this weakly by spending most of his time fucking and wanking, engaging in sadistic and masochistic fetishes and generally coming anyway he can. As the story progresses, Slothrop is endowed with the nickname 'Rocketman' and amazingly he finds that the inconvenient biological disposition of not being entirely a penis, like the rocket, is one he can transcend:

[Slothrop] was some how, actually, well, *inside his own cock*. If you can imagine such a thing. Yes, inside the metropolitan organ entirely, all other colonial tissue forgotten and left to fend for itself... (1995: 470)

If we look at *Gravity's Rainbow* as a whole, the resounding statement the text makes is: 'In war men are disembodied penises'. Is prose, the arbitrary written form itself, not castrated, cut off from the body of the language organism?⁸ Written prose then fulfils the definition of the Phallus in psychoanalysis. We could say that by populating his discourse with phalluses, Pynchon is simply calling a spade a spade in the structure of readerly interpretation. On the other hand, in the metaphorical sense of the text as phallus, is literature's sole task not to penetrate the reader anyway it can? When writing penetrates the reader it is the moment that the organism of language is reclaimed through the desire of the reader and is thus placed inside the writing. The signs of the text can be this powerful. At the point that Slothrop is '*inside his own*

cock, the reader is entirely separated from earthly bodies or 'colonial tissue'. The reader's being is wholly invested in the text!

What goes up must come down: Derrida, in his essay 'La Parole Soufflee' applies the pull of gravity to this phallus. This is to say that there is always a dysfunction of the author's intent:

[L]ike the turd, which, as is also well known, a metaphor for the penis, the work *should* stand upright. But the work, as excrement, is but matter without life, without force or form. It always falls and collapses as soon as it is outside of me. This is why the work – be it poetic or other – will never help me stand upright. I will never be erect in it. (1978: 230)

Freudian terms like this in Derrida's essay signify interpretation, which, like a dream, is made from the pieces of the already collapsed work. The collapsed work is literature that is diminished to a system of signs; the novel itself. The reader rebuilds. Syntax plays its games. In this convoluted process, we again find evidence of the *méconnaissance* that we have established as part of the reader's gaze.

Like Slothrop, who experiences what it's like to be inside his own cock, the reader's consciousness is drawn into the novel. We have seen that the reader bestows a consciousness on the text such that their gaze will be returned. The text becomes an appendage to their body; an organ. The reader's interpretation signifies a collapsing of the author's intent and the writing of a new text. The prose on the page is a phallus and the reader shows (and embodies) its inadequacies as communication. The text, as it is read, collapses into ruins. What is left of the reader once engaged and psychically invested in the text is a Slothrop-like character: a body in the world.

4

But what can we say about the reader's return from the text? Is it not a return but in fact a mere transition from one reality to the next? The reader returns from the text to realise that the reality of the story, while we may call it fiction, is *also* reality. We can continue with the analogy to the phallic signifier. This *realisation* is metaphorized beautifully in one of the many songs of *Gravity's Rainbow*, 'The Penis he Thought was his Own'.

(lead tenor): Twas the penis, he thought-was, his own-
 Just a big playful boy of a bone...
 With a stout purple head,
 Sticking up from the bed,
 Where the girlies all played Telephone-

(bass): Te-le-phone....

(inner voices): But They came through the hole in the night,

(bass): And They sweet-talked it clear out of sight-
 (inner voices): Out of sight...
 (tenor): Now he sighs all alone,
 With a heartbroken moan,
 For the pe-nis, he thought-was, his, owwwwn!
 (inner voices): Was, his, own! (1995: 216-17)

This is Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck's great big meaningless secret. What is so fatal about the secret, is not that he *thought* the penis was his own, but that it was in fact his own after all. The horror of the situation lies in the difference between thinking and knowing; between what is potentially real and in fact real. The inference that it would be less shameful, and therefore more desirable, if the penis were to be other than *his* penis is precisely a metaphor for the reader's relationship with fiction. Were the penis not his own, Sir Stephen could have experienced a secret and vicarious pleasure of the act (namely fellatio) that the penis was involved in without owning the act itself. The reader believes that they are reading something 'other' when it would be closer to the truth to say that they are reading the 'same'. This is the lie that is to call reading a form of escapism. This is the pleasure of reading, the mind masturbation of the reader of which the reader is secretly conscious. Yet this consciousness, for the reader, is necessarily secret. If told, this would be a fatal confidence⁹ (just as is Sir Stephen's secret that the penis he thought was his own was, in fact, his own). Such an admission, that a reader does not differentiate between fact and fiction, would be perceived not as a dirty secret but rather, a sign of a pathological illness. The reader's return from the text is necessarily an untold lie.

We say that literature has space. But we know that beyond the page, that 'metropolitan organ', there is no space. It is exactly as we see it. The pages are white and, without assuming that this is particular, some parts have been made black, and that is all. Where is the spectacle that entertains us, that prevents us from seeing merely a white page with black ink? We have seen that signifiers are posed on the page and apprehended by the eye while the preconscious plays its syntactical games. At the end of this process the signified appears and consciousness is woven while the opposing force of the 'return to the real' provides a link to the unconscious. Language penetrates the reader, but it is the reader who causes the text to *be* language at all.

My four points of analysis have been pointed towards the reader's re-writing of the text. I have shown that reading is a process of continually averting ones eyes. The signifier is apprehended through syntactical games that constitute the preconscious function of the gaze. Ultimately, the reader is read by the novel. A reader can never say anything about the novel except the part of the novel that is also part of them. To draw a line and say that these two spaces I have defined, language as apprehended by the eye and the signifier that is sought out by the gaze, are separate would be a feeble distinction. These are both part of the reader's reality.

What is imagined in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the statement that 'in war men are disembodied penises'. This, in case we have not yet grasped it, is how Pynchon makes his novel an anti-war novel. Not by the suggestion of some miserable cliché that men become shadows of their former selves. It is instead the case that Pynchon leaves it up to the reader to perceive the punch line to his joke about war: In war men are total dicks, and *yet* war is pointless. Ultimately, this gaze is what the novel *Gravity's Rainbow* has read of this reader. What this means is that the syntax, made pre-consciously when I read the novel, signifies this message. The return to the real is concealed by the consciousness reweaving itself. Just as what goes up must come down, the novel as a great Phallus of language, like a rocket, follows a parabola facilitated by the reader's desire to relate to the text. These syntactical games that are played in the interaction between the page and the reader's gaze are a function of desire. The difficulty, in finding out precisely what these relation-functions are, is that they are concealed by the details of what we want them to be.

Endnotes

1. Many of Lacan's so-called algorithms are in fact, strictly speaking, equations.
2. Recall Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and the frequently used line 'So, what's it going to be then eh?' or Vonnegut's line 'so it goes', in *Slaughterhouse 5*.
3. For me, Jonathon Franzen is a master of this. His technique involves an almost unbearable accumulation of tension, followed by an event that is truly shocking. The most effective of which are: The accidental death of Barbara in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the attempted assassination of Renee in *Strong Motion* and, the attempted suicide of Alfred in *The Corrections*.
4. These tests were done on an earlier version of page 2. Not all of these words appear in the current version.
5. Pynchon makes his reader aware of this by using different written forms in the body of the text. There are frequent appearances of song lyrics, opera scripts, even graffiti.
6. This continues to be in line with Richards' argument, 'the reader... is not concerned with what as historical fact was going on in the author's mind when he penned the sentence, but with what the words – *given the rest of the language* – may mean (1961: 14-15, my italics)
7. The above algorithm is used by Jacques Lacan in 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious', *Écrits: A Selection* (1977a: 164).
8. Saussure describes the language organism as the internal aspects of language (1983: 21-23).
9. Freud mentions this in 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming': '[T]he adult... is expected not to go on playing or phantasing any longer, but to act in the real world; on the other hand, some of the wishes which give rise to his phantasies are of a kind which it is essential to conceal' (1989: 438).

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