PYNCHON NOTES

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Introduction

The number and variety of critical responses to Gravity's Rainbow have been extensive, yet often these responses have been traditional in their critical approaches. However, Pynchon wrote Gravity's Rainbow during the time "poststructuralism" and "deconstruction" were fast becoming forces in literary production and reception. Pynchon's novel posits and amalgamates endless structures (narrative, existential, scientific, historical, etc.) that often fall apart during the act of reading—unless the reader props these crumbling structures with an extratextual, totalizing structure. Most of the essays contained in this issue of Pynchon Notes do not seek to prop up particular structures; instead, they seek to explore some of the deconstructive narratives Pynchon has given play within the zone of his text. Whether Pynchon's sense of structures that come-and-go derives from some awareness of deconstruction is not the point, but as an activity of reading, deconstruction does offer Pynchon's readers a new perspective on the text.

In the first essay, "Thomas Pynchon and the American Dream," Louis Mackey reads Pynchon as engaged with other American writers in a struggle to free themselves from a Puritan heritage of depravity and determinism so that they may embrace an American dream of innocence and originality. Yet Mackey sees this opposition of heritage and dream as always already interpenetrated—the American dream as supplement to Puritan tradition. Gravity's Rainbow, however, deconstructs both views by highlighting each's belatedness, incompleteness, and inability to allow for the condition Slothrop finally discovers: "just feeling natural." Joel D. Black, in "Pynchon's Eve of Destruction," focuses on a different dialectic: extinction and transformation. He cites how each functions in fictions designed to rationalize history—history becoming a vast encyclopedia that reflects post-Enlightenment rationality and not necessarily truth. Gravity's Rainbow's metafictional project is to explore these other cultural fictions; however, Black sees Gravity's Rainbow perpetually displacing
its own assertions, denying its own encyclopedic project. In Black's view, the novel offers not an alternative rationalization of events but "a seriously playful challenge" to the will to rationalize and to control.

Terry Caesar turns his attention to the condition of "mindlessness," which he sees as a necessary condition of "mindfulness." To show how mindlessness permeates Gravity's Rainbow, "'Trapped inside Their frame with your wastes piling up': Mindless Pleasures in Gravity's Rainbow" examines how waste, particularly "shit," functions as a trope that seeks to eliminate itself from the text, yet is always also a constituent element of the text. In the novel, "Waste is the sign of what the text seeks to bring under the control of meaning as well as what it seeks to release from meaning." Mindless pleasures and mindful pleasures, then, are each inscribed in the other. Steven Weisenburger's essay, "The Chronology of Episodes in Gravity's Rainbow," is a plea (possibly embattled in context with the other essays) for a surface textual structure—that of a great circle. He sees the text as a "Mandala" structured by the chronology that can be extracted from the novel and by particular key dates that coincide with religious feast days. The evidence presented (and this is only a sample from a book-length study now in search of a publisher) is considerable, and Weisenburger's essay implicitly reminds us that Pynchon is capable of having his text both ways: structured and deconstructive.

Instead of reading Gravity's Rainbow with relation to some ordering system either inside or outside (or both) the text, Stephen P. Schuber questions the entire activity of placing the text in any "orbit" (context) when the text is already displaced from the presumed authorial authority that would privilege particular contexts for reading. As "Textual Orbits/Orbiting Criticism: Deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow" suggests, the novel forces the issue of what constitutes the critical image of a unified text, but critics have yet to address Gravity's Rainbow's problematic textuality. In the review essay that completes this issue, I show how Molly Hite's new book, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, partakes of
poststructuralist and deconstructive activities of reading to explore how epistemologies seeking to order Pynchon's fictional worlds discover only a mass of "descriptive residue" that has no "Holy Center."

Orders occur in Pynchon's texts, but Hite finds no single Order; instead, she traces the trope of the "absent insight" which motivates the quests of characters and readers alike.

It must be stressed that the following essays offer readings of Gravity's Rainbow that have been influenced by a current set of critical and philosophical ideas. Thus the claims made here are either focused or distorted by the lens of critical perspective. For what is, indeed, lacking in any deconstructive enterprise concerning Pynchon's writing is an established set of texts from Pynchon as to his intentions or philosophies of life and art. As readers we have only the novels. But the novels are not always consistent in their perspective, the characters are rarely singular in their assertions, and the narratives certainly exceed the boundaries of the genre. It might be that in the last analysis Pynchon's writing defies deconstruction just as it has defied other, more traditional, critical approaches.

I am prompted to make these qualifications after reading Pynchon's "Introduction" to Slow Learner, the recently published collection of his early stories. While dwelling on his novice mistakes in fiction writing and all but disowning the stories (warning the reader of "some mighty tiresome passages... juvenile and delinquent too"), Pynchon makes some statements about the function of literature with relation to life that seemingly contravene many of the assumptions regularly made about his texts. For example, Pynchon writes, "The problem [with "Under the Rose"] is like the problem with 'Entropy': beginning with something abstract--a thermodynamic coinage or the data in a guidebook--and only then going on to try to develop plot and characters. This is simply, as we say in the profession, ass backwards. Without some grounding in human reality, you are apt to be left only with another apprentice exercise." And he later brings this notion of "some grounding in human reality" closer to home: "Displacing my personal experience..."
off into other environments went back at least as far as 'The Small Rain.' Part of this was an unkind impatience with fiction I felt then to be 'too autobiographical.' Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. Moreover, contrary evidence was all around me, though I chose to ignore it, for in fact the fiction both published and unpublished that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live."

Granted, Pynchon is writing about his early stories and largely pointing out weaknesses in them, but the tone of these two passages suggests a current allegiance to a set of ideas that is strikingly traditional rather than postmodern or deconstructionist. On the other hand, Pynchon also dwells on his early attempts at projecting a writer's "pose," and could it be that this Introduction is also a pose--only better contrived? The only story in the collection Pynchon states he likes more than dislikes is "The Secret Integration." He describes this story as "a journeyman . . . effort." Yet one could also describe the Introduction to Slow Learner as journeyman work, particularly in its style and tone; indeed, Pynchon appears to be so forthcoming here that one almost has to conclude he must be putting us on again. I am hesitant to draw this conclusion exclusively because, on the one hand, I want to believe that Pynchon has finally dropped his guard here and given us a glimpse at the man behind the texts. On the other hand, however, I hear in the back of my mind "Proverbs for Paranoids, 3: If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers."

Far from invalidating the essays that follow, the assertions in Slow Learner add to the ensemble of texts we designate as Pynchon and offer to his readers (possibly the real slow learners) yet another perspective for reading and interpretation.
Look at a rainbow. While it lasts, it is, or appears to be, a great arc of many colors occupying a position out there in space. . . . And now, before it fades, recollect all you have ever been told about the rainbow and its causes, and ask yourself the question Is it really there?

--Owen Barfield

Ever since Emerson—since long before Emerson actually, but I have to start somewhere, so I start with an open-and-shut case—American writers have struggled to liberate themselves from their Puritan heritage; from the doctrine of predestination, which says that the present and the future are irrevocably determined by the absolute past; and from the doctrine of total depravity, which says that no matter what you do you are sure to do it wrong. As against predestination, the American wants to believe that the present is a time of origination; as against total depravity, that actions proceed from an innocent mind and will. The American dream is a dream of innocence and originality.

To continue with the obvious: the dream never comes true. Emerson's manifesto of originary self-reliance is fixated on the past it refuses and repeats; his protestation of transcendental innocence is a denial of corruption corrupted by the guilt it disavows. His consciousness blocks out realities (sexuality, death, etc.) that do not illustrate his thesis. But the repressed returns to cloud his Edenic vision. Cata- racts, as it were, of the transparent eyeball. Hawthorne cannot decide between the antinomian forest and the orthodox city. Temperamentally unable to breathe the transcendental gas, he has no illusions of natural innocence, and he knows that reality demands (though it will not inevitably reward) a candid confession of guilt and a stoic acceptance of destiny. His hopes for the future of the race are scarcely more
than wistful longings for an emancipation he sees no reason (in principle) to believe in. In "Song of Myself" Whitman manages to achieve the ideal American personality: Adamic, free, forward looking, sound of body and soul. But only as a myth. A colossal fiction that he himself did not and could not inhabit. A fiction that presumed to encompass crucifixion and resurrection (Christ's or, equivalently, Walt's), but which could not even contain the Civil War. Whitman's poetry, which begins as a celebration of life, passes through clouds of windy mysticism and ends in rapt meditation on death. Whitman the man, who displays himself on the frontispiece of his first edition as a hippie Christ, winds up hyping the good grey poet. A model of hygienic purity if not an insufferable prude.

The list could go on forever. But you get the drift. The question is: Why is it (apparently) impossible for Americans to escape the negations of New England Calvinism? The answer, I think, is simple. Am I still explaining the obvious when I surmise that for the American writer Puritanism is indistinguishable from reality? The conduct of life, the regulation of society, and the production of literary texts (inter alia) depend on the preservation of order (read: suppression of disorder) and respect for reason (read: suppression of the passions). But the only available paradigm of reason and order is Calvinist theology (or one of its secular derivatives), and outside the boundaries of that paradigm nothing has the right to exist, save in hell and Rhode Island.

That was (of course) exactly what the guardians of orthodoxy had in mind. In Michael Wigglesworth's great poem on the last judgment, the ultimacy and acceptability of the divine decrees, even for the preterite, is a function of their superior rationality. The reprobate infants appear before the throne of God and protest their innocence. But after God has taken off their arguments one by one and demonstrated their culpability, their consciences confess that "his Reasons are the stronger." The punishment of the damned is tolerable to the elect because it satisfies the demand for moral order no matter what the cost in personal wretchedness.
Therefore, when American writers try (as they always do) to reject predestination (the tyranny of the past) and total depravity (the tyranny of guilt) in favor of originality and innocence, they are bound to see their exit from Puritanism as a flight from reason to unreason and from order into chaos. But this is intolerable—the irrational cannot be borne—and literally insufferable—the unordered cannot be—and so they invariably retreat, under whatever cover of mystification, into the very structures they tried to break out of. Guilt and predestination are the American reality, for which there is no cure that is not worse than the disease.

How else could one write a book? To write a book is to impose order and rationality on the boundless possibilities of language. The writer functions as a Calvinist God, predestining the creatures of his pen to weal or woe, inscribing in them from the first their total dependence on his authorial and authoritative decrees. The possibility of the book, presuming an omnipotent and omniscient narrator, demands the belatedness and impotence of its characters. In both senses of that word. The book itself, bound snugly within its covers, with well-defined beginning, middle, and end, is the suppression of everything irrational and chaotic. Life may occasionally fall apart, and death, while it does end things, is rarely a consummation. But the book hangs together and provides its readers with a convincing and fulfilling conclusion. Every Book is Doomsday: a graphematic eschaton.

Now then, riding the same old rails, here comes Tom Pynchon, belated and guilt-ridden and very wise about all these things. His Puritan paranoid reflex honed to a fine edge and blown up to more than cosmic proportions, he too wants out. He wants a way out of war and work and government and austerity, and a way in to love, dreams, the spirit, the senses, and all the trivial joys that might (if there were any) fill the idle hours. He also knows that there is no way out, or rather, that the way out of Puritan reason and Puritan order is the way to dissolution. The way of the preterite. But, unlike his predecessors, Thomas Pynchon bites the bullet. He writes Gravity's Rainbow. The book that Leaves of Grass and The Scarlet Letter just failed to be, a book that is and must be a
rejection of all the patterns and all the powers of the book.

A lot of people have trouble reading, or at least finishing, Pynchon's novel. Maybe they're on to something. After all, Gravity's Rainbow (hereafter GR) is not exactly your ordinary book. It's what happens to the book when it is released from the Puritan reflex. From the itch for order that creates international cartels to profit from international carnage, and from the lust of reason (aka technology) that rapes the universe with its rockets. GR is (therefore) a wholesale rejection of every standard of taste, an offense against every rule of literary decorum, and a repudiation of the conditions of literary reality. It is a monument to vulgarity and a wagonload (Pynchon would have said "shitload") of obscenities. Qua novel, it is a gratuitous indecency.

Well, not quite. Pynchon is not quite liberated. As he observes, paranoia keeps flooding in. In lots of ways Tyrone Slothrop and Thomas Pynchon are the same persona. Neither fully succeeds in freeing himself from the sense that he is dominated and victimized by all the Western, Christian, European, and American forms of reason and order: industry, technology, government, work, law, international finance, and war. Which are, after all, just the secular reduction and global expansion of the Puritan ethos.

GR wants to live--honestly--outside the law. A compost of mindless pleasures, it celebrates moments of pure innocence and perfect originality neither scripted nor rehearsed nor staged but simply enjoyed. And yet, when anyone does step outside the boundaries drawn by the Firm, he is likely to be snuffed. Tantivy Mucker-Maffick was erased when he leaked Ned Pointsman's plot to Slothrop. What cannot be recovered for and reinstated in the system will be denied all reality by the system. Roger Mexico's love for Jessica Swanlake, which is authentic and therefore strictly out of bounds, is replaced by her preordained marriage to Jeremy. Roger was a holiday from the austerities of war conceded to Jessica by the Firm (it kept her happy in her work); her marriage to the Beaver is one of the even more terrible austerities of peace.
Almost without exception experiences that seem to have escaped the surveillance of the Firm turn out to be its products. Slothrop's hardon for Katje Borgesius, which looks spontaneous enough and issues more than one mindless ejaculation, is a reflex prepared in his infancy. His opportunity to stick it in and get it off is prearranged by Pointsm an with the help of a carefully conditioned octopus. Katje herself is a witting co-conspirator. Brigadier General Pudding, now chained to a desk and obliged to shuffle papers, relives the reality of World War I (a reality compounded of mud, shit, blood, and the manly love of comrades) in his sado-masochistic rendezvous with the Queen of the Night, who forces him to eat her filth in exchange for the gift of pain. But the account of these meetings, at once nauseating and deeply moving, is finally chilling. Domina Nocturna is Katje Borgesius in leather and furs, her performance a scenario written, produced, and directed by Ned Pointsm an (complete with laxative tablets).

Reality is a spectacular put on by the Firm. Literary reality included. Nothing exists outside the system save death and dissolution. But death and dissolution are themselves effects of the system. From the people who brought you reality. The Puritan God (and the omniscient narrator), when he elects a few for salvation (eternal life), by the same act consigns the remainder to damnation (everlasting death). Election is reprobation. Life is death. There is no escape. In or out, you are in—-that is, a creature of--the Firm. For the Firm (God, the author, etc.) ordains the dichotomies (in or out, life or death) by which persons/personae are predestined and in which, therefore, they are trapped. It is not that there is nothing outside the system. It's much worse: there is no such thing as "outside." As Father Rapier observes: "Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of being connected one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good. The word has ceased to have meaning" (539). And as Roger Mexico realizes, the "interesting" (and probably unanswerable) question is "which is worse: living on as Their pet, or death?"(713). Whatever you decide, your life and your death are defined by Them. Death without and living death within.
sition: robs escape of its promise and does nothing to make captivity more attractive.

That's Pynchon's problem. Pynchon the writer. No wonder the stuttering raconteur of GR is embarrassed by his own omniscience and half-ashamed of the blatant artificiality of his artifice. If he plays omnipotence to the hilt, then (not only his characters but) we (gentle readers) obediently gorge when Super-Pointsman strokes our critical members. And if he shows his hand, tips his trick, we are cut loose to twist in the wind. You read what's set down for you or you don't read at all. Either way your number is up. Your goose (you are goosed) is well-done and hanging high.

Apparently. But maybe not quite. Pynchon-narrator is red-faced and red-handed. Caught in the act. Caught, that is, at the most embarrassing moment of all: between inauguration and completion, cause and effect, complication and denouement. The instant of ejaculation, which (if you're caught at it) is thereby forever premature and unconsummated.

GR is a text poised at Brennenschluss. Burn-out: the interface between the exhaustion of the power that sent the rocket up and the first tug of the force that will bring it down. Suppose the inconceivable: if there were no gravity, the path of the rocket would be a straight line. After Brennenschluss it would continue climbing forever, powered by inertia. But there is gravity, and the rocket falls. Gravity bends the straight line of its trajectory into a parabola. The instant after Brennenschluss is the infinitesimal point (\(\Delta t\)) just before gravity takes charge: the bare far side of orgasm just before your cock shrivels and Chiquita's picture flutters to the bathroom floor. At that point the rocket is neither launched nor falling, but—in that timeless moment and only there—hanging in space.

GR and its anti-hero Tyrone Slothrop are likewise arrested in the moment, out of time and out of history, that follows the burn-out of Western civilization. World War II was the explosion that exhausted its power. The Zone (northern Europe after the collapse of the New Order) is the instant after Brennenschluss, frozen forever in the text. In Pynchon's novel (at
"There are . . . no zones but the Zone!" (333).

As Pynchon informs Karl Marx, "Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression" (317). The engine of death and repression, of which New England orthodoxy is only the American variant, also powers behaviorist psychology, captivated by a dream of perfect control. And the technology of plastics—fired by Kekulé's vision of the benzene ring as the worm ouroboros—aspires to replace nature with a wholly self-contained system of artificial substances. Not to mention war and the rocketry by which the art of war is perfected: a "celebration of markets" (105) planned and executed by homosexual masculinity, an introversion of the male principle which (even when it uses her) neutralizes and displaces the female. Emersonian self-reliance, via Whitmanian masturbatory self-sufficiency, ends as fatal faggotry in high places. And "the real and only fucking is done on paper" (616).

The preterite of course continue to die. Like his precursors, Pynchon is obsessed with the thought of breaking out of Puritanism—away from death and repression—into the exuberant vitality of mindless pleasures. But for Pynchon, as for his predecessors, to run from Puritanism would be to run into madness and chaos. An escape from the system (rationality and order) would be an escape from being (identity) and truth (intelligibility). Why is Slothrop in the Zone? Either they have put him there for a reason, or else he's just there without reason. Paranoia or anti-paranoia? Tyrone isn't sure he wouldn't actually rather have that reason (434). With it he's doomed, without it he'll disappear. Can he make it in the Zone without Pointsman? As Pointsman's control is relaxed and finally withdrawn, Slothrop slowly disintegrates, becoming at first invisible and at last inconceivable. The escape does not come off. And the novel (which for that reason is not a novel) remains fixed at \( \Delta t \), between "It is too late" (3) and "There is time" (760). 

GR is the uninhabitable interface between a deadly conspiracy of predestination and depravity and an impossible fantasy of innocence and originality. Literature at Brennenschluss. The literature of exhaustion, with no repletion in sight.
Virtually (it is impossible to be sure) every character, object, event, and institution in GR is intricately and obscenely (in both senses) connected with every other. That these connections exist adumbrates a pattern in which every particular has its place, its identity, its destiny. But the very complexity and confusion of the linkages frustrates the will to order and insinuates that all of these "Kute Korrespondences" (590) are random and lawless. There is too much and (for that reason) too little. The reader trying to dope out this "novel" is stuck at the interface of paranoia--Pynchon has designed and executed this book, and it's up to me to figure out what it means--and anti-paranoia--the whole thing is a medley of incoherences, no one is really in control, and there's no point worrying about what it means. Is the reader's role defined and thus constrained by the Omniscient Narrator (Tom Pynchon playing God)? Or is he released, like Slothrop, to be dismembered and dispersed among the errant signifiers of a preterite text? Between the slippery signifier and the superintendent signified, between word and world, between the either and the or, there is an arrow. And the caption: YOU ARE NOT HERE.

The American dream was interrupted from the first by a recurring and unshakeable nightmare of belatedness and corruption. The Civil War was the waking reality. But in fact the dream was interrupted before the first. The founding fathers of Lincoln's address were already 150 years too late. Their version of innocence and originality--"we hold these truths to be self-evident"--was a desperate ruse to finesse their forefathers' convictions of total depravity and ineluctable predestination. The forefathers' forefathers were, in their time, exorcizing their own sense of belatedness. It was for these hard-shell Calvinists that America was the beginning place: the Canaan given them by God, where they might build a new Jerusalem free of the carnality and prelacy of old Europe. In themselves they conjoined, impossibly, originality and belatedness, innocence and depravity. The controversy in old New England between the orthodox and the antinomians was only the outward and visible sign of
a conflict deep within the Puritan consciousness: the civil war in the American soul.

More than one American writer has done his best to awaken from the nightmare of guilt and belatedness while continuing to dream of innocence and originality. Thomas Pynchon (aka Tyrone Slothrop)--how far-fallen!--is only the last of his line (569). Toward the end of GR we get two views of America. One is the terminal raving of that most corrupt of corrupt old Europeans, Captain Blicero:

"And sometimes I dream of discovering the edge of the World. [. . .]

"America was the edge of the World. [. . .] Europe had found the site for its Kingdom of Death, that special Death the West had invented. [. . .] America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it. It wasn't Europe's Original Sin--the latest name for that is Modern Analysis--but it happens that Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for.

"In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. [. . .] Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. [. . .] Death and Europe are separate as ever, their love still unconsummated. Death only rules here. It has never, in love, become one with. . . ." (722-23; bracketed ellipses mine)

Weissmann's America is Europe's Death: a gift from the invisible powers, by Europe refused and now returned (at the end of the world) to occupy and to rule, but not to consummate their love. His sacrifice of Gottfried is at once an attempt to break out of the cycle of infection and death and a cosmic Liebestod uniting Blicero and his Lustknabe in a love that is Immortal and a death that is final. But the ascent is betrayed to Gravity, and the rocket with its victim, rising on a promise of Escape, is in bondage to falling (758).

And here's Slothrop's America. He has just found, in the occupied Zone, the harmonica he lost in '38 or '39 down the Toilet at the Roseland Ballroom. But he no longer remembers that far back. Where should he go and what should he do?

Yup, still thinking there's a way to get back. He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose--but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go. She's whispered love me too often to him in his sleep, vampished insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises. One day--he can see a day--he might be able finally to say sorry, sure and leave her . . . but not just yet. One more try, one more chance, one more deal, one more transfer to a hopeful line. Maybe it's just pride. What if there's no place for him in her stable any more? If she has turned him out, she'll never explain. Her "stallions" have no rights. She is immune to their small, stupid questions. She is exactly the Amazon Bitch your fantasies have called her to be. (623)

For Slothrop/Pynchon America is a nostalgia for home and love. A mother (and lover) to whom he would like, for a while at least, to return. But Slothrop's America is haunted by a fearful ghost: "the coupling of 'Jarm' and 'I' in the primal dream. Who can he go to with it?" (623). The longing for home and love is troubled by the thought that the nest was fouled before the albatross of self had even hatched.

Slothrop's anxiety reflects the anxiety of America itself (herself?): the coupling of hope and fear. For Weissmann, America is Ground Zero: Europe's lover and her destroyer. For Tyrone, America is the place of origin . . . an origin always already corrupted. Both of these reports are torn by ambivalence. Blicero sees America as the end of the world, and longs to be lovingly one with her death. Slothrop dreams of a long-lost mother/lover, and knows in his heart of hearts that she is an Amazon Bitch. For both of them America is a way of return that is refused.

"Slothrop, just suckin' on his harp, is closer to being a spiritual medium than he's been yet, and he doesn't even know it" (622). In one of our last
views of him, Slothrop is recollecting his youth—a garbage heap of American trivia—"and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. . . ." (626) That's one of the few occurrences of the word—it may be the unique occurrence of the feeling—"natural" in the whole of GR. Nature's nation!

The problem is to find a way through the oppositions: orthodoxy/antinomianism, predestination/freedom, depravity/innocence, reason/madness, order/chaos, rocket/Gravity, male/female. The Opposition. Them. Opposed to the Opposition is the Counterforce. Of what avail the Counterforce? Roger Mexico fears the worst. He may (and does, literally) "'piss on Their rational arrangements!'" (639), and he would like to "disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man." But the hard fact is that "[t]he Man has a branch office in each of our brains," so that even in opposing Them we "will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical. . . ." (712-13) In this worst-case scenario the opposition clearly becomes: Their life or your death. Which disjunction is also, as we have seen, a conjunction: Their life is your death. You get it either way.

Could that be the way out? Strictly speaking—that is, speaking as loosely as possible—it does no good to invert the oppositions. Opposed, the oppositions remain in force. But there is some point to the flip-flop. If the opposition is upended, and if the inversion is equivalent to the inverted, then in effect the opposition is leveled. Displaced from vertical and hierarchic opposition into horizontal and unvalorized apposition. "Outside and Inside interpiercing one another too fast, too finely labyrinthine, for either category to have much hegemony any more" (681). That may be GR's way of describing itself. And if that goes through, we may be home free.

"The dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you and I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad hoc adventure" (706). Adopted by the Gross Suckling Conference, the "resolution" here set down is a typical Counterforce gesture. Paradoxical as it is, it may be (cf. dozens
of references in the New Testament) a definition of grace: the state (pun intended) in which everything is gratuitous and free, if also without future and without promise. A grab-bag of mindless pleasures. "Your objective is not the King--there is no King--but momentary targets such as the Radiant Hour" (674).

Byron the Bulb achieves immortality because G. E. and its C(ommitee on) I(ncandescent) A(nomalies) cannot anticipate the random capacities of bulb-snatchers. Rocketman scarfs the hash, right under the noses of the Russian guards, Mickey Rooney, Harry S. Truman, and the whole Potsdam peace conference. There are holes in the web. Hope is perilously possible in the interstices. Your job is to locate and occupy the uncharted place between the exclusive oppositions: the contingencies neither foreseen nor provided for by the busy spiders who weave your destiny.

One might, in her anti-paranoid moments, wish that were true. But is it credible? We have to be wary of belief. Creeds fatten on opposition and hierarchy. And the point is to transgress. Not to oppose or propose opposing positions, but: to transgress absolutely. To put the bananas in the refrigerator not in spite of but simply without any of the good reasons in Chiquita's hat. Just suck on your harp (or whatever organ is at hand), cry (or laugh) mindlessly, and feel natural.

New England Calvinists (as opposed to their co-religionists in Old England) were covenantal theologians. The Dutch rub. The elect, chosen by God for salvation in total disregard of their merits (they have none), nevertheless strike a bargain with their Redeemer. In return for election, they are bound (their part of the bargain) to keep his commandments and prosper his will. And thereby prosper. Election, though it preserves the elect from the otherwise ineluctable consequences of guilt, is not exactly liberation. If they are freed from sin and death, the elect are also (thereby) freed for obedience to the law of God: free to do what (God has decided) is good for them. Election entails obligation. It binds the elect to conditions, and if the conditions are not met, their election is uncertain.
If anyone is free—in the sense of "let loose"—in a world like this, it may be the preterite who, by virtue of God's neglect, are released at once from salvation and from the conditions of salvation. They die, of course, but (a) living on Their terms is not importantly different from dying, and (b) the preterite at least die without strings attached.

Freedom is not the opposite of predestination. It is the neutralizing transgression of the boundary between predestination and freedom. Just as innocence is not the opposite of depravity, but the appositional reduction of the difference between innocence and guilt. Seaman Bodine, farting melodies through the siren-ring installed in his asshole, signals "a return toward innocence" (740). As he gives Slothrop his Dumbo feather (a T-shirt stained with John Dillinger's blood), he tells him, "what we need isn't right reasons, but just that grace" (741). That's the wisdom of the preterite: of Pig Bodine, perpetually AWOL; of Plecha-zunga, whose misplaced pigskin preserves Tyrone's embattled testicles; and of all those trusting porkers, "possessed by innocence they couldn't lose" (555), who lovingly follow William Slothrop to the slaughter.

Analogously, GR is not the opposite of the novel. It does not simply contradict the assumption of autoteleology that underlies our notion of the well-made book: the book as onanistic system. It is the transgression and the displacement of the will to contain and control. A book that is not a book: is it any wonder that the critical establishment has wanted to reject this... thing? This text which violates the (paradigmatically Puritanical) second law of thermodynamics by exploiting the powers left over when all the available energy has been used up and fiction is brought to terminal equilibrium. GR is a text always already from before the first remaindered: it is what remains when all the oppositions have failed—in flagrant disregard for the law of contradiction, that (paradigmatically Puritanical) most fundamental of all the foundations of law and order—to cancel each other out. What remains is this:

There's no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made—at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos
of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-round assholery[. . .] with hopes for success and hopes for disaster about equally high (and no, that doesn't cancel out to apathy--it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives). [. . .] Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as "the glozing neuters of the world" have no easy road to haul down, Wear-the-Pantsers, just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When's the last time you felt intensely lukewarm? eh? (676-77)

Now everybody. . . . (677, 760)

iii

Of course, if you do put bananas in the refrigerator, you get spoiled bananas and nothing to eat. Chiquita's revenge. And if you refuse to color within the lines, you get an F in--no, friends and neighbors, not coloring--: you get an F in conduct. John Dillinger and Jesus and Judas and all the trusting pigs and stupid lemmings of this world--not a one of them would color within the lines. They all got F. Tyrone Slothrop is taken apart and scattered. Maybe a D-?

It makes little sense, therefore, to ask: does Pynchon get away? He has disappeared--has always already been invisible and inconceivable--just like Tyrone. Does GR succeed in finding and following the "fork in the road America never took"? (556). Not to say. A preterite text, GR is not authentic. It is a work without integrity and without certifiable meaning. There is no definitive edition. Cut loose from superintendent significance (superintendence and significance are Their prerogative), the fiction like its author and like its hero is disassembled (dissembled) and dispersed. GR "exists" in diaspora and takes effect by dissemination.

GR suggests, both by what it says and by what it does, that everything is connected to everything else. But if that is the case, then nothing connects meaningfully with anything. Meaning demands connection, but also differentiation. For example, the differentiation
of the message from the static. But if there is no determinable difference—if anything and everything might mean everything and anything—then there is no meaning. Just noise. When the plot (both senses) has expanded to include everything, then there is no plot. No conspiracy and no story.

Too much is nothing at all: the problem of the author. But not enough is just about everything: the situation of the reader. YOU ARE NOT HERE. Where you are is $\Delta t$, not quite here but no longer there. "Their neglect is your freedom" (694). On his own, without an omniscient narrator—or (what's worse) with a narrator who blows his omniscience every time he opens his mouth—the reader is free to pursue his own mindless pleasure along the interfaces of this twisted text. Or for that matter (the reader as Gravity), to construct his own novel—an infinite series of novels—out of the accumulated wastes of his civilization, lovingly preserved if somewhat casually packaged by the last of the Pynchons. Those who do manage to read GR find that they have to read it again and again. And it's a different book every time.

Is that a description of narrative entropy? Or is it the final triumph of the preterite: their radical innocence (indistinct from original guilt) and their primordial originality (indistinct from terminal belatedness)? Is this the American Dream? Is it really there? Not to ask.

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Notes


2 Some of them are remanded to his journals; where they function as the unconscious of his public pronouncements.


5 Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 177. All subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

6 Happily, they are not tempted to seek an anodyne in any of the varieties of self-mystification exported by the East. The point is not to elude one's heritage (the example of Emerson advises against that), but to confront the West and combat it on its own ground.

7 Cf. St. Augustine, Confessions, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor, 1963), Book I, chapter 6, 20: "I do not know where I came from into this mortal life or (should I say?) into this living death."

8 It may be argued that Pynchon's fiction is sexist, since (with the notable exception of Oedipa Maas) the women in his novels exist mainly to be used (more often abused) by the men. As the hapless creatures complain, "'Tits 'n' ass . . . . , tits 'n' ass. That's all we are around here!'" (507). Well, after all, it is a man's world. But the message of GR in this connection (if it has one) is: sooner or later Gravity wins. And Gravity is a female force. Gravity alone receives and reverses the thrust of a self-assertive masculinity. Mother Nature will not be fucked over by homosexual technology. The straight arrow: parabola:: the erect phallus: the climaxing and descending phallus. What comes between—and makes the difference—is the female = Gravity. Receiving the erect phallus (the straight arrow of flight at G=0), she bends it into the parabola of detumescence. Hers is the power of the passive, the venereal potency that always in the end subsumes and subdues the sword of Mars. That may be another reason to regard the rainbow—Gravity's own—as a sign of hope: if not the reality of the dream, then at least its possibility. Whether this is a feminist gesture or just another turn of the chauvinist screw I will not attempt to decide. I do know that it is a pervasive motif throughout GR.
Pynchon's Eve of Destruction
Joel D. Black

In the epigraph to Gravity's Rainbow, the German rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun declares that "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." Even before his fiction begins, Pynchon offers a chilling instance of the supreme Cover-Up, the Ultimate Rationale which, in effect, excuses the human race in advance for inflicting unimaginable atrocities upon itself, culminating in its own annihilation. So long as the brute and brutal reality of extinction can be rationalized or fictionalized as a mere episode of transformation from one stage to another in some idealistic evolution of the spirit, mankind can plunge ahead mindlessly towards its own destruction.

Pynchon's most ambitious work to date deals precisely with the dialectic announced in its epigraph--of extinction and transformation. If Tristram Shandy could claim that his narrative is informed by "two contrary motions"--that his "work is digressive, and it is progressive too,--and at the same time" (Tristram Shandy, I, 22)--the view of history presented in Pynchon's fiction is propelled by the (counter-)forces of extinction and transformation. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that extinction and transformation are the motivating forces behind historical dialectic itself; doesn't their combined interaction perfectly describe the process of Aufhebung in Hegel whereby a subject cancels and supersedes itself at the same time? But by simultaneously negating and conserving itself, by negating itself in order to conserve itself, doesn't the Hegelian subject preclude the absolute finality, the irrevocable loss entailed in the phenomenon of extinction, that "mute and nonproductive death" which Jacques Derrida has discerned in his critique of Hegel as "death pure and simple, absolute negativity"? In the dialectical movement of Aufhebung, what is negated is not eradicated but, on the contrary, raised to a higher level of life. Nothing in the idealist schemes of Hegel, von Braun, or the latter's fictive parallel in Gravity's Rainbow--Captain Blicero--is irrevocably
lost; rather, all being is repeatedly transformed to a higher power. Yet, of course, something is lost, forgotten, passed over; some excess invariably escapes the closed idealist schemes of dialectical self-realization. That excess, that waste which is excluded from idealist salvation-schemes, is the recurrent point of reference in Gravity's Rainbow.

Extinction in the sense of absolute negativity—that which is suppressed in all idealist salvation-schemes, sacred and secular—is unquestionably a major preoccupation in Pynchon's text. Dodoes and Hereros alike are the collective victims of genocidal colonial invasions. The former are wiped out in the seventeenth century by the Dutch settlers on Mauritius; the latter were nearly exterminated in 1904 by General von Trotha's troops in South-West Africa. Nearly exterminated, but not quite. The descendants of the surviving Hereros are today allied with the descendants of their former exterminators in a joint effort to suppress a common enemy—a new generation of African rebels. Ironizing these shifting alliances between victims and their victimizers still further, Pynchon transplants the Hereros who survived von Trotha's rampage from Africa to Germany, where, far from being raised to a higher level of being, they are transformed into the Schwarzkommando, the slave-troops of the German rocket-industry during the Second World War. Yet despite this transformation, this apparent co-opting and amalgamating of the victim into the oppressor's historical program, the victim's impulse to extinction is still active: "Inside the Schwarzkommando there are forces, at present, who have opted for sterility and death. [...] The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904. [...] But to the Europeans, conned by their own Baby Jesus Con Game, what they were witnessing among these Hereros was a mystery potent as that of the elephant graveyard, or the lemmings rushing into the sea" (316-18).

Because Gravity's Rainbow presents conventional versions of historical events like von Trotha's suppression of the Herero rebellion in the Südwest, and convenient scientific rationalizations such as von Braun's denial of extinction in nature as the fictions
they themselves are, it will not do to call Gravity's Rainbow itself a fiction. Insofar as it exposes fictions which otherwise masquerade as historical facts and scientific theories, Gravity's Rainbow would be more properly designated a meta-fiction. Yet also a meta-fiction, since while Pynchon's text exposes dissimulating fictions for the rationalizing fabrications they are, it does not itself pretend to reveal any "truth." In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon disclaims any pretensions to dialectical self-transcendence, to von Braun's idealistic scheme of transformation through self-negation. Pynchon wisely avoids the ever-present pitfall of exposing such fictions-of-transformation as rationalizations-of-extinction only to re-place them with his own alternative fiction. After all, any encyclopedic undertaking which attempts to get at some hidden central truth in the myriad relations between words, ideas, things, and events is fated to recuperate the very rationalizations which it sets out to critique and overcome, to negate and transcend.

If, in the eighteenth century, the encyclopedist Diderot and his Enlightenment colleagues succeeded in expelling all the old religious deities (and bogies) from the domain of scientific knowledge, they also facilitated the process whereby the work of art was deprived of its ancient affinity with the ideal, or of what Walter Benjamin called the work's "aura"--a kind of luminous halo surrounding the non-reproducible, inimitable art object.5 Pynchon employs a strikingly similar image in Gravity's Rainbow, namely, the rainbow, to indicate, among other things, the former integrity, centrality, and gravitational presence of earthly objects--all of which privileged qualities have been irrevocably lost through the mechanical, reproducible operations of modern technology.6 Art is exposed as artifice; it has been demystified by modern self-conscious and self-critical "artists," and revealed in its original sense of technē, of praxis. Pynchon's encyclopedic fiction presents itself bereft of any privileged structural or gravitational center, and consequently bereft of an aura. The book's very title commemorates the sacral nature of the classical conception of "fine art" which Gravity's Rainbow is incapable of appropriating for itself.
For the leading post-structuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, the absence of the Center or "the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."7 There is no longer a stable "center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions."8 As a de-centered metafiction which perpetually dis-places its own assertions, Gravity's Rainbow ironically undercuts and undermines itself, becoming ultimately an open-ended discursive playground. Pynchon thematizes this play-ground in Gravity's Rainbow with the topos of the "Zone"—the area in war-torn Germany of frenzied reconstruction and re-alignment at the tail-end of the Second World War. There are moments when Pynchon's protagonist Tyrone Slothrop is able to envision this wasteland as a playground in which all the polar principles which animate history are abrogated and transcended, and the Zone is de-centered:

It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back—[ . . . ] maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. . . . (556)

Finally, however, modern history is enacted neither in the de-centered play-ground of Slothrop's imagina-
tion nor in Pynchon's de-centered text, but in "our crippl'd Zone" (760); and even Slothrop's own body is, if not exactly crippled, nevertheless a zone of care-
fully mapped out, intricately surveyed regions which any number of experimenters—fo
erunners of today's Central Intelligence agents—have monitored since his childhood for purposes of industrial research. In this respect, Pynchon brilliantly dramatizes Martin Heidegger's insight that "Man does not only stand in the critical zone . . . He himself, but not he for himself and particularly not through himself alone, is this zone."9 There is nothing original, different, alien, isolated, or sacred about Tyrone Slothrop; this is, in fact, what makes him such an ideal subject for experimental research. He is eminently substitutable;
he is always already caught up in a secular, encyclopedic, reproducible network of references and cross-references. He lacks both the aura of the hero and the gravitational center of the founding patriarch. He is merely Raketemensch: a primitive prototype of the rocket.

Having been the helpless victim of scientific experimentation upon his own body, Slothrop is related to other crippled modern anti-heroes ranging from Georg Büchner's Wozzeck to William Gaddis' protagonist Wyatt Gwyon in another American encyclopedic fiction, The Recognitions. Both Gwyon's and Slothrop's adult sexual behavior is strangely influenced by their physical maltreatment as children. Wyatt Gwyon suffers no end of mortification and medical abuse to his body during a bout of childhood fever: "Week after week, he continued to provide an outlet for this conspiracy of unconscionable talents and insatiable curiosity" on the part of his "healers." As for Slothrop, his exposure as a human guinea pig in an experiment in the '20s to test a new elastic polymer later used in German rocket technology appears to have conditioned him into a state of heightened sexual response in anticipation of the imminent impact of Hitler's V-2 rockets. As an unwitting victim whose body literally becomes a playground for unscrupulous scientific conspiracies, Slothrop represents a peculiarly modern fictional obsession with the mechanization of the human body. As the anti-heroine of Pynchon's first novel, V., had been a self-made bionic Venus (who in the end is taken apart--deconstructed--piece by piece by the children of Valetta), so Orphic Slothrop's intimate connection with the Germans' V-weapons of the Second World War confirms Gravity's Rainbow as Pynchon's V-2.

Slothrop's scientific visage, like that of Wyatt Gwyon, is related to his inherited Calvinism with its closed structures of election and rejection, predestination and preterition. Slothrop's ancestors are New England Calvinists; the earliest, William Slothrop (modeled on Pynchon's own colonial forebear, William Pynchon), wrote a heretical tract called On Preterition which advocated the holiness of the many souls passed over by God when the elect few are chosen. William's
scheme is grounded in a notion of redemption which he conceived during his repeated treks to Boston to lead his pigs to slaughter: "William must've been waiting for the one pig that wouldn't die, that would validate all the ones who'd had to" (555). According to William Slothrop, some form of payment is necessary to redeem the sufferings and the ultimate extermination of the preterite. This, of course, implies an economic system of exchange which can somehow balance extinction with the transformational mystery, the transsubstantial sacrifice of some greater "Erect" individual. (Ironically, the account of William's religious reflections in the seventeenth century interrupts a comic scene in Pynchon's text describing a wild goose chase in which the American serviceman Tyrone helps a German youth find his lost pet lemming—an animal species as prone to racial suicide as the Erdschweinhöhlers, or Aardvark [earth-pork]—people of the Zone [315ff.].) Like his ancestor William Slothrop/Pynchon, Tyrone/Thomas is greatly concerned with the problem of preterition. Very much in doubt of his own election, Tyrone comes to realize that as a potential victim of the rocket, perhaps it's better to be passed over and saved from History's inscrutable selective operations where the chosen few are simply obliterated out of existence.

Slothrop's associate in wartime intelligence, Roger Mexico, responds to the threat of rocket attack in purely secular terms: "'Everyone's equal. Same chances of getting hit. Equal in the eyes of the rocket!'" (57). According to Mexico's statistical training, no particular individual or race is marked or selected for annihilation by the rocket (or, therefore, by its launchers); there is, in other words, no hidden agenda of extinction—it is all a matter of chance. When Mexico is criticized for this sanguine refusal to pay his dues in dread like everyone else, he snaps back, "'it's the damned Calvinist insanity again. Payment. Why must they always put it in terms of exchange?'" (57). As a secular statistician, Mexico believes only in the relative assurances provided by probability and credibility, not in the sheer possibility or the absolute certainty (or, amounting to the same thing, the pure chance) of the inevitable "truth." There is a kind of comfort—one of the few
forms of consolation available in a secular world—in such a modern creed of probability which leaves aside the metaphysical problem of divine destiny or purpose, of the deity who all too easily transforms himself into a demon.13

Like William Slothrop's heretical doctrine of the holiness of the preterite, Roger Mexico's secular creed of statistics is a way of breaking out of the closed, deterministic economy of Calvinist exchange. Another, far more pervasive and collective, attempt to break out of the closed circuits of Judeo-Christian messianic/apocalyptic schemes of salvation-history is the industrial-capitalist enterprise itself.

The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. (412)

Here as elsewhere in Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon develops a twentieth-century theory of history by combining two nineteenth-century discourses—Marx's economic discourse based on the concept of surplus value and Maxwell's thermo-dynamic discourse with its vision of energy-loss and entropy. Behind the tug of wars of theology-secularized-as-ideology, the diversional tactic of geopolitics where each warring nation claims to have God on its side, the actual mechanism of entropic economics continues to accumulate ever-greater deficits in its mad drive toward transcendence, laying waste "most of the World [. . .] in the process."

Contrary to utopian Marxist scenarios, Pynchon's fiction implies that the existing exploitative economic and political system will not be reversed through a revolt of the oppressed masses; these are portrayed, rather, as merely passing from one form of victimage
to another, from victimage in someone else's program of racist genocide to their own program of racial suicide. Pynchon's thermo-economic metaphors suggest instead that the System will simply consume itself in its mindless Faustean quest for (self-)transcendence. All available energy resources will be directed toward keeping the levels of interest and surplus values rising, until the principal, the base values, and all the material resources are depleted, leaving the ever-expanding System to collapse inwards upon itself. After all, the force of Gravity which has eluded physics since Newton's formulation of gravitational law may be nothing else than the quintessential void caused by the (Ptolemaic, Aristotelian, Augustinian) Center's regressive disappearance. Gravitation, in this case, would not be a function of a body's mass as Newtonian mechanics holds, nor would history be the record of the dialectical transformations of matter as Marxist theory insists. Far from simply being the self-negation of the fully-present, immanent or imminent Idea envisioned by Hegelian philosophy, mass and matter are presented by Pynchon (as Derrida would say) as supplements of a fundamental lack. That is to say, gravity and history are respectively predicated on the loss of mass and the exhaustion of matter, on the evacuation and evisceration of merely supplementary--rather than surplus--forms of material existence.

Perhaps the earliest example of secular transcendence out of a closed system of exchange can be found in the Romantic theory of art which envisions the artwork as a unique, mystical creation complete with internal center and surrounding aura, and which envisions the artist himself as an original creator-god who is able at will to produce infinite quantities of value out of nothing at all. In the essay "Economimesis," Derrida has characterized Kant's proto-Romantic view of the artist-creator as just such a purely metaphysical, noumenal confabulation transcending the materialist, phenomenal circuits of discursive exchange proposed by Marx and Maxwell in the next century. The artist-god "gives more than he promises, he submits to no exchange contract, his over-abundance generously breaks the circular economy." And regarding the Romantic concept of poetic discourse, Derrida observes that "By breaking with the exchange of values, by
giving more than is asked and more than it promises, poetic speech is both out of circulation, at least outside any finite commerce, without any determinate value, and yet of infinite value. It is the origin of value."14 As always, however, Derrida implies that this priceless value which originated all actual values, this super-signifying poetic discourse which is at the origin of all other discourses, is itself a necessary postulate required by the inadequacy, the internal contradictions of any actual system of value or discourse. Insofar as any value can be considered surplus, it is also a supplement with respect to a void which makes it possible in the first place. "The overabundance of the signifier, its supplementary character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented."15 In the case of Gravity's Rainbow, harmonica—playing Slothrop's Romantic quest for his own origins, his hidden link with the rocket/phallus, does not bring him any nearer to an Orphic reservoir of Value or Being; on the contrary, his actions merely supplement his own inner void, and ultimately he suffers the identical fate of Orpheus and V. His regressive journey towards his beginnings ends not with self-knowledge, but with his infinite dispersion. "[S]ent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly [. . .]. He is being broken down instead, and scattered" (738). The yarn—both ball and tale, textile and text—is unraveled only to dis-close the Center that is always no longer there.

The protagonist of Gravity's Rainbow is indeed "a fascinating combination of crude poet and psychic cripple" (738), possessed by that "Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (188). Again, like the Calvinist hero of Gaddis's The Recognitions who has been taught "that there was no more hope for the damned than there was for the Elect,"16 Slothrop performs a perpetual pas de deux with a demonic Center or Other. For Pynchon's protagonist, however, the problem is not—as in The Recognitions, or even Hamlet for that matter—the artist's secret struggle to hide himself in order to escape the guilt of imitation, usurpation, and repression of a worthy precursor whom he intimately knows. Pynchon portrays the other side of the Oedipal situation—the para-
noiac's struggle to discover a guilty secret, some unforgettable, unforgiveable knowledge that is kept hidden from him by some unknown central intelligence agency. Though he never learns the full extent of this secret, he becomes acutely aware that as one link on a chain of substitutable supplements to the void, he risks imminent annihilation by a technologically superior supplement, the concretized product of his culture's most profound repression, the embodiment of evil in its radical symbolic form, western man's own phallic substitute--the rocket. Indeed, the Platonic recognition of the evil of symbolism,17 and of the transgressive nature of all artistic creation and fiction-making, may be said to be a chief concern, if not the chief concern, of postmodern American fiction.

Pynchon seems to come close in Gravity's Rainbow to liberating his fiction (and one might even say all fiction) from the nemesis of narrative, the western mania for order and control. The digressions, section divisions, epigraphs--all the encyclopedic paraphernalia that constitute Pynchon's text--seem to tend ultimately toward entropic randomness, toward decentralization. Almost as a compensatory effort to reassert some control over his increasingly unwieldy encyclopedic narrative, Pynchon has evolved a more or less identifiable, ironic narrating persona, reminiscent in a way of the sportive narrators of eighteenth-century picaresque fiction. This use of the narrative voice as an overt means of control provides the minimum orderliness necessary for organizing the encyclopedic text which comes perilously close to becoming a free zone of random activity, as well as for the documentation of the detritus of the Empire, the Third Reich. The rambunctious love in the ruins of the Reich, however, the seemingly unrestrained carnival antics in the bombed-out zone with all its familiar landmarks gone, disguises an imperceptible articulation of a new set of rules of the game, the organized deployment of the post-war's covert systems of control, centered around a new Center, as the CIA was to emerge after the war from the older intelligence network, the OSS. The visionary paranoia of the Schwarzkommando leader Enzian drives him to find the new (or old) Order lurking behind the Disorder, the Text beneath (or before) the Pre-text:
This serpentine slag-heap he is just about to ride into now, this ex-refinery, Jarm Ölfabriken Werke AG, is not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order. Only waiting for the right connections to be set up, to be switched on... modified, precisely, deliberately by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both sides--"sides?"--had always agreed on... (520)

the bombing was the exact industrial process of conversion, each release of energy placed exactly in space and time, each shockwave plotted in advance to bring precisely tonight's wreck into being thus decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text... If it is in working order, what is it meant to do? The engineers who built it as a refinery never knew there were any further steps to be taken. Their design was "finalized," and they could forget it.

It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted... secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war.(520-21)18

Empire is conspicuous in its absence here, or perhaps as absence--the absence of a Center. Though the German hegemony has been dismantled, the trace of Empire persists subliminally in, or beneath, the legible text as conspiracy. The secret Empire never emerges directly into view because, like the emperor's new clothes or the machinery of the Wizard of Oz, its power, efficiency, and effectiveness depend precisely on its remaining invisible, concealed behind the scenes. Pynchon's fiction is accordingly haunted by the imminence of a secret Empire with its totalizing gospel of extinction and transformation. Pynchon is obsessed by secular structures of control from above left over intact from ancient sacred hegemonies and newly supplemented by and valorized through the occult legitimacy of scientific and economic interests. By the end of the work, Slothrop has completely vanished, the young redemptive hero Gottfried is sacrificed, and
the audience/congregation witnessing the novel/sermon/film is about to be wiped out by a falling missile so that all the reader is left with is the ironic narrator--his master's voice, the disembodied voice of the Empire, urging us to sing along as we too are about to be dispersed and disembodied. 19

At the same time that Gravity's Rainbow presents such a compelling case for left-wing paranoia inspired by the specter of the imminence of Empire, Pynchon's fiction does not fail to convey the impression that the Empire's (re-)assertion of power is itself a desperate reflexive action on its own part of right-wing paranoia. The Empire, it turns out, is haunted by its own specters--namely, those cults, populations, nations, races it is intent on subduing. A cursory reading of the following passage may seem to suggest that the Empire's leaders are directly responsible for the suicidal destruction of the planet:

The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide . . . (412)

Note that the identity of the suicidal maniac behind the wheel of the bus, the Demon in the System, is not specified in this passage. It is not necessarily the technocrats in the service of the Empire who are in charge; the Empire itself is only a part of the entire System. The maniac at the wheel may just as easily be a revolutionary terrorist as a reactionary totalitarian. This possibility is what throws the Empire's leaders into a panic--their suspicion that the client- and slave-populations which they have sought to co-opt have in turn gone underground, and even decided to opt out of the System altogether. The Hereros' program of racial suicide--like its real-life parallels as practiced by Japanese kamikaze pilots, Iranian suicide
squads, or the Jonestown commune—must prove incomprehensible and terrifying to the Empire's strategists since they call into question its most basic assumptions about the value of self-preservation and the deferral of death. Of what use are strategies of deterrence—as a rationale either for capital punishment or for the arms build-up—when increasing numbers of human beings no longer seem to want to buy (or bide) time or postpone death, but are bent instead on accelerating the advent of Doomsday or the Millenium, whichever it happens to be?

My invitation to consider Pynchon's voluminous fiction as a de-structive paper empire is intended in all seriousness. For I think Gravity's Rainbow is a seriously playful challenge to the deadly earnest literary, political, and corporate empires in which the infinite varieties of human intercourse are subtly rechanneled into more or less prescribed and controlled discursive routes. Pynchon's fiction complements the theoretical writings of philosophers from Nietzsche to Foucault insofar as it exposes the cultural mechanisms which subvert the private mystery of desire to the corporate mastery of power. As a writer of fiction, however, Pynchon is distinctive insofar as he uses empirical description rather than theoretical method to show how a fantastic, neo-Alexandrian Empire centered in America, and hidden beneath a proliferating fabric of software of nearly inpenetrable density, is in the process of subverting (or eradicating) itself in the very process of converting (or transforming) its "Others."

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Notes


1. Hereafter references will be cited in the text.

2. Cf. rocket engineer Franz Pökler's dispute with his activist wife about whether the A4's purpose is ultimately one of destruction (extinction) or transcendence (transformation):

"They're using you to kill people," Leni told him, as clearly as she could. "That's their only job, and you're helping them."

"We'll all use it, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend."
She laughed. "Transcend," from Pöklér?
"Someday," honestly trying, "they won't have to kill.
Borders won't mean anything. We'll have all outer space.
...
"Oh you're blind," spitting it as she spat his blind-
ness at him every day, that and "Kadavergehorsamkeit," a
beautiful word he can no longer imagine in any voice but
hers... (400)

3 Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans., with an
intro. and notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press,
1978), 255.

4 Also cf. Enzian's account of von Trotha's slaughter of the
Hereros: "Forty years ago, in Südwest, we were nearly exterminated.
[. . .] The orders came down from a human being, a scrupulous
butcher named von Trotha. The thumb of mercy never touched his
scales" (362). Enzian proceeds to teach Slothrop the Herero
mantra "mba-kayere": "'It means 'I am passed over.' To those of
us who survived von Trotha, it also means that we have learned to
stand outside our history and watch it, without feeling too much.
A little schizoid. A sense for the statistics of our being'" (362).

5 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in
Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, with an intro. by

6 Benjamin's thesis of the infinite reproducibility of the
artistic object as a socio-historical product ("the work of art
reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility"
[ibid., 224]) is occasioned by his reflections on the newest artis-
tic medium which was being developed at the time of his writing—
namely film, that most representational and reproducible of art
forms. In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon exploits the paradox that
film is the most realistic artistic medium precisely because it is
the most artificial—using "the rapid flashing of successive stills
to counterfeit movement" (407). But Pynchon goes beyond Benjamin
in revealing film to be not merely a medium of artistic reproduction,
but a literal mediator of sexual reproduction. Franz Pöklér impreg-
nates his wife Leni while fantasizing about raping the pornographic
film-star Margherita Erdman, whose sadistic film he had seen only
hours before in a Berlin theater. Thus, his child Ilse "was con-
ceived because her father saw a movie called Alpdrücken one night
and got a hardon" (429)—exactly in the manner of Slothrop's erotic
pre-reactions to the V-2 strikes in London. During the war, Ilse
is incarcerated by Pöklér's German superiors, who allow her to visit
her father once a year as a reward for his work on perfecting the A4
rocket. In effect, Pöklér experiences the life of his "movie-child"
(398) as a very slow slow-motion film: Pokler's love for his daughter becomes "something like the persistence of vision, for they have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child . . . what would the time scale matter, a 24th of a second or a year (no more, the engineer thought, than in a wind-tunnel, or an oscillograph whose turning drum you could speed or slow at will . . .)?" (422). And of course, Gravity's Rainbow ends with the freeze frame of the rocket just before its impact on the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles: "And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t" (760).

7 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 280.
8 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 289.
11 As a point of biographical information, it should be noted that Pynchon's own ancestor in the American colonies, William Pynchon, was the first American "meat-packer," and pork was his specialty. See Boston Globe 7:8 (Sept. 23, 1982), "Calendar," 5.
12 Cf. Derrida's distinction between play and chance (Writing and Difference, 292) "For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace."
13 Thus Enzian, the Schwarzkommando leader whose people were nearly wiped out by the demon von Trotha and who now maneuvers against his personal demon Tchitcherine, takes cold comfort in "A sense for the statistics of our being" (362).
14 Jacques Derrida, Economimesis (Paris, 1975), trans. R. Klein, Diacritics, 11, No. 2 (1981), 3-25; 11 and 18. Similarly, Gaddis's The Recognitions is also obsessed with the problem of returning to origins and of creating original works of art. The painter Wyatt Gwyon struggles with his demon-originals, and turns to forgery when
he recognizes that to be an original creator is already to be an impostor, a counterfeit of the inimitable Divine. See my article, "The Paper Empires and Empirical Fictions of William Gaddis," in In Recognition of William Gaddis, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1984), 162-73.

15 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 290. Whereas Derrida in "Economimésis" questions Kant's infinitely signifying poetic discourse, in his essay "From Restricted to General Economy," he follows Bataille's critique of Hegel's master-discourse of philosophy, designating it a closed "restricted economy":

The Hegelian Aufhebung thus belongs to restricted economy, and is the form of the passage from one prohibition to another, the circulation of prohibitions, history as the truth of the prohibition. (Writing and Difference, 275)

The absolute production and destruction of value, the exceeding energy as such, the energy which "can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning" --all this escapes phenomenology as restricted economy." (Writing and Difference, 271)

Such a "general economy," as Bataille calls it, would not be the absolutely efficient economy of Kant's divine artist-creator or Hegel's philosophical master, but rather an economy that always exceeds itself—in Bataille's words, where "excesses of energy are produced . . . [which] cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning" (Writing and Difference, 270; Derrida is quoting from Bataille's L'expérience intérieure [Paris: Gallimard, 1943], 233).

16 Gaddis, The Recognitions, 35.


18 Pynchon's suggestion that modern political and ideological conflicts are in fact only a diversion from a multi-national technological conspiracy in which "both sides" are involved has received remarkable credence through Joseph Borkin's factual account of the German chemical industry, The Crime and Punishment of I. G. Farben (New York: Free Press, 1978).

19 Gravity's Rainbow actually closes with a disembodied "voice"—the choral refrain to William Slothrop's seventeenth-century hymn sung by whatever twentieth-century survivors are left after the final blast.
"Trapped inside Their frame
with your wastes piling up":
Mindless Pleasures in *Gravity's Rainbow*
Terry Caesar

It is well known that *Gravity's Rainbow* was initially entitled *Mindless Pleasures*. What is not so well known is how this fact has been assessed by the considerable critical industry which has already grown up around the text. "It is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read," writes Roland Barthes, "that creates the pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, War and Peace, word for word?"¹ Possibly not. But many have read *Gravity's Rainbow* this way. It is already one of the most massively explicated narratives of the century. Not only does it have a reader's guide; chronological errors in the dating of certain movies have been noted, mistakes in the German have been identified, and textual sources for such matters as the imaginative recreation of Peenemünde or the semantics of Herero have been traced. There may be pleasure in the enterprise, but finally it is pleasure of a quite familiar, academic kind. Concerning one of the sequences in the Zone, Douglas Fowler writes: "some of the references in this scene's last paragraph escape me."² These words are the very voice of critical consternation, if not despair: something in the text has escaped, and cannot be located in terms of either knowledge or elucidation. An intellectual rhythm has been disrupted which ideally seeks to process every word. What is potentially mindless in the text must be converted into mind. The title of one of the first books of Pynchon criticism discloses the energies of what continues to sponsor it as well as to thoroughly the earlier title of *Gravity's Rainbow* has been transformed: Mindful Pleasures.

In this essay I want to consider not so much the pleasures of mindlessness in *Gravity's Rainbow* as the condition of mindlessness itself. Mindless pleasures, I will argue, are wasted ones, and they appear according to the logic of the textual figure of waste, or
more specifically, shit. The pleasure is in the elimination, but the mindlessness which is its condition has a more urgent participation in the procedures by which things get produced: waste. Gravity's Rainbow is full of waste. Waste is the sign of what the text seeks to bring under the control of meaning as well as what it seeks to release from meaning--only to constitute it as meaning-full yet again. Mindfulness is no more indispensable than mindlessness. Each, indeed, is inscribed in the other, and to privilege the former is to deny the relationship of the textual body to what it excretes, or what it figures forth as excretion.

Roger Henkle is one of the few critics to confront the mindlessness of Gravity's Rainbow, but he confronts it with the same criteria by which the rest reject it. "Pynchon's commitment to a metaphoric reconstitution may signify an inability to achieve a total imaginative transmutation of his material," he writes, and again: "Much of Pynchon's writing toward the end of Gravity's Rainbow is consciously surrealistic--an involuted configuration of the pattern that seeks to 'control' dehumanization through comic play with some of the forms that dehumanization has taken." There is a firm hierarchy established by such comments: a presumed "totality" according to which what Henkle terms "the image of explosion" (one of his examples is defecation) is wholly transformed into organic calm and a putative control under whose auspices the indulgence of any sort of play ought to be conducted. Elsewhere Henkle speaks of Pynchon "toying" with acausal patterns--the same ones, he states, that come to dominate the narrative as "the plots that circulated within it break down and randomness prevails." Nowhere does Henkle entertain the notion that the randomness (a narrative correlate for waste) is always and everywhere present, from the very first page of the text, whose second word is mindless "screaming," even before the "progressive knotting into" which grimly begins to structurate the sound and provide it with a context.

Of course the structuration is a constant, totalizing activity, and the context is not only carefully built up but remorselessly explicated. But it is equally apparent that structure in Gravity's Rainbow breaks up and that context becomes evacuated. So there are times,
at least beginning with the Kenosha Kid, when Fowler is baffled, or later times when Henkle is censorious. Or there are ubiquitous times which can prompt Edward Mendelson to write the following: "Pynchon's own buf-foonery, the puns and pie-throwing that occur whenever matters threaten to become too serious, is a way of in-sisting that Gravity's Rainbow not be confused, even locally, with the world it illuminates."5 Always the assumptions are the same: not only is there an author (that is to say, authority) present, but this author proceeds under the probity of ultimate seriousness and by means of conscious control. Mendelson employs the invariable critical trope of light dispelling textual darkness. His own rhetoric begs the question of what sort of text he would be dealing with if it were one which nurtures confusion rather than clarity.

Few critics, indeed, deal with passages where the narrator exclaims, "It is difficult to perceive just what the fuck is happening here."6 Everyone knows what is going on, or what ought to be going on. One of the things which is going on in Gravity's Rainbow is images, "flowering, in and out, some lovely, some just awful" (123). There is a consensus in the criticism about which images are which, but few pause to ask about the necessity whereby there has to be either, much less whether or not there might be a logic whereby each is convertible into the other. Somebody says, "jeezers"; a dog Roger Mexico is coaxing asks him if he was expec-ting Lassie; Slothrop's flabby cells pipe up; the hand of Providence gives Slothrop the finger--and, in the face of such mindless "explosions," critics remain firm, sober, and rational, like Pointsman writing in his journal after his dream of a monstrous Slothrop: "We must never lose control" (144). Even if suddenly aboard the Toiletship or (like Pirate Prentice) newly arrived and chewing taffy at Beaverboard Row, it seems essential to the critical response to the text that it always know where it is, what it would take in, what it would get rid of, and why.

A recent discussion by Jeffrey Stout, "What is the Meaning of the Text?", draws upon W. V. Quine's notion of explication as elimination and at one point states the following: "What does seem wrong, or silly, is discarding some readings because they fail to grasp the
real meaning of the text. Meanings, if they exist, could turn out to be the least interesting thing about texts. ... We can always get on to this question rather quickly simply by treating the interpreter's explication of meaning as a rule for prompt elimination of the troublesome term."7 It is my contention that readings of Gravity's Rainbow work precisely this way. In order to "mean" at all (and surely readings of the text so far have produced some of the most excessively theme-ridden results of any in recent decades) troublesome terms must be eliminated, and ones which have to do with mindlessness have proved to be the most troublesome of all. The trouble (in turn) with such readings is not so much (as in what might be termed the standard deconstructionist account) that they repress always again the repressed term by which the text gets generated. After all, we read in Gravity's Rainbow itself of the imperative to "bring" each Deeper Significance "together, in their slick persistence and our preterition ... to make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste. ..." (590) Instead, the trouble with most readings of the novel is that the text is working more openly according to the same eliminative logic, trying to get rid of the same ideas or "meanings" (e.g. preterition, or "sense" here) that it needs to retain in order to get rid of them in the first place. (One has only to imagine a Reader's Digest condensation of Gravity's Rainbow to see how the text's eliminative logic obtains.) This activity is, I think, the most basic property of the structure of Gravity's Rainbow, even if (and here the standard deconstructionist account seems to me quite in order) it cannot itself be structured, only replicated.

Mindlessness, in other words, is crucial to the text because it is so full of its own mindfulness, and seeks both relief and release. Of Roger, and the possibility of either "living on as Their pet, or death," we read: "It is not a question he has ever imagined himself asking seriously. It has come by surprise, but there's no sending it away now, he really does have to decide, and soon enough, plausibly soon, to feel the terror in his bowels. Terror he cannot think away" (713). Here Terror is presented as something which seeks bodily elimination because it cannot be mentally effaced, even
as it becomes the substance of thought. Mindfulness cannot be eliminated, only temporarily eased—though so insistently and pervasively that mindlessness can be equally well understood as but a special condition of mind. Criticism which ignores mindlessness in Gravity's Rainbow concedes to the novel the power of its intellectual energies while simultaneously appropriating its own power from those energies by eliminating their inherent urge to void themselves of that very power—to become again mindless.

I have said that the specific textual figure for such a textual logic is shit. Let me give an example, Slothrop on the day of his pig hero celebration:

Slothrop returns from the brown back room of a pipesmoke-and-cabbage cafe, and an hour's game of hammer-and-forgo with—every boy's dream—TWO healthy young ladies in summer dresses and woodsoled shoes to find the crowd begun to coagulate into clumps of three and four. Oh, shit. Not now, come on. ... Tight aching across his asshole, head and stomach inflated with oat mash and summer beer, Slothrop sits on a pile of nets and tries, fat chance, to will himself alert. (569)

The passage is subject to much excremental overdetermination, of course—"brown," "back," "coagulate"—and of course its explicit subject is Slothrop's need to excrete. He suffers, indeed, from a fundamental condition of the entire text: inflation. The interesting thing, however, is that his condition is presented as something divided against itself. He wants to shit but he can't. Therefore he has to will himself to do so, which only results in a hapless "alertness." In the next paragraph we read not of shit but of paranoia and hustlers "passing through."

So it goes in the textual body itself. The most quintessentially mindless occasions of the text become instead occasions for the exercise of mindfulness, and the need for the absence of something is transformed into the presence of something else, eventually if not very suddenly resulting in a reconstruction of flatulence which begins the process all over again. Insides are yielded up to outsiders of which they were originally
a part, like food, only to be re-absorbed and then eliminated once more. An originary fullness expires into an originary lack which was in turn the product of that fullness. Such significations as that of "a textured darkness in which flows go in all directions, and nothing begins, and nothing ends" (661) are one of hundreds of variations upon an excremental trope, just as such asides as "Poor asshole, he can't let her go" (623) have the character of anal jokes. Shit is the figuration not only for such states as passage, passing out or passing through, and control or its loss. Shit is the property for the richly, almost costively mobilized displacements of heaping, sliding, sweeping, erupting, streaming, shuddering, rippling, scattering, blending, blurring, smudging, and oozing. Shit even provides the conceptual resource for law; as Gravity Itself speaks: "I am Gravity, I am That against which the Rocket must struggle, to which the prehistoric wastes submit and are transmuted to the very substance of History" (639). Shit is the sign in the text for everything in life which falls, or which has fallen, or which needs to be aware, like Slothrop inflated and aching, that it is subject to falling as a condition of being alive. This includes mindlessness, considered not only as the negative of mind but as its falling away.

Gravity's Rainbow is, I think, never more exalted than when it most exuberantly discards its most profound thoughts or carelessly throws away its more careful determinations. The text is so alive to what gives it life that at times it immerses itself in its own befoulment--by, for example, sending Slothrop down a toilet at the Roseland Ballroom, singing aboard the Toiletship, or explicating the meaning of "ass backwards" or "shit 'n' shinola." Yet for this reason Gravity's Rainbow provides an especially telling instance of the fact that no text can somehow "transcend" any account it might give itself because it cannot fully elaborate generative figures which must be suppressed so that they can generate. "Shit carries a very powerful double charge," writes Martin Pops, "positive and negative, and that is why it is the body's most magical substance." Inevitably, Gravity's Rainbow "routinizes" what might be termed the "charisma"
of its most fundamental figure by retaining the negat aspect only. With respect to "Shit 'n' Shinola," we read this: "Shit, now, is the color white folks are afraid of. Shit is the presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff an rotting corpse itself inside the whiteman's warm and private own asshole, which is getting pretty intimate" (688). Such a discourse is also getting pretty inti- mate with its own anal priorities while at the same time getting pretty far away from how elsewhere these same priorities serve precisely discourses "abstract-arty" which eulogize many other forms of waste or pro-pound upon history. When Gravity's Rainbow thematizes shit, the substance loses its buoyancy, or, more generally, all that the body predicates. It loses, that is to say, a self-possession that it never quite had, and becomes too mindful of its own mindlessness. Ur, death-ridden, it loses its own emblem, as Brigadier Pudding, whose own special horror is that he has to eat shit in order to nourish himself and live.

On his knees before Katje, Pudding is "bare as a baby" (233). The birth image here is significant be- cause it is an instance of how Gravity's Rainbow re- fuses the scatological cynicism that Mikhail Bakhtin claims post-Rabelaisian texts cannot easily refuse. As himself representative of medieval folk culture as well as ancient literature, Rabelais, writes Bakhtin, articulates in the imagery of urine and excrement "the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, wel- fare." In Rabelais, he writes elsewhere, excrement is conceived of "as both joyous and sobering matter, at the same time debasing and tender; it combined the grave and birth in their lightest, most comic, least terrifying form." There are examples of something like such a Rabelaisian conception in Gravity's Rainbow. Hovering over the prelaunch moments of Gottfried, the narrator intones, for example: "Blicero's seed, sput- tering into the poisoned manure of his bowels ... it is waste, yes, futility ... but ... as man and woman, coupled, are shaken to the teeth at their ap- proaches to the gates of life, [...] there have to be these too, lovers whose genitals are consecrated to shit, to endings" (722). Yet even in passages such as these, what is fructifying about the "consecration" is but a function of what is terrifying about it: that
it will merely fall away, die, and be lost.

The most I think one can say of excrement in *Gravity's Rainbow* is that when it is conceived of, and conceived of as a specific substance, it is seldom either joyous or sobering and almost always debasing. There is no link with earth's renewal, but only with its putrefaction and decay. As a trope, on the other hand, shit does function as a fertilizing emblem; indeed, I have been arguing that there would be no textual fertility without it—because the text would lack a figurative means at once to void and re-nourish its own proliferation. Mr. Information rebukes Skippy for going off "on another of your senseless and retrograde journeys. Come back, here, to the points. Here is where the paths divided." Mr. Information holds out to Skippy a cartoon-Rilkean vision of Happyville, where the "right ones" don't survive: "Wouldn't it be nice if we could eliminate them completely?" (644-45). Once again it is the text's production of what gets constituted by what needs to be eliminated which is its motive force, just as mindfulness has mindlessness inscribed within it.

The problem with shit in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the problem with waste generally in the novel—and this is the real difference between Pynchon's text and Rabelais's: it keeps piling up. The textual body continually swells to flatulence because their frames—political, intellectual, scientific—enclose the most mundane actions of fertility and renewal and reduce them to waste as a function of eliminating them. So it becomes imperative to indulge these actions and try to retain them. (To the very conclusion we read of such matters as the siren ring of Pig Bodine, "cleverly arranged in his asshole so it can be operated at any time by blowing a fart of a certain magnitude." Its ostensible purpose? "a brand-new reflex arc, ear-brain-hands-asshole, and a return toward innocence too" [740].) But the effort to do so merely belabors the same oppositional logic which brought the effort into existence, and comes to signify in turn the ultimate detritus that is death. As we say in such common ob-scenities as "that doesn't mean shit" or "I don't give a shit," excremental logic is thought which uses its object in order to deny it, and dispel it as meaning-
less. Excremental logic is mindless logic which mocks
the imperiousness of thought only to be mocked by it,
because this logic does not have within itself any
other principle than its own evacuation. The frame is
Their, which is another way of indicating that They
control whatever is emptied out, and reconstitute it
for their own purposes, one term for which is "Bad
Shit."

"Do you want to put this part in?" (739), Gravity's
Rainbow asks at the end of a passage very near the end
(it ought to be quite clear that a text of this kind
is going to have a problem situating its "end"). Such
a question speaks as openly as the text ever does about
its equivocations concerning what to leave out and what
to retain; the possibility of the reader consuming the
"part" not only transfers the problematic of authority
but displaces an ostensibly mindless portion under the
possible agency of mind. Such second-person modes of
address in the text always have this effect, and are
part of the same seemingly contrary impulse to put
instead everything in, such as the celebrated passage
about the wasted toothpaste tubes, heaped, transformed,
tessellated, and returned during the time Roger and
Jessica attend church in Kent at Christmas. Both pas-
sages have to do with waste (potential and actual), and
both express what I have been emphasizing as the same
insistent, urgent textual logic by which the text ex-
presses its own dissolution, thereby bringing into play
an undifferentiated, non-categorical surplus of figuра-
tion taken up, or taken in, again. What accomplishes
this redemption, or "return," is mind, but the prefi-
guratire moment which enables mind cannot be allowed to
exist as such because that moment is an evacuation of
mind, as decisive as the body's own motion to evacuate
its own wastes. The mindless moment is an excremental
one because it is immediate, singular, and self-
contained. In Gravity's Rainbow, on the other hand,
there is very little which is self-contained, which is
why the text appropriates the figure of shit but cannot
be contained by it. At one point we read a "Partial
List of Wishes on Evening Stars for This Period," one
of which is the following: "Let me be able to take a
shit soon" (553). But, though the text (so to speak)
shits, and smears the results repeatedly, the action
is as still to be produced as it is everywhere still
to be accomplished, reinscribed back into the condition of a wish, a possibility, an exemption from meaning, a fullness aspiring to lack, and a presence that cannot finally be pleasurable because too much has piled up either to economize or to get rid of.

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Notes


4 Henkle, 286, 289.


10 Bakhtin, 175-76.
The Chronology of Episodes in Gravity's Rainbow
Steven Weisenburger

The differences between narrative "story" and "discourse" are well established. Story, known among Russian formalists as fabula and among French structuralists as histoire, is that sequence of events understood to have occurred diachronically (Todorov, Barthes). The discourse of a narrative, its sjužet or discours, takes that sequence and unfolds it synchronically, for example through the agency of point-of-view and plot. Following Gérard Genette, Christine Brooke-Rose further divides the narrative discourse into the lexical groupings of words as we read them, the "micro-text," and the larger episodical groupings of events in a plot, the "macrotext." Reading at the micro level gives access to that figure in the carpet she calls the underlying or base structure, while the macrotext shapes that visual model of a plot, its surface structure (Brooke-Rose, 189-90).

We have had no outline of the surface structure in Gravity's Rainbow. The narrative logic of its division into four parts has not been accounted, nor has the respective distribution of 21, 8, 32, and 12 episodes in those parts. Also, we have simply lacked any model for the order Pynchon gives to his 73 episodes, many of which, as it happens, closely correspond with the historical (diachronic) calendar of a nine month period, from mid-December 1944 until mid-September 1945.

What then are these temporal correspondences in Gravity's Rainbow, and how can we describe them? Genette shows that in narrative discourse the diachronic "story" is coded in two ways: it can be internally or externally determined (140-43). For instance, a phrase like "the next day" is relational only inside the text; thus it constitutes an internal determinant. In contrast, a comment like "It's Boxing Day" (Dec. 26: GR, 174) relates the narrative to an external calendar. In the table that follows, these two determinations in Gravity's Rainbow are designated "ID" and "ED" respectively. Episodes featuring a significant analepsis or prolepsis are designated "A" or "P" respectively.
There is one more category of temporal references, beyond the scope of this paper but much in need of further study. It includes all those indistinct references—like "Once," or "One morning"—which mark segments of narrative cut free of any other temporal connection. In the table, episodes wholly given over to such an indistinct chronology are signified by an "I." A pertinent example in Gravity's Rainbow is Episode 16 in Part 1, the "Night's Mad Carnival" (133) episode with Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake. Pynchon shifts the focalization between these two characters (but mostly focalizes through Roger), as he builds around them a set of reminiscences (for they are narrated as analepses) which we must finally read as without date and perhaps even age: the moments are anachrony. Like the room in which Roger and Jessica tryst, these moments stand against that routinized, accelerated time of the War's spinning clocks. Throughout the novel such moments are linked by shared memories, collective nightmare, or parodied myth; and they compose a sizeable amount of the narration. Their meaning in relation to Pynchon's satire of Romantic ontology, with its doctrine of the frozen moment, needs to be clarified.

Readers find other cruxes with the chronological references in Gravity's Rainbow. There is a familiar range of internal references in the text, for example; but any reader will have wanted more of them, and the close reader will have spotted problems in following them. Try, for instance, sorting through all of "The next day" and "That night" references to say when Slothrop arrives at Putzi's, and a near-castration, as Part 3 closes; or try, similarly, to determine from internal and external references the day Slothrop arrives on the Riviera. There are also problems with the novel's external determinations. Aside from the odd and obvious anachronism—like "this is 1945" (81) when it is still 1944, or the mention of "this seventh Christmas of the war" (126)—some will have noticed the more subtle anachronisms, like the date of Anton Webern's death (440) or the rise of Argentine descamisados under Peron (263), both of which occur months too early in the narrative chronology. However, more important than these infrequent errors is this: Pynchon's external determinations do sketch a pattern,
a cyclical surface structure which, with few exceptions, is supported by the great range of chronological markers in the novel.

Among the most apparent external determinations of time in the novel are those pertaining either to Christian or Pagan feast days, or to historical moments easily checked. In some cases, the ritual and historical dates even coincide. Ten days stand out: the narrative opens with past tense references to the onset of the Rundstedt Offensive (Dec. 16, 1944) in the Advent season; then come Christmas and Boxing Day, Mid-Winter, the Spring Equinox (Mar. 21, 1945), Whitsunday (which fell on May 20 in that year); a reference to Walpurgisnacht (April 30) having been nearly a month ago, and a similar past-tense reference to "the Ice-Saints" (May 12, 13, 14) begins Part 3; then come Mid-Summer, Hiroshima and the Transfiguration (which coincided on Aug. 6, 1945), until finally we end the reading in Part 4 in mid-September, on what is probably the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Omitting for a moment the analeptic recall of that cold spring noonday when Rocket 00000 was fired with its sacrificial payload, these ten dates constitute a neatly pegged diachronic movement. One key thing about it: the Christian feast days and the historical dates bracket all four parts of Gravity's Rainbow. And the firing of Rocket 00000, the principal enigma of Pynchon's story, completes this pattern in a stunning way I shall discuss below.

First we should note the range and specificity of other, less apparent, external determinants. For example, Jacob Grimm's Teutonic Mythology supplied Pynchon a variety of direct and oblique references to Norse gods--Tiw, Wotan, Thor, and Freyr--which appear in the narrative on calendar days named for them. Also, working with Pynchon's periodical source-texts, such as the London Times of 1944-45, it soon becomes evident that among items of historical detail he culled from the sources and transformed into fictional exist-ents were many which support our image of the surface structure. Thus, a reference to "Primo Scala's Accordion Band" playing over a radio fixes the narrative sequence in Part 1, Episode 15, as occurring on Saturday, Dec. 23, 1944, because that is the only time in
December, according to the BBC programming schedules published in the Times, when Mrs. Quoad can have been sitting "by the wireless" and hearing the band (115). Now this sequence, as it happens, sits amidst others which confirm that Pynchon was consulting the Times of Dec. 22, 1944. For interestingly enough, the achronies of Episode 16 are also composed, and thus synchronized, around Dec. 22-23, date of the London Times article from which Pynchon gleaned details about the macaronic caroling that closes the episode with Roger and Jessica. The point, as I see it, is not that the ideal reader is expected to make this determination by unearthing its source. Rather, the considerable evidence of this, and many comparable references, strongly supports the pattern delineated by more apparent dates. Such references (e.g., to weather, phases of the moon, historical events, items taken from closely-dated periodicals)—and they are simply too numerous to list in the table below—are the chronometric trace Pynchon left while researching to fill out the novel's surface structure. They are excellent textual evidence for the reader's emerging model of that structure.

The table gives a working summary of this chronological evidence in Gravity's Rainbow. References are to page/line numbers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPISODES</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>DETERMINATIONS and SOURCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PART 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Probably Mon., Dec. 18, 1944</td>
<td>ID &amp; ED: &quot;This dripping winter noon&quot; (17/9) and other references correspond with information gathered from the London Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 8</td>
<td>Tue., Dec. 19, early a.m.</td>
<td>ID for hours; ED for day: past tense reference to the onset of the Rundstadt Offensive (Dec. 16) at 52/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 11</td>
<td>Wed., Dec. 20, a.m. &amp; after</td>
<td>ID for hours; ED for day: references to Woutan crop up, for instance at 72/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Thu., Dec. 21</td>
<td>ID; ED at several points: &quot;the walls read ice&quot; (72/34) corresponds with weather information for that day; also, the reference to &quot;Bert&quot; or Berchtold (72/23) stems from Grimm (272-82) who associates the god with Thor, and places his festival at the winter solstice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fri., Dec. 22</td>
<td>ED: &quot;The very bottom of the year&quot; (86/39) is the solstice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Fri., Dec. 22, afternoon</td>
<td>ID &amp; ED: onomastically, Gottfried (94/26) is associated with Freyr: Friday (Grimm, 212-14) A: to Holland, late-October of 1944 (96/18) A: to Weissmann's tour-of-duty in South West Africa, circa 1922; the &quot;great Herero Rising&quot; (99/38) occurred in that year A: to Frans van der Groov on Mauritius, circa 1670 (see 108/17-18 ff.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sat., Dec. 23</td>
<td>P: film of Katje being shown to Octopus Grigori (113/31-37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>ED: &quot;Primo Scala's Accordion Band&quot; (115/19) played at 10:30 p.m., according to the London Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sun., Dec. 24</td>
<td>ED: details about macaronic carols were drawn from a Times article of Dec. 22, which listed schedules for caroling planned on the 23rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A: to Berlin, circa 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sun., Dec. 24 - Mon., Dec. 25</td>
<td>A: to the day of the &quot;Lübeck raid&quot; (146/27) on Palm Sunday, Mar. 28, 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tue., Dec. 26, evening</td>
<td>ID</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART 2**

<p>| 1 - 2 | I | ID: Slothrop arrives in Monaco around Christmas-New Year's, but the text is vague, and elsewhere even contradictory (cf. 143/24 and 256/2-5) |
| 3 | I: ranges over some weeks into 1945 | ID &amp; ED: &quot;midwinter&quot; (224/25) is Feb. 3 |
| 4 | I: probably late Feb. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event/Comment</th>
<th>Source/Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 20-21</td>
<td>ED: &quot;The great cusp--green equinox and turning, dreaming fishes to young ram&quot; (236/36-37); also, Wernher von Braun &quot;prepares to celebrate his 33rd birthday&quot; on Mar. 23, 1945 (237/2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: late-Mar. to mid-Apr.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 28-29</td>
<td>ED: &quot;last Tuesday's London Times&quot; (252/14) is that of Apr. 24, 1945; the &quot;April summertime&quot; (253/26) is the traditional end to the tourist season in Monaco, according to Baedeker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>ED: &quot;Mr. Pointsman has decided to spend Whitsun by the sea&quot; (269/26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 May 20 (approx.)</td>
<td>ED: &quot;We are safely past the days of the Eis-Heiligen&quot; (284/7), the Ice-Saints whose feast days are May 12-14; &quot;a crescent moon has risen&quot; (288/25) corresponds with a waxing crescent moon appearing at this time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 next day</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>[background on Herero culture]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 May 28</td>
<td>ED: &quot;May Day Eve's come and gone ... nearly a month&quot; ago (329/13-14); also, details about the Brocken derive from May 28, 1945 Life magazine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 late-June</td>
<td>ED: &quot;The Zone is in full summer&quot; (336/33); also, to the 1920s and Tchitcherina's tour-of-duty in Kirghizia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 mid-July</td>
<td>ID: &quot;Last week, in the British sector&quot; of Berlin (359/23), identifies Slothrop as having been there for some days ED: preparations for the Potsdam Conference--July 17-Aug. 2--are under-way (370/5-11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event/Details</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 18</td>
<td>ED: Slothrop raids the Potsdam Conference area, retrieving buried hashish from &quot;White House&quot; lawn; details Pynchon deploys (e.g., 373/26) are from the July 23, 1945 edition of Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>[action aboard Der Aal, the Argentine anarchist U-boat]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 10</td>
<td>Day after Episode 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A: Franz and Leni Pökler in pre-Hitler Berlin, until 1945; Franz's memories follow the chronology of Pynchon's principal source, Walter Dornberger's V-2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 - 15</td>
<td>late-July</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 19</td>
<td>late-July</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mon., July 30, p.m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Tue., July 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**July 30, p.m.:**

EU: "A sharp sickle of a moon has risen" (506/37); the moon entered its last quarter in late-July, and rose at 11-12 p.m. on the 30th.

**I:** "Schwarzkommando astride bikes unmuffled go blasting on through tonight" (519/24-25)

**Tuesday, July 31:**

ED: day after Episode 20; Slothrop is directed to Putzi's, in Cuxhaven, and told to arrive in one week (527/3) -- he will (see below).

**ED:** the god Svetovid (528/13) is, according to Grimm (201), also the god Tiw (Tuesday).

**I:** "One day [Katje] found the cans of film [at the White Visitation] (533/17)

A: "Brigadier Pudding died back in the middle of June" (533/10)

A: Part 1, Episode 14
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>24</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>[a hallucinated journey through &quot;Hell,&quot; with Katje and Pirate Prentice]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 - 27</td>
<td>Aug. 1-2</td>
<td>ID: one day after Episode 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Aug. 2-3</td>
<td>ED: Plechazunga associated with Thor (Grimm, 178); the comment that &quot;There's no moon&quot; (572/30) corresponds with astronomical data—the thinnest sliver of a moon was left, and it did not rise in the sky until after 1 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Aug. 3-4</td>
<td>ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A: to 1930s and Lyle Bland's association with the Masons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early-Aug.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ED: &quot;Harry Truman [...] this very August 1945, with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay's atomic clit&quot; (588/7-9)—Truman departed Europe Aug. 3 and remained in constant radio contact with the officers who managed the Hiroshima mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Aug. 5, p.m., to Aug. 6, a.m.</td>
<td>ED: &quot;Sandy MacPherson at the Organ&quot; (592/25-26)—BBC schedule in the Times lists him at 10:15 p.m. on Aug. 5; also, the &quot;Small moon [...] at its zenith&quot; (608/40) pegs the time at 5-6 a.m. on Aug. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>P: to an unspecified date, in London, after the botched castration of Slothrop at Putzi's in Episode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART 4**

<p>| 1 | shortly after Aug. 6 | A: recall of Slothrop's &quot;transfiguration,&quot; when he &quot;becomes a cross himself, a living intersection&quot; (625/3-4) on a mountainside |
| 2 - 5 | early to mid-Aug. | ID |
| 6 | mid-Aug. | ED: Slothrop finds a scrap of newsprint announcing the Hiroshima |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>same</td>
<td>ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>late-Aug.</td>
<td>ED: now in &quot;early Virgo&quot; (712/21), which pegs the time as shortly after Aug. 22; also, &quot;Thermidor&quot; (713/10) has past, meaning it is after Aug. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>late-Aug. or early-Sept.</td>
<td>A: to Lüneberg in late-Mar., 1945—&quot;it was the equinox&quot; (720/13); it was &quot;only a matter of weeks&quot; until V-E Day (721/21); also, &quot;the latest spring torn across rainy miles&quot; (724/21) identifies the time just before the launch of Rocket 00000 as Mar. 21 to Apr. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 - 11</td>
<td>early-Sept.</td>
<td>ED: the medicinal herbs mentioned (727/33-34) become ripe and in Sept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>mid-Sept., probably Sept. 14, 1945</td>
<td>ED: &quot;a September morning&quot; (735/30); the &quot;rocket raising&quot; (737) recalls The Exaltation (or Raising) of the Holy Cross A: To spring and the firing of Rocket 00000 (749/15)—that Pöklau had produced &quot;a fairing&quot; for Weissmann and the 00000 &quot;in the spring&quot; (431/21), and that Weissmann had gone, leaving Pöklau to make his own escape during &quot;the first week in April&quot; (432/9), are details that fix the time of this flashback at Easter weekend, 1945, which coincided with April Fool's day P: to Los Angeles, circa 1970 (753)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend of Symbols:
- ID = internal determinant(s)
- ED = external determinant(s)
- A = analepsis
- P = prolepsis
- I = indistinct chronology
This chronology of episodes reveals a carefully drawn circular structure. Gravity's Rainbow is not arch-shaped. Pynchon structured the text as a mandala, its four quadrants defined according to the coincidence of historical moments and key ritual feasts on the Christian liturgical calendar. As Leni Pôtler so well describes this kind of structuring to her husband, the movement is "Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems!" (159).

Part 1 of the narrative begins in Advent and ends on Boxing Day, the day when the British servant class--the preterite--traditionally celebrate Christ-mas. Part 2 commences soon afterward, whenever Tyrone Slothrop arrives in Monaco, and it concludes on May 20, 1945, or Whitsunday, a feast celebrating the descent of the Holy Ghost to Christ's disciples, seven weeks after Easter. On this satirically inverted "White-sunday," Pointsman is visited by auditory hallucinations while vacationing at Dover's white cliffs. Part 3 opens with references to obscure saints' days in mid-May, and closes on the morning of August 6, 1945: the Feast of the Transfiguration and the day Hiroshima was obliterated. Part 4 begins with an ana- leptic recall of Slothrop's transfiguration on a mountainside, when he "becomes a cross himself, a crossroads" (625) and practically disappears from the narrative (just as Christ no longer appeared to the twelve apostles). Gravity's Rainbow ends, then, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, whose fictional counterpart is the exaltation--the "Rocket Raising"--of V-2 number 00001 by Enzian and his Herero comrades. But this moment opens onto the narrative's most daring representations--the pro-lepsy to Los Angeles, circa 1970, and the analepsis to the firing of Rocket 00000 from Lüneberg Heath.

What is the date of that firing? All the textual evidence in Gravity's Rainbow, as well as the anticipation set up by Pynchon's use of the liturgical calendar to end all three previous parts, points to Easter, which in 1945 fell on April Fool's. That coincidence had occurred only 43 times since 500 A.D.; it occurred once more in 1956 (the year in which V. is set) but will not grace us again in this century. Thus, Easter fulfills that pattern of religious feasts
bracketing the novel's principal divisions. For the most significant dates on the Christian liturgical calendar are Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, and The Transfiguration. Pynchon simply reserves the most important one till last. Yet it is equally true that the occurrence of Easter on April 1 completes a thematic preoccupation of the narrative: that the whole enterprise is a poisson d'avril, a red herring, a Fool's Quest. And one can find nothing in the novel to resolve this antinomy.

Everywhere in Gravity's Rainbow the linear, parabolic arch is a symbol of disease, dementia, and destruction. Its counterpart is the circular mandala, symbol of opposites held in delicate equipoise. In the novel, drinking contests and dances move in circles; until their disintegration into a bow-shape, Herero villages were arranged mandala-like on the African veld; and everywhere in the text one finds windmills, buttons, eyes, windows, ferris-and roulette-wheels reminiscent of mandalas. Pynchon's lowly, living, preterite souls come together around such symbols. Psalm 12 claims, In circuitu impii ambient ("the godless wander in a circle"), but Gravity's Rainbow reveals such wandering as a sign of survival and possibly even hope.

Pynchon anticipates this circular surface structure in the opening episode. Watching the first sunlight of morning illuminate a rocket contrail, Pirate Prentice imagines its parabolic trajectory suddenly transformed into a rainbow (6). Given the physics of it--low source of light, high vapor source--this could only yield a perfectly circular rainbow high over the North Sea. For as the narrator reminds us again near the close, like the rocket, a rainbow is not as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it "rises from" and the Earth it "strikes" No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course 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. (726)

Put simply, the shape of gravity's rainbow is parabolic; the shape of Gravity's Rainbow is circular.
With this surface structure in mind, a good deal remains to be studied. The numbers of episodes in the novel's four parts were doubtless arranged with certain numerological—chiefly Kabbalistic—motifs in mind, but how they tie in with the broader thematics of Pynchon's narrative is unclear. Still more interesting, the cyclical structure of the narrative seems frequently to repeat itself at the episodic level. Episode 14 of Part 4 is a brilliant instance. It begins with an omniscient view of Katje Borgesius standing at a window, wearing "an old, tarnished silver crown" while posed for Osbie Feel's camera; analepsis, and a shift in focalization to Katje's perspective, take us next to her days with Blicero's rocket battery in Holland; a second analepsis, now through Blicero's focalization, takes us still farther back in time, to South West Africa in the twenties; a third, through the focalization of Pirate Prentice, takes us to the 17th century and Katje's ancestor Franz van der Groov, on Mauritius; finally the episode ends where it began, with what Genette terms a "zero focalization" (the dispersed, omniscient view) and Katje still posed with her hair "secured in a modish upsweep with an old, tarnished silver crown . . ." (113; my emphasis)—only now, rather than being filmed, the finished print of the film is being shown to Octopus Grigori as part of his conditioning. This is the "progressive knotting into" (3) Pynchon anticipates in the novel's opening paragraphs, and it shapes other episodes as well.

Does this "knotting," cycling motion also operate, if only occasionally, in the microtext? Some of Peter Cooper's remarks about style (218-19) suggest that a close examination would show that it does. But studies of the novel should also keep an eye on larger—imagistic, symbolic—patterns. John Muste, for example, has shown the symbolic texture that the mandalas weave through the narrative. And, like many critics, Peter Cooper has also glimpsed (but then as quickly passed over) the image of Gravity's Rainbow as "a gigantic circle" (214), as though it were "the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth" (GR, 412). I suspect Cooper leaves the structuring potential of this image behind because he thinks "the chronology of memories, experiences, and reveries is unimportant" (215).
But again the cautionary note: pursuing this mandala too far is a fool's quest. The obviousachronies, anachronisms, and internal contradictions all trace Pynchon's other desire—for Disorder, for a withholding of that wholeness too easily achieved had he closed the circle. For there is no "real story," no surely pegged diachronic sequence that will naturalize this narration. The chronology shapes a reading of the narrative, but the narrative is not bound to it. Indeed, the more one considers the details, the more Pynchon's cyclical surface structure stands as the most obsessive of his spoofs on "holy-center approaching," that desire of Western man for a myth of origins, source, and order. We might well read Pynchon's plot as a vast instance of what Molly Hite aptly calls his "trope of the unavailable insight." At stake in the Easter/April Fool's coincidence is an expectation, always deferred, of epiphany. For the characters in Gravity's Rainbow, that deferral or différence is itself an enabling condition for freedom as well as for storytelling. So it should be, also, for the novel's critics.

Gravity's Rainbow turns in a vastly orchestrated tarantella, it is true. The vision of its wheels within wheels within a wheel calls to mind the image of God's throne-chariot in Ezekiel 1, a favorite Puritan image for the Apocalypse and a key, also, to the "throne-mysticism" in Kabbala (see Scholem, Pynchon's source). Still, this vast orchestration occurs in a satire. What the Puritan Saints would have interpreted as a sign of grace—the advent of a son and his greatness in sacrifice—becomes here a mock-hero's calendar, a fool's progress through bloody history and an unholy commonwealth.

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Notes

1 At least two critics have wrestled with the chronology of the novel's last scenes. In his recent essay, Khachig Tololyan notes that the firing of Rocket O0000 occurs in April, and certainly before V-E Day (40). Barbara Mooney tries to pin the firing down to May 1, May Day. However, she erroneously assumes that Weissmann-Blicicero does not survive after the launch. She also draws on Enzian's claim that the Schwarzkommando "have someone [Thanatz] who
was with Blicero in May. Just before the end" (GR; 663). But "the end" is too unspecific: is it the firing, V-E Day, or even Thanatz's loss of sanity as he fell into the black hole of the DP camps? Also, Thanatz's recollections are, as critics have shown, notoriously fuzzy (see his imagined "windmill" on Lüneberg Heath). In the face of other, more reliable determinations, I see his reported statement to Enzian as another example of characters' exchanging misinformation.

Works Cited


Textual Orbits/Orbiting Criticism:  
Deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow  
Stephen P. Schuber  

Effect, n. The second of two phenomena which always occur together in the same order. The first, called a Cause, is said to generate the other—which is no more sensible than it would be for one who has never seen a dog except in pursuit of a rabbit to declare the rabbit the cause of the dog.  

—Ambrose Bierce,  
The Devil's Dictionary  

I. Project and Projectile  

The list of projects critics have imputed to Gravity's Rainbow generates a type of encyclopedia. There are projects of becoming, projects of knowledge, projects of social import, projects of reading and critical style, and projects of science. No wonder Edward Mendelson goes so far as to call the text an encyclopedic narrative, part of a class of books that "are metonymic compendia of the data, both scientific and aesthetic, valued by their culture. They attempt to incorporate representative elements of all the varieties of knowledge their societies put to use."¹  

But weighted down with so many imputed projects and while so many "data" accumulate and await deciphering—the text seems to be slipping away. Not that Mendelson means that the text results from a scissors-and-paste job performed on certain parts of encyclopedias, compendia of arcana, learned papers, books-of-the-month. Not that "data" fill in the void left by the text. Not even that, as Molly Hite says, "... Pynchon is flouting conventions that require an explicable coherence from the work of art precisely because the work of art must stand in ironic contrast to the 'chaos' of reality."² Quite simply, the "text" itself is slipping away.  

That is, as a totalizing encyclopedia of Western Civilization, the text of Gravity's Rainbow is replaced by a double-edged series of alleged intentions and imputed goals. In the first place, it is reported that
projects such as history—World War II, the V-bombs, people who worked on the bombs, their lives, for example—generate the text, stand behind it, give it legitimacy, and impel it toward readers. In the next place (or in a simultaneous act, depending on how one reads), from this tissue of intentions the reader reportedly discerns the goals of the text and forms ideas such as: The Influence of World War II on American Fiction; Technology and Post-War Fiction; How Biography Enriches Fiction; etc. In this series of glosses and goals, meanings imputed, created, discovered, and replaced—the text slips away.

Slipping away is not the best phrase, perhaps. Actually, the text may better be regarded as a projectile: The projectile is launched, follows a presumed course, leaves a trace (or contrail if one prefers a more visible simulacrum), and presumably is targeted toward a certain objective. The assumption of a target means that the text/projectile will have an impact somewhere. What is more, the projects of the projectile are simply descriptions of the most likely points of impact. That one or more points of impact are possible or are to be anticipated need not disturb postmodernists. Thomas H. Schaub even opines that "Pynchon knows that he is addressing an audience addicted to knowing, and one which believes passionately in 'the facts.' ... Pynchon's books are filled with so much knowledge, and flooded with so many facts and their endless relations, that they trigger in the reader a ... hopeful expectation that reading them will result in enlightenment."³

However, the displacement of the projectile/text during an encyclopedic quest after knowledge is accompanied not by enlightenment, but rather by a series of metalepses (defined by Jonathan Culler as the substitutions of causes for effects).⁴ In an event presumed to be unitary, the trajectory of the text produces a series of equations; that is, the projectile's formulas/sources/analogs theoretically make meaning manifest and support both the projectile and the readings that purport to track its progress. The simulacra of formulas/sources/analogs gloss over the text and ultimately are taken as a unity that corresponds with or is equifinal with the projectile/text.⁵
With metalepses, then, devolve another series of texts that in some respects have supplanted the projectile; one may, in fact, speculate that the critical or collateral texts are in orbit around the projectile. But hence again arises a series of problems: Schaub, for example, maintains that a "revelatory unity is present in the text, but without confirmation or recognition" (4). Yet how can unity be present, unconfirmed, and unrecognized? And by whom? And if the posited unity can be said to exist (some where, some how), then how is the posited unity available for discussion or analysis? In short, the presumption of a unitary theme assumes that the text as object has both a predictable impact and a certain intentionality. Further, because the "revelatory unity" is equated with the projectile/text taken as a unit, this "revelatory unity" must be a fixed item, still and frozen forever—the text at Absolute Zero, posited in an indecomposable absolute—Culler's felicitous phrase for a notion or object that is or signifies only itself and therefore is never amenable to discussion or analysis (see Culler, Chapter One).

Yet the "revelatory unity," posited as the projectile/text, "achieves" meanings (reaches "targets"), according to Schaub, because of the text/projectile's "insistence that meaningfulness requires uncertainty," and "Pynchon's style, then, opens up a space between chance and design, experience and meaning, and the profane and the sacred" (107, 108). Peter L. Cooper develops this theme in a different orbit: "Uncertainty ... is not just a theme: it is also a technique, or rather an ultimate effect that Pynchon achieves through all of his fictional techniques." Hite further suggests that " ... Gravity's Rainbow dictates the terms on which [the novel's] totalization should be possible, even as it resists totalization" (97). However, the textual "unity" produced by critical orbits of "uncertainty" is paradoxical, since the manifest uncertainty is presumed to be masking a latent unity.

In fact, Gravity's Rainbow mocks the very process by which the text is reduced and treated as a conveniently fixed unity:
Is there a single root, deeper than anyone has probed [.. .]? Or has [Slothrop] by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly idling play of a chemist whose molecules are words. . . . 8

The point is that the "mathematics of combination" is not an equation of the sort that one can reconstruct or reduplicate from a textbook. And no equation will determine the meaning or even the impact of Gravity's Rainbow. Nor are footnotes of much help; consider Schaub's finding that:

The V-bomb distribution is one of the most well-known examples of a Poisson distribution. Pynchon may have read about it in an introductory statistics course at Cornell University. A footnote in Feller's An Introduction to Probability Theory refers his readers to the Journal of the Institute of Actuaries and a brief one-page article by R. D. Clarke, F.I.A., of the Prudential Assurance Company, Ltd., entitled "An Application of the Poisson Distribution." (108)

But the prudential assurance of a footnote only limits the possibilities of the text as such; that is, a footnote seems to generate a series of texts, ignoring the text qua text. Or to return to the notion that the text is in orbit: The attempt to surround the text with so many critical orbits that the text is--if not absolutely fixed--at least located within an area defined by probabilities, is itself an attempt to reduce the text to a limit of \( \Delta x \). And the text makes explicit the problematic of reducing changes and attempting by equations to still that which is not inherently a product of equations. For example, "film and calculus, both pornographies of flight" (GR, 567), are assumed to be central to the text. But the text makes clear the potential futility of equations, calculus, calculations:
In the static space of the architect, he might've used a double integral now and then, early in his career, to find volumes under surfaces whose equations were known—masses, moments, centers of gravity. [.] But in the dynamic space of the living Rocket [/Text], the double integral has a different meaning. To integrate here is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled. . . . "Meters per second" will integrate to "meters." (301)

And were this not enough warning from the text, the passage just cited is introduced by an exchange between Etzel Ölsch, designer of the Mittelwerke, and the gnome Apprentice Hupla:

"It—it's about the shape of the tunnels here, Master."
"Don't flinch like that. I based that design on the double lightning-stroke, Hupla—the SS emblem."
"But it's also a double integral sign! Did you know that?"
"Ah. Yes: Summe, Summe, as Leibniz said. Well, isn't that--"
BLAM. (300)

One can wonder whether Etzel is like an Edsel, whether the gnome is gnomic, whether the double integral is related to the "Ss" on the novel's second page, whether Leibniz said or wrote "Summe, Summe" (much less what he meant if he said it, or what resonance this has with the text), whether this is just more Hoopla, or whether such trains of thought are detonated by a BLAM.

The text calls into question not only the calculus of reading but also the reading of reading. Slothrop, by Jamf's crypt,\(^9\) begins to read a document that Slothrop has sought, a document that is supposed to be about Jamf but is equally (one infers—the text, strictly speaking, is silent on this point) about Slothrop, a document that far from ending any quest on Slothrop's part appears relatively early in the quest/text. Were reading not sufficiently problematic, the text specifies that:
The absence of Jamf surrounds him [Slothrop/reader] like an odor, one he knows but can't quite name, an aura that threatens to go epileptic any second. The information is here--not as much as he wanted (aw, how much was that?) but more than he hoped, being one of those practical Yankees. In the weeks ahead, in those very few moments he'll be allowed to wallow in his past, he may even have time to wish he hadn't read any of it . . . (269)

A reader may infer that the "information is here" at the same time that the reader does not know the information, at the same time that a parenthetical voice is speaking up, at the same time that the reader's reader (Slothrop) is potentially generating another orbit through his regional proclivities.

Not too surprisingly, Slothrop's readings have not been considered determinants of critical orbits around Gravity's Rainbow, even though his attempts to read his own history form a significant portion of the text. In this case, the combination of the very science and reading inherently questioned in/excluded from the text itself has been used in critical orbits that tend to fix the text as a closed item. The result is that in such cases Slothrop is not allowed to read; to the contrary, he is read. That is, from the orbits about the text, the hierarchy of meaning is subject to a curious set of rules. For example, once it is stipulated that Slothrop is like an electron, then it is relatively simple to presume that in the Zone, Slothrop is in orbit. As every schoolboy knows, the next step is to jump a level without mentioning that one is jumping a level in reading, to invoke Heisenberg (for some reason, Korzybski is out of fashion in such reading circles) to the effect that one can never know exactly where the electron/Slothrop is. Whatever affective validity such a construct may have for some readers, the jumping of levels can lead to critical orbits that obliterate the text, as in Cooper's conclusion that "Even Pynchon characters other than fetishists or sado-masochists behave so as to dissolve the borders between recognizable individuals but also between animate beings and inanimate objects" (50). But what is said about Slothrop?--that nothing can be
said? That he is indeterminate? Indeterminable? Undetermined? Without a terminus? That a failure in a project of reading erases a text and substitutes an orbiting discourse?

Thus, from certain critical orbits it may appear that Slothrop is dissipating (problems with someone's grasp of $\Delta t$, $\Delta x$?) while in Part Four readers "will want cause and effect" (663). Actually, after the text's excursions into the problematics of reading, being, and being read, Part Four is refreshingly stochastic—defined analogically by Gregory Bateson as a word that derives from "Greek, stochazein, to shoot with a bow at a target; that is, to scatter events in a partially random manner, some of which achieve a preferred outcome" (230). Slothrop's so-called dissipation, the problematics of reading, and the scattering of events are all complicated because while the text/projectile is in orbit, and while no one is taking credit for launching the text/projectile, there is no authority, no set of equations, to reassure readers about where the text is supposed to land. In short, to date no one can specify a "preferred outcome."

II. Lost Causes

While the text is in orbit, the question of its point of launch is subject to debate, and in the absence of a ruling authority, the name-of-the-father cannot be enunciated. The text again is suspended, for there exists no authority for its issue. Thus, it is not uncommon for a certain tone of embarrassment to creep into critical orbits; Cooper, for example, begins by saying that "Reading Pynchon, or, certainly, writing about him, should make us self-conscious, for as readers and critics, we ape the plights and practices of the characters about whom we read"(1). In a similar vein, Mathew Winston says: "I am also uneasy because the nature of Pynchon's writings compels me to examine my own reasons for pursuing the information I have sought." Mendelson, among others, pursues a slightly different orbit in asserting that "Almost alone among his contemporaries, Pynchon has refused to let 'Pynchon' stand for anything but his books" (1). But this compounds the problematic, for at the same time, "Pynchon" is taken
to stand for two separate things: first, as a proper name, "Pynchon" may be the name-of-a-person; second, "Pynchon" may be taken as equifinal with the name-of-a-person who also is reportedly the progenitor of a text.

Beyond these considerations, there is a collateral and cultural habit asserting that an individual logic and talent produces a property that is consumed as text. Again according to this tradition or critical orbit, the progenitor of a text is at liberty to legitimize certain approaches to the text. That is, in certain circles, the logos of the progenitor permeates and sustains the text, and since progenitors typically are taken for males, a certain phallogocentrism governs many of the orbits around Gravity's Rainbow.

But again, the text mocks or elides such phallogocentrism. The "penis of official commendation" (GR, 516) is absent, and it is a mistake to assume that one can double-integrate, stop the action, determine a legitimizing source. Again the text is not subject to such simple means of recuperation: "all right, say we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop . . ." (520). Yet instead of a "penis of official commendation" there is a simulacrum, a rocket, and the quest for authority--be it for 00000, which still adds up to zero, void, null set--or for an Author.

Thus the metalepsis is doubled: "Pynchon"/author in some way produces a text that in some way produces results and readings and meanings. That is, "Pynchon" (sous rature) inscribes himself in a text and in the same gesture is circumscribed from the text. The text then is presumed to be in a certain trajectory, and attempts to fix that supposed trajectory instead inscribe orbits about it.

Another equation is the last thing we need--the text is already sufficiently plural. It has not yet been located, in spite of all the equations. Rather,
it has dislocated itself, and readers of the text are well advised to bear in mind Jean Pierre Faye's observation that a critique or reading is itself an activity subject to the same problematic that governs the text under examination:

Because history/story makes itself only in recounting itself, a critique of history/story cannot be exercised except by recounting how history/story, in narrating itself, produces itself.14

In addition, Faye's historicity should be tempered with an observation regarding the very starting point of thinking about reading/writing; as Jacques Derrida says, we must "think the present starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral."15 This is not simply a call for a so-called new approach. The text is always already a new departure.

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Notes


2 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), 5.


5 Strictly speaking, this projectile-cum-critical-orbits is not the "text" that ostensibly is under discussion, and for this reason, "text" should be understood under erasure (sous rature) following Derrida's practice. A theoretical discussion of the implications of this practice would create another orbit in the present writing (as does this footnote); see Derrida's Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976); Spivak's preface, esp. xiv ff., is helpful in explaining this practice.

6 A text under erasure—"inaccurate but necessary, and thus
"legible" as Spivak says (xiv)—may be so, but Schaub seems to be discussing the projectile as viewed from a very particular critical orbit.


Or the reader—by Slothrop's story. It is curious that while critical orbits dissect Slothrop, they do not highlight parallels between Slothrop's problems with reading and those of readers reading.


Just as I feel no need to carry on about parallels between rockets and phallduses, I shall not insist on a Freudian reading of Cooper's remark.


Jean Pierre Faye, Théorie du récit (Paris: Hermann [Coll. Savoir], 1972), 9, my translation. Faye writes: "Parce que l'histoire ne se fait ou'en se racontant, une critique de l'histoire ne peut être exercée qu'en racontant comment l'histoire, en se narrant, se produit."

Included Middles
and the Trope of the Absent Insight
Bernard Duyfhuizen


Criticism of Thomas Pynchon's three novels to date (V., The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow) has been largely concerned with explaining the texts in relation to something else--be it object, concept, or system of ideas--which is perceived as already knowable and known. The critics have seen their task as one of control and mastery. By exploring sharply defined conceptualizations of the text, by way of often convention-ridden critical strategies, these critics have sought to untie the knots of discourse that, of course, conceal a central message, an originary meaning, that will illuminate the entire text. I do not want to suggest by the remainder of this review essay that these efforts have been futile. On the contrary, the explications of Pynchon's use of entropy, historical facts, scientific facts, films, other literature and arts have all contributed to our understanding of the disparate elements Pynchon has amalgamated into his encyclopedic writing.

These pioneering critics venture onto shaky ground, however, whenever they attempt to raise their explications to the status of hermeneutics. They desire either an ultimate meaning, structure, order that will explain everything, or a final confirmation that the texts are incoherent, irredeemably random, meaningless. As Pynchon puts it, it is the tension we recognize in the conditions of paranoia and anti-paranoia--conditions in which either everything is connected to everything else or everything is hopelessly unconnected to anything else: pure and total order versus unremitting chaos. For the reader to make sense of the fictional worlds in Pynchon's texts, the texts must be made to conform to one of these extremes, and the question then becomes: "Who or what is responsible?" Though this dichotomy and question of responsibility are deeply ingrained in Western epistemologies, Molly Hite asserts in Ideas of
Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon that they offer Pynchon's reader a fundamentally wrong approach to the novels.

In her alternative approach, Hite contends that Pynchon's "fictional worlds . . . are pluralistic—governed not by a rigid, absolute, and universal Idea of order but by multiple, partial, overlapping, and often conflicting ideas of order. And these worlds are familiar, even when they are most bizarre and surreal, because they evoke a multilayered reality in which multiple means of putting things together manage to coexist without resolving into a single, definitive system of organization" (10). By foregrounding her study of the novels on this pluralist assertion, Hite examines with great sensitivity the mania for order that motivates most of Pynchon's characters. Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, Ned Pointsman, Tyrone Slothrop, etc.—all become seduced by the desire for and the image of an order that would make sense of everything, an order hidden just below the surface of perceived reality, an order that either will allow the world to continue (the order of a benevolent God) or will fulfill the prophecy of randomness oracled by the second law of thermodynamics. Pynchon's narratives, in Hite's reading, play out the drama/comedy of life, as each character is caught with incomplete data between the metaphysical extremes of order and chaos.

To be able to read Pynchon's texts in this way without succumbing, as Hite admirably does not, to some sort of totalizing metaphor that will privilege a single ordering principle requires a poststructuralist epistemology unavailable to any of the characters. Hite is well-schooled in poststructuralist and deconstructive activities of reading texts (though her readers are spared the turgid or self-indulgent prose that characterizes some deconstructive critical writing). She uses this way of reading to uncover the "middles" that constitute Pynchon's fictional worlds but that are actively excluded by the characters in their individual quests for a meaningful order for experience. Paradoxically, the inclusion of "middles," local systems of order that overlap and interweave to form the fabric of experience, necessitates that we recognize a fundamental "centerlessness" in Pynchon's
fictional worlds and his fictions. Despite his characters' courageous efforts, there is no all-inclusive order or ultimate single meaning undergirding their existences. Hite sees this centerlessness as a condition rather than a theme in the novels, and it correlates with what deconstructionists see as "the gap between language and its true referent"--the referent being always already different and absent from the word and the universe of discourse.

As Hite so cogently demonstrates throughout her study, the condition of centerlessness is the enabling trope that directs each character's quest for an Idea of Order. But such an Order is never accessible, because the quest is always for the "absent insight," the "Holy Center" one always approaches but which never actually exists. The "Holy Center" promises to provide a totalizing answer to the random events in each character's life, yet the failure of the questing characters to discover the center does not mean that everything is an illusion masking a great cosmic blank. Instead, the absence of the center and a single order emanating from it marks a plenitude of smaller, competing, overlapping and always incomplete orders that allow meaning and life to continue. This lack of unity is, moreover, a positive condition--the necessary element in human freedom; thus, Slothrop's scattering at the end of Gravity's Rainbow marks a full embrace of freedom rather than an inevitable loss. It is only to readers who bring their own totalizing metaphors to the text that Slothrop's disappearance marks a nihilistic denouement. But why do we read Pynchon's texts this way?

Hite notes throughout her study how Pynchon's characters tend to "read" the signs of their experiences as if they were characters in a traditional novel. The operative word here is "traditional," since in Hite's view the linear thinking and organization of experience that constitutes the structure of most traditional novels does not ultimately apply to Pynchon's texts. Pynchon's narrators are never god-like presences having complete control over the fictional world; instead, they appear to be in much the same condition of centerlessness as the characters. And if the narrators and the characters have no privileged access to a "Holy Center," then neither can readers expect privileged
access. Nor can they impose onto the narrative a system, based on the tired conventions of traditional novels, that will routinize the text's process of becoming into that of an unchanging artifact. Hite seeks primarily to overturn the convention of seeing narrative structure as operating only within a logic of cause and effect; in its place she proposes we read the many events in Pynchon's texts as elements in a series of resemblances that have neither a single originary event, nor a definitive hierarchical order, nor an end. Resemblances form into orders, but these are mostly orders imposed by a logic that "plots" experiences as if they occurred in novels, and these orders never approach an Order that would explain everything. In Pynchon's worlds the events may be ultimately random, but the drama and comedy in his texts come from the ways his characters, narrators, and readers order their experiences in futile yet necessary quests for total meaning.

These, then, are Hite's premises for her readings of the novels. In looking at V., Hite begins by citing that "Stencil's story does not approximate Pynchon's," and from there she traces Stencil's quest as an allegory of a naturalistic reading of history that seeks to plot events along a deterministic time line that will confirm Stencil's perception of his present day world as the scene of final degradation. The always absent insight or center is the lady V., who presents an enigmatic image that refuses to become clearly defined, that suggests far too much, that neither confirms nor disavows anything which would unlock the secrets of the world. In The Crying of Lot 49 Hite focuses on the novel's parody of a pure linear narrative structure and of Oedipa's paradigmatic acts of interpretation. Oedipa reads each mark of Tristero that she discovers in a search for the cause-and-effect order that is either undergirding or undermining her world, but again the evidence fails to add up, and Oedipa along with the reader is left with a mass of "descriptive residue." However, "this residue constitutes a world," and Hite observes that Pynchon "uses the device of 'descriptive residue' to initiate a radical questioning of whether anything can be merely residue... Waste signifies; it communicates" (76-77).
Gravity's Rainbow inevitably gets the longest chapter in Hite's study. Here Hite shows how the novel dramatizes the conflict between Providential and secular histories—the former being firmly centered in a myth of origin and totally end-directed (eschatological), while the latter is centerless and a celebration of life as it is lived. Thus Gravity's Rainbow is a historical novel, but not in the traditional sense; instead, it contravenes the orthodox literary patterns and focuses for examining historical events, and substitutes a narrative logic that Hite aligns with "Murphy's law": "By making Murphy's law a 'brash Irish proletarian restatement of Godel's Theorem,' Pynchon implies that a truism of experience—something will go wrong, something will always surprise us—derives from the necessary incompleteness of all totalizing conceptual systems" (123-24). This "incompleteness" is marked in the text by the constant use of ellipses, which suggest there is always more to anything than can ever be said. Nearly a third of Hite's chapter is devoted to examining the narrator and the use of "language" in Gravity's Rainbow; though these are not the last words on these subjects, Hite has certainly done a fine job in showing readers how contingent these two can be.

As excellent as Ideas of Order is, it too suffers from some incompleteness and an occasional blindness to the implications of some of its points. For example, in discussing V., Hite makes only passing comments about the eleven chapters that make up the present time of the narrative, and one would like to see a more extended reading of Benny Profane's story within the context of ideas of order. Though Hite is very right in seeing Lot 49 as an assault on linear narrative thinking, on the narratological level of the sentence, the novel manifests some dizzying shifts in focalization and temporal orientation: for all its apparent linearity, Lot 49 is less straightforward in its narrative patterns than Hite implies. And finally, with regard to Gravity's Rainbow, one can cite two rather disturbing assertions. The first has to do with the "incident [that] marks the decentralization of Slothrop's sexuality" (119), Trudi's "nose job," given in Sause Bummer's Berlin apartment (GR, 439). According to Hite, Slothrop's nasal erection is "his final sexual perfor-
mance before he loses coherence as a character" (119), and the shifting of his "hardon" from his penis to his nose marks his "deginalization." However, Hite overlooks Slothrop's later tryst with Bianca (GR, 468-72), when "something, oh, kind of funny happens here. Not that Slothrop is really aware of it now, while it's going on--but later on, it will occur to him that he was--this may sound odd, but he was somehow, actually, well, inside his own cock" (469-70). The problem with Hite's reading of the "Incident" is her making it Slothrop's "final" performance; in so doing she contravenes the logic of the non-totalizing act of reading she is trying to posit.

The second, and perhaps more disturbing, assertion occurs during Hite's examination of "the deathward tendency of the action." Hite observes that despite all of the deathward tendencies in the text, "not one of the major characters dies" (130). First of all, this statement is true for a traditional logic of reading that seeks singular narrative lines organized around particular characters, especially the titular character. But elsewhere Hite wants the reader to recognize that "Pynchon refuses to establish a hierarchy among the cacophony of voices in Gravity's Rainbow" (102). If Pynchon refuses to establish hierarchies (a point I find fundamentally necessary for understanding Pynchon's text), then there is no such thing as "major characters," and some characters' deaths are felt and shared by the "community" (Hite's term) of the novel. If this is not so, then Hite's statement implies (though in no way do I think she intends) that it is okay for minor, or marginal characters to die, since it is really only the central characters that matter. Hite blindly falls, here, into the trap set by conventional habits of novel reading and by her desire to read the novel ultimately as a comedy; as she puts it at the end of the paragraph in which she states no major characters die: "To take the arc of the rainbow seriously as a controlling metaphor is to betray a richly comic novel to the excessive gravity of its providential plot" (131). Hite's careful way of reading is occasionally and similarly betrayed to the excessive gravity of traditional structures of reading.
Although one may quibble with a few elements in Molly Hite's study, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* is a major work of Pynchon criticism, and it marks a significant step forward in our quest to understand, arguably, the most important American novelist living. Hite's work opens new perspectives to novels and to our activities of reading them, and her work is a must for anyone who wants seriously to study Pynchon's writing. Ultimately, the value of Hite's work rests in her break with previous methods for reading the texts—methods that were steeped in the training of New Criticism. Molly Hite reads Thomas Pynchon, through his writings, as one with his age's most radical intellectual movements: post-structuralism and deconstruction.

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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.

NEW PYNCHON:


Includes:

"Introduction." 1-23.
"Low-lands." 53-77.
"Entropy." 79-98.
"Under the Rose." 99-137.
"The Secret Integration." 139-93.

CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


Includes Pynchon among "makers of genuine literature."


Beidler, Philip D. "Truth-Telling and Literary Values in the Vietnam Novel." _South Atlantic Quarterly_, 78 (1979), 141-56. (142, 154)

Mentions Pynchon as a practitioner of the "'new' novel of war."


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    Merely quotes from GR 410-13.


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    Notes a home and a hangout of Pynchon's.

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CIRCULATING MANUSCRIPT:

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