PYNCHON NOTES

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ISSN 0278-1891
Gravity's Rainbow: The Original Soundtrack
J. O. Tate 3

Gravity's Rainbow as Orphic Text
Thomas A. Bass 25

Rereading Pynchon: Negative Entropy and "Entropy"
Stephen P. Schuber 47

William Slothrop: Gentleman
Philip Storey 61

Notes 71
Bibliography 72
Contributors 75
Gravity's Rainbow:  
The Original Soundtrack  
J. O. Tate

In his essay "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Edward Mendelson has laid down instructions and suggestions that are among the most useful in all comment on Pynchon:

Although the genre that now includes Gravity's Rainbow is demonstrably the most important single genre in Western literature of the Renaissance and after, it has never previously been identified. Gravity's Rainbow is an encyclopedic narrative, and its companions in this most exclusive of literary categories are Dante's Commedia, Rabelais's five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes's Don Quixote, Goethe's Faust, Melville's Moby-Dick, and Joyce's Ulysses.

The resistant reader might reflect that Mendelson ignores here fundamental distinctions of genre, such as that between poetry and prose; and that Northrop Frye's well-known scheme does identify that encyclopedic mode as Menippean satire, or anatomy. Mendelson excludes Tristram Shandy and Gulliver's Travels from his canon, but Frye would identify them—and Gravity's Rainbow—as anatomies. The interruption of a prose text by verse interludes—which occurs again and again in Gravity's Rainbow—is a defining characteristic, according to Frye.

But this collision of theory is not nearly so important as the dove-tailing of application. Mendelson goes on to point out that

All encyclopedic narratives include a full account of at least one technology or science. . . . An encyclopedic narrative normally also includes an account of an art outside the realm of written fiction: the carved bas-reliefs in the Purgatorio, the puppetry of Don Quixote, the Greek tragedy in Faust, whale-painting in Moby-Dick, the musical echoes in Ulysses's

I hasten to emphasize that film and opera have music in common: melodrama. Usually, the experience of film includes the "background music," but we remember most the plot, the characters, the scenes. An opera works inside out—or outside in: we remember best the "foreground music," this or that aria or concerted piece. Hearing the obvious, we can say that in the modern environment the citizen in his home, at work, in his car, in a restaurant, on the street, is surrounded by "background music," Muzak, AM and FM, Sony Walkmans, etc. Through their musical association, in Gravity's Rainbow film and opera are united: the "low" and the "high" are artfully confused. And because film experience extends to cartoons—an animated cartoon is a film—comic books make their entrance. Similarly, the parodistic music of cartoons is associated with that of which it is a travesty.

By extension, radio soap operas are "acoustic movies." The "aural interface," the totalitarian background noise of civilization, is represented in the text—or on the tape—of that "acoustic collage," Gravity's Rainbow. Because of his "setting" and "plot," Pynchon obliges himself to translate ("carry over") the popular culture of the Second World War into German terms. The literary text of Gravity's Rainbow becomes a Gesamtkunstwerk of Wagnerian ambition, association, and accomplishment. Yet this "film"--a magnum opus, sometimes literally an opera--savages what it celebrates by way of parodistic reduction, popular misapprehension, commercial exploitation and Nazi association. Wagner's melos becomes Looney Tunes and Merry Melodies.

We do not have to look far for an example of Pynchon's syncretistic, eclectic method of attack. Novelistic plot, operatic form, and anatomistic procedure coalesce on page 19: the map, which is associated not just with stars, but with patterns of stars, is explicitly connected to the catalogue of Don Giovanni's conquests mentioned on page 270. The "background music" we are meant to think of is Leporello's aria from Act I of Mozart's Don Giovanni. The map of Slothrop's assignations is congruent with
the Poisson distribution pattern of V-2 strikes. Pynchon fuses history and war with science and opera, and those with sex and death; the whole book can be extrapolated from this aperture.

We must admit that a "catalogue aria" is appropriate for inclusion in an "encyclopedic narrative" which is, among other things, a catalogue of catalogues. That list of lists must include films as well as operas; but we must remember the omnipresence of music stated and implied.

That the rhetoric and much of the substance of Gravity's Rainbow are explicitly inspired by the movies, Pynchon makes perfectly clear. Movies are a form as well as a subject, so we find the giant Adenoid, a travesty of horror movies, because "it's all theatre."4 Pynchon doesn't mean drama; he means a movie-house. We are sitting in the Bijou when we hold Gravity's Rainbow in our hands. "Slothrop is the character juvenile tonight" (437). On this page "light-values" are mentioned, as the description is that of a photograph or movie scene. On page 522, we have popcorn at the movies. There is a Busby Berkeley scene (594). The narrator appeals to "aficionados of the chase scene" (637), because "it is a movie!" (691). The movie under the rug (745), "tasteless [ , . . . ] will never be completed," because this book or movie seems endless, and because the k.a.m.p. movie called History seems endless too, as well as tasteless. And we keep reading, because we are all "old fans who've always been at the movies" (760). Yes, indeed; and if we had not always been at the movies, how would we recognize a "classic gangster head-move" (530)?

Our impression must be that Pynchon can deal with any subject in terms of film. American racism is conjured in terms of Hollywood's more painful absurdities, as follows: "Ooga-booga! Gwine jump on dis drum hyah! Tell de res' ob de trahb in de village, yowzah!" (656). Any buff could cite a hundred examples of such howlers in any number of Tarzan movies, Crash Corrigan serials, etc. Pynchon strikes this note again when he puns on the title of A Day at the Races and the embarrassing "Who Dat Man?" episode.
(619). Within Gravity's Rainbow this connects with Enzian and the Herero tribe, von Trotha's massacre in 1904, and so on. But though the subject seems to be race, it manages also to be movies.

The movies also lend form to Gravity's Rainbow as a German subject, as an index to the growth of a modern art-form and to the rise of Nazism. Indeed, Gravity's Rainbow can be seen as a gloss on From Caligari to Hitler. Certainly the characters include a German actress and a German director. And Pynchon connects such things as a "movie set" and a "stark Expressionist white/black" mise-en-scène (393) with the growth of the German petrochemical industry, and even Leibnitz and the calculus. Furthermore, the image of erotic stimulation that begets a child connects the movies (German ones, this time) with the whole massive evocation of what we may call the Tristan und Isolde theme, which I will explore more fully below.

Truly, "all of us [are] watching some wry news-reel ..." (150), and in the end, in the theater, following the insulting bouncing ball and doing as we are told, we are annihilated in a movie house by the super-weapon that was so often the subject of newsreels. So we have been at the movies a long time. I remember (in Pynchon's monumental home-movie) W. C. Fields, Cary Grant, Shirley Temple, Dennis Morgan, Lassie, Greta Garbo, Maria Montez, Jon Hall, Groucho Marx, Bob Steele, Johnny Mack Brown, King Kong, Don Ameche, Oliver Hardy, Errol Flynn, Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy, Marlene Dietrich, Brigitte Helm, Pluto, Asta Nielsen, George Raft, Henry Fonda, John Wayne, Clark Gable, Basil Rathbone, S. Z. ("Cuddles") Sakall, Porky Pig, Dumbo, Bela Lugosi, Henry Wilcoxon, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Audie Murphy, James Mason, Bugs Bunny, James Cagney, Bette Davis, Margaret Dumont, Dick Powell, Carmen Miranda, William Bendix, Arthur Kennedy, Sam Jaffee, Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Margaret O'Brien, Norma Shearer, and Tom Mix. To that extent, Gravity's Rainbow is a long, strung-out night at the Late Show and the Late Late Show. But surely this show, like everything in it, is Too Late."
That is one sort of popular culture (a man has a right to be ashamed that he has a clear mental image of all those faces), and we will not have to look far for related references to producers and directors, American and German. They are, I think, evil geniuses, or invisible manipulators: Cecil B. DeMille, Merian C. Cooper, Busby Berkeley again, and Pynchon's own Osbie Feel (who writes a movie for Rathbone, Sakall, and the Midget from Tod Browning's Freaks). Of movies themselves there are at least Going My Way, The Return of Jack Slade, King Kong throughout, A Tree Grows In Brooklyn, The Bride of Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Gunga Din, Dracula (passim), covert allusions to To Hel and Back, the aforementioned A Day at the Races (is not the "opera of Balkan Intrigue" Duck Soup?), and more than one allusion to Manhattan Melodrama, starring Clark Gable, which John Dillinger watched at the Biograph Theatre in Chicago before he was shot by Melvin Purvis.

Turning to the German side of things, we have Lang, Pabst, and Lubitsch together (112), the Ufa studios again and again. "Neubabelsberg" is the German Hollywood, a new Babel, as "Zwölfkinder" is a Nazi Disneyland. We should not omit Nibelungen, Die Frau Im Mond, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Der Mude Tod, Metropolis, Klein-Rogge, Stinnes, the fictional von Göll (an Eisenstein in Mexico, as it were, on 388), and the ubiquitous Doktor Mabuse. The fiction we are considering is as parasitic as it is paracinematic. 6

Turning from the movies to the comics, we have the "batman, a Corporal Wayne" (11), who is Bruce Wayne, no doubt, the alias of Batman. Alfred Appel does not need to strain, as he does in his Nabokov's Dark Cinema, to construe this as a condescension to John Wayne--that Wayne is not hard to find elsewhere in Gravity's Rainbow. There are Captain Midnight, Hop Harrigan and Tank Tinker, Zorro, the Green Hornet, Superman, Submariner, Plasticman, the Lone Ranger, Jimmy, Krypton, and the Daily Planet. Some of these are radio stars, movie subjects, and cartoon characters. The German reference in this context is to Wilhelm Busch, the influential satirical cartoonist, whose work both developed cartooning and influenced the Surrealists.
Pop fiction—often "translated" on film or on the radio—is mostly represented by grand myths of conspiracy: Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu tales (with Nayland Smith, and hence "dacoits"), Eugene Sue and his interminable melodramas, Sherlock Holmes, Dracula again, the Stuart N. Lake version of Wyatt Earp, Phillip Marlowe, and Pynchon's rehearsal of an old trick: the word "gunsel" (435 and 517). Dashiell Hammett used that word in The Maltese Falcon in order to prove that critics don't read carefully, for it does not mean "gunman," as it seems to in context in both The Maltese Falcon and Gravity's Rainbow; rather it is an old word meaning "a boy used for immoral purposes." The boy Wilmer really was a gunsel, then, with Caspar Gutman and Joel Cairo around—but not the way most readers thought.

Or we turn on the radio: Stella Dallas, Helen Trent, Mary Noble—Backstage Wife, the soaps; and music, music everywhere: George Formby, Falkman and His Apache Band, "Dancing in the Dark," Lecuona's "Siboney," Bob Eberle and "Tangerine," a tango by Juan D'Arien go, the Andrews Sisters, Carmen Miranda, Sinatra, Irving Berlin, Gene Krupa, Hoagy Carmichael, Bing Crosby, Guy Lombardo, Nelson Eddy, Sandy MacPherson at the Organ, "Love in Bloom" (Jack Benny's theme song), Dick Powell and "in the Shadows Let Me Come and Sing to You" (from Goldiggers of 1933), Stephen Collins Foster, Spike Jones, Roland Peachey and His Orchestra, "There, I've Said It Again," Primo Scala's Accordion Band. Under the apple tree sits a girl "with anyone else but Slothrop" (744). That's a fine joke and a good measure of annihilation; but it is also an allusion to the Andrews Sisters' greatest hit. I do not need to say anything about the instruments of the Preterite, the kazoo and harmonica, for these are Pynchon's best-known signatures. Otherwise, one should note the use of musical terms: rallentando, crotchet, grace note, crescendo, thirds; "birds whistle arpeggios" (371); a capella; the thumb harp made of German materials (a kalimba); spiccato, détaché, and "breath pauses" (Luftpausen). Needless to say, the text is continually interrupted by songs Pynchon has made up, some but not all of which are parodies of the popular music of forty years ago.
And one finds many musical instruments and artifacts: the Frank Bridge variations (59) (Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge, Op. 10 by Benjamin Britten) are "local color" played on the radio and an introduction to "bridge music" (222). Frank bridge variations sound throughout Gravity's Rainbow. Orchestras abound, as do clarinets, bassoons, ukuleles, a Bösendorfer Imperial concert grand piano (437, 439, 441), a Victrola, a Tannoy radio, a Wittmaier harpsichord (533), harmoniums, conservatory windows, minor-keyed lieder (646), horns, violins, and, in the catalogue of refugees (549-51), "deathless piano performances punched on Vorsetzer rolls" (550). The image of the Vorsetzer--a robot pianist--connects with all the mechanical images throughout Pynchon's work. The author perhaps implies that the "deathless performances" are not so immortal after all, as there are no names mentioned.

Of so-called classical music itself, and composers, there is an abundance: Purcell, "Bach riffs," Carl Orff, Kurt Weill, Brahms, an allusion to the salmennella that killed Tchaikovsky after he finished his sixth symphony (702), and three great composers of the Second Viennese School, Schönberg, Berg, and Webern. The expressionism of these last is quite apposite to the world of Gravity's Rainbow. Berg's Wozzeck is a similarly bleak vision of human life--as was the relentless play of Büchner on which the opera is based--but I am thinking here in terms of music. Webern, that strange genius, was shot by an American GI in occupied suburban Vienna: a historical fact that Pynchon borrowed, although it reads like something he must have invented. And Schönberg's exploration of tone-rows and serial music is the dead end of German music, a symbol of the abstraction that drove a culture to destruction. Yes, Gravity's Rainbow is a kind of addendum to Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus, for Pynchon too makes of musical history a register of values. He does not believe in "progress." In technological terms, progress means more advanced ways of killing. In musical terms, it means music so arcane that it sounds like not-music. In political and social terms, it means Gemeinschaft becoming Gesellschaft: the growth of corporations, and their hand-
maiden, the corporate state; the elephantiasis of capitalism, mass politics, dictatorship, the big lie. (Pynchon follows Weber, who in turn follows Tönnies in his Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft of 1887.) And just as the V-2 is the literal progenitor of the nuclear-tipped weapons that we live among now, so the history of Germany foreshadows our own "progress." Pynchon thus writes about contemporary America without necessarily mentioning it.

Music, as much as social forms, history, and technology, is a measure of where we are. And Pynchon scores a number of points by reference to music alone. The word Erwartung (101) means anticipation or yearning, and here has to do with both perverted sexuality and the Rocket. It is the quiver of anxiety--of Isolde waiting for Tristan at the beginning of Act II of Wagner's opera. Love and death are telescoped within the rocket, as Tristan and Isolde found release in death, and Weissman/Blicero mounts the ultimate orgasm for Gottfried. Isolde sings Mild und Leise at the end of Act III to the same sexual strains to which she had embraced the live Tristan in Act II. And Erwartung and "anticipation," the romantic frisson of desire suspended tantalizingly, are cited in reference to the Rocket (424, 517). It remains only to add that Arnold Schönberg's Erwartung, the expressionist monodrama of a woman waiting for or looking for or dreaming of her lover, completed the Wagnerian gesture towards perfect Liebestod in the dissolution of tonality. But Pynchon has created in the sadistic homosexual rocket-ride an even more powerful and powerfully sick image. This image, as we have seen, is compounded as much of Musik as it is of anything else. Music and history flow together--in the world and in Gravity's Rainbow.

There is no avoiding the music. The horrifying Rocket ride is not only the ultimate orgasm--the most perfect love-death, the most powerful buggering, not only of Gottfried by Blicero, but of the Earth by man--it is also a travesty of the Ride of the Valkyries. There is no avoiding the most exasperating of all German personalities, Richard Wagner, whose hand is everywhere in Gravity's Rainbow (for the same reasons that we feel his presence in Doktor Faustus--though, to be sure, in the figure of Adrian Leverkühn we also
perceive the silhouettes of Schönberg, Richard Strauss, and Hans Pfitzner). Leaving Wagner's musical genius aside, we can feel the animating presence of some of his other attributes such as his anti-Semitism, and his status as a Nazi cult figure, who had, indeed, anticipated the worst vulgarities of the Nazis by erecting his own monument to himself. I refer not to his music, but to Bayreuth, and the suffocating atmosphere that endures there to this day. Like that old wooden pile, the Festspielhaus, nineteenth century Romanticism is still with us, festering away—and nowhere more so than in Gravity's Rainbow.

The rot of Romanticism casts a pretty light; or rather, I should say, the collapse of the romantic ego makes a pleasing sound. Wagner is not the only romantic composer, and not the greatest one; he is simply the most systematically romantic. Systems: in seeing to the construction of the Festspielhaus, he in effect routinized his own charisma—to use Weber's terminology which Pynchon follows about the Rocket. But we can look elsewhere for other kinds of music, before it is time to deal completely with Wagner and his place in Gravity's Rainbow.

Some of this other music, like some of the music for the songs that interrupt Pynchon's obscene musical comedy-tragedy, is made up. Yes, one would love to hear the great Josef Joachim (friend of Brahms and Schumann, and one of the greatest of nineteenth century violinists) play the cadenza of the "long-suppressed Rossini violin concerto (op. posth.)" (684). The only trouble is that there is, of course, no such thing as a violin concerto by Rossini, posthumous or otherwise. And of course there is no suppressed "Kazoo" quartet from Haydn's Op. 76 (711-12). Pynchon is thinking of the music called the Kaisermarsch, and the village idiots are insulting things German. The point is that anatomizing things fictional is more fun than listing real things; but now we will turn to some real music.

J. B. Steane has written that one of his favorite recordings that was never made is Tito Schipa's rendering of Alfredo's graceful aria from the beginning of Act II of La Traviata, "Dei mei bollenti spiriti,"
because Schipa would have been perfect for the job; and Pynchon is indicating that a Rossini violin concerto is something sorely to be missed (although a paragon of German classicism like Joachim would not have been perfect for the job—Paganini or Sarasate would have). Who would disagree? Does Gravity's Rainbow tell us that Rossini is Pynchon's favorite composer? He is at least the counterfoil, in his bubbling comic gift, to all kinds of lumpish German signifying. But this brings us to the subject of opera itself, for Rossini and Wagner are not the only, though they are the most important, operatic composers in Gravity's Rainbow. Verdi references include Rigoletto (132), the Requiem for Allesandro Manzoni (through the latter's novel I Promessi Sposi, mentioned on page 386: the Libera Me was composed on the death of Rossini, but the whole was dedicated to the memory of Manzoni), Il Trovatore on the same page, and La Forza del Destino (595). The name "Eddie Pensiero" (640) reminds me of Verdi's first popular success, the chorus Va, pensiero from Nabucco. But the fourth line of the Duke of Mantua's famous aria "La donna è mobile" in Act IV of Rigoletto is "e di pensiero."

"Good-natured and penetrable disguises, as at a masked ball. It is a transvestism of caring . . ." (742). This passage evokes Un Ballo in Maschera (which Verdi should have named Una Vendetta in Domino)—the transvestism referring to the pants role of Oscar, and the homosexual proclivities of the Swedish king who inspired the libretto. The singing duel between races (387) reminds one of such scenes in I Lombardi, La Forza del Destino, and Otello. And of course the phrases "Tv vendettas, jeweled gauntlets, subtle poisons" (582) are operatic in several ways.

Puccini, whose specialty was to prick the Schadenfreud of his audiences with scenes of passive suffering, is also represented. La Bohème is cited in connection with bohemian German Communists and otherwise (132, 155). Madama Butterfly, whose eponymous heroine is a delicate victim of American imperialism, is with us on page 351. And we are reminded of the use of Manon Lescaut in V.

Other operatic allusions include Don Giovanni (cited above), Lehar's The Merry Widow, and Wolf-
Ferrari's Secrets of Suzanne (477), Spohr and Spontini (622), Offenbach (584), the aforementioned Wozzeck (465), Gilbert and Sullivan (538). The "queen of the night" (649) may be construed to be the character of the same name in The Magic Flute. Generally speaking, operatic references are both background music and analogous actions. In the Italian melodramas, love and death are entwined, and heroes and heroines are killed on schedule as the conductor beats time.8

But it is the "Sublime Rossini" (376), most famous for his comedies, who dominates these mostly Italian references. No composer, of course, excepting perhaps only Offenbach, is less sublime than Rossini. That is what is so "sublime" about him. By contrast, those metaphysical Germans, Beethoven and Wagner, are all too sublime! In the spirit of invention, Pynchon not only concocts a violin concerto for Rossini, but also stages the imaginary "L'Inutil Precauzione" (a suggestive title in this context) at the Casino Hermann Goering (204). This nonexistent comedy is mentioned in the text of The Barber of Seville. We are also aware of Rossini's effervescent music: the overtures to William Tell (262), La Gazza Ladra (273), L'Italiana in Algeri (440), the tarantella from Tancredi (204, 441). We step on the Rue Rossini (253, 257). Why is Rossini worth all this devotion? He is the perfect entertainer, and his significance needs no explanation, for it is all explicitly stated in the debate between Säure Bummer and Gustav Schlabone (440-41). This is foreshadowed by the parenthetical remark about the inferiority of Beethoven's overtures, "statements of intention" (273). Säure Bummer's eloquence on page 440 needs only to be read to be appreciated. But the same argument was rendered in fiction even better by James M. Cain in Serenade, and to the same conclusion.

Cain did not put a political slant on the comparison of Beethoven with Rossini; his characters speak in terms of drama, of overtures and their functions as curtain-raisers. Säure says, "'The point is [. . .] a person feels good listening to Rossini. All you feel like listening to Beethoven is going out and invading Poland. Ode to Joy indeed. The man didn't even have a sense of humor'" (440). The qualities of intellect and will that are so magnificent in the best
of Beethoven attach themselves to other German qualities that are uncomfortably familiar. If we are uncomfort-
able, surely Wagner is somewhere around.

And so he is. Gustav praises Beethoven for his "progressivism"—he was a link from Bach to Wagner to "modern" music and its "polymorphous perversity," a democracy of all the notes. Where could music go after Webern, he asks—implying that it was no acci-
dent the man was shot, but a necessity of history. Germany's disaster he of course calls a Götterdämmerung (441). We even find a "Götterdämmerung of the mucous membranes" (559), not to mention a "Götterdämmerung mentality" (163). The movie Nibelungen connects Wagner with the cinematic mode, as the Ring des Nibe-
lungen itself is connected with science—the Dream of Kekulé, the Benzene Ring (410). These associations snowball, amassing the text that embodies this wonder-
ful German progress, Wissenschaft, heilige Deutsche Kunst! The static test of the rocket engine (161) is preceded by the Wagnerian images of the waterfall and the rainbow (that is, the Rainbow Bridge from Das Rheingold, and Pynchon does not omit Miss Rheingold of T946 [387]). The swans on page 502 have waddled out of Lohengrin ("What time does the next swan leave?") and Parsifal. The "rare or fabled bird" on page 676 is the Wood Bird from Siegfried; also from Siegfried is Fafnir (665), and there is Sigmund himself (457). "If you cannot sing Siegfried at least you can carry a spear" (103). Wuotan (72), the Wütende Heer (75), Valkyrie (151), Brunhilde (200), Das Wütend Reich (394), all allude to Wagner as well as to ancient Nordic legends. Midsummer Eve (379) is St. John's Day and Hans Sachs' name day, as David remembers in Die Meistersinger (361). Attila (578, 717) is Etzel in the Nibelungenlied (and the protagonist of Verdi's Attila). We are so surrounded by Wagner that even "Tyrone Guthrie's accustomed murk" (148) reminds us of Wieland Wagner's own stage settings. The "Hitler Youth Glee Club" (736) sends us back to the Wandervögel (162, 670) who in turn are reminiscent of the Minnesingers and Walther von der Vogelweide, in the form of Nazi Boy Scouts. Ludwig II (394, 750), the mad King of Bavaria, was Wagner's admirer and patron; the "Spanish dancer" (750) was the mistress of his
father, Ludwig I. She was the legendary courtesan Lola Montez, who was not Spanish, having been born in Ireland and buried in Brooklyn. This is a covert movie reference—to the romantic masterpiece of Max Ophuls, Lola Montès. Ludwig I with his love, and Ludwig II with his castles and grottoes, were together perfect exemplars of what Pynchon calls "Tannahäuserism" (299). Ludwig II did build his own "Nymphenburg" (750), and Lola Montez, who it seems was swiveled by every worthy in Europe, was a real-life Venus.

"Wagner" (324, 450): Gravity's Rainbow is a series of "Wagnerian soirées" (375), complete with "Wagnerian opera costumes" (365). The Raktemensch wears a Wagnerian helmet (366); the glasses of an SS man are "like Wagnerian shields" (416). The Hoard of the Nibelungen (419) is there at Zwölfkinder, the anachronistic Nazi travesty of Disneyland, where the "fanged mouths of dragons" evoke Fafnir. Slothrop is the Fisher King in the last paragraph of page 447, and therefore Amfortas in Parsifal, as well as a denizen of the Waste Land called the Zone. Otto's explanation of the Mother Conspiracy ends with the strains of Tristan und Isolde (505). The Wagnerian-sounding Schweinheildfest boasts Siegfried's hammer-and-forge (568-69). Franz van der Groov, Katje's ancestor, the slaughterer of doodos, is a kind of Flying Dutchman.

Wagnerian allusions are more than operatic, German, and historical; they are also parodistic and even cinematic. William Zakariasen, writing in the March, 1970 High Fidelity (67,ff), seems to have anticipated Pynchon's matter and method in his article on musical parody, "The Siegfried Waltz?" He not only cites the all-but-forgotten Siegfried-Walzer of Josef Klein, the Nibelungenmarsch of Gottfried Sontag, and the Tannhäuser-Parodie of H. Carl Binder, but also connects these parodies of Wagner with the Second World War and the movies:

The funny faces of our adversaries in World War II inspired a series of movie cartoons lampooning the Axis—naturally the incidental music was transmogrified Wagner. Everyone from Tom and Jerry to Bugs Bunny warbled, barked, meowed, or quacked unholy arrangements of the Bayreuth
master. But it was a non-Wagnerian Disney soundtrack of 1947 which initiated the unique career of a master parodist. Der Führer's Face, with its spoof of a Brauhaus band complete with nasal vocalist, made a star of Spike Jones, who managed even to upstage the onscreen antics of Donald Duck.

Zakariasen goes on to cite other works of the "deceptively lowbrow" Jones, whom he calls "the Furtwängler of musical humor." He also makes tantalizing reference to Ginastera's Overture to the Creole Faust, which raises the musical prospect of Pynchon's South American characters and fantasies.

But we have not yet dealt with the most important function that Wagner serves in Gravity's Rainbow, though we are aware of what in V. was called "the Tristan-and-Iseult theme, indeed, according to some, the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages." Wagner did not invent this theme, needless to say, but within the musico-operatic world of Gravity's Rainbow, his is the greatest exemplar of the myth. As Wagner's oeuvre is very much all of a piece, a continuous progression, it is in another form that most references summon the love-death cult, but still in a Wagnerian context. The "submontane Venus" (88) anticipates a wealth of allusions, in the context of which even such a minor aside as "malachite nymphs and satyrs paralyzed in chase, evergreen" (194) seems to anticipate the full blown swellings of Tannhäuser throughout Gravity's Rainbow, as well as raise the image of the Grecian Urn. When "Tannhäuserism" is explained to us, we should not fail to notice that this plainly implies that the Mittelwerke in Nordhausen is the Venusberg we know from Wagner's opera (299). Pynchon does not bother to make the pun on Mount of Venus, mons veneris; in this book, he doesn't need to (Wagner himself had to change his title from Der Venusberg to Tannhäuser because of ribald comments). The parodic passage that turns the minions of Venus into lab technicians is a scene straight out of the opera:

No, wait, by golly here comes a delegation of girls in tight pink lab coats reaching just to
the tops of bare thighs, tripping up the tunnel on stylish gold wedgies "Ah, so reizend ist!" too many to hug at once, "Hübsch, was?" now now ladies one at a time, they are giggling and reaching to drape around his neck lush garlands of silvery B nuts and flange fittings, scarlet resistors and bright-yellow capacitors strung like little sausages, scraps of gasketry, miles of aluminum shavings as curly-bouncy 'n' bright as Shirley Temple's head--they Hogan ya can keep yer hula girls--and where are they taking him here? into an empty Stollen, where they all commence a fabulous orgy, which goes on for days and days, full of poppies, play, singing, and carrying on. (304)

The opening scene of the opera, of course; and there is a musical accompaniment too--Pynchon doesn't need to bring it up--the "Venusberg music" which is a bridge from the Overture to Act I. We also notice here the juxtaposition of German Romanticism with German science, and the whole with a Hollywood chorus line. In this passage, the method and even the organization of Gravity's Rainbow are plain to see: Wagner, opera, sex, death, technology, movies, vulgar music--all there at once. "Sounds of carousing, of voices distinctly unbalanced, come welling up, reverberating off of the concrete" (305). Change the concrete Stollen to an opera house stage, and you have a good description of the beginning of Act I of Tannhäuser.

So Slothrop is something like "Tannhäuser, the Singing Nincompoop," but "where is the Pope whose staff's gonna bloom for you?" (364). The answer is, nowhere. And the wrong word causes the mountain to close again behind this preposterous and doomed Minessinger (377). Franz Pökler, the rocket engineer, has worked at Nordhausen; hence he too has been under the mountain, and his dream associates the Venusberg/Mittelwerke with Zwölfkinder, "a city of elves producing toy moon-rockets" (431). The elves have their own significance, as we shall see. But as for Slothrop, "The Pope's staff is always going to remain barren, like Slothrop's own unflowering cock" (470). The lines of iambic pentameter are spoken by Slothrop-as-Tannhäuser, his sonnet of his own lost state (532).
The Pope has no power in the Zone anyway, and Pirate Prentice cannot help Slothrop. "His orders are terse and clear, like those of the others, agents of the Pope, Pope got religion, go out 'n' find that minnesinger, he's a good guy after all" (619). Even the road to Happyville is "under the mountain," though it is not Slothrop who gets to travel there (645).10

One of the real obscurities connected with the Tannhäuser allusions is "Lisaura," who is quite well defined when we first hear of her (364). She is not an Elizabeth exactly, as Joseph W. Slade has it in his book on Pynchon. The Lady Lisaura of Mantua (also on 393 and 533 in reference to Greta Erdmann) was simply eliminated from the Tannhäuser legend when Wagner composed his synthetic libretto. She was affianced to Tannhäuser, the story goes, and when he, advised by the philosopher Hilario (a good name for a Pynchon character, though you will not find him in Gravity's Rainbow; however, there is the character Hilarius in The Crying of Lot 49), went off to seek out Venus, she killed herself. Wagner's personal and composite libretto for Tannhäuser contains elements from E. T. A. Hoffman (Die Bergwerke zu Falun), Fouqué, Tieck, and Bechstein, as well as the Deutsche Mythologie (1835) of Jacob Grimm. And before Wagner addressed it, Brentano had worked on the Tannhäuser legend for Carl Maria von Weber, as Ernest Newman tells us.

Wagner's Tannhäuser is a story of the conflict of the spirit and the flesh, with twisted Christian elements. Wagner always has it both ways. The plain implication of the ending (the news of the blossoming of the Pope's staff) is that the dead Tannhäuser has been redeemed. In the world of Gravity's Rainbow, there is no redemption, not even any force for good, except isolated and feeble human will (such as the Counterforce). Because of this, a certain unimportant part of the opera is continually conjured up, and it is as much a musical joke as a literary one; and either way it is a demonic jest, a sneer at any sort of faith or optimism. I am referring to Wolfram's Song to the Evening Star, O du, mein holder Abendstern. The music to this little soliloquy is very famous, and not just as an operatic aria: I mean that everyone who has ever been on an elevator has heard the melody. It is
perfect for renditions à la Muzak, for that is just what it sounds like, a remarkable little specimen of musical banality, polished to a certain gloss. Its self-regarding "prettiness" and mushy solemnity cry out for the attentions of Spike Jones, or the relief of, say, just about anything by Rossini. In fact, Pynchon's virtuoso exploitation of Tannhäuser not only evokes Franz Liszt's staggering transcription of Wagner's overture, but also reminds us, with its perverse associations, of Aubrey Beardsley's Under the Hill. And so Pynchon will do the Spike Jones job, in a literary sense, on this scene again and again.

He never does so specifically, but like a painter taking advantage of complementary colors, he can evoke with precision, without nominating his reference. The Song to the Evening Star from Tannhäuser is the background music for a number of multifaceted references that have mostly to do, I would say, with Innocence. We have already looked at the stars on the map (19). The Abendstern is also Venus, natürlich. And the Christmas star. "[T]he Star's awful radiance" (58) shines over a world at war; there's no use praying to it. The Star of Advent (128) presages not only the birth of Christ, but also the Massacre of the Innocents (128-36), the symbol of governmental conspiracy to kill, yet also a cultural symbol of goodness, and therefore a lie in these latter days of slaughter. Herod (135) is still running things. There are even Christmas bugs, wretched survivors like the rest of us--Pynchon tells a story omitted from the Synoptic Gospels (173-74). At one point, Slothrop is too impatient to wait for "the first star" (253). Enzian's people have a "Herod Myth" about him: during the massacres, he was "passed over" (323). The Hereros wonder: "[T]his must be a different star, a northern star. There is no comfort. [...] [H]ave we been passed over, or have we been chosen for something even more terrible?" (328). "Pass over": it now means to be passed over, not by the murdering agents of Herod, or by the plague, but by the Rocket itself. One of Slothrop's "Wishes on Evening Stars for This Period" is "Let that only be a meteor falling" (553). Paranoid perhaps, but not unreasonable under the circumstances. Perhaps Pynchon's best joke is
that if V. was V-1, then G.R. (I have emphasized the "Teutonic arc" [443]) is V-2. You will find more stars on pages 562, 567, 635, and star-wishing on page 685. Perhaps the key star images are on pages 759-60, where the masses are seen wishing on a star that is not a star at all, but a "bright angel of death," the Rocket in re-entry—not a promise of mercy, but the vehicle of annihilation. Not a star anyone would wish on, except by terrible mistake. And with all of Pynchon's cartoon and Disney references, I suppose that we should think of the cozy tune (from the Disney Pinnochio) that for years introduced the Disney show on television:

"When you wish upon a star,
Makes no diff'rence who you are . . ." etc.

And everyone knows the nursery rhyme, "Star light, star bright." But I am suggesting that these telescoped images of Jesus, the Childermass, the chumminess of commercialized Xmas, which merge with the threat of the Rocket and its obscene payload, are ultimately derived from a minor scene in Tannhäuser. In the story of William Slothrop and the pigs and On Preterition (554-56), we would guess that stars must show up, and they do. But the Evening Star with all its associations of comfort and security is literally exploded in Gravity's Rainbow--on the last page, on the reader's head.

So Wagner has reached far into the heart of our study, and he reaches by personal extension even farther. The original legends of Tannhäuser did not associate the hero with the Singing Contest at the Wartburg, but Wagner did, for obvious reasons. This Sangerkrieg or Kriegspiel fuses the Tannhäuser figure with that of Heinrich von der Ofterdingen, and in Gravity's Rainbow we cannot fail to notice the singing duels on pages 356, 387, and 610. These I presume to be inspired by Wagner in Tannhäuser and Die Meistersinger, as well as by the traditional operatic brin-disi or chanson a boire. Other Wagnerian properties are more German than specifically Wagnerian. But let us look at something that is indirectly Wagnerian, and musical.
The many references to Hänsel and Gretel, in the musical context I have been trying to establish, should remind us of Engelbert Humperdinck before we think of the Brothers Grimm. Humperdinck's little masterpiece of composition, for which the libretto was a children's play written by his sister, is associated by tradition (and for no other reason) with Christmas. In that sense, with its happy ending, it is another "Star-wish"; the siblings spend most of the opera whistling in the dark, as it were. The innocent are saved. (Wagner himself engaged Humperdinck to be the musical tutor to his son Siegfried, after Humperdinck had proved himself by service to the master, such as helping copy the orchestral parts to Parsifal.) It has been said that the most perfect Wagnerian music-drama is Hänsel und Gretel, with its glowing counterpoint and its fulfillment of Wagner's strictures. And it is perhaps worth adding that later in life Humperdinck wrote a larger, darker Märchenoper, Die Königskinder, that did not end cozily at all—in that sense it was more Grimm, and in its great scope and tragic end, Humperdinck consummated his own Gravity's Rainbow.

For on the German side of things, Gravity's Rainbow is very much a Märchenoper. It is as "spooky as an old northern fairy tale" (54). The Brothers Grimm (74) haunt the periphery; we will find gremlins (151), and a "deep pool in the forest" (152); the violence of the war has liberated trolls and dryads (367). Slothrop's sexual encounter with Greta Erdmann features a Black Forest elves' whip (396). At Zwölfkinder we see a goat, a bridge, and a troll (398). Pökler fears his mysterious daughter is a changeling out of some Märchen (417), and they see at Zwölfkinder in addition "fairy-tales, legends [. . . ] the elf king and his queen [. . . ] a splendid retinue of dwarves and sprites" (419). We have already noted the association of elves and rockets (431). Metamorphoses such as that from "toad to prince, prince to fabulous monster" (660) cannot be unexpected, for we are looking at "illustrations for children" (759).

The Brothers Grimm did not invent the Märchen und Sagen (97); they were tapping the mythology of a people. The mythological world of romantic opera
similarly gains much of its power from primordial images. Perhaps the most fundamental such symbol in German music is the Forest, from the Wolf's Glen scene in Der Freischütz through Wagner (via Liszt's Wild Jagd and "hunting horn" passages in Schumann and Brähms) to the exquisite evocation of the forest in Humperdinck's version of an old tale. The many allusions to the story of Hänsel and Gretel summon all these legends and their demonic association, and give them a modern twist.

So the Oven is there on every page from 94 through 99, the "Oven-game," the "Oven-state" (102), the "Oven" again (103), the "Oven-game" again (106), and towards the end this threat: "The Oven we fattened you for will glow" (751). Here the fires in the witch's oven are associated with the combustion chamber of the V-2, but more broadly considered, these references point toward other ovens, for after Auschwitz, the connotations of the word oven have been forever altered. The dense cluster of allusions from pages 94 to 107 makes the reader reconstrue the old fairy tale in new and terrible ways: the fattening goose, the strayed children, the wood-wife in the edible house, the captivity, crumbs and sugar smears, u.s.w.

Hänsel and Gretel (174) will always be "alone in the forest" (176), the "true forest" (239) where the demons include Maxwell's. In the Zone it is the Evil Hour (374-75), and the witches, such as Geli Tripping, will celebrate their Walpurgisnacht (after Goethe, Mendelssohn, Gounod) on the Brocken. Agents of Evil, as well as the mediocre and uncaring, assist in the Slaughter of the Preterite, which is only another form of the Massacre of the Innocents.

And this is the monstrous film that we have watched and listened to— not read, where Götterdämmerung and Weisse Sandwüste von Neumexiko (482) exist side by side. The fictitious German Western yokes by violence together two different channels of allusion and unites them on film. Its title also points to the Proving Grounds at White Sands, New Mexico, where, after the War, captured V-2's were brought for study and testing. This film is, in effect, a miniature of Gravity's Rainbow, itself a film on paper with the effect of
Alpdrücken. And in the tradition of movies like the old Karloff/Lugosi The Black Cat, bits and pieces of nineteenth century music are continually conjured. (The Black Cat, being a parable about the slaughter of the First World War and the consequent dissolution of the Hapsburg Empire, is not about what it seems to be about, either.) Kazoos and harmonicas and inane popular tunes interrupt but do not contradict the "tissue of irrelevance" that is Gravity's Rainbow, for its logic (in which the Japanese Ensign talks like John Wayne) is as much that of a Bugs Bunny cartoon as it is of the sober reasoning of Max Weber, the abstract beauties of the calculus, the cosmic imperialism of Wernher von Braun, or the angelic summonings of Rilke.

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Notes


2 William Westerman has discussed the issue of song in his "Pynchon's Poetry," in Mindful Pleasures, 101-12.

3 Mendelson, 164.


6 David Cowart has gone deep into the relationships of the German film industry and the V-2, both historically and fictionally, in his essay "Cinematic Auguries of the Third Reich in Gravity's Rainbow," Literature/Film Quarterly, 6, No. 4 (1978), 364-70. I would add that this Germanic and cinematic background is partly shared by Brock Brower's novel The Late Great Creature (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

A rich exposition of "Music in Pynchon" can be found in Chapter 4 of David Cowart's *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion*. Cowart shows us the young Pynchon learning music with friends. When he hears *Madama Butterfly*, he appropriates it for *V*. The "Catalogue Aria" from *Don Giovanni* turns up in both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as "Entropy" and "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." The young Pynchon becomes a Wagner fan as well as a jazz buff. Expanding on *Manon Lescaut* and *The Rite of Spring* in *V.*, on Bartok, Vivaldi, and Stockhausen in *The Crying of Lot 49* (not to mention "the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto") as well as on "Bird" Parker, etc., Cowart gives us a valuable survey.

Gravity's Rainbow as Orphic Text

Thomas A. Bass

Gravity's Rainbow is not an easy book to read. Its language is daunting and torrential. Its hundreds of voices—dialogically compressed and often presented without identifiable speaker—yatter off the page in a kind of acoustical hallucination. Many of these voices mimic the pure, exclamatory speech that might be produced were the "watching agent" to turn in for the night. This is uncensored language, contradictory, disturbing, and rendered at times into not even good English.

The book has no hero in the traditional sense. There is no Jamesian center of value to act as moral referent. With their comic-book names and pop art flatness, Pynchon's characters often seem insufficient to the weight of their allegorical burden, for Gravity's Rainbow, in its great ambition, presumes to comprehend contemporary culture in its entirety, while allegorizing changes in consciousness and modes of production and reproduction from the Second World War to the present. The problem of characterization in the novel is compounded when Tyrone Slothrop, its central if not most heroic figure, disintegrates into the mud of postwar Germany, before turning himself into a living crossroads. The narrative itself suffers a similar fragmentation. In the final hundred pages, the text breaks into speed raps and ellipses while undergoing its own syntactic dismemberment.

Critics of Gravity's Rainbow have treated the hero's and novel's fragmentation in a number of ways. Some have tried to take the pieces and fit them back together again. They find value either in Slothrop's "transcendence" or embodied in other of the novel's more stable characters. Pynchon is then said, by inference, to recommend some appropriate stance toward contemporary life: be it transcendence or "creative paranoia" or allegiance to the Counterforce or anarchy or a return to tribal animism and its conception of cyclical time. Unfortunately, none of Pynchon's characters can bear the weight of such exemplification.
They too, like Slothrop, split under the contradictions of modernity, and one finally has to conclude that these readings of value in the novel attempt an optimism simply not found in the text.

A second approach avoids the pitfalls of the first by acknowledging the novel's fragmentation, before going on to analyze its social content. In this reading, it is our modes of production and political organization that disembowel the individual, degrade relationship into fetish, and otherwise organize bureaucratic support for the technologies of death. This reading is justified by the text, and its representation in Gravity's Rainbow accounts for Pynchon's stature as the great social novelist of our day.

But what elude even this interpretation of the book, and the pessimism of its social analysis, are the tangible affirmations of life that exist in Gravity's Rainbow. Opposed to social control and fetishism are the redemptive moments in the novel, when it breaks into song and dance, speaks in tongues and imagines with Dionysian enthusiasm a world other than the Apollonian present. Beyond exemplary and social readings of the novel, there is a third, one might call it esoteric, approach that embraces the book's ambiguity. This reading looks for value among the novel's fragments and asserts that in fragmentation itself Pynchon finds value. Given the crisis of the moment, he yearns for a more radical separation from the present than most of his critics are capable of imagining. This is what often remains misunderstood in the casual description of Pynchon as an apocalyptic writer.

Apocalypse is for him a profound hope, a chance to awaken from the nightmare of history. This is an aspiration voiced explicitly by many of the characters in Gravity's Rainbow--the Herero tribesman Enzian, the "world choosing witch" Gelli Tripping, and the various anarchists whom Pynchon holds favored among his preterite--but it is a hope that resides most ardently in Pynchon's language, in its yearning to break free from "the chain link fields of the Word" and out into silence or sensuous speech or the Pentecost of tongues that presages the new heaven and new earth. For all
the bad news he brings, Pynchon lovingly augurs out of the wastes of the world the hope of transformation, of an apokaluptein that will, as in the original meaning of the word, uncover and reveal to us what we already knew before our fall into history.

This reading of Gravity's Rainbow has had difficulty finding its own appropriate language of expression. Ambiguity and the dialectic have been employed to good effect. Most of the discussion, though, has used the terminology of metanoia, salvation, and apocalypse. Many critics have also acknowledged the importance to Pynchon of concepts of transcendence borrowed from the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, particularly the Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus. Tyrone Slothrop has been recognized as a latter-day Orpheus, and Pynchon himself has been characterized as writing in an Orphic voice. But what does it mean to call Pynchon's voice Orphic? How well does Slothrop succeed as an avatar? And what insights are opened to us by thinking of the text itself as Orphic?

The story of Orpheus is simple in outline. He is the mythical poet who through music and song tames the wild beasts and moves even trees and rocks to dance. He sails with the Argonauts as keleustes, or chanter, pacing the oarsmen. Among his various feats on the voyage, he charms the Clashing Rocks and puts to sleep with his lyre the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece. He later descends into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice, but fails on casting the backward glance. Finally, after he is dismembered by a band of Thracian Maenads, his head and lyre are thrown into the river Hebrus, where they float singing out to sea before landing on the isle of Lesbos.

Tyrone Slothrop's course through Gravity's Rainbow retells this story with what remains to us of its details. It begins with his descent into the underworld, which is occasioned by Slothrop's pursuit of his lost mouth harp down the toilet bowl at the Rose-land Ballroom, and from there into the sewers of Boston. "There's no calling it back. Either he lets the harp go, his silver chances of song, or he has to follow."1
Slothrop's attempts at love in the novel are said to be guided by a "Eurydice-obsession," and they suffer, like those of Orpheus, from the retrospective glance, at which the loved one disappears. This happens twice for Slothrop. The first time with Katje Borgesius, who is also known as Domina Nocturna and Mistress of the Night. After one of their last couplings, she appears to Slothrop like "the terrible Face That Is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable [ . . . ] a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being" (222).

His second failure in love is with the girl Bianca. Pynchon emphasizes the Orphic elements of his encounter with her in various ways. The ship on which he meets her is the Anubis, named after the jackal-headed god of the ancient Egyptians who was the son of Osiris, himself once slain and dismembered. Anubis is the god of the necropolis, the Egyptian cemeteries and cities of the dead, and (along with Thoth) conducts the souls of the dead down to the judgment halls of the underworld. These associations with Orpheus's descent into Hades are underscored: "Too much closer and it begins to hurt to bring her back. But there is this Eurydice-obsession, this bringing back out of . . . though how much easier just to leave her there [ . . . ] 'Why bring her back? Why try?''" (472).

Slothrop also suffers the fate of Orpheus, the dismemberment and scattering of limbs that make their way singing to the isle of Lesbos. He recovers his harp, "the same one he lost in 1938 or -9 down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom" and wanders with it naked in the Harz Mountains of Germany. "There are harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers, wherever water moves," and Slothrop joins them before his final "disassembly" and transformation into a "living intersection" (622-23). To describe Slothrop's end, Pynchon paraphrases the last of Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus, Number Twenty-nine, the final stanza of which he has quoted earlier in the chapter.

... 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. . . . (626)

Paraphrase may be too strong a word for Pynchon's use of Sonnet Twenty-nine, for one sees how freely he plays with his myths and other sources. They exist as points de départ, chords on which he improvises the complexity of his own musical texture. Tyrone Slothrop is hardly substantial enough as a character to bear Orphic embodiment—much less dismemberment. One might also remark that he does not "really" descend to the underworld, that this takes place in a dream—actually a drug-induced state in which sodium amytal is used to aid him in recollecting his past.

But this may be the point of the story: the dream world has priority for Pynchon, as it did for the followers of Orpheus. They conceived of life as sleep disturbed by dreams. To be born was to die, while death, if properly navigated with the aid of the Orphic intercessor, was a return to life. Fausto Majistral, the poet who himself lives underground for a time in Pynchon's first novel, V., remarks that "in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? A poet feeds on dream."2

The entirety of Gravity's Rainbow itself can be said to take place "underground," in an above-ground underground where dreaming and waking exist as inverted images of each other. The boundary between the two is permeable. Throughout the novel the dead converse with the living, while the living are often surprised to find themselves dead: "some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are" (303). Of all the literary genres Pynchon employs, the most basic is that of the Quest. It is an inverted quest, though, for the journey is backwards to knowledge of the past, and downwards in a shamanistic descent into the realm of the dead.

Gravity's Rainbow opens at night, underground, in a dream. It is London, the winter of 1944, "total
blackout" during "The Evacuation" from the city of a "rush of souls" which are "among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation" (3, 4). "There is no way out. Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?" (4).

This is being dreamed by Pirate Prentice, who lives below the "rooftop earth" on which he cultivates a stand of bananas. As this "fantasist-surrogate" (12) emerges to pick fruit and scan the morning sky, we find him waking into his dream. A "red daybreak" and a "new star" (6) in the east, which seems to presage his vision of the cataclysmic end, actually may be visual traces of a V-2 rocket coming from across the channel, that Prentice believes is pointed straight at the top of his head. On the last page of the novel, nearly 760 pages later, the rocket will still be arriving, although aimed now for the top of the reader's head. "Pirate," in the meantime, "hunches his shoulders, bearing his bananas down the corkscrew ladder" (7).

The specific loci of Pynchon's tours underground are actually quite numerous. Like several sewer-dwelling or roving predecessors in V., Slothrop, early in Gravity's Rainbow, drops down into the sewers of Boston, and his subsequent wanderings are conceived as an extended tour of the labyrinthine world below. The Herero rocket troops known as the Schwarzkommando and their leader, Oberst Enzian, live in "underground communities" (315) near the German rocket factory at Nordhausen. The charismatic missile they hope to launch for the world's salvation is being built there "one and a half levels below" (673).

We also find Pirate Prentice, along with several others of the novel's characters, down in Hades. Again he dreams, or wakes into, the image of the world at twilight, only this time, in a Dionysian whirl of souls, he, Katje and the residents of Hell "dissolve now, into the race and swarm of this dancing Preterition" (548). Pynchon also locates underground what seems to be, for him, the quintessential image of the modern world and its bureaucratized forms of death:
the Mittelwerke and its neighboring prison camp, the mile-long rocket city built under a mountain from which the Nazis hoped to launch the ballistic instruments of the National Socialist Millenium. Pynchon finally describes how the act of authorship itself is for him a descent underground. In a bracketed interjection, he characterizes "the years of grease and passage, 1966 and 1971" during which he presumably composed the book:

I am betraying them all . . . the worst of it is that I know what your editors want, exactly what they want. I am a traitor. I carry it with me. Your virus. Spread by your tireless Typhoid Marys, cruising the markets and the stations. We did manage to ambush some of them. Once we caught some in the Underground. It was terrible. My first action, my initiation. We chased them down the tunnels. We could feel their fright. When the tunnels branched, we had only the treacherous acoustics of the Underground to go on. Chances were good for getting lost. There was almost no light. The rails gleamed, as they do aboveground on a rainy night. And the whispers then--the shadows who waited, hunched in angles at the maintenance stations, lying against the tunnel walls, watching the chase. "The end is too far," they whispered. "Go back. There are no stops on this branch. The trains run and the passengers ride miles of blank mustard walls, but there are no stops. It's a long afternoon run. . . ." Two of them got away. But we took the rest. Between two station-marks, yellow crayon through the years of grease and passage, 1966 and 1971, I tasted my first blood. Do you want to put this part in? (739)

Journeying underground is perilous, traumatic, open to failure, but it also holds the possibility of renewal, and it is to this chthonic source that Pynchon looks for a force strong enough to counter the death-in-life prevailing in the above-ground underground. "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (525). That one goes underground to
search for such a key was known to Orpheus, and, more recently, to psychoanalysis.

Gravity's Rainbow resists any description of what it's about. The novel subverts Aristotelian succession in a unidirectional time. The point is to get lost. Every symbol, character, thing in the novel is polymorphously perverse, open always to multiple interpretations and capable of transforming itself into its opposite.

The seventy-three unnumbered chapters of the book are divided into four sections of unequal length, with titles as multireferential as any of Pynchon's metaphors: "Beyond the Zero" (177 pages), "Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering" (100 pages), "In the Zone" (338 pages), and "The Counterforce" (144 pages). The longest of these by far is "In the Zone," and just as the novel can be said to take place underground, or in an above-ground underground, so too can it be said to take place entirely in the Zone of war-torn Europe immediately following the Second World War, when our present boundaries and spheres of influence had yet to be fixed in place.

Nominally, though, the action of the novel moves from wartime London in the winter of 1944 to liberated France and neutral Switzerland, before entering the actual Zone of occupied Germany in the spring and summer of 1945. The narrative then reverses direction, as it moves from around the German rocket launching sites back to London, and finally on to a Los Angeles contemporary with the book's composition.

The first section introduces most of the significant characters, through direct action or flashbacks, or through occult leaps across the wall of death as conducted by the "cliques of spiritualists, vaudeville entertainers, wireless technicians, Coueists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, [and] Dale Carnegie zealots" (77) resident at The White Visitation, a facility outside of London researching "Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender. Whose surrender is not made clear" (34). The novel's characters line themselves up on one side or the other of death. Some are literally dead, some are capable
of communicating with the dead, while others dream of, or prepare themselves for, or struggle against the imminence of death.

Just as waking and dreaming scumble confusedly into each other throughout the novel, so too does war shade imperceptibly into postwar, with its technologies of control still intact. The dead, the past, the underground—which in the novel is the physical topos for the psychic givens of the unconscious—continue to exert their power over the living. The temporal dimensions of Pynchon's story, its nominal setting in England, France, Switzerland, Russia, and Germany before and after the war, exist as a palimpsest, a kind of dreamscape overlaid on the unconscious and its primary urges. Pynchon's characters move through this dreamscape under the spell of what he calls "demonic possession," the political implications of which he describes as "death-by-government—a process by which living souls unwillingly become the demons known to the main sequence of Western magic as the Qlippoth, Shells of the Dead. . . . It is also what the present dispensation often does to decent men and women entirely on this side of the grave" (176).

At stake from the beginning of the novel are the shape of the post-war world and the use of its technologies for death or life. Ranged on either side of the struggle are twinned sets of characters: Dr. Edward Pointsman, director of a research unit at The White Visitation, vs. his employee, the statistician Roger Mexico; the German engineer Franz Pökler vs. his wife, Leni; Major Weissman, otherwise known by his SS code name as Captain Dominus Blicero, vs. his counter, Oberst Enzian, head of the Schwarzkommando. Other characters spin off more haphazardly to one side or the other: Katje Borgesius ends up in Hell, while Jessica Swanlake, Mexico's former lover, is finally enlisted into the ranks of the "domestic bureaucrats." Geli Tripping and Tyrone Slothrop, also lovers, assume their own forms of living "beyond the zero" of death. Some of these characters are possessed—by dreams of power, control, knowledge—while others are among the dispossessed, the great mass of the Preterite. Slothrop wanders in the midst of these contending forces, at the center of a great many characters' attention.
because of an unusual physiological symptom that correlates his penile erections with A4 rocket strikes. His story is told as a comic-book version of the Oedipal complex, where "The Penis He Thought Was His Own" turns out to be an organ of social control.

With these as its psychic and social givens, Part Two of the novel begins the working out of their permutations. I intentionally use the language of probability theory because its concepts are central to Pynchon's literary method. We are moving into what is called the sample space of the experiment—the set of all possible outcomes, with a probability measure assigned to each of them between zero, the statistically impossible, and one, the statistically certain. We should also note that Pynchon is unorthodox enough a statistician to entertain the hope of radical change "beyond the zero" of impossibility.

Slothrop has taken "un perm" to the casino Hermann Goering—the first of his many personal permutations (in French slang this also means a military change of posts)—and he is on the road now from London to liberated France and then to Switzerland, where he seeks the grave of Laszlo Jamf, the scientist who originally conditioned his "hard-on reflex" and who subsequently has a kind of priority over him that his putative father lacks. Part Two ends and Slothrop's journey into the Zone begins with a visit to the dead father, which reminds us again that the direction of Slothrop's progress through the novel is ever deeper into the psychic underworld that he originally entered through the toilet in the Roseland Ballroom. While Slothrop is camped on top of Jamf's crypt, "It, the Repressed, approaches. . . . waitaminute up out of sleep, face naked, turning to the foreign gravestones, the what? what was it . . . back again, almost to it, up again . . . up, and back, that way, most of the early night" (268).

Part Three launches us fully "In the Zone." This is Germany in the spring of 1945, a no-man's land of scavengers after military hardware, of refugees and avengers. It is an open space, temporarily cut off from the European civilization obliterated by war, and not yet closed into the trajectory of the postwar
future. A statistical sample space, its possible outcomes have yet to receive their measure of probability from zero to one. The initial hopefulness found in the Zone is linked to this anarchic lack of definition.

Characters float through the Zone like particles in Brownian motion. Many of them are nominally driven by a desire to secure the remains of the Nazi A4 rockets, but their actual motives have more to do with revenge, power, money, salvation, or, in Slothrop's case, the retrieval of his elusive and fast-fading sense of self. But the anarchic possibilities of the Zone quickly resolve themselves in postwar boundaries, economies, hierarchies, bureaucracies, cartels—into the technologies, polities, and attendant sexual arrangements that comprise our present civilization and its discontents.

Pynchon is a dialectician, though, who for every force posits a counterforce. Along with the probability of ruin, he also calculates our slim chances for success. "Dialectically, sooner or later, some counterforce would have had to arise . . ." (536). Part Four of the novel, called "The Counterforce," explores these dialectical possibilities. It and the novel climax in the twinned events of Chapter 70 (pages 717-24), in which Geli Tripping's Dionysian vision of "the green uprising" is paired with Blicero's speech to the lover whom he is encapsulating and launching in the Rocket 00000 which anticipates all its world-destroying progeny. There are in fact many rockets, real and dreamed-of, in the novel: "The Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it," above all Enzian's and Blicero's: "Manichaean [ . . . ] see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idolatry of the Primal twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle" (727). It is the second of these that has been arcing across the novel from its first sentence. As it rushes toward point of contact, on the last page of the novel, we find ourselves in the Orpheus Theater, in the dark, singing. What does this final invocation of Orpheus portend? Other than
Tyrone Slothrop's appearance as a rather unconvincing avatar, what in the text are the larger implications of Orpheus's presence?

There is more to the story of Orpheus than the few details of his legendary existence, and there is more to Pynchon's use of the myth than his inscription of it into the figure of Tyrone Slothrop. Orpheus's greater significance is as the founder of a religion—one based on a set of texts: the Orphic Rhapsodies or hymns that narrate the theogony from which the Orphic adepts derived their practices.

This is not the place to describe the precepts of Orphism or their centrality to Greek religion. But a sketch of Orphism's basic tenets might illuminate their importance to Pynchon's own narrative. For the sake of brevity, I will rely on the description of Orphism given by W. K. C. Guthrie in his classic account of Orpheus and the Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement (1935, revised 1952).

There is first of all for the practitioners of Orphism the primacy of the text: the Orphic Rhapsodies that, as cosmogonical poem, encompass the entire evolution of the universe. "We have seen that Orpheus was known to everyone as the author of a religion based on the written word," says Guthrie. "Orpheus was famous for many things, but best of all perhaps, he was known as the theologos, one of the most famous, if not the most famous of all that tribe" (69).

The text is of obvious primacy to Pynchon, as well. Appearing throughout his work are references to cosmos and world and psyche as text. He too is a theologos attempting to sing our cosmogony from start to finish. The Creation itself is described by Pynchon as a text. "And at the end of the mighty day in which he gave us in fiery letters across the sky all the words we'd ever need, words we today enjoy, and fill our dictionaries with, the meek voice of little Tyrone Slothrop, celebrated ever after in tradition and song, ventured to filter upward [. . .]" (61).

As in the opening of Genesis, where the earth is without form until God divides the light from the darkness, Orphism begins with the belief that Everything
comes to be out of One and is resolved into One. Judaism and Christianity have "repeated with varying degrees of mythological colouring," says Guthrie, what in Orphism was "this central thought, that everything existed at first together in a confused mass, and that the process of creation was one of separation and division, with the corollary that the end of our era will be a return to the primitive confusion" (75).

Many critics have seen in Pynchon's "Rocket-state cosmology" an apocalypticism coming out of the Christian tradition, but this cosmology might be comprehended more fully if expanded from a narrowly Christian context to include the original Orphic precepts. From its opening epigraph to its apocalyptic conclusion, Gravity's Rainbow is concerned with the nature of "transformation" and "belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1). The following is only one of dozens of passages in the novel where one can fruitfully employ an Orphic reading of Pynchon's text:

It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the peak that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world [ . . . ] a very large transfer of energy: breaking upward into this world, a controlled burning--breaking downward again, an uncontrolled explosion . . . this lack of symmetry leads to speculating that a presence, analogous to the Aether, flows through time, as the Aether flows through space. The assumption of a Vacuum in time tended to cut us off one from another. But an Aether sea to bear us world-to-world might bring us back a continuity, show us a kinder universe, more easygoing. . . . (726)

The idea of a temporal and spatial aether, which is mentioned several times by Pynchon, was crucial to the Orphic mysteries. It explained the paradox of how differentiated life could appear out of primal oneness and then, at the end our era, return to that oneness. Eros, the first of the gods, is born out of that "ineffable aither," and it is back into it that the Orphic adept journeys on transforming him or herself from this side of death to the other (Guthrie, 81).
Orpheus was "the expounder of a sacramental religion and of the life hereafter," and Orphism, says Guthrie, was "a religion that laid great stress on the life after death" (29-30). Orpheus's descent into and knowledge of the realm of the dead gave him "peculiar powers as advisor and intercessor" in helping his followers make the passage from this world to the next (29). Necessary for that journey was the purging of earthly attachments and the sinful, or Titanic, aspects of our nature. "The doctrine of original sin was of Orphic origin," says Freud in Totem and Taboo. "It formed a part of the mysteries, and spread from there to the schools of philosophy of ancient Greece." 3

The followers of Orpheus conceived of our nature as two-fold, part Titanic and part Dionysiac. Their ascetic practices were directed toward purging the former and exalting the latter. "We can be quite clear," says Guthrie, "on what I would say was the most important point to one who wants to know the facts about classical Greek religion. To the question 'who was the god of the Orphic religion?' there can be but one answer--Dionysos. Orpheus was a religious founder, and the religion he founded was a species of the Bacchic" (41).

The Orphic theogony recounts the story of Dionysos the thrice-born, who appears as Dionysos-Phanes, Dionysos-Zagreus, and Dionysos the resurrected. As Phanes he is the firstborn of the gods fashioned by Chronos out of the aether. Phanes is identical with Eros: "the creator of all, from whom the world has its first origin," and it is to Eros that the followers of Orpheus direct their allegiance"(80). The second creation is presided over by Zeus, whose pre-eminence comes from having swallowed Phanes and taken into himself all things that exist. To Zeus and Persephone is born Dionysos-Zagreus, who is slain and dismembered by the Titans, before his final resurrection. "Alive again, he remains for the Orphics the supreme object of worship" (82).

It is from the Titanic crime against Dionysos that the Orphics conceived the twofold nature of humanity, and it is in his resurrection that they saw their hope of a life free of the primal crime. As Guthrie
recounts:

. . . in what follows we have the link between all these warings in heaven, these seemingly domestic affairs of the Immortals, and our own religious life. The most heinous part of the Titans' crime is still to be told. When they had slain the infant Dionysos, they tasted his flesh. In wrath at the outrage Zeus launched a thunderbolt at them and burned them up, and from the smoking remnants of the Titans there arose a race which this age had not yet known, the race of mortal men. Our nature therefore is twofold. We are born from the Titans, the wicked sons of Earth, but there is in us something of a heavenly nature too, since there went into our making fragments of the body of Dionysos, son of the Olympian Zeus, on whom the Titans had made their impious feast. So now to Dionysos we make prayer and sacrifice "in all seasons of the year" as the sacred writings say, "yearning to be set free from our lawless ancestry." Dionysos can free us, wherever we call him "liberator," Dionysos the immortal, the resurrected, of whose nature there is yet a small part in each and every one of us. Knowing all this, what other aim can we have in life but to purge away as far as possible the Titanic element in us and exalt and cherish the Dionysiac? (82-83)

It is finally to be said of Orphism that central to its doctrines is the figure of Chronos (Time). The theogony of the Rhapsodies begins with time, while allied to Chronos in preeminence are Ananke, or dread Necessity, and Night, whose special task is to advise the rulers of the Universe. The creation of humankind divided within and against itself is in time, and the hope residing in Dionysos the Liberator is to free us from time.

As well as Dionysos—the goat-god who will purge our Titanic urges—the figure of Orpheus also exists for Pynchon as an image of liberation. He stands as the divinity to whom all of Pynchon's numerous anarchists pay allegiance. If the Preterite in his novels dance under the aegis of Dionysos, the music that
moves them with its intimations of freedom and wholeness comes from the lyre of Orpheus. His political function for Pynchon is like that described by Marcuse in Eros and Civilization, where Orpheus represents "the Great Refusal" to obey "the repressive order of procreative sexuality."

"The Orphic and Narcissistic Eros," writes Marcuse, "awakens and liberates potentialities that are real in things animate and inanimate, in organic and inorganic nature--real but in the un-erotic reality suppressed. These potentialities circumscribe the telos inherent in them as: 'just to be what they are,' "being-there," existing." What images there are in Gravity's Rainbow of non-repressed sexuality occur not in the everyday lives of its characters, who function entirely in a bureaucratized world of legitimated repression, but in the dream sequences, the Orphic visions that erupt momentarily into the course of the narrative.

Held fused in a single chapter near the end of Part Four, but tensed against each other as the novel's central dialectic, are the Dionysiac intoxication of Gelli Tripping, who envisions the green world before the birth of human consciousness, and the Apollonian dream of Captain Blicero, who is about to inaugurate the Nazi millenium through the launching of his sexual fetish in a world-destroying rocket. Consolidated into these final images of Dionysiac union and Apollonian will are the divergent psychic and political energies that have fueled the course of the novel for the preceding seven hundred pages.

The dialectic at work here is specifically Nietzschean. As in The Birth of Tragedy, the Apollonian dream is countered by the intoxication of "the Dionysiac reveler," who through dance and music attempts a "mystical process of unseling" and ultimate reunion with nature. The story Nietzsche tells is one of lost primacy, and the way back--the possibility of getting unstrung from the Apollonian dream--lies in art, particularly the art that can sing of the Dionysiac spirit with "a recognition that whatever exists is of a piece, and that individuation is the root of evil; a conception of art as the sanguine hope that the spell of individuation may yet be broken, as an augury of eventual reintegration."
Like the dialectic of his cultural analysis, Nietzsche is also present in every line of Gravity's Rainbow that strives in its style, as Nietzsche said of his own voice, "to sing with a sort of maenadic soul" (39). As Nietzsche wrote in the introduction to The Birth of Tragedy: "People would hint suspiciously that there was a sort of maenadic soul in this book, stammering out laborious, arbitrary phrases in an alien tongue--as though the speaker were not quite sure himself whether he preferred speech or silence. And indeed, this 'new soul' should have sung, not spoken" (67).

Nietzsche distinguished "the separate art realms of dream and intoxication, two physiological phenomena standing toward one another in much the same relationship as the Apollonian and the Dionysiac" (19). It was, he said, from "the glorious transport which arises in man, even from the very depths of nature, at the shattering of the principium individuationis," the shattering, that is, of the Apollonian dream, that "we are in a position to apprehend the essence of Dionysiac rapture, whose closest analogy is furnished by physical intoxication" (22).

Gravity's Rainbow is filled with an array of intoxicants, and the voice, the vision that its language continually tries to force is this break through the veil of Apollonian illusion into the rapture of Dionysiac primacy. Slothrop's entire course through the novel is under the influence of the sodium amytal given him in the Abreaction Ward of St. Veronica's. "Micro" Graham leads us underground to tour the Raketen-Stadt of the Nazi Mittelwerke. Tchitcherine, "the Red Doper," shoots up with "oneirine theophosphate" in his search for God. Säure Bummer (bad trip) defends Rossini against Beethoven. It is Geli Tripping who opens herself up to Dionysiac rapture. Enzian's confrontation with Ombindi comes in the form of a "speed rap." There is even the verging over the limit defined by Nietzsche--where the "maenadic soul" is found "stammering out laborious, arbitrary phrases--as though the speaker were not quite sure himself whether he preferred speech to silence"--in the parting lines of Gerhardt von Göll (maker of the movie New Dope), which he delivers while shot up on sodium amytal and
sitting on "an unusually large infant's training toilet."

"Through evil and eagles," blithers the Springer, "the climate blondes its way, for they are no strength under the coarse war. No not for roguery until the monitors are there in blashing sheets of earth to mate and say medoshnicka bleelar medoometnozz in bergamot and playful fantasy under the throne and nose of the least merciful king..." (746)

The method for getting unstrung from the Apollonian dream, free of the "chain-link fields of the Word," Pynchon describes as that of "drug-epistemologies." The use in his prose of ellipses, parataxis, condensation, temporal distortion, and enjambment is an attempt to arrive at this kind of hallucinated reality or surreality. "Those like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity" (582).

The last chapter of Gravity's Rainbow is divided by fifteen sub-headings. The one referring to Blicero, called "STRUNG INTO THE APOLLONIAN DREAM..." is followed by another entitled "ORPHEUS PUTS DOWN HARP." This latter explores the political implications of the Orphic counterforce, using what is, by now, a rather dated take-off on Richard Nixon. He is called here "Richard M. Zhlobb, night manager of the Orpheus Theatre on Melrose" in Los Angeles, and his greatest worry is the "state of near anarchy" induced by the playing of mouth harps in the queues for his midnight showings.

The novel concludes in the Orpheus Theatre at one of these midnight gatherings. "The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we?) to tell which before the darkness swept in" (760). The rocket arriving throughout the novel is now about to fall. At night, in the dark, at time's end, the novel's end, Pynchon breaks
into song--an Orphic hymn followed by a Dionysiac invitation:

There is a Hand to turn the time,
Though thy Glass today be run.
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
All through our crippl'd Zone,
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . .

Now everybody-- (760)

What make Gravity's Rainbow an Orphic text, then, are the incorporation into the book of Rilke's Sonnets; the establishment of Slothrop as a latter-day Orpheus; the adoption of Orphic tropes and precepts--life as sleep disturbed by dreams; Eros as a first principle that is at once life, love, sleep, and death; a soniferous aether to solve the problem of how all things are separate yet one; history as a progression from undifferentiated mass through individuation and back again to unity; our current age as a fall into time presided over by Ananke and Night; the twofold nature of being as a struggle between the Titanic and Dionysiac; the belief in life after death as a negotiable transformation; the primacy of the text in explicating esoteric mysteries; music and dance as vehicles of worship and images of the liberated self; and, finally, belief in Dionysiac enthusiasm as a way back to the original erotic unity.

It is most fully, though, in Pynchon's voice that one hears the Orphic strains, as he breaks into song or offers up the fragments of "drug-epistemologies" that resonate with Dionysiac enthusiasm. For Pynchon's hope is ultimately that of an Orphic adept yearning to live enchanted in a responsive world known to us through Nietzschean art and music. Striving after a "maenadic soul," Gravity's Rainbow itself finally suffers Orphic dismemberment in the syntactic scattering of its final chapters, which are characterized by a multiplication of voices and narrative units: "Remember The Password In The Zone This Week Is FASTER--THAN, THE-SPEEDOFFLIGHT Speeding Up Your Voice Exponentially--" (726).
There is much in Gravity's Rainbow that remains incomprehensible without an understanding of its embrace of Orphism. Unless one dismisses it as ironic, which it is not, the epigraph of Wernher von Braun's that prefaces the narrative already posits an Orphic precept. "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation," he says, before asserting a "belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1). Characters that shuttle back and forth from one side of death to the other, and the novel's various descents into Hades, all bespeak the possibility of such transformation.

Pynchon's critics have difficulty with what they regard as his deep pessimism. In the temporal realm of politics and history, he is indeed pessimistic. He regards as improbable the arrival of some leader or force capable of effecting our charismatic salvation. Far more likely to arrive is the missile screaming across the night-sky of the novel. But at least those of us seated in the Orpheus Theatre, awaiting the coming of light from one source or another, have with us the enabling elements of the Orphic text—the central unity of word, song, and dance—to guide us through what might be only the first of many deaths.

Several critics, trying to place Gravity's Rainbow in the context of American literature, have interpreted it in relation to Puritan and Calvinist doctrine, often making a rather grim affair of it. I have already suggested how what first appears in the novel as Christian symbology can be better understood in light of its Orphic origins. But Orphism itself has a centrality in American literature that makes Pynchon merely the last in a long line of adepts. Harold Bloom, in the essay "Death and the Native Strain in American Poetry," characterizes the native strain of American writing, from Emerson to the present, as "a curious variant or version of Orphism."

Divination, in every sense of the term, is the enterprise of the native strain in American poetry. ... The American Orphic not only worships the gods Bacchus, Eros, and Ananke or Necessity, as the ancient followers of Orpheus did, but he seeks to become those gods. Zeus,
Apollo, Jehovah and Christ count for less in American poetry than Bacchus, Eros and Ananke do, for the American Orpheus begins in the Evening-land, and so starts out in the belief that he is already a quasi-god, who perhaps can evade true death through divination, by joining gods like Dionysios, Eros and Ananke, all of whom include death, and so surmount it.  

Emerson wrote with an Aeolian harp in his study window. Orpheus was for him the supreme poet capable of animating nature, of replacing the There and Then with the Here and Now. "The transmigration of souls is no fable," he said, and it was in "the cyclus of Orphic words" that Emerson found the ideal of "the universal man." He embraced the act of divination as his own poetic project. "The poets are thus liberating gods," he wrote. "I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary."

This is the literary project that Pynchon himself has undertaken—an act of divination with Orpheus as adept and image, guide and embodiment of what we perceive only in fragments to be the possibility of death-in-life transformed. In its drug-epistemologies, dreams, and visions, and in the pure intoxication of its language, one hears in the voicing of Gravity's Rainbow a promise of revelation that exists almost tangibly on the back side of each page. In these Orphic strains of the novel, Pynchon has created his own rhapsodic text with which to remember the promise of Orpheus.

Notes


Rereading Pynchon: Negative Entropy and "Entropy"

Stephen P. Schuber

Since its publication in 1960, Thomas Pynchon's short story "Entropy" has been situated within critical attempts to read Pynchon's novels as literary articulations of the thermodynamic principle of entropy. Indeed, entropy and related issues are so thoroughly embedded in Pynchon criticism that an exhaustive index of "entropic" readings might closely approximate a list of some of the most frequently cited responses to his fiction.2 Typical of such approaches is William M. Plater's comment that Pynchon "examines the philosophical world as if it were a closed system in which facts, rather than molecules, are distributed according to the laws of thermodynamics" (1). Similarly, Tony Tanner states that "Thomas Pynchon made his intentions clear from the outset. The title of his first important short story is 'Entropy' and . . . his work is certainly about a world succumbing to entropy . . ." (153). Peter Bischoff generalizes: "When Thomas Pynchon gave the title 'Entropy' to his second published short story, he furnished . . . the key for the interpretation of this story which is programmatic for his entire work."3 Anne Mangel agrees in regarding entropy as the basic principle informing Pynchon's narrative technique: "Pynchon's use of scientific concepts and disorder in his fiction holds a dual excitement, for not only does it sever him from a previous, more rigid and static kind of writing, but it also links him with contemporary artists working in other media who incorporate scientific ideas and seek randomness in their art" (207-08). Such statements assert rather than demonstrate randomness, and ultimately lend support to Gore Vidal's dismissive comment that "The imaginative writer can never be serious unless, like Mr. Thomas Pynchon, he makes it clear that he is writing about Entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics and a number of other subjects that he picked up in his freshman year at Cornell."4

Still, critics often agree with Tanner that Pynchon "is the plotter of a growing disarray" (180), and that
entropy is a metaphor of the deterioration of modern life.\(^5\) Yet it is precisely in such a fashion that many readers miss crucial points about both entropy and Pynchon's use of this concept, for entropy, properly understood, is a more complex and vital notion than is generally recognized. The basis for critical misapprehensions is a popular confusion of entropies. In the first place, there is the scientific concept which obtains, for example, in physics, chemistry, biology, and information theory. Second, there is a less scientifically defined, metaphorical entropy, the tenor of which is "growing disarray," in Tanner's words. Third, associated with the first two entropies is the notion of negative entropy, the scientific component of which is less widely recognized, and whose metaphorical ramifications have usually been ignored in critical discourse concerning Pynchon.\(^6\) Before this variety of entropies can usefully be applied to Pynchon's early story, however, some definitions must be clarified.

Entropy is generally defined as a measure of disorder within a closed system; the concept of disorder is a familiar one to critics, but too few have taken into account the notion of a closed system. Norbert Wiener, a pioneer in the field of cybernetics, is often cited for his famous discussions of entropy and communication; many are familiar with his observations that "a system may lose order and regularity spontaneously, but . . . it practically never gains it . . . [A] message can lose order spontaneously in the act of transmission, but cannot gain it."\(^7\) As Wiener points out, statistical knowledge enables us to specify that "in an isolated system, the probability that the entropy shall decrease is zero" (22, my emphasis; cf. Ch. 2). This means simply that in a closed system, spontaneously generated higher orders of complexity are not to be anticipated, and are, in fact, statistically impossible. Similar considerations of probability attend information theory. As Wiener points out, a "message is a transmitted pattern, which acquires its meaning by being a selection from a large number of possible patterns. . . . [The] less probable a message is, the more meaning it carries . . ." (8). By following Claude Shannon's pioneering probability theories, the noted biologist Lila Gatlin observes that
the sequence \{ATATATATAT \ldots \} is absolutely probable or predictable, and the information content of the sequence is thereby reduced; Wiener had made a similar point earlier (7-8), and Shannon himself observed that "the redundancy of ordinary English, not considering statistical structure over greater distances than about eight letters, is roughly 50%. This means that when we write English half of what we write is determined by the structure of the language and half is chosen freely" (cited by Mangel, 206). From the point of view of entropy, there is an a priori and severe limit on the new information conveyed by any utterance. In summary, then, entropy is a measure of decreasing differentiation and greater predictability within a closed system, biological or linguistic.

At this stage in the discussion concerning entropy, most critics adopt the concept as a metaphor for the futility of attempting to construct meanings, relationships, and human encounters in Pynchon's works. Tanner makes a specific equation: "These two phenomena--entropy and the dread of love--may well be linked in some way, for they show a parallel movement towards the state of lasting inanimateness, and share an aspiration to eradicate consciousness and revert to thing-status" (159). Love, of course, is never a simple given, but rather a state of higher valence, one requiring the figurative addition of energy; a lack of love is equivalent to metaphorical entropy or "inanimateness." The extreme human case of entropy, as Plater notes, is death (3). Finally, assumptions about the nature of entropy have led some critics to judgments concerning Pynchon's style; according to Mangel, "The redundancy, irrelevancy, ambiguity, and sheer waste involved in language glare from every page \ldots\" (206-07).

Thus the theories of entropy and critical metaphoric entropy seem to suggest that the world is running down in an inexorable process of decline; but we have not yet considered negative entropy. As Wiener also points out in his 1950 study, "Let us note that the assertion of the second law of thermodynamics is confined within narrow limits. The statement that we are dealing with an isolated or a substantially isolated [i.e., closed] system is of the essence. In the non-isolated [i.e.,
open] parts of an isolated system there will be regions in which the entropy . . . may well be seen to decrease. In this connection, the coupling which unites the different parts of the system into a single larger system will in general be both energetic and informational" (23). The limits to which Wiener refers are those of systems, and he draws several significant distinctions. Systems are defined by their relations with other systems. That is, some systems are relatively closed, others relatively open. In a closed system, entropy may well seem to increase; in open systems, on the contrary, one finds growth, development, and higher orders of complexity. Gatlin has made the same point in biological terms: "as higher organisms have evolved, their entropy has in some way declined because of their higher degree of organization," and she cites the physicist Schrödinger's dictum that life "feeds on negative entropy" (22).

Anthony Wilden makes the same point in this fashion: "Somewhere between the low order of systemic complexity of the energy relationship involved when two billiard balls strike each other, and the very high order of informational complexity when men [sic], nations, and ideas collide, we pass from the realm of closed systems to that of open systems, from the 'inorganic' to the 'organic.' In a later metaphoric emergence, we also pass from 'nature' to 'culture.'" In other words, negative entropy is not simply a mathematical concession that life may exist; rather, it is the acknowledgment of far greater possibilities--culture, for example--than those of narrowly entropic outlooks. Of central importance is Wiener's observation that open systems interact in "energetic and informational" fashions; while organization seems to be running down in some systems, a characteristic of life, as Wilden too suggests, is the ability to process information into higher orders. Nature may behave according to general rules such as those of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, but culture derives from the manipulation of information. Or as Gregory Bateson puts it, "The conservative laws for energy and matter concern substance rather than form. But mental process, ideas, communication, organization, differentiation, pattern, and so on, are matters of form rather than substance."
Yet even on the level of "substance" and in terms of the most basic conditions for life, entropy is not actually the negative limit popularly imagined. An early prophet of what is here termed metaphoric entropy, Henry Adams, "calculated the running down of intellectual energy on earth [and predicted that] thought would reach the limits of its possibilities...in the year 1921."\(^{11}\) Luckily for us, his entropic metaphor was mixed. Actually, the possibilities for organismic, negentropic development are far from limited in the conventional sense, for as Gatlin points out, life is dependent on DNA, and "since there are four kinds of DNA bases, over \(4^{10^9}\) base sequences are possible for present-day organisms. This number is greater than the estimated number of particles in the universe" \(^{(4)}\). In other words, statistically possible forms of life have an upper limit only because there is a theoretically finite number of elements in the universe.

Such speculations, however, are examples of what might be called metaphoric negentropy; it is obvious that the forms of life--or information--have been and continue to be limited. As has often been observed, it is statistically possible to generate a word in English, zaj, for example, but the simple possibility guarantees neither sense nor survival. As both Gatlin and Wilden point out, it is the interplay of constraints and freedom--entropy and negentropy--which governs the conditions of life and information theory (Gatlin, 35 ff. and passim; Wilden, Ch. XII and passim). In this light, we might recall Shannon's previously cited observation that only half of what we write in English "is chosen freely." Far from being a pessimistic statement of metaphoric entropy, Shannon's comment is simply an acknowledgment that if we wish to make sense in English, we may not write zaj: constraints and freedoms interact in life as well as in information theory. Similar observations and considerations obtain in Pynchon's story "Entropy"; far from being a simple statement of decay or metaphoric entropy, the story highlights the more fundamental problems of freedom and constraint.

 Appropriately, then, "Entropy" is divided between two settings: Meatball Mulligan's party downstairs, and Callisto's "hermetically sealed" \(^{(279)}\) hothouse apartment located directly above. Meatball's party
has been in progress for forty hours, and Meatball himself is asleep during the introductory scene, which focuses less on the chaos of the party than on background information. Above, Callisto lives in a world apart, musing, as had Henry Adams, on Thermodynamics with a capital T. This upstairs/downstairs division cannot, as shall become clear, be taken simply as a contrast of higher and lower levels of organization.

Meatball's party is composed of "a lot of American expatriates" who "would stage, for instance, polyglot parties where the newcomer was sort of ignored if he couldn't carry on simultaneous conversations in three or four languages" (277, 278). Of course, a certain irony attends the pretensions of such a group, but at the same time one must note a striving for plurality, novelty, unpredictability, and new information. Most notable among Meatball's partygoers is a jazz group, the Duke di Angelis quartet. Not only do they smoke pot and wear sunglasses; but they also operate on a jazzed-up non-linear scale; granted, they embody bohemian clichés of 1957, but they also serve as a nexus for sound and wind metaphors in the story. While the quartet listens to The Heroes' Gate at Kiev, Meatball's "party seemed to be gathering its second wind. Outside there was rain... The day before, it had snowed and the day before that there had been winds of gale force and before that the sun had made the city glitter bright..." (278). The narrator moves from the jazz quartet to the weather and thence to a generalization, based on etymology: "as every good Romantic knows, the soul (spiritus, rauch, pneuma) is nothing, substantially, but air; it is only natural that warpings in the atmosphere should be recapitulated in those who breathe it" (278). Thus the reader encounters several variations on the theme of air, many of which entail uncertainties beyond that of etymological accuracy: from jazz (non-linear sounds in air), to weather (changeable air), to a subroutine equating soul and air (explained by sounds--moving air), positing a similarity between all these forms of moving air and people's actions.

The transition from Meatball's party to Callisto's hothouse is moving air, "the last bass notes of The
Heroes' Gate," which awaken Callisto in his "hothouse jungle, . . . a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather" (279). The hot air of Meatball's party gives way to Callisto's hothouse, and one is tempted to equate the former with simple randomness, and the latter with controlled order. But as any reader of late 19th-century literature knows, the hothouse is a favorite trope of the Decadents, a sort of locus amoenus which is a temporary refuge from a debased, disordered civilization. Yet for the Decadents, escape is only temporary; Callisto's problem is more complex, but still analogous: "Through trial-and-error [note the stochastic process] Callisto had perfected its [his hothouse's] ecological balance . . . so that the swayings of its plant life, the stirrings of its birds and human inhabitants were all as integral as the rhythms of a perfectly-executed mobile" (279). For both the Decadents and Callisto, escape and separation carry the penalty of absolute predictability; both reach the pendulous--and perilous--states of "perfectly-executed mobile[s]," self-contained or closed systems susceptible to, but resisting outside influences. Or more precisely, the closed system of the mobile conserves balance only when outside interferences--movements of air--are kept below a certain threshold.

Meatball is similarly subject to thresholds; by "that last cymbal crash" he "was hurled wincing into consciousness . . ." (280). Like Callisto, Meatball is subject to the movements of air, and similarly he awakens to a decadence, spelled here with a lower-case d. While the "final hiss" of the sound which awakened him "remained for an instant in the room, then melted into the whisper of rain outside" (280), Meatball refuses a joint and crawls into the kitchen for some tequila. He opens a window, the first of the important window images in the story, to admit Saul, who will later discourse on the failure of information theory; watches three coeds majoring in Philosophy enter his apartment; and somewhat later sees five sailors "all in various stages of abomination" enter his apartment, thinking it is "the hoorhouse that chief was telling us about" (287). Such a confusion of events, from the
hothouse to the hoorhouse, seems to signal a decadence, too much noise for successful or effective communica-
tion at Meatball's party.

Again, it might seem that Callisto's world repre-
sents a neatly ordered universe, while Meatball's is one of disintegration. After all, Callisto dictates his reflections on entropy and broods over the ap-
parently constant outside temperature of 37°; mean-
while Meatball seems to misunderstand Saul's discourse on information theory. However, it is a mistake to assume that Callisto is losing a battle to the forces of entropy, represented by his measurements of tempera-
ture and by contrast with Meatball's seeming disor-
ganization. More accurately, Callisto is perpetuating an entropic situation, and Meatball is ordering a potentially negentropic state.

Callisto in fact avoids new information; his dic-
tations about entropy are but memories of things past--
theories he imposes on the present from his isolated perspective. He recalls that "The cosmologists had predicted an eventual heat-death for the universe . . .
the meteorologists, day-to-day, staved it off by contradicting with a reassuring array of varied tem-
peratures" (280). The reader has already been informed
about previous changes in the weather: wind, rain, snow, gales, and sunshine. Perhaps the weather re-
ports are, as so often in Pynchon's works, simply more
plots. Or perhaps Callisto is so enclosed in his own thoughts that he can never measure more than 37°:
"Leery at omens of apocalypse, Callisto shifted
beneath the covers" (280); he never moves from his bed, nor does he ever escape his ideas of entropy. He never himself ventures to check his appropriated
theories against external reality, and thus is trapped not by entropy, but by his essentially subjective pessimism.

Callisto is an entropic island, insulated from larger systems; everything he needs in his hothouse is delivered from outside (279). Even his companion, Aubade, is distanced from him: before the reader learns her name, she is referred to three times simply as "the girl" while she "lay like a tawny question
mark facing" Callisto (279). She is French and Anna-
mese, which has led Joseph W. Slade to speculate that Pynchon "may be hinting at exploitation by a technological colonialism." Aubade is certainly described in such terms; not only is she "obedient" (280), but she also takes dictation and until the end of the story performs for Callisto those functions which he cannot execute without leaving his bed. Clearly Callisto drains energy; for all his musings about entropy and heat death, he does very little himself, but rather relies on outside forces to support him. His one act of human decency, holding a sick bird, is a failure: "I held him [the bird] ... to give him the warmth of my body. Almost as if I were communicating life to him, or a sense of life" (292). There is, first of all, quite a difference between life and a sense of life; the latter is a more closed system than the former. Second, Callisto's entropic sense of heat is not the same as life. Finally, the limits of Callisto's entropic framework blind him to a variety of possible ways of saving the bird; all he can believe in his paranoid self-enclosure is that the bird needs heat.

Callisto's musings are similar to Saul's downstairs lectures on information theory. Saul's wife has just left him; as he explains, "It seems she is, as we say, bugged at this idea of computers acting like people. I made the mistake of saying you can just as well turn that around, and talk about human behavior like a program fed into an IBM machine" (285). Saul's comments on entropy in information theory include the usual jargon: "Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit" (285). Both Callisto and Saul are immobilized; in the face of scientific and metaphoric entropy, neither is capable of initiating a negentropic action. Callisto cannot move in order to seek outside help for the bird, and Saul is similarly lethargic, hiding behind theories; as he opines, "You find I think that most "successful" marriages ... are sort of founded on compromises. You never run at top efficiency, usually all you have is a minimum basis for a workable thing. I believe the phrase is Togetherness!" (286). But the word "Togetherness," even with a capital T, is so predict-
able that, like Shannon's {\text{ATATATATAT \ldots} } sequence, it conveys no information. While Callisto and Saul, in their separate ways, seem to be aware of the debilitating forms of entropy, neither one advances to a new form of energetic or informational activity.

Callisto and Saul have another parallel in the Duke di Angelis Quartet. Meatball observes them "going through the motions of a group having a session, only without instruments" (289). They explain that they are escaping "root chords. Nothing to listen to while you blow a horizontal line. What one does in such a case is, one thinks the roots!"; as the Quartet becomes more and more self-enclosed, "a horrified awareness was dawning on Meatball. 'And the next logical extension,' he said. 'Is to think everything,' Duke announced \ldots" (290). The group mimics interaction; at least they claim they are counting bars and paying attention to keys, but when they begin to "play" again, they are going back to what they call "the airless void" (290). Their actions are so restricted that, like Callisto and Saul, they constitute hermetically sealed systems which, because they are incapable of information-sharing with larger systems, doom them to entropic stagnation. The Quartet, once the center of sound and wind images, has retreated to an "airless" state—or perhaps to a soulless one.

Degeneration is not, of course, limited to the Quartet; soon Meatball's party sinks into a mad, drunken brawl. While chaos engulfs the scene, Meatball considers the "two ways he could cope: (a) lock himself in the closet and maybe eventually they would all go away, or (b) try to calm everybody down, one by one" (291). Alternative (a) requires that Meatball treat his party as a closed system in which, ultimately, entropy would ensure the damping of difference and noise; adopting this perspective would also require of Meatball that he insulate himself within an even more closed system, the closet. Becoming a closet case would be similar to the actions of Callisto, Saul, and the Quartet. But unlike these, Meatball has the negentropic capacity of organizing information and anticipating a wide variety of possible outcomes: "But then he started thinking about that
closet. It was dark and stuffy [notice the absence of wind] and he would be alone" (291). Not only does the closed space of the closet parallel closed systems—hothouses, isolation within metaphoric entropy and information theories, and soundless music—but the closet, like all closed systems, is also subject to intrusions: "And then this crew [of sailors] off the good ship Lollipop or whatever it was might take it upon themselves to kick down the closed door, for a lark. And if that happened he would be, at the very least, embarrassed" (291). He concludes that the energy necessary to order the phenomena of the party "was more a pain in the neck, but probably better in the long run" (291). Meatball's negentropic expenditure of energy, of course, saves the party from total chaos.14

Anticipating intrusions saves Meatball; he conserves his system by predicting or extrapolating from available data, and he is capable of adaptive behavior. In contrast, Saul witnesses the destruction of his system from the inside; he reports that his wife "ended up throwing a Handbook of Chemistry and Physics at me, only it missed and went through the window, and when the glass broke I reckon something in her broke too. She stormed out of the house crying, out in the rain. No raincoat or anything!" (284).15 The Handbook and its rules go out the window, and Saul must confront his inabilities to deal with the complexities of another human system. From a certain perspective, his wife is a much braver person; she leaves without protection, "No raincoat or anything." Perhaps that which "broke" in her was an ability to tolerate the closed system of her marriage to Saul; his only consolation is one-sided theorizing.

Saul's wife puts a hand-book through a window; Aubade also smashes a window, but her action is more calculated and physically consequential. After Callisto's bird dies, "as if seeing the single and unavoidable conclusion to all this she moved swiftly to the window before Callisto could speak; tore away the drapes and smashed out the glass with two exquisite hands which came away bleeding and glistening with splinters ..." (292). This is the first act which she initiates in the story, and she faces immediate
consequences: the splinters of glass are embedded fragments of a destroyed pseudo-protective barrier, and—if one pursues the neo-colonial theme—the splinters are also a sign of her self-destructive liberation. Now she can only "face the man on the bed and wait with him until the moment of equilibrium was reached..." (292), if it were to be reached at all, one might add.16

Thus Aubade shares with Meatball the onus of negentropic initiatives, those actions which must irreversibly change the state of affairs within otherwise closed, entropic systems. Neither is left in an enviable situation: Aubade faces the elements from without, and Meatball may awaken to chaos from within. Entropy, in both cases, is but a measure of possibilities, and it is a mistake to subsume both under some generalized critical concept of entropy as a notion of decay. Rather, Pynchon is suggesting that real choices are at issue, that the constraints on our thinking are to be examined, and, finally, that human beings are human only to the extent that they rise above those limits which are stasis or entropy.

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Notes


3 Peter Bischoff, "Thomas Pynchon, 'Entropy,'" in Die amerikanische Short Story der Gegenwart: Interpretationen, hrsg. Peter Freese (Berlin: Schmidt, 1976), 226; my translation. The original stands thus: "Wenn Thomas Pynchon seiner zweiten veröffentlichten Short Story den Titel 'Entropy' gibt, liefert er... den Schlüssel für die Interpretation dieser für sein gesamtes Werk programmatischen Story..."
Gore Vidal, "The Thinking Man's Novel," New York Review of Books, 27, No. 19 (4 Dec. 1980), 10. Vidal concludes that "English teachers without science like this sort of thing while physicists are tempted to write excited letters to literary journals"—a view from which the present writer wishes to dissociate himself.

Taking issue with Tanner, however, is David Seed, in his "Order in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy,'" Journal of Narrative Technique, 11, No. 2 (1981), 135-53, esp. 136-37. Seed argues that "order could be the ultimate theme of the story" (148), but does not go beyond a dictionary definition of entropy.

One exception to this generalization is David Mesher's "Negative Entropy and the Form of Gravity's Rainbow," Research Studies, 49, No. 3 (1981), 162-70.


Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (New York: Ballantine, 1972), xxv.


Air, or rather gas, was central to Maxwell's formulation of the laws of thermodynamics, but one must be careful to make certain distinctions: as Wilden points out, there is a difference between the "theory of physics" and the "reality it studies"; in assuming "the perfect gas," Maxwell made methodological assumptions, and as Wilden continues, "in this sense, classical physics is the study of closed systems" (358). Pynchon's air/gas metaphors do not depend on assumptions similar to those of Maxwell.


Meatball must not be compared to Maxwell's Demon, however; as Mangel shows (198-99), the Demon is an impossibility, and even if a Demon did exist, it would have to be immortal. Cf. Wilden's more technical comments, 130, n. 2. Mangel still sees "Perception ... working to create disorder" in Pynchon's fiction (200).
Actually, the opposite is true: there is no Demon; human beings are mortal; and they avoid perception, as do Callisto, Saul, and the Quartet, at the risk of losing their humanity.

15 The pun in this passage on "stormed out" may be intended; Aubade will let a storm in.

16 Seed goes so far as to suggest that Aubade's action "could equally well be seen as a liberating gesture which has the immediate result of freeing herself and Callisto from their hothouse" (148), but one wonders how well Callisto is prepared for this; notice that he is named only as "the man on the bed."
William Slothrop: Gentleman

Philip Storey

Edward Mendelson discusses at length the "illegality of Pynchon's vision." He describes the author of Gravity's Rainbow as an outsider who chooses "a stance alien to our literary culture," a writer who "proposes a grotesquerie that governance can never acknowledge," a person who stakes out a "position at the edge of a culture." ¹ Thomas Pynchon, were he available for comment, might agree with such statements. He might also point out that the same sorts of things were said of an ancestor of his, William Pynchon, who published in 1650 a religious tract entitled The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption. Ezra Hoyt Byington writes of this tract:

It is the production of a very intelligent layman, living upon the outermost rim of civilization, and moved by the currents of theological opinion in his time to put forth his independent protest against opinions that seemed to him inconsistent with the word of God.²

Strongly similar phrasing is used in the descriptions of Thomas Pynchon's "position at the edge of a culture" and William Pynchon's position at "the outermost rim of civilization." Another historian states that William Pynchon's "sin consisted in being in advance of his age--happily one of the sins which posterity does not consider damnable beyond forgiveness."³ Most copies of William Pynchon's book were burned publicly in Boston. Likewise, Gravity's Rainbow was metaphorically "burned" by the awarders of the Pulitzer Prize. History repeats itself, and sometimes it repeats itself in the same family.

Much has been written about Thomas Pynchon's indebtedness to Puritan thought, particularly to the concept of the preterite and the elect. My purpose here is not to go over ground already well covered--not to look at the literature of Puritanism as it relates to Thomas Pynchon's work--but to trace historically the sources of William Slothrop, that premier religious gadfly who haunts the memory of one of Gravity's Rainbow's main characters, Tyrone Slothrop. I will consider in parti-
cular William Pynchon's life and his book, but I will also consider other sources for the character of William Slothrop.

William Pynchon was a well-to-do and well-educated man before he set sail for the Bay colony. He could trace his ancestry back to the time of William the Conqueror. He was enrolled at Oxford at the age of eleven (it was a custom then to send boys this young), although it is not known how long he studied there. He was a church warden, and he was already thirty-nine years old when he crossed the Atlantic. There were three or four ships on that expedition. Most sources place William Pynchon aboard the Ambrose or the Jewell, but at least one source, the Dictionary of American Biography, places him aboard Governor Winthrop's flagship, the Arbella, the same ship on which the fictional William Slothrop took passage. Whichever view is historically correct, it is certain that William Pynchon spent some time on the Arbella during the voyage. Historian Stephen Innes writes:

Already one of the luminaries in the company, William received a midvoyage invitation to dine with Governor Winthrop. The governor entered into his journal that "About eleven of the clock, our captain sent his skiff and fetched aboard us the masters of the other two ships, and Mr. Pynchon, and they dined with us in the roundhouse." Tyrone Slothrop's ancestor, on the other hand, was not a luminary; he was just "a mess cook or something." The dinner "in the round-house" was probably elegant and succulent; the "night's stew" Thomas Pynchon mentions in the passage below most likely would not have been served there:

There go that Arbella and its whole fleet, sailing backward[ . . . ] across an Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse . . . a redemption of every mess cook who ever slipped and fell when the deck made an unexpected move, the night's stew collecting itself up out of the planks and off the indignant shoes of the more elect, slithering in a fountain back into the pewter kettle as the servant
himself staggers upright again and the vomit he
slipped on goes gushing back into the mouth that
spilled it ... (GR, 204)

In this reverse-time sequence William Slothrop himself
seems represented as the type of person who might have
vomited on "the indignant shoes of the more elect";
William Pynchon would have been wearing those shoes.

The Puritans in general were seeking religious
freedom, but William Pynchon seems to have been more
interested in the economic opportunities afforded by
the New World. Innes notes:

While the other migrants made the trek [to the
Connecticut River Valley] primarily for religious
reasons, Pynchon went to the valley as a merchant,
not a Puritan. The community he built reflected
this priority.7

Even before William Pynchon moved west to what is now
Springfield, Massachusetts, he was a successful
merchant. Innes writes:

By 1634, with the help of his London agents,
Pynchon was the leading fur trader in Massachu-
setts with a volume of pelts tenfold that of his
nearest competitor.8

In addition, William Pynchon had many other business
interests, including real estate holdings, grain and
meat exports, and a trading post. In contrast, mention
is made in Gravity's Rainbow only of William Slothrop's
modest "pig operation." Thomas Pynchon writes, "By the
time they got to market those hogs were so skinny it
was hardly worth it, but William wasn't really in it so
much for the money as just for the trip itself" (GR,
555). In giving William Slothrop the absurd occupation
of pig-driver, Thomas Pynchon has deflated the stature
of his own ancestor; he has succeeded in reversing an
old adage by fashioning a sow's ear from a silk purse.

Although William Pynchon was not involved in a pig-
driving enterprise as was his fictional counterpart
(more will be said on this subject later), he did travel
"the long, stony and surprising road to Boston" (GR,
556) frequently on official business during his many
years as a magistrate for Springfield. He was on good
terms with the "heathen" Indians. Mason Green writes:

William Pynchon was a great traveller, both in this valley [the Connecticut River Valley] and in the Bay country, and his impressive figure and strange garb became a familiar sight to the Indians. This stern horseman riding down a forest bridle-path, attended by a mounted servant, became to the Indians the impersonation of justice. . . . He never designedly violated the Indians' notion of right and wrong, but when he made a bargain with the Indians, he even suffered rather than break it, or allow it to be broken. . . . William Pynchon . . . was a student and a lawyer, and a man who believed that only through a primitive code of ethics could amicable relations subsist between the English and the red man.9

The Indians who lived near Springfield knew that they would be fairly treated if they were accused of a crime against a white man, and they also knew that justice would be swift if they accused a white man of a crime against them. (In his fiction, Thomas Pynchon has shown a concern like his ancestor's for native peoples.) As things stood before the publication of his inflammatory book, William Pynchon was regarded as an honorable man by most people (both red and white) with whom he came in contact.

The central concern of the fictional William Slothrop's book, On Preterition, is the salvation of the preterite. William Pynchon, however, hardly mentions the preterite (he calls them reprobates). On this issue he is an orthodox Puritan/Calvinist. In The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption he writes:

[Christ] never intended to redeem all Mankind in general, he never intended to redeem any but the Many [which here means the elect]: he confirmed the promise of the covenant only for the Many . . . Christ did not shed his blood for the whole world, but for the elect number only.10

Elsewhere he states, "It is the iniquities of the elected Believers only that the Lord laid upon Christ."11 He takes Martin Luther to task for making "a most dan-
gerous error to affirm that Christ hath redeemed the whole world."12 William Pynchon's views on the preterite and the elect differed not at all from views then commonly held in New England.

He ran afoul of such views, however, with his pronouncements on atonement. Religious leaders in England and New England preached that Christ suffered both in body and in soul on the cross--his body the physical tortures and his soul the "hell torments." William Pynchon disagreed:

[Christ] did more than patiently suffer; for he delighted to give his back to the smiters, and he delighted to give his Soul to God [in the time of his sufferings] as a Mediatorial Sacrifice of Atonement.13

This view seems to diminish the weight of Christ's sufferings, and it shocked the Puritan sensibilities of New England. Innes writes:

By emphasizing the redemptive nature of Christ's life instead of his death, Pynchon undercut orthodox Puritanism's central tenet: that by taking men's sins upon himself and dying for them, Christ had saved the elect from Adam's curse.14

In a larger sense:

Pynchon [demanded] greater toleration for heterodox opinions and less stringent tests of faith, tests always rendered suspect by the innate fallibility of all men, ministers and magistrates included. This individualistic and antiauthoritarian biblicism was scarcely calculated to sit well with the coastal magistrates ...15

Or, as Thomas Pynchon might put it, "You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that" (GR, 555).

With the publication of his religious tract, William Pynchon endangered enterprises he had built up for twenty years. Historian Philip F. Gura suggests this reason for his doing it:

Noting the bifurcation of English Puritanism into Presbyterians and Independents, Pynchon observed that the best frame was not necessarily Presby-
terian or Congregational but rather one "where zeale of gods glory and godly wisdome are joyned together." He went on to maintain that a "world of good hath bin don by godly ministers even in England, that have held no certaine fourme of discipline." On the other hand, "where a could spirit doth rule in ministers," the people may "yet be but dead christians." What mattered was less the form of the polity than the zeal of the clergy.16

What William Pynchon's work meant to other colonists is well summed up by Henry M. Burt:

William Pynchon's book literally and figuratively was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." The details of his theology are of less importance to us than the fact that he alone in New England dared to proclaim the faith that was in him when the faith was opposed to the lawfully established religion.17

Although Thomas Pynchon makes little use of this particular back alley in the history of religious thought, he does use the fact of his ancestor's persecution. William Slothrop also "dares" and he too is persecuted. William Pynchon becomes a metaphor in the person of William Slothrop. "Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from?" (GR, 556) Thomas Pynchon asks. But, ultimately, William Slothrop's ideology doesn't quite mesh with that of William Pynchon. Thomas Pynchon writes: "William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite. Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart." "William argued holliness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect" (GR, 555). William Pynchon had no concept of "second Sheep"; he noted only the "lost sheep" who were stray members of the elect.18 The rest of mankind is "damned totally and penally, because there is no place of repentance left open to them."19 And God has no "equal and opposite counterpart"; rather, God "hath destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the Devil."20 William Pynchon allowed for no ambiguity, and for no balance of power, in his universe.
Both William Pynchon and William Slothrop were "exiled" from the Bay colony. Both had a son named John. William Pynchon returned to the family estate in Writable, England, but John Pynchon remained behind and vastly expanded the family's business interests. One lucrative enterprise was a "pig operation." Burt writes, "In 1656 John Pynchon set out on a pork-raising speculation"; and Innes notes, "Because of John Pynchon's extensive pork exports, pigs made up the majority of animals slaughtered in early Springfield." Of course, William Slothrop drove live pigs to market instead of shipping barrels of pork, but Thomas Pynchon could have had John Pynchon in mind when he fashioned the business side of Slothrop's character. John Pynchon also had a flair for turning a religious phrase.

In 1675, during King Philip's War, he wrote to his son Joseph:

The sore contending of God with us for our sins ... hath evidently demonstrated that he is very angry with this country, God having given the heathen [Indians] a large commission to destroy.

Interestingly, the sanction for the heathen/preterite "commission to destroy" comes from God here, not from his counterpart.

A later Pynchon, this one also named William, was involved in another religious controversy in 1736. Rev. Robert Breck was nominated for a ministerial post in Springfield, but a certain faction of townspeople including, ironically, William Pynchon, opposed him and almost succeeded in blocking his appointment. They did not care for what Breck once said in a sermon:

What will become of the heathen who never heard of the Gospel, I do not pretend to say, but I cannot but indulge a hope that God in his boundless benevolence will find out a way whereby those heathen who act up to the light they have may be saved.

When Thomas Pynchon writes that "Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite" (GR, 555), he is referring to events that occurred in 1650, but the quote is equally applicable to the Breck case. Breck held the same optimistic hope for the spiritual well-being of the
"heathen" as William Slothrop held for his "second Sheep." Later in his life Breck took on a more somber tone:

A faithful minister . . . is what the world very much needs in its present dark state. . . . Ignorance and darkness have overspread the world, and if God had not taken compassion upon us, the world had remained in midnight darkness to this time.25

The fictional William Slothrop wrote in a similar style when he composed this hymn:

There is a Hand to turn the time,
Though thy Glass today be run,
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
All through our cripl'd Zone,
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . . (GR, 760)

These last two passages can be joined in a nice amalgamation: Thy Glass today be run. Ignorance and darkness hath overspread the world. Riders sleep by ev'ry road all through our cripl'd Zone. A faithful minister--a Hand to turn the time--is what the world very much needs in its present dark state.

The title page of The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption identifies its author as "William Pinchin, Gentleman, in New England." The tag, "Gentleman," is almost too humble. Early Pynchons were prime movers in the Bay colony. It is quite likely, if not certain, that Thomas Pynchon would be familiar with most of the material presented in this essay. Any general history of Springfield, of Massachusetts, or of New England is replete with references to the Pynchon name. The study or source materials for Gravity's Rainbow is valid because Thomas Pynchon himself pays meticulous attention to historical details. We can read Gravity's Rainbow as a historical document, or we can read Thomas Pynchon's family history as an aid in understanding his encyclopedic work.

Washington, Connecticut
Notes


2 Ezra Hoyt Byington, The Puritan in England and New England (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896), 204.


7 Innes, 5-6.

8 Innes, 4.


11 Pinchin, 28.

12 Pinchin, 87.

13 Pinchin, 24.

14 Innes, 15.

15 Innes, 15.


18 Pinchin, 28.
19 Pinchin, 58.
20 Pinchin, 24.
21 Burt, 59.
22 Innes, 115.
23 Quoted by Holland, 99.
24 Quoted by Holland, 200.
Notes
New/Old Pynchon

In April, 1984 Little, Brown and Company will publish a collection said to contain five of Pynchon's six previously published short stories, plus a 7500-word introduction by Pynchon. Which story will be omitted has not been revealed. According to an item in the New York Times of September 23, 1983 announcing the publication, "'Pynchon became annoyed about the illegal pirating of his stories,' Melanie Jackson, the author's literary agent, said."

The Viking Press has recently acquired reprint rights to V. and The Crying of Lot 49 from J. B. Lippincott. The Viking editions of these novels will contain textual emendations which first appeared in, for example, the Bantam paperbacks. Publication dates have not been announced, though we understand that Viking, which has been expecting Pynchon's next manuscript for several months, may schedule release of the reprints to take advantage of publicity generated by the new novel--whenever that appears.
Bibliography

We would like to remind our readers that they are invited to contribute bibliographic information about bibliographies, dissertations, books, chapters, essays, articles, reviews, interviews, translations, newspaper and magazine stories, fragments, oddments, stray comments, conference papers, and anything else of the sort which seems significant, interesting, or otherwise valuable and worthy of wider publicity with specific reference to Pynchon. We also welcome news of work in progress, circulating manuscripts, and forthcoming works.

PYNCHON REPRINTS:

*Entropy.* Troy Town: Trystero, 1957 [sic].


Contains "Low-Lands" and "The Secret Integration" in English, with an introduction and notes in Japanese.

CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


"Pynchon's novels are central to modern American writing. Historically alert and historically conditioned, they are cybernetic novels generating, like the world itself, information in excess of mastery and systems in excess of relationship, displaying what has been called a 'paranoid' style to deal with the entropic world of random and dehumanizing energy, yet creating textual energy and generic and linguistic proliferation on a huge scale in an attempt to redeem the word."


Mentions Pynchon.


"With Thomas Pynchon's V. and Joseph Heller's Catch-22, we enter more firmly into the modern mode, where the novelist is conscious of modernist techniques and attitudes and uses them as needed, while at the same time remaining solidly within traditional American themes: 'Americanized Modern,' we might label their works. V. is the more elusive piece of work and suggests a future development in Pynchon of even greater indirection, toward that self-consciousness of technique which has been associated with postmodernism." Lot 49

"is a major modernist achievement: a novel to be read not so much as one would read other novels, but as a work which serves as an experimental development of a major talent whose flowering would occur in Gravity's Rainbow." GR "has become the Ulysses of the seventies... At the beginning of the decade, Gravity's Rainbow seemed an aberration; at the end, it is a traditional novel."


"Pynchon seems to disbelieve in the power of the mind to shape experience to its private satisfaction, even in the province of his art."


"Pynchon has been the last young male novelist in America to receive abundant praise from older writers."


Weisenburger, Steven. "Contra Naturam?: Usury in William Gaddis's JR." Genre, 13, 1 (1980), 93-109. (93, 94, 108, 109) "Thus, as Gravity's Rainbow concludes Pynchon is affirming the imaginative spark—compassion—that links characters together and lifts them above the traps of technology and into 'systems of caring.'"


Contributors

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