

At the Edge of Evening, Often Forever: On Ethical Communion with Fictional Characters

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Late in Thomas Pynchon's 1973 magnum opus *Gravity's Rainbow* we encounter one of the definitive anticlimaxes in contemporary literature. Having spent the bulk of the novel in antagonistic approach, the half-brothers Vaslav Tchitcherine and Oberst Enzian finally come to face each other.

Tchitcherine in particular has been pursuing his brother with homicidal obsession, driven by historico-racial-psychological impulses far beyond his (or anyone's) understanding. He wanders the sprawling, chaotically undefined "Zone" of post-war Europe seeking out and awaiting this opportunity to confront Enzian.

As a paired couple, Tchitcherine and Enzian are almost over-determined, bound to collide by the attraction of their oppositions: the white, legitimate, Soviet son, Tchitcherine, and the black, illegitimate, African-cum-Nazi son, Enzian. Everything in the structure of their plot suggests a climax waiting for when they meet.

And yet these binaries can hardly withstand the characters as they reveal themselves throughout the book. *Gravity's Rainbow* itself is a book of complications, guided by deferrals and unwieldy digressions, networks of characters (real and fictional and real-within-the-fiction) and events and machines that interact chaotically and yet seemingly inevitably along the slow arc of tragedy. We see as much when Tchitcherine and Enzian finally meet face to face.

"Face to face" because this is an encounter between "faces" in the Levinasian sense: it is a moral confrontation with alterity.

It takes place as follows:

Enzian on his motorcycle stops for a moment, mba-kayere, to talk to the scarred, unshaven white. They're in the middle of the bridge. They talk broken German. Tchitcherine manages to hustle half a pack of American cigarettes and three raw potatoes. The two men nod, not quite formally, not quite smiling, Enzian puts his bike in gear and returns to his journey. Tchitcherine lights a cigarette, watching them down the road, shivering in the dusk.
(734)

And so their story ends.

On the level of action, this is jarringly uneventful. The promised collision of opposites (promised by the novel in its construction and by the characters themselves) provides none of the spectacle the audience has been led to expect. In this regard it parallels the novel's main narrative thread, the adventures of Tyrone Slothrop in the Zone, which concludes in similar

contradiction to expectations, with the perhaps literal dissolution of the book's primary protagonist long before the book itself comes to an end. These events are anticlimactic in their opposition to Aristotelian ideals, but almost overwhelmingly powerful in conveying literary substance.

The novel itself seals the importance of the meeting between Tchitcherine and Enzian a few lines after the passage quoted above. "This is magic. Sure, but not necessarily fantasy," (735). It is magic within the context of the novel, in which Tchitcherine has been bewitched by his lover Geli Tripping so he cannot "see" anyone but her on this particular morning. But magic is not fantasy, and indeed, this is "certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it" (735). This is a moment whose importance explicitly reaches out beyond the bounds of the novel. It is insistent, and whatever else it may or may not be, it is magic.

Geli's spell is simple. It makes Tchitcherine "blind to all but [her]" (734). The word "blind" here, though, clearly has a meaning beyond what we usually attach to it. Tchitcherine is not alarmed when he awakes "blind," and his interactions with Enzian clearly demonstrate that his vision is unimpaired. So in what way, then, is Tchitcherine blind?

We can return to Levinas here, and realize that "the other is invisible" (6). That is to say, the face of the other, in a Levinasian sense, is everything that is not their visible countenance. "The other is," as Roger Burggraeve summarizes, "essentially, and not merely factually or provisionally, a movement of retreat and overflowing. I can never bind or identify the other with his plastic form" (30). It is this plastic, physical countenance that Tchitcherine seems to be blind to, leaving him only the "invisible," essential, ethically demanding face of Enzian to interact with.

This is lovely blindness, brought on by Geli's love and met with generosity, the cigarettes and potatoes that ensure another day's survival in the Zone. It leads us, though, to a question for both Levinas and for Geli: If this is not about visual perception, how and why is it *blindness* at all? Why is this metaphor so intuitive and legible that it hardly seems metaphorical at all?

If we look at the passages surrounding Tchitcherine and Enzian's encounter, we're bombarded with visual references that key us to Tchitcherine's condition while remaining largely unnoticed. The description of vision is so essential (not factual or provisional) for literature that we pass through it like atmosphere, unnoticing. And yet, as we see with Tchitcherine and Enzian, it is capable of magic—is the source of so much magic.

Geli's spell enables us to grasp Tchitcherine's position in his encounter with Enzian relatively easily. He is blind, but only in a way that has little to nothing to do with the perception of visual stimuli. This allows him to see past the obscuring, visible countenance of Enzian, the face he's learned to hate and all the accrued importance he's laid onto it throughout his life, and to thus encounter Enzian's face as a metonymy for his existence as an individual with moral and ethical demands. Tchitcherine rises to this occasion, sets aside the violence he's been preparing for

and the violence that inheres to the vulnerability of the Levinasian face. He has an unambiguous triumph, morally and materially (those cigarettes and potatoes), and he returns to camp where he “sees” Geli, falls in love, and achieves the closest thing to a happy ending *Gravity’s Rainbow* is able to provide.

Crucial in understanding this triumph are two key ideas: 1) Tchitcherine’s triumph comes through the manipulation of the way he sees, with sight standing in for a deeper operator we’ll explore in detail below, and 2) Enzian is a fictional character.

This second point is at once more obvious and more debatable. Obvious in that, as a character in a fictional novel, Enzian is fictional. Debatable in that, beyond this, his standing is less clear.

According to PISCES (Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender) and others at the paramilitary occult organization known as The White Visitation trace the origins of the Schwarzkommando, Enzian’s group of breakaway African soldiers, to their own propaganda efforts, Operation Blackwing. This film, meant to terrify the German army and populace with the threat of colonial African soldiers deserting during the final stages of the war early in the novel (30-37), is credited with actually summoning or conjuring the real Schwarzkommando that Enzian leads later, with the definitive question here being: “can fantasy *produce* reality?” [emphasis in original] (275). This ontological uncertainty haunts Enzian and the other Herero Schwarzkommando throughout the rest of the novel on multiple levels of reality.

The historical Herero, some of whom did serve in the German military, though years before WWII, were victims of the colonial genocide carried out by Lothar von Trotha in German Südwestafrika. The tribe barely survived this extended massacre, which itself plays a role in Pynchon’s *V.* as a premonition and forerunner of the horrors that would follow in the 20th century. In the novel, Enzian’s Herero are under assault from within by the “Empty Ones,” a group of Herero engaged in abstinence, abortions, and the general non-proliferation of the tribe, their “program is racial suicide” (314). This precariousness, both historically and within the fiction of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, directly springs from and feeds back into the precariousness of the Schwarzkommando as a potentially fictional creation within the novel’s Zone, and as a fully fictional creation of the novel itself.

Here we are reminded of the precariousness of fictional characters, and their corresponding power. As Bruno Latour puts it, quoting Deleuze and Guattari: “Their proper status is that of a ‘composite’ that ‘has to hold together on its own,’ [...] if we don’t take in these beings, if we don’t appreciate them, they risk disappearing altogether” (242). The existence of fictional beings, then, is defined by a precariousness that never ends, relying on “*continuous creation*” through the collaboration between the author and the reader, coming to us to “require that we *prolong* them” (Latour 242) [all emphasis in original]. It is this unending, relentless danger of blinking out of existence altogether that haunts Enzian and his Herero throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Their existence as fictional characters in the book is forever contingent, the ontological uncertainty of their source and reality within the book imbues their existence there

with uncertainty, and their position as the target of genocide, both within the book from within and in reality from without only further serves to reinforce the existential danger they face.

This precariousness, though, requires that the beings of fiction, as Latour calls them, achieve a more rigorous, fully realized existence than those beings whose existence is taken for granted. It is an existence defined by danger and demands, defined, for Latour, “by hesitation, vacillation, back-and-forth movements, the establishment of resonance between the successive layers” (244). This is where Enzian finds himself as he moves through *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and as he stands face to face with the unrecognized, unrecognized Tchitcherine.

And if he needs Tchitcherine, needs us as readers, to prolong his existence, then being seen in all his invisibility by Tchitcherine is a moment of confirmation for Enzian as well. His real existence as a being of fiction enlivens Enzian and enlivens Tchitcherine, realizes Enzian and transforms Tchitcherine.

Tchitcherine is transformed through an ethical encounter with a fictional being, or a stand-in for fictiveness. This idea is inherent (though unexplored) in both Levinas and Latour, and certainly an animating idea in much of literature. What stands out in this scene in particular is the way the elements of the ethical and the fictional combine, and the way the emphasis on vision throughout highlights the role of each in the other, finally suggesting a role for literature as a transformative agent.

Simone Weil suggests that “This gaze is first an attentive gaze, where the soul empties itself of all its own content in order to receive in itself the being who it looks at as he is, in all his truth. This can only be done by those capable of *attention*” (114). We see this in both men in this scene. Tchitcherine’s emptiness is explicit, that is the “blindness” Geli has conjured for him, a blindness to everything but the invisible truth. In Enzian it is his ontological condition, fully real in his fictionality, realized through being read, being seen, and through this reading, this seeing, reaching back into the reader and seeing everything secret there within, the truth each reader holds and hides, from the world and from himself and from everything perhaps except these fictional characters. This is the gaze that Derrida calls “seeing in secret” [*voir dans le secret*].

All this vision, all these secrets, truths, confrontations, they burn outward from the eyes or we trace them back inward into the eyes on the assumption that there, behind the eyes, is the seat of the self. This is magic, sure, but not fantasy. If we follow the light that emanates from the eyes, emptying us out, outward into the world and onto the face of the other, back inward (back-and-forth), back to the source of the secret in the other, revealed to the other in truth, inhabited by the other and inhabiting him through the inward and outward exchange of fiction, the collaboration through which fictions are realized, if we follow this movement, we may pass by our brother there on the edge of evening, perhaps forever, without violence. And this is a small thing, a minimal triumph, but an undeniable and graceful one, too.

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