

“de mule[s] uh de world.” As Mullen mentions in an interview, the “mule” or “drudge” has traditionally provided the “material conditions” for the creation of poetry: someone “had to be...there cleaning the house, washing the dishes, and making the food for the person who is dreaming and creating.” These layered punnings challenge the traditional image of lyric inspiration by illuminating its complicity with traditional silencings of women, laborers, people of color. The poems mock stereotypes to activate alternatives: a “drudge” may be “dubbed,” or quoted, a “mule” may be a muse.

Muse & Drudge is the least Steinian of the three books, employing a stanza reminiscent of Sapphics and the blues. It’s full of women’s voices, many quoted from other texts. Mullen has described them as “a heteroglossia or maybe a cacophony of voices.” In *Muse & Drudge*, lyric “inspiration” entails direct borrowing from other texts: the speaker of the text is multiple and communal, the lyric situation is heterogenous, inclusive. At one point, Mullen uses her rhyming quatrains to skewer the media’s marketing of lighter skin: in Spanish (which she learned as a child in Texas) she quotes packaging copy on a skin “elixir” that promises that the buyer will be “hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora” (enchancing with skin-bleaching cream). The cream is selling “enlightenment / nothing less than beauty itself”—a brand of truth inaccessible for a “double dutch darky / they dipped...in a vat at / the wacky chocolate factory.” A cascade of ironic racist references climax in this poem’s final stanza: “color we’ve got in spades / melanin gives perpetual shade / though rhythm’s no answer to cancer.” Racist clichés are “corralled in ludic routines” and used bruisingly against themselves.

This writing, in its pronounced attention to cultural grotesqueries, is alive with didactic intention. While we usually assume didactic writing marshals evidence to support a particular agenda, Mullen’s didacticism is, instead, exploratory, fearless of what it might discover. We wince at her puns because they glow with pain.

Catherine Wagner

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Zak Smith, *Gravity’s Rainbow Illustrated: One Picture for Every Page*. Portland: Tin House, 2007. 784pp. \$39.95

As a thesis-generating machine *Gravity’s Rainbow* has it all: the military-industrial complex, Rilke, mysticism; thermodynamics, sadomasochism, behavioral psychology; the forties, Teutonic myth, song. Making sense of the novel’s explosive composite of concepts, characters, styles, settings, and plots is a potential fool’s errand, an act all too often carried out in tones reminiscent of the book’s personae themselves: paranoid, conspiratorial, schizophrenic, megalomaniacal.

At the 2004 Whitney Biennial a bold new response to the novel appeared in the form of Zak Smith's *Pictures of What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow*. Smith's work was arrayed in a grid of 760 mixed-media compositions (drawings, paintings, photos) sequentially illustrating, in a highly idiosyncratic manner, each of the 760 pages of Viking's original 1973 edition of the novel. These illustrations have now been reproduced by Tin House in a handsome book, retitled *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated: One Picture for Every Page*.

Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated is, for the most part, a bleak page-by-page landscape of convulsively detailed monochromatic line drawings, punctuated here and there by frenzied bursts of psychedelic luminosity. The whole manic cast is on visual parade: Pirate Prentice, Tyrone Slothrop, Roger Mexico; Dr. Pointsman, Katje, Gottfried; Grigori the Octopus, Byron the Bulb, and the Argentine anarchists.

Smith's renderings, which capture Pynchon's wit and irreverence, if not his erudition and capaciousness, assimilate a number of influences, high and low, into something approximating a coherent, individual style. The drawings and paintings are as indebted to Egon Schiele's angular eroticism and George Grosz's Weimar grotesqueries as they are to DIY punk and comic books. Such diverse coordinates suggest the kindred spirit with which Smith approaches Pynchon's work.

Nevertheless, one striking stylistic divergence should be noted. Smith, whose other major projects include *100 Girls and 100 Octopuses* (2005) and *Girls in the Naked Girl Business* (ongoing), is most at home with portraiture; whereas Pynchon, with the notable exception of *Mason & Dixon*, has never been a novelist of character or psychological depth. Smith's portraits, even in the most stylized comic register, evoke pathos and at times an uncomfortable intimacy. Pynchon, conversely, is a man of systems, patterns, structures; his protagonists are Einstein, Freud, Marx, and Darwin, rather than his own fictional creations.

This difference in artistic focus and temperament ultimately results in a disjointed relation between Pynchon's novel and Smith's illustrations. Smith's difficulty in matching Pynchon's intellectual and narrative scale leads to two errors, one strategic and one tactical. Strategically, the near Oulipian formal constraint that Smith employs—creating one picture for each page—hobbles his ability to capture the broad thematic and fictional contours of the novel. Obviously, Pynchon did not write the novel with the page in mind as a discrete artistic unit; the action and evolution of plot and thought, therefore, is unnaturally hemmed by Smith's conceit. The tactical error, meanwhile, lies in Smith's capricious selection of elements to illustrate from the pages themselves. Given the project's constraint, Smith must select some bit or piece to illustrate from a page in which multiple, and possibly unrelated, events are taking place.

This selection process is decidedly uneven, with the unfortunate result that even the most ardent fan of *Gravity's Rainbow* would be hard pressed, outside a few illustrations, to identify which book, if any, Smith was illustrating.

The combined effect of these errors is that instead of charting the manifest trajectories of the text, Smith has produced a much more atomized panorama, one that convolutes rather than enhances our understanding of the novel. *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated* would be much more engaging, independent of one's familiarity with Pynchon's book, if Smith had provided a more comprehensive visualization of the novel's paramount episodes.

Consider how Smith handles (or fails to, as the case may be) one of the central moments of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Early in the novel's concluding part, "The Counterforce," we witness the final appearance, or ultimate dissolution, of Slothrop in the fictional present. As he undergoes this metamorphosis, Slothrop loses himself in reverie, a myriad of memories, sights, and sounds that form a strange personal coherence:

and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural....

Instead of imagining this highly charged scene, which takes up the first half of page 626, Smith opts for the relatively inconsequential second half of the page, in which Roger Mexico speeds through Lüneburg Heath on his way to join the Counterforce. This is a glaring tactical mistake. Even with the strategic limits posed by the picture-for-page principle, Smith almost certainly could have made a more judicious choice.



It is perhaps telling that one of the strongest illustrations in the book—insofar as it provides a complex visual analogue to one of the text's principal themes—responds to the epigraph that opens the novel's first part, "Beyond the Zero." The novel's animating dialectic is the affirmation and rejection of this conjecture by Wernher von Braun, the famed Nazi scientist, which takes up a whole page in *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.

Smith depicts this, page one, in the form of a faceless, *Scream*-like figure slump-shouldered in front of what resembles a black-and-white Rothko abstract. In this arresting image, Smith capably stages the novel's both/and attachment to existentialist disenchantment and transcendentalist redemption. The result is an example of damaged life *and* a spiritual absolute beyond mortality, both an eternity and infinity.

Smith's unevenness, brilliance and bemusement in equal parts, raises a central question: what is the exact relation between the novel and this book of illustrations? This is no traditional *livre d'artiste*, wherein text and image square off—one thinks of Tom Phillips's magisterial *Dante's Inferno* as exemplary of this mode. Nor is *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated* an instance of book art, which



seeks to explore the formal and meaning-making capacities of books themselves. Instead, Smith has produced a highly personal tribute to Pynchon's magnetic novel, a companion-book shorn of the didactic and the instrumental. This is not a book of elucidation or revelation.

But while Smith is at pains to reassure us that he has attempted to be “thorough” and “faithful” to the text (he notes that this is “not some hippie word-association game”) the overall effect is an odd fusion, page after page, of the myopic and the impressionistic: a hazy figure, an indecipherable scribble, a battleship, a vibrant abstraction, a man in a pig suit (aha! Tyrone Slothrop). Even if we were to concede a certain autonomy to *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated*, it would still be difficult to say what, if anything, framed this hectic series. Smith projects a world, no doubt, but it is one that resembles Pynchon's only through a high volume of static.

That Smith fails in the Sisyphean task he has set for himself—to be faithful to the text; to mimic Pynchon's variegated style; to render every page, page-by-page; to create something original; to create something derivative—does not mean that *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated* is trivial or a mere curiosity orbiting Pynchon's work. Smith's audacity and obvious technical felicity attest to a formidable talent, one that vigorously merges hand, eye, and mind. Readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* will enjoy simply seeing how their imagined visions of the book match up with Smith's. And in the end perhaps Smith's project is not so different from the one Pynchon set himself: to produce a work of art about everything and nothing. Somewhere (who knows where?) Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow Illustrated* in hand, is smiling.

Chris Woods