Pynchon Notes

Editors
John M. Krafft
English Department
Suffolk County Community College
Western Campus
Brentwood, NY 11717-1092

Khachig Töloyan
English Department
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06457-6061

Bernard Duyfhuizen
English Department
University of Wisconsin — Eau Claire
Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004

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Manuscripts, notes and queries, and bibliographic information should be addressed to John M. Krafft.
Subscriptions and back issue requests should be addressed to Bernard Duyfhuizen.

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THE DEATH OF THE REAL
IN THE CRYING OF LOT 49

Maurice Couturier

Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds
are, of course, those that seem unusual;
--Vladimir Nabokov

Few of the so-called postmodern novels have caused a great
deal of discussion about the so-called referent, be it history
or American society for example. Even when writers like
Barthelme, Coover and Abish apparently depend so much upon good
old "reality" to compose their fictions, only exceptionally do
the critics (so far at least) focus their attention on the
referent that is point to or torn apart. Pynchon's The Crying
of Lot 49 is clearly an exception. Many scholars--taking their
cue from Oedipus, who suddenly discovered "that the legacy was
America"--have been tempted to study the book as a reflection
of media-manic America and have experienced great difficulties
in extricating themselves from the referential snare.

"Reality," a concept which sounded very suspicious to
Pynchon's one-time professor, Nabokov, preoccupies Oedipa
throughout her quest. She rarely mentions it directly but keeps
referring to the "truth," explaining that the act of metaphor is
a "thrust at truth" (85). She becomes gradually aware of what
Jean Baudrillard calls the "agony of the powerful referents, the
agony of the real and the rational," an agony which is
precipitated by the proliferation of the media and of the
techniques of simulation. She would like to stop this
proliferation, but, in order to do so, she must first rediscover
the authentic text hidden beneath the surface of everyday
reality. This crusade lamentably fails, because she keeps
unearthing more and more texts which duplicate reality and make
the "real" more elusive. Her quest is circular: the "real" she
is looking for is of course her elusive self.

1: Communication

The California described by Pynchon in The Crying of Lot 49
extends between San Francisco and Los Angeles, a region which
has become famous all over the world for, among other things,
Silicon Valley with its computer labs and plants, and Bateson's
invisible college of Palo Alto specializing in communication and

* A slightly different version of this essay was published
as Direction de travail: Agregation d'Anglais 410. Dragulgan:
interaction. The novel ridicules Californians' passionate desire for communication as a way to defeat the anxiety inherent in solitude.

On the first page, different systems of communication are evoked. Oedipa has been attending a Tupperware party, not only, presumably, to buy airtight containers, but above all to meet other lonesome women and have a good time with them. This is apparently what she got with a little help from her hostess's fondue (a highly socialized dish), which had providently been laced with kirsch. Back home, she finds a letter informing her that she has been named co-executor of Inverarity's estate. While she is trying to sober up from so much alcohol and excitement, she casts a glance at the television's dead screen and invokes the name of God as if help could only come from that quarter, that is to say, the media.

The Crying of Lot 49 can indeed be read as an elaborate textbook on communication in its various aspects: as a system of technical devices meant to convey information, goods, or persons from one source or place to another; as a set of rule-governed behaviors enabling people to interact; as an elaborate network of symbols and myths which weld together the members of a cultural group. These various forms of communication are not didactically exposed, of course; they are obliquely described and analyzed through their various failures to achieve their goal.

The whole story apparently began a year before the opening of the novel with Inverarity's phone call. While she is listening to the Huntley-Brinkley nightly news program, Oedipa remembers this long distance call at three in the morning from her erstwhile lover, Inverarity had tried to confuse her by changing his voice many times, finally adopting the voice of an actor, Lemont Cranston. This was Inverarity's last attempt to reestablish communication with her, but she hung up on him as her husband advised her. What shocked her most, apparently, was that she had no way to tell where he was calling from: "That phone line could have pointed any direction, been any length," she commented to herself afterwards (6). She could not fully understand his message because she didn't know all the deictic coordinates of his discourse (where he was, whom with . . .); the call naturally didn't have the same meaning, the speech act was different, if he was calling from far off Mexico or from a hotel next door.

The next phone call in the novel is again at three o'clock in the morning; it is from Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa's shrink. He also takes advantage of the fact that, with a telephone, you can drop in on anybody at any moment without any consideration for what the receiver is doing; he hardly apologizes, as if the telephone had the ability to abstract the interlocutors from the spatial and temporal continuum. In this case, the telephone has apparently pointed in the wrong direction: usually, it is the
patient who calls his doctor, not the contrary. He begs her, "We want you!" (10). Later in the novel he will go mad and will confide in Oedipa the way a patient confides in his or her analyst. The multi-directionality of the telephone line has forced patient and doctor to change parts, as it were: the medium has manipulated those who wanted to use it.

The telephone plays an important part again in Chapter 6, when Oedipa tries to get in touch with Dribletta, the director and actor whom she met earlier, after the performance of the Courier's Tragedy. An elderly lady answers her call: "I'm sorry, we've nothing to say!" (102). Oedipa hasn't even had time to introduce herself; the elderly lady will only explain that she is "his mother" (102). Since Dribletta's name has never been mentioned, this deictic phrase could have two different referents, one for the lady and the other for Oedipa. Later, the latter will discover that Dribletta has committed suicide and that the news has been in the paper. The joker responsible for this communication failure is the "Shadow," death (6): it has simply removed the expected receiver.

The last important phone call occurs a few pages farther on. Oedipa, who is now desperately trying to make contact with the Tristero system, makes a last attempt: she calls the "Inamorato Anonymous" she met earlier at the Greek Way. Since she does not know his name, she must give a description of him on the phone to get him. Here again, the medium is imposing words upon her. When she gets him on the line, she gives his name as "Arnold Snaid" (122), the name given to her by a stranger (presumably named Arnold Snaid) who pinned his ID badge on her breast as he bolted from a tour group about to enter the Greek Way bar. In this telephone conversation, neither of the speakers knows the real identity of the other; the IA knows she can't be Arnold since this is a man's name, but he doesn't seem to care since his own sexual identity is not clearly defined. Yet this is the man Oedipa calls in the last resort: "Help me!" (122). He hangs up on her, as she once hung up on Inverarity; the communication can't be restored because she has no coins left to operate the public telephone. The medium is again imposing its law, its logic upon the "helpless" user, firing her with a desperate longing for communication which she can't appease.

The media's chief function, therefore, is not so much to facilitate communication as to create an unfulfillable need for it. This is typically the case with television in two very important scenes. In Chapter 2, Metzger and Oedipa find themselves watching television in a motel room. There's a war movie on, with Metzger as the child actor Baby Igor. Gradually they get engrossed in the film, which is interrupted at regular intervals by advertisements celebrating the commercial achievements of Inverarity in San Narciso. Their relationship becomes more affectionate as the show develops, and as the various stories (the plot of the film, the shooting itself, and
their own story) get confused. In these various stories, they naturally play different parts, or put on different masks. Metzger is a specialist in this kind of game; he once was an actor, and now he is a lawyer; the story of his life as an actor turned lawyer has been made into a film in which his part is played by a lawyer turned actor, Manny Di Presso.

Pynchon is playing here with the mirror effects that television and the cinema allow, and he spells out the sexual fantasies that they arouse. Loaded, stimulated, by the show, Oedipa starts asking questions about what is going to happen next; Metzger teases her into making bets, a communication of a sort, and proposes a little game of his invention, "Strip Botticelli": for each new "bit" of information she gets from him, she must shed a piece of clothing. Though she cheats by putting on additional articles, the scene is still being run by the film in a way, as much as by Metzger himself. While she is putting on more clothes, she overturns the spray can and sends it ricocheting against the walls and mirrors of the bathroom, a trivial presage of what is going to happen to her in the course of the story. The erotic scene escalates to its happy climax, but at this very moment, the TV tube goes dead: "The Paranoids had blown a fuse" (27) with their electric guitars. However, it probably didn't take only the Paranoids, but also the television set, which had been fueling the two protagonists with sexual vitality. There is a teasing suggestion at this point that it was the violent explosion of their climax which blew the fuse and put an end to the TV show.

In this scene, Pynchon is demonstrating that the media can't function separately in complete isolation. Television is a medium which depends on another medium, electricity, to function. For the scientist, electricity is only an energy, and as such it can become so depleted that it becomes unable to fulfill its appointed task--providing "juice" to the television set and to the Paranoids' amplifier. Electricity, however, is not only a "utility"; it is also a medium, as McLuhan has explained in Understanding Media. As such it imposes its logic upon the community, allows certain technological or cultural developments. It is like a possessive mother who keeps her children forever dependent upon her. Most of the time, people are not aware of this situation; but when the medium breaks down, we pathetically beg the great goddess not to forsake us.

Would Metzger and Oedipa have made love without the benign complicity of electricity and television? Perhaps, and perhaps not! Oedipa was not particularly attracted to the man but rather to the type he represented: "He turned out to be so good-looking that Oedipa thought at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on. It had to be an actor" (17). Reality has been so transformed by the cinema and television, by the many techniques of simulation, that Oedipa can't trust her eyes; her hesitation is understandable since Metzger was an actor before he became a lawyer.
The second character in the novel to be infected by television mania is Nefastis, the scientist who is in charge of the Demon. Oedipas finds him on, of all streets, Telegraph Avenue. When she arrives, he is watching on television "a bunch of kids dancing some kind of a Watusi" (72). Like the other television maniac, Metzger, like the radio maniac Mucho, he is interested in "young stuff" (72), in children as sexual objects, the impulsion being, perhaps, that the media tend to have a debilitating influence on people and breed perversions of all kinds. Pynchon may have had in mind the Shirley Temple phenomenon which Nabokov exploited poetically in Lolita.

Nefastis invites Oedipas to "watch the picture" on the box so that she may receive the energy from the Demon and "feed back something like the same quantity of information" (72), while he continues to watch television. There is clearly a symmetry in the two situations: Oedipas is supposed to draw energy from an image and transform it into information; Nefastis, on the other hand, passively absorbs information and transforms it into sexual energy. When Oedipas, having failed to move the piston (1), returns to him, he invites her onto the couch to have sexual intercourse with him while watching television:

"Maybe there'll be something about China tonight. I like to do it while they talk about Viet Nam, but China is best of all. You think about all those Chinese. Teeming. That profusion of life. It makes it sexier, right?" (74)

The neutral shifter, "it," becomes gradually loaded with a great deal of "semantic energy" in this passage: in Nefastis's earlier statement ("We can do it there"), it stood for "love," but since the phrase "to make love" would probably seem objectionable to Oedipas, he paraphrases "it" as "sexual intercourse." In the last sentence, the two "it"'s have different meanings: "profusion of life," and "love" or "sexual intercourse."

Nefastis is translating into another medium or language the excitement he derives from making love in front of a television set. He is a poet, in a way: he doesn't care about the dreadful plight of starving Chinese, only about their swarming crowds. He is not a stupid materialist like some unimaginative scientists; he never mentions laws or principles when he talks about information and thermodynamics, but uses the word "metaphor" instead: "Entropy is a figure of speech, then... a metaphor." (73). In this case, the materialist is Oedipas; she takes his words too literally. She should have been aware of the poetic kinship between herself watching the Demon and him watching television. There is no relevant information to be drawn from either box except that inherent in the technology (real or imaginary), or that invented freely, artistically, by the beholder.
In both scenes, Oedipa is manipulated by the media. Metzger and Nefastis are both artists: they can turn television to their advantage without sticking slavishly to the normal use that normal people make of it. For them, the medium is not the message; for Oedipa, it is.

This weakness, which she shares with her fellow Californians, incapacitates her to deal with the chief medium in the story, the Tristero system. For all good Americans who have pledged allegiance to the flag at school, the postal monopoly enjoyed by the Federal government is a foundation stone of the American way of life: it doesn't only guarantee satisfactory communications among the members of the community; it also allows the government to censor offensive materials, like books and other publications. Besides, the post office is often the only Federal building in small villages and urban districts; that's where the "portrait of Uncle Sam" (10) and the pictures of "wanted" criminals are posted.

Oedipa is utterly unaware at first of what the system may imply, until it starts to break down. A letter is like a greenback: it is a standard of official value. If anybody could issue stamps or banknotes, there would be no order, no consensus, no nation. Since many of the so-called traditional values have disappeared through history, it becomes vital to preserve such artificial values to serve as ultimate standards around which societies structure themselves. Oedipa had never thought stamps could be more than the price to be paid for a letter to be carried to its destination, their cancellation by the post office implied that the only thing of value left was the content of the letter. Oedipa begins to have doubts about this principle when she receives Mucho's letter:

It may have been an intuition that the letter would be useless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside, when it arrived. At first she didn't see. It was an ordinary Muchoesque envelope, swept from the station, ordinary airmail stamp, to the left of the cancellation a blurb put on by the government. REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER. (30)

It is the paucity of the tenor which draws her attention to the vehicle. The postal system, which is supposed to convey information, not generate it, has transgressed the law here; with the help of Mucho's stamp, it has reminded Oedipa of her conjugal duty. Mucho himself would never have dared.

The next important crisis for Oedipa takes place at the Scope when Fallopian explains about the parallel postal system which uses Yoyodyne's inter-office delivery and which, for all we know, may constitute the core of the nationwide WASTE system. It was the necessity of delivering mail more quickly or more efficiently which encouraged the development of this system, but
a "principle": "To keep it up to some kind of a reasonable volume, each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system. If you don't, you get fined!" (35). As Fallopian laudably admits, the members are rebels: "It's not as rebellious as it looks," a half-hearted confession which Metzger reformulates as follows: "A little like cop-out" (35). It is not a matter of exchanging information but of beating the monopoly and everything the monopoly stands for. This form of dissent is childish, as far as materialistic Oedipa is concerned; but it makes sense if one accepts McLuhan's theory ("The medium is the message").

The users of this parallel system gain nothing in terms of information but a great deal in terms of interrelation. Fallopian keeps saying "we" in his explanations, and he mentions that they are organized in "chapters," that is, small communities in which individuals accept their alienation in return for a little warmth and a sense of belonging. This community spirit comes out clearly in Stanley Koteks' reaction to Oedipa's bluff, "Kirby sent me" (58). She uses this name which she saw on the latrine wall at the Scope as a password. Koteks refuses to acknowledge the sign and rejects Oedipa into the cold world: "You're lost, huh?" This sounds like a description of Oedipa rather than a polite question. She has failed to penetrate the WASTE system again. Koteks will make a slip a little later in the same conversation: he will give her Nefasti's address in the WASTE code:

"Box 573," said Koteks.
"In Berkeley."
"No," his voice gone funny, so that she looked up, too sharply, by which time, carried by a certain momentum of thought, "he'd also said, "In San Francisco; there's none--" and by then knew he'd made a mistake. (60)

It is Oedipa who unwittingly makes him realize his mistake. In her postal system, a box number is meaningless unless it is completed by the name of the post office or the city. We assume that in the WASTE system a box number is enough; they have drawn up a map where Federal post offices and city names have been supplanted by numbers, inventing a Shadow country as it were.

Oedipa acquires a first-hand knowledge of the WASTE system during her San Francisco trek. For instance, she overhears the following conversation:

"I'll write, ma," he kept saying. "Write by WASTE," she said, "remember. The government will open it if you use the other. The dolphins will be mad." "I love you, ma," he said. "Love the dolphins," she advised him. "Write by WASTE." (65)
The boy, who wants to "slip at night into aquariums and open negotiations with the dolphins," and his mother make a strange couple: like all true Oedipuses, he is passionately in love with his mother, but she wants him to give his love to the dolphins, a most un-Jocastian attitude. Here is the first indication that the WASTE system is being used to beat government-imposed censorship. Many of those who use it want to indulge in their "unspeakable practices and unnatural acts," as Barthelme would phrase it, without any interference by the authorities. So it is with Mucho, Metzger and Nefastis, who like "young stuff." Others, like Driblette, Arnold Sarnb and the I.A., refuse to conform to the love code which is crammed with clichés, or even to the life code, prohibiting suicide, which breeds endless miseries. The members of the WASTE community inhabit another country: that of their uninhibited fantasies, desires, or dreams.

Oedipa eventually manages to penetrate the system with the help of a dying man who gives her a letter for his wife, who lives in Fresno; he asks her: "Drop it in the, ' and he held up the tattoo and stared into her eyes, 'you know. I can't go out there. It's too far now, I had a bad night'" (86). He responds to her flagrant longing to enter the WASTE world by entrusting her with the letter and telling her that she will find the box under the freeway. Here is a "monumental" metaphor: the WASTE system runs underneath the Californian freeway system and undermines it. A meet retribution, in a way, since the freeway system has been undermining the world of the dead, as Genghis Cohen points out when talking about his dandelion wine: "I picked the dandelions in a cemetery, two years ago. Now the cemetery is gone. They took it out for the East San Narciso Freeway" (65-86). It is perhaps because the freeways have killed the dead a second time, severing the symbolic link which existed between the living and the dead (the dandelion wine), that they must be "antagonized" like this. The WASTE system will redeem the dead from the materialistic curse.

Thanks to the old man, Oedipa finds herself inside the system, carrying a letter with a phony stamp on it. She is not interested in the content of the letter, only in the underground network. Her quest takes her back to Telegraph Avenue, and Nefastis: she has unwittingly been running in a circle. Perhaps the dying man, realizing that his condition would spontaneously gain Oedipa's trust, has set her up and sent her back to the lascivious scientist. No matter how hard she tries, she remains within the US postal system.

Genghis Cohen, who has told Oedipa earlier about the deliberate mistakes in Inverarity's stamps, invites her to have a look at an old American stamp "bearing the device of the muted post horn, belly-up badger, and the motto WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO'S EMPIRE" (116). This renews her flagging interest in the stamps. She looks forward to the "crying of lot 49" now that a new "book bidder" has announced his intention of buying
the whole lot. She does not realize that Genghis Cohen is deliberately teasing her, kindling her paranoia. He is of course a member of the Tristero system, and he draws his pleasure from witnessing her hopeless attempts to penetrate the system.

The stamps, the muted horn, the badger have now become opaque signifiers for Oedipa despite all the background information she has gleaned about them. She had hoped that the vehicle would some day reveal its tenor, but she understands now that it won't. The money that will be bid on the stamps at the crying will define their value on the collectors' market; at the same time it will irretrievably cancel out their value as vehicles of a tenor since it will remove them from the postal system which guaranteed their exchange value.

The market appears eventually as the grave of communication. It normalizes and digests something that could have constituted a threat, transforming the badge of a rival state into a collector's item. As Barthelme has demonstrated in many of his fictions (especially in "The Balloon"), we are endowed with a tremendous capacity to naturalize disturbing phenomena and objects, to weave around them a "cocoon of habituation" (Barthelme's felicitous phrase again). The phony stamps, like the senseless balloon in the Manhattan sky, must be made to signify; otherwise, they threaten our sanity. The market, by assigning a money value to everything, normalizes the unknown; it is a device which abolishes the unpredictable and increases information entropy. It is the model for all the media, the telephone, television, the postal system, whose avowed goal is to improve communication: it precipitates an information hemorrhage.

2: The "Real Text"

Faced with this paradoxical situation, people like Oedipa devise all kinds of strategies to have a modicum of exchange with their fellow men; in most cases, unfortunately, these strategies succeed only in aggravating their frustrations and "disinheritance." A Tupperware party is one of these strategies: it is not the airtight containers which are really for sale but a little share of conviviality. No medium is being used, except money, the medium par excellence. Money is what prevents genuine exchange between the guests at such parties; it pollutes everybody's speech. The hostess must resort to an extreme solution to make her guests relax and buy goods: she gets them drunk on kirsch. This is not a real party, therefore, but a simulacrum of a party.

This extra-textual scene mentioned in the first line has an allegorical value in the novel: it shows that in our modern world people have completely lost touch with reality, with what Pynchon calls the "Real Text" in Gravity's Rainbow.
But, if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now, if this is it . . . or if I passed it today somewhere in the devastation of Hamburg, breathing the ash-dust, missing it completely . . . if what the IG built on this site were not at all the final shape of it, but only an arrangement of Tetishes, come-ons to call down special tools in the form of 8th AF bombers yes the "Allied" planes all would have been, ultimately, IG-built, by way of Director Krupp, through his English interlocks--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, redetecting the holy Text . . .

In this passage, Pynchon explains that the war is not a tragic accident caused by antagonistic ideologies but a necessary process in our technological world: "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 . . ." War is therefore part of the "Real Text"; the phony text is peace, political and economic order, what, in other words, is commonly held as normalcy.

In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon shows how the real is gradually supplanted by the text. The process begins with Inverarity's will, which names Oedipa as his executrix in its codicil. The codicil does not properly duplicate the will, but it adds a second executor, Metzger having been named chief executor in the body of the will. Inverarity has entrusted Oedipa (and Metzger) with the difficult job of "sorting it all out" (5), sorting out all his property, checking that reality (the wealth to be distributed) conforms with the description in the will. In such circumstances, one normally expects the items listed to correspond exactly with the reality of the estate. It is not the case here: Oedipa finds a great deal more, especially in the stamp collection, than was itemized. Her investigation consists on the one hand of rereading the will to discover what was "encrypted" (123) in it, and on the other hand of deciphering the estate more thoroughly to assess its true value or relevance. She is terribly disturbed at the end when she finds that the text (the prescription) won't match the estate (the referent), either because Inverarity deliberately fooled her, or because something had "slipped through" (124) in spite of him. Oedipa is behaving like an efficient grocer who compares the items listed on a bill to the goods delivered. She is an arch materialist; she insists on the perfect adequacy between the descriptive/prescriptive text and the referent.

The chief item on the list is a city, San Narciso. The name of the city probably points to the fact that Inverarity
founded it, invented it, in his own image. All the commercials which interrupt the TV show in Chapter 2 spell out this message. San Narciso is not a "real" city born of people's need to find shelter, warmth, happiness together, but a "group of concepts," as Oedipa learns when she arrives:

Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts—census tracts, special-purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. (14-15)

The city is not real; it is textual: everything has been meticulously planned, projected, in advance. The city existed on paper before it found its way onto an actual tract of land and eventually onto a map of California. Spontaneously, Oedipa senses that there is something wrong about it:

and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. (14)

Written language has contaminated the technological world, as we see in this passage: one speaks of "printed" circuits, of a circuit "card." Intuitively, Oedipa feels that there is a text which underlies this city, a text which shows as hieroglyphics through the surface of streets and houses, and which was authored by narcissistic Inverarity.

The new housing development called Fangoso Lagoons is a model text, a "mise en abyme" of San Narciso as it were:

It was to be laced by canals with private landings for power boats, a floating social hall in the middle of an artificial lake, at the bottom of which lay restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and friezes from the Canaries; real human skeletons from Italy; giant clamshells from Indonesia—all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts. (19-20)

The model for this project is obviously Venice. Nothing here is genuine; everything is borrowed: from the Bahamas, the Canaries, Italy, Indonesia, etc. Each borrowed item is meant to contribute to the exoticism of the place: Fangoso Lagoons must not be an ordinary place in California; it is supposed to look different. One could almost speak of an intertextual place, each item pointing towards an idealized representation of
another country, towards another text. Like Disneyland, Enchanted Village, Marine World in Los Angeles, it is not a real place inhabited by real people, but, to paraphrase Baudrillard, an imaginary power station, a power station which generates "de l'imaginaire" and whose chief function is to bolster the shaky reality of the world outside."

The most troublesome item on the list is naturally the "real human skeletons from Italy." These skeletons, salvaged from Lago di Piatâ, are those of American G.I.'s who were mercilessly butchered by the Germans during the Second World War; they were bought by Beaconsfield to make cigarette filters, and filched by Inverarity, who immersed them in his Fangoso Lagoons. Neither he nor Beaconsfield had any particular cult for the dead; they were merely trying to draw financial profit from them. They would have congratulated Winthrop Tremaine for making money out of Nazi symbols: swastikas, SS uniforms, armbands, rifles, etc. (103). To recall what Pynchon wrote in Gravity's Rainbow, they are only following the "Real Text," playing their part in the theatre of war by converting the surplus symbols of the war and its garbage into marketable objects and goods. This tragedy, prefigured in Wharfinger's play, has a central function in the novel; it shows the process whereby death loses its magic and stops being the ultimate source of symbolic exchange, and is turned into a text. If the skeletons had remained in their watery tomb, they would have continued to live in the imagination of their country. Beaconsfield and Inverarity have killed the G.I.'s a second time; they have robbed them of their symbolic value, to give them a commercial value instead.

Gradually Oedipa begins to realize the importance of death in the economy of her world. In front of the dying sailor, she is terribly shocked:

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all man who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of. (88)

Because she feels sympathy for this man who is about to die, Oedipa realizes with a sense of panic the loss his death, like the going up in smoke of the mattress, is going to constitute. Her reaction is again that of a materialist: a man, like a
mattress, is no more than a text crammed with information. When the text is burnt, there is nothing left.

Oedipa's theory of information is close to Shannon and Weaver's. Information is somewhat like a physical quantity which can be measured in bits. It circulates within a communication system whose model is the radio in which a transmitter sends a message, a certain quantity of information, to an intended receiver. What is wrong with the theory is that there is little feedback, no interaction; hence the lack of communication with the dead for Oedipa and her fellow materialists, Beaconsfield and Inverarity. There is no text once the sender has gone.

The sad story of the symbolic death of the skeletons precipitates the multiplication of the texts in the novel. The Paranoids, who have been listening to Metzger and Manny Di Presso, mention that there is a similar slaughter in a Jacobean play they have just seen, The Courier's Tragedy: "Bones of lost battalion, in lake, fished up, turned into charcoal—" (42). Oedipa takes the hint and goes to see the play with Metzger. The theatre's name, the Tank, is ambiguous. It probably refers to the war, as does the playwright's name, Wharfinger. The theatre itself is "framed" between two firms involved in information gathering and broadcasting, "a traffic analysis firm and a wildcat transistor outfit" (43). We gather that all three institutions perform complementary tasks in this information-crazy society.

The play itself is crammed with references to Inverarity's California. Faggio sounds like Fangoso; Saint Narcissus, Bishop of Jerusalem, is the namesake of Inverarity's city; and there is the tale of the Lost Guard, "every one massacred by Angelo and thrown in the lake. Later on their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink" (50), which ink will be used by Angelo in his subsequent communications with Faggio.

It is immediately after this that Trystero (or Tristero) is mentioned for the first time in the story (though not in the book). Pynchon obviously exploits the time-honored technique of "mise en abyme," first named by André Gide in his discussion of Hamlet's play-within-the-play. The Courier's Tragedy is to the novel what the "Mousetrap" is to the tragedy: It reflects the main plot and contributes to quicken its pace. It also marks the true beginning of Oedipa's investigation. After the performance, she goes to speak to Randolph Dribblette, the director and actor, and asks him if she can have a look at the script and the original from which the copies were made. The original, a paperback found at Zapf's Used Books "over by the freeway" (53), has been stolen. But there was another copy at the bookstore. Dribblette is somewhat unnerved, however, by this interrogation, and he asks, "Why...is everybody so interested in texts?!" (53). He does not care about texts, only
about the life his performance can blow into them. He is right, of course, esthetically speaking, but Oedipa is only interested in the original text and specifically in the reference to the Trystero. Later, she visits Zapf’s Used Books to buy the paperback, but she is not satisfied; she also wants to see the hardcover and will go to Berkeley to get it from the publisher. She had every reason to doubt the authenticity of the reference, since the Trystero is not mentioned in the hardcover. Her next stop will be at Professor Bortz’s, the editor of the book who now lives in San Narciso. He will briefly allude to another edition of the play, a pornographic version kept in the Vatican library.

Here, therefore, are the chief versions of the play:
- Driblette’s performance
- the script
- the paperback
- the hardcover
- the pornographic version

Finally, Bortz shows Oedipa a book about one Dr. Diocletian Blobb (a name which sounds suspiciously like his own), in which a massacre at the Lake of Piety is described, and he tells her about the history of Trystero and its struggles against Thurn and Taxis. Oedipa gradually becomes aware that Bortz is making things up as he goes. History is nothing but a text, after all. She will never know the truth about Trystero but will continue to discover new texts referring directly or obliquely to it or him. Nothing can stop the process of textual proliferation. The Real Text as a mirage becomes ever more elusive, and the reality which was at the origin of it, death (the death of Inverarity, of the G.I.s . . . ), fades into oblivion and is supplanted by all-out paranoia.

This process is accompanied by the proliferation of the WASTE and post horn graffiti. It all begins at the Scope. The name Scope—which comes from the Italian “scopo,” meaning “aim, goal, purpose, object,” and from the Greek “skopos,” meaning “watcher, goal, purpose”—is loaded with meaning. Here Oedipa starts discovering a new text:

Interested in sophisticated fun? You, hubby, girl friends. The more the merrier. Get in touch with Kirby, through WASTE only, Box 7391, L.A. (34)

The message is accompanied by the symbol which, later, she will come to recognize as a muted horn. She copies all this in her memo book, which she will also use as an address book when Koteks tells her how to get in touch with Nefastis: "Oedipa took out her little memo book and opened to the symbol she’d copied and the words Shall I project a world?" (60). Unwittingly she is composing a text with the graffiti gleaned here and there plus her own thoughts; she is submitting the disturbing inscriptions to the law of her writing in an attempt
to make them less awesome. The first time she discovers the symbol in the watermark of one of Inverarity's stamps, she nearly blacks out: "What is this?" she asked, wondering how much time had gone by" (B6). She is scared by the discovery of this shadow world which appears in filigree through her own world, of this other text described or pointed at in the underground letters travelling through WASTE. She will never read these letters, not even the one handed to her by the dying sailor; but, gradually, she will begin to picture that other world through the imaginary text composed by all these unsealed letters.

In Chapter 5, these graffiti turn up everywhere, along with others like DEATH (which stands for DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORNY) and AC-DC (Alameda County Death Cult). San Francisco is teeming with them: Oedipa has the feeling during her visit of leafing through the pages of an utterly fantastic book. It is not only homosexuality which has set its "stamp" upon the city, but death as well, as the episode of the dying sailor testifies. Oedipa feels sorry for these people who are ultimately doomed to sterility. But she is mistaken, in a way, since they look a great deal happier than she is. She is actually reading the book with a code which does not suit it, the materialistic code:

With her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system: seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE stamps, WASTE cancellations. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturated the Bay Area. Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy--some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. (91)

These are but opaque signifiers which terribly tax her imagination and sanity. San Francisco, like Joyce's Dublin in Ulysses, is an unreadable book which refuses to surrender its secret.

With the help of Genghis Cohen, in Chapter 6 Oedipa learns to read some of the signs, and particularly the word WASTE, which stands for "WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO'S EMPIRE"; but the text as a whole gets more and more enigmatic and disturbing. Whenever she thinks she is getting closer to its underlying significance, it immediately eludes her, as if the perverse puppeteer, Tristero, is teasing her to distraction. Her last hope is the book bidder, who, according to Genghis Cohen, could be from Tristero and might want to "keep evidence that Tristero exists out of unauthorized hands" (122). She has been unable to make sense of the proliferating text, but what if she could make contact with the keeper of the word through the book bidder? In the last scene, she reverently waits for the revelation in the company of the bidders, like the Apostles at the Pentecost waiting for the Holy Spirit.

The novel has turned into a parody of the Bible. It is framed by two testaments, Inverarity's will on the first page
and the New Testament on the last page. It is composed of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting texts which are like the relics left by the dead, texts which proclaim the advent of ultimate death and the collapse of reality as a lofty edifice of symbols. Oedipa belongs to the post-Saussurian and the post-Freudian world: her experience of reality has been undermined by the accumulation of grids, books, intellectual formulae. She is assailed by numberless representations which do not allow her access to the real. Biological necessity has lost its power over her; it has been supplanted by the text, as she recognizes near the end:

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unburrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (126)

Now that the Tristero has revealed itself as a Text underlying or undermining the Real Text called America, Oedipa can't recover her pristine naivete. She has lost touch with the real, which is, as the French philosopher Clément Rosset puts it, "that which is without a duplicate." In her California, everything is duplicated, represented, "textified." The real has vanished, and only paranoia endures.

J: Oedipa-Narcissa

In nineteenth-century fiction, the protagonist was usually introduced to the reader at the beginning and then only gradually made to perform his or her part in the following story. In the twentieth century, many novelists, like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute, have refrained from describing their characters with stable identities, choosing instead to present them as "des êtres de papier" as Barthes astutely put it. Pynchon's stance in The Crying of Lot 49 is apparently more conservative: his protagonist is a plausible Californian housewife who attends Tupperware parties, has had her love affairs in the past, and is now burdened with a husband who lacks virility. She is the average woman, and the fact that she goes to a psychiatrist only confirms her normalcy.

The only disturbing fact, at the beginning, is that all the men around Oedipa badly need her assistance some way or another. First there is (or was) Inverarity, who called her a year before, apparently wanting her back; he has appointed her to sort out his "tangled assets." Then there is Mucho, her husband, who comes back from work utterly defeated and confides in her as he would in his mother or his shrink. When Oedipa asks him what she should do about the will, he answers, "Oh, no . . . you got the wrong fella. Not me. I can't even make out our income tax right."(9). In the middle of the night, her shrink, Dr. Hilarius, calls her: "We want you," he begs,
forgetting his part (10). The next day, when Oedipa calls on
Roseman, her lawyer, for legal assistance, he only answers,
"Oh, go ahead then . . . don't let me keep you!" (12-13),
blatantly refusing to acknowledge her request. Immediately
after this, he asks her to run away with him.

Being so badly needed by so many men makes Oedipa feel like
a princess, the Rapunzel evoked in the following passage:

And [she] had also gently conned herself into the
curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow,
magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of
Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down
your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she'd
happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it
tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when
Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair
turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great
unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass. (12)

Since the whole novel is written in the form of "represented
thought" (to borrow Ann Banfield's terminology in Unspeakable
Sentences), the image is Oedipa's own invention. It is not only
the fairy tale she has in mind here, but also, probably,
Solomon's song:

7.4 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like
the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim;
thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looked
toward Damascus.
7.5 Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair
of thine head like purple; the king is held in the
galleries.

Her men's admiration has placed her on a pedestal; she is a
goddess who benevolently looks down upon her despondent male
worshippers and feels that the whole world is gyrating around
her.

Until her own crisis really begins, Oedipa doesn't realize
the ambiguous roles imposed upon her by her admirers. She is
not only a benevolent goddess, of course, but also and above all
perhaps the castrating mother, invented by the man, as she is
described by Christopher Lasch in The Culture of Narcissism:

Fear of the devouring mother of pre-Oedipal fantasy
gives rise to a generalized fear of women that has
little resemblance to the sentimental adoration men
once granted to women who made them sexually
uncomfortable. The fear of women, closely associated
with a fear of the consuming desires within, reveals
itself not only as impotence but as a boundless rage
against the female sex.
Donald Barthelme has given a poetic representation of this castrating mother in his novel *Snow White*, published a year after *The Crying of Lot 49*:

Snow White let down her hair black as ebony from the window. It was Monday. The hair flew out of the window. "I could fly a kite with this hair it is so long. The wind would carry the kite up into the blue, and there would be the red of the kite against the blue of the blue, together with my hair black as ebony, floating there. That seems desirable. This motif, the long hair streaming from the high window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms. Now I recapitulate it, for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life."10

Oedipa is not as sexually greedy as Snow White, but she has been so loved and admired and entreated by her men that she now feels mightier than they. Hence the tower metaphor which occurs to her. Hence, also, the irony in the name of Mucho Mas (much more) and in her own name: by a strange process of poetic reversal (which Freud tells us is frequently present in dreams), she, the castrating mother, has been given the feminized name of her docile son, Oedipus. When the men look up at this impressive tower of ivory, they are reminded of their Oedipean identity and feel like helpless dwarves. Perhaps inverarity realized that when Oedipa hung up on him, and he decided to work his revenge upon her by burdening her with an ego-destructive task, sorting out his estate, tracing the whereabouts of Tristero.

The tower image, however, as Oedipa found out in front of the Varo painting, is terribly ambiguous: it signifies both the inaccessibility of the castrating mother to the helpless male and the impossibility for the woman who is so idealized to step down and be free:

Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental; and what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (13)

Oedipa is a prisoner of the image the frustrated men have imposed upon her, with her benign complicity. From inside the tower, she is looking through the window at her despondent males, while they are looking at her from outside; what they see, in fact, is their respective images, reflections of their frustrated desires.
To defeat this inexorable logic, the members of the Inamorati Anonymous have completely banished love and decided to live as "isolates":

"Nobody knows anybody else's name; just the number in case it gets so bad you can't handle it alone. We're isolates, Arnold. Meetings would destroy the whole point of it." (78)

Though she has the feeling of being immured, encapsulated in her tower, Oedipa is not an isolate. On the other hand, she is hoping that, by cutting herself from the tyrannical desires of her men, she may in turn become an isolate in full possession of herself, with nobody to support, or depend upon, her. As we are going to see, she will fail in her quest: she lacks the autonomy and superiority of the Nietzschean superman.

The superman, in the circumstances, is naturally the Tristero, the absolute "Other" (108), whom, in the course of her investigation, she tries so much to unmask as to master. This is again a typical representation of the Oedipus myth, Oedipa acting the part assigned to her by her "sons and lovers." She would like to rid the world of the archetypal father in order to be happy and free ever after. She doesn't realize, of course, that the father, though he is meant to be killed as Freud and Frazer have explained, never dies for good since he is the invention of the son's unconscious. As Barthelme phrased it in The Dead Father, "When a father dies, his fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, who is the sum of all dead fathers taken together." (11)

Oedipa behaves in a very predictable way, therefore, when she starts her revolution. She begins by being unfaithful to her husband. At first she seems to tease Metzger. She agrees to play "Strip Botticelli," but first puts on as much extra clothing as she can, allegedly to prevent Metzger from seeing her naked and making love to her. She is not thinking about her husband any more, but trying to protect herself against sexual aggression. She is attracted to this actor/lawyer, but at the same time she is afraid of sex. The second time she goes into the bathroom, she blunders "almost absentmindedly, into another slip and skirt, as well as a long-leg girdle and a couple of pairs of knee socks." She is only trying to buy time: "It struck her that if the sun ever came up Metzger would disappear. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to" (27). She is both defending herself against her desire and, in a way, kindling it. Eventually, she assaults him (as Lolita seduced Humbert) when she finds him asleep "with a hard-on" (27). She likes sex, but she doesn't want the man to know she does or to witness her surrender. Metzger has blacked out after drinking too much Beaujolais; later Oedipa will fall asleep while copulating with him. The important thing is that neither of them should be fully aware of what he or she is doing or being done to.
Oedipa is not absolutely sure of her sexual identity. She likes to seduce but is afraid of having sex. There is a strange passage describing Metzger's clumsy and drowsy struggle to undress her: "It took him twenty minutes, rolling, arranging her this way and that, as if, she thought, he were some scaled-up, short-haired, poker-faced little girl with a Barbie doll" (27). They both uncannily change sizes in Dedipa's mind, somewhat like Alice when she drinks from her bottle. He is a "scaled-up" girl, and she is an even more "scaled-up" doll. He is turned into a little girl, and she is turned into a sexless toy. These similes indicate Oedipa's lack of psychological or sexual involvement in what she is doing; sex is a kind of joke.

The freakish manipulation of the characters' sexual identities begins, in fact, at the beginning of the novel with the name that Dedipa has been named "executor, or her supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity" (5). The letter apparently refers to her in the masculine and not in the feminine gender, and she resents it. The will, and Inverarity himself, has assigned her a task for which her sex is of no importance whatever. Later in the novel there are indications that she is either changing sex or discovering that her sexual identity is not so clearly defined as she had thought. There is first the incident where an unknown man pins on her breast an ID badge which reads "Hi! My name is Arnold Snarb! And I'm lookin' for a good time!" (76). The man, whose name we assume is Arnold Snarb, has a "cherubic face" (76); he is probably a homosexual, like most of the people Oedipa meets in San Francisco, and he gives his masculine name away to a woman. Oedipa could unpin the badge and throw it away, but she does not, so the member of Inamorati Anonymous, whose name she will never know, calls her Arnold. Later, when she tries to speak to him on the phone, she identifies herself as Arnold Snarb (122). This is more than a convenient way to open a conversation with the IA; she is acknowledging the fact that she has turned into a man in San Francisco among all the homosexuals. Except for Nefastis, none of them propositioned her: none acknowledged her sex. And when, in the same chapter, she finally contemplates the possibility of changing her name, only masculine names occur to her:

Change your name to Miles, Dean, Serge, and/or Leonard, baby, she advised her reflection in the half-light of that afternoon's vanity mirror. Either way, they'll call it paranoia. (117)

Oedipa is now one of the Paranoids, one of the boys.

This sexual mutation may have been brought about by the men who, each in his turn, got interested in her, Mucho, Metzger, and Nefastis in particular. All three had a preference for young girls, Nabokov's nympha. Mucho was only interested in teenage girls, which Oedipa knew about and forgave him for, for she had "once been seventeen and ready to laugh at anything"
(30). Metzger teases her, before making love to her, as if she were a child, which may account for the Barbie doll image which occurs to her; later he runs off to Nevada with Serge’s chick to get married. As psychiatrists kept telling Humbert Humbert, you
to have to be homosexual or impotent to be attracted to young
girls. Nefastis, also, has a crush on young kids, either boys
or girls; he even identifies with them, watching the television
programs meant for them. It is right after this that Oedipa
nearly has an accident on the freeway:

She drove more or less automatically until a swift boy
in a Mustang, perhaps unable to contain the new sense
of virility his auto gave him, nearly killed her and
she realized that she was on the freeway, heading
irreversibly for the Bay Bridge. (74)

The fact that a homosexual has just somewhat crudely proposed to
make love to her has finally made her change sides sexually;
she is heading the wrong way; she is a man, like the boy who is
rushing towards her from the other side of the traffic-mirror.
There is no accident because it is all happening in the "haze"
of her over-wrought imagination. Oedipa is that boy and the
cherubic Arnold Snarb; she is Narcissus.

Her narcissistic attraction to mirrors appears earlier in
the novel, when she dresses up in the bathroom to cheat Metzger,
who wants to seduce her:

She made the mistake of looking at herself in the
full-length mirror, saw a beach ball with feet and
laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of
hair spray on the sink with her. . . . The can
collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a
silvery reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second
before it all fell jingling into the sink. . . . (23-
24)

Oedipa tries to hide her feminine charms to protect herself from
Metzger’s sexual assault. As a result, she loses her sexual
identity to become a ridiculous object which she does not
recognize as her reflection and which makes her laugh. It is at
this very moment that she sends the phallic spray can
ejaculating all around the room, threatening to upset everything
and breaking a mirror. Though she triggers the ejaculation, she
has no control over it.

The close association between sexuality and mirrors appears
again when Oedipa spends a night in a hotel in Berkeley and has
a disturbing dream:

When she finally did settle into sleep, she dreamed
that Mucho, her husband, was making love to her on a
soft white beach that was not part of any California
she knew. When she woke in the morning, she was
sitting bolt upright, staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face. (69-70)

The mirror may have induced the dream. Oedipa looks as exhausted as if she had actually been making love. The suggestion is, clearly, that she has been making love to herself in the mirror, like Narcissus.

Oedipa has grown utterly contaminated by the pervading narcissism which permeates everything in Inverarity's estate. San Narciso is a "closed system" conceived by a highly narcissistic person and which turns out narcissistic individuals, like the Paranoics and Fallopian. When she enters Echo Courts, Oedipa surrenders to the spirit of the place:

The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. (16)

The novel being written in the form of represented thought, it is Oedipa's mute comment that is given here: she recognizes her own face in the nymph's. At the same time, she is shocked by the exaggerated sexual attributes which her own apparently do not match. She likes being admired as a nymph, a Rapunzel, by her servile men, but she refuses to be considered as a whore or a castrating woman. It is during this scene that she discovers this duality of her ideal self, the nymph, and her degraded self, the whore whose sexuality her men admire and are afraid of not being able to satisfy.

Inverarity has planted a mirror for her at the entrance to San Narciso so that she may discover the discrepancy between the two selves. But she too easily rejects the degraded self, starting to develop an elaborate strategy to forget it. She projects the unbearable duality upon the world around her and professes that once the Tristero has been unmasked and destroyed the world will recover its order and unity and she will have regained her sanity. She is in exactly the same position as the governess in The Turn of the Screw, who naively believed that things would return to normal once Miles had confessed and proved that she was right. Oedipa behaves like Schreber, Freud's unfortunate patient, who became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe:

He himself was "the only real man left alive," and the few human shapes that he still saw—the doctor, the attendants, the other patients—"he explained as being "miracled up, cursorily improvised men." Occasionally the converse current also made itself apparent: a newspaper was put into his hands in which there was a report of his own death; he himself existed in a
second, inferior shape, and in his second shape he one
day quietly passed away."

Like Schreber, Oedipa feels that she has been appointed by a
superior power to save her homeland against the perfidious
invasion of Tristero, the "brute Other" (106), and his army of
the night. Gradually she abandons herself to a Manichean view
of the world, turning Tristero into Lucifer in the same way the
governess had come to hold Quint (her fantasy) to be the devil.
She needs an enemy worthy of her exalted ego, and she thinks she
is going to meet him or his envoy at long last at this parody of
a black mass or of the Pentecost, the "crying of lot 49" at the
end of the novel.

Oedipa's paranoia expands at the same rate as the men who
have believed in her and contributed to build up her ideal self
disappear. Inverarity is naturally the first to go. He is
followed by Hilarius, who goes mad and confides his secrets to
her, then by Mucho, who loses his identity and becomes "less
himself and more generic!" every day, as Funch phrases it (97).
Mucho is evidently going to be a victim of the NADA principle.
The next is Metzger, who runs away with his nymphet. Then comes
the turn of Driblette, who commits suicide. Right after Oedipa
hears about this death, she realizes her men are being stripped
from her:

They are stripping from me, she said
subvocally—feeling like a fluttering curtain in a
very high window, moving up to then out over the
abyss—they are stripping away, one by one, my men.

(105)

This is the first and only time Oedipa's thoughts are quoted by
an omniscient narrator, which may indicate that she is losing
control over the narrative itself. Each time a man disappears,
it is a "version of herself" (111) which vanishes, as if her men
were so many articles of clothing, those she put on in Chapter
2 to cheat Metzger and protect herself from sexual aggression.
Until they started to vanish, she was not aware that they were
part of herself, part of her body and her unconscious. After
Driblette's death, she comments to herself, "Perhaps her mind
would go on flexing psychic muscles that no longer existed;
would be betrayed and mocked by a phantom self as the amputee is
by a phantom limb" (111). She experiences each new
disappearance as a more damaging amputation; she too is
vanishing. When she cries out to herself "Where am I?" (105),
we understand that she means "Who am I?"

It is around this time that Oedipa begins to have doubts
about her real name. Her husband, after interviewing her about
Dr. Hilarius, who has just been arrested, thanks her on the air
as "Mrs. Edna Mosh" (96). The name he gives her is
reminiscent of NADA. When she calls on a doctor in Los Angeles
to check if she is pregnant, she gives her name as Grace Bortz
Finally, as we said before, she introduces herself on the phone to the IA as Arnold Snarf (122). She is indeed pregnant, but not with a baby: her hopeless quest has led her to discover that another person was hiding in her whom she didn’t know, a foreign body as it were. She does not succumb to "information overload," as Molly Hite claims, but to psychosis: she herself generates information, wills it into existence, like the governess in The Turn of the Screw, in an attempt to ward off the blows of Insanity; but in the process she manufactures a new world which has little to do with the one she knew before. In the presence of her bedazzled shrink, she recovers a semblance of sanity for a while, enough at least to beg, "I came ... hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy" (95). She is about to fall into the abyss and tries to cling to this rotting rope, her mad psychiatrist. Her request for help draws him out of his confusion for a brief moment; he answers, "Cherish it!" (95). As a psychoanalyst, however gone mad, he knows that reality is nothing but a fantasy that enough people believe in or adhere to.

As a born materialist, Oedipa had always believed in the compactness of reality. When she discovers cracks in it, her beloved tower starts to totter and collapse. The crisis develops from the moment she finds out, with the assistance of dreamers like Nefastis, that everything is a metaphor for something else. Tristero is itself/himself a metaphor of a kind (75). She tries to rationalize this, later, saying that the act of metaphor is nothing but "a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost" (89), but this does not really help her with her problem. For the poet and the philosopher, the act of metaphor is indeed a "thrust at truth," but for the psychotic, it is a dangerous lie which removes the individual from the "damned consensus" Bartholomew writes about.

In this novel Pynchon seems to propose a complete reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex. Freud, and Sophocles, had studied the problem from the son's angle, laying stress upon the father-son conflict. Here, the problem is viewed from Jocasta's angle: she is a castrating woman who wants to keep her men under her power and exacts endless proofs of admiration, love, and submission from them. She is basically sterile. Oedipa has known men carnally, but has had no child. It might have been a relief to her if she had really been pregnant. Oedipus is a projection of her unfulfillable desires: he is not the agent but simply a victim. Hence the name Oedipa coined by Pynchon: she is the model, and Oedipus is only the pale reflection of her desires and frustrations.

---University of Nice
Notes


4 On this subject, see my analysis in Maurice Couturier and Régis Durand, Donald Barthelme (London and New York: Methuen, 1982) 81-83.


7 Baudrillard 26.


13 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 86.
GRAVITY'S RAINBOW'S GOLDEN SECTIONS

Alec McHoul

Elsewhere, I have tried to argue that quotations, like statistics, can easily be extracted to muster evidence for whatever "coherence," "logic," or "position" their manipulator wants to find anyway. A possible counter-position to this is explored in this paper. I try to show how a critical reading of a fictional work can be constructed from passages which have been selected not on the basis of their support for a particular preconstruced argument but on random, or at least thematically unmotivated grounds. At the risk of self-defeat, to cite Gravity's Rainbow itself now: the "debate" between Mexico and Pointsman (89-91), assuming we side with the former, the text's own clear favourite, would support a probabilistic reading over one founded on cause (predetermined theme) and effect (quoted passage). Another reason for selecting textual samples first (rather than selecting them later to support a pre-given reading) is that it avoids what is rapidly becoming, in the case of Gravity's Rainbow at least, a "canon" of Pynchon quotables.

No paper on GR is complete these days without mention of the fact that "everything is connected" (703); without indicating that "the narrator"—or worse, "Pynchon"—addresses "the reader" directly with "You will want cause and effect. All right." (663); without the "pencil words on your page only Δt from the things they stand for" (510); without Leni Páklar's "Parallel, not series" argument for the centrality of metaphor (159). They crop up everywhere, even though the first is a view of the world under the effects of Oneirine; the second is not clearly addressed by anyone to anyone at all; the question mark often gets dropped from the third; and the fourth should be read as Leni's fruitless "try" at translating her hermeneutic worldview into Franz's hopelessly positivist one.

The list could go on—for example, to mention the profusion of "stout rainbow cock[s]" (626), Death being told to f**k off (10), obligatory and multiple citations of the "progressive knotting into" (3), and the movement from "death to death-transfigured" (166). To say the least, it gets tiring. And to say the worst, there's a real question as to whether the Pynch industry may have got so grim, inbred and tame that it will never rise again from the ashes. For it seems like it's developing its own selective sub-texts of Pynchon to work on regardless of anything else that might occur between the covers. Perhaps this in itself needs to be accounted for.

In the conventional sense, GR appears to work hard on avoiding foreground/background distinctions. That is, no particular sections of text present themselves for attention. There is certainly a very high degree of stylistic difference,
but that difference is relentless: there is no "routine text" from which it emerges. Pynchon criticism, perhaps faced with this amorphous text in which everything and nothing acts as "punctum" in Barthes' sense, has begun to practise its own conventions of decoupage—selecting, cutting out particular objects of attention from the flow of writing, under the compulsion of a particular logic. That logic is almost always a logic of binarity, of polarised oppositionality whose forms, to mention only the ubiquitous, are: humanism/anti-humanism, damnation/salvation, election/preterition, cause-and-effect/probability, pattern/randomness, paranoia/hebephrenia, and the inescapable entropy and its many-named opposite. But I shan't get into any more of a flap over this.

Instead, I want to experiment with a single, thematically unmotivated, method of text-selection and look at its upshot—as a possible way of reading DH. I have approached the text, then, informed by a geometrical principle rather than with any axe to grind in any interpretive debate. That principle is the "golden section" (g): a division of a line such that the whole of the line is to one part as that part is to the other part. Visually:

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 a ______________________ b c
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Where ab : bc :: ac : ab. This way of dividing a line is a conventional means of producing an aesthetically satisfying balance. It was a principle used in classical architecture to decide the placement of horizontal and vertical intersections that would be pleasing to the eye. A surprising number of paintings use g as a means of placing horizon-lines or other major picture-divisions. Debussy is known to have divided his compositions according to g in order to achieve a balance between mood and tonal sections. Certain paper measurements (such as A4, formerly) are given by g such that ab (in the figure above) forms the length of the sheet and bc its width. Most paperback books (Penguins, for example) are in the proportions of the golden section or golden ratio, as it is sometimes known. Also, g provides a basis for calculating Fibonacci number series: any large Fibonacci number divided by the next in the series will give an approximate value for g (such as 7752 /12543, derived from the 3, 6, 9, 15 series).

Assuming the line in question to be a single unit in length, the formula conventionally used to find a point along it which satisfies g is \((15 - 1) / 2\) units. This works out at .6180339, calculating to seven decimal places. However, any line can be cut in two ways in order to satisfy our requirements. While .6180339 is the conventional number for finding the "major" section, a second point \((g')\) can be found by calculating the same distance back from the right-hand point of
the line. Hence the number for calculating the "minor" section is:

\[ g' = (1 - g) = .3819661 \]

Some interesting results occur if we use \( g \) and \( g' \) to locate two points in the standard edition of GR considered in terms of page and line numbers. Below, I will refer to these as Section 1 and Section 2 respectively.

Section 1

To arrive at Section 1, we apply \( g \) to the number 750 (the total page length of the text), with the result: 469.70576. This means we should look .70576 of the way into page 470. Since that page has 41 lines, this gives us the location: page 470, line 29. But since the formula is only approximate (e.g., if \( g \approx .618 \), the Section will occur at line 26), we should look for units of sense in the two lines preceding and following the section point:

They have been holding each other. She's been talking about hiding out.

"Sure. But we'll have to get off sometime, somewhere."  

"No. We can get away. I'm a child, I know how to hide. I can hide you too."

The passage occurs in the post-coital space immediately following Slothrop and Bianca's mutual orgasm, the one after which it occurs to Slothrop that "he was somehow, actually, well, inside his own cock" (470). The assimilation of Slothrop's penis with the manned (or boyed) O000O is no great leap of the critical imagination here; the text makes it explicit.

Sliding her arms around his neck, hugging him, she starts to come, and so does he, their own flood taking him up then out of his expectancy, out the eye at tower's summit and into her with a singular detonation of touch. Announcing the void, what could it be but the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself? (470)

Some connection between himself and the rocket is, we might remember, supposed to be Slothrop's "quest," the point of which is never made quite explicit. It does, however, have something to do with the fact that the rocket is piloted and that its pilot, Gottfried, is shrouded in an Impolax something-or-other and that he, it or both (or some combination of these with something else unmentioned?) is or are known as the "Schwarzgerät." If there's an end to Slothrop's quest, it might as well be right here: it's perhaps the closest point at which he, his cock, the rocket and the idea of a human payload ("manned" flight) come, as it were, together. It's pretty much
from this point that Slothrop, after all, begins to disintegrate --and we shall see why.

But there's more to it than making a clear cock-rocket connection. That reading, like Slothrop, neglects Bianca. Section 1, that is, also falls at a place of supposedly genuine emotional involvement for Maline's little boy. And, if that's what it is, it's a pretty rare occurrence in SH: a novel where the sex tends towards the Pulitzer-offending end of the decadence scale, the mother-befuddling end of the deprivation scale, not to mention the exploitative and the phallocentric ends of a whole range of other scales. What can, at its kindest, be called a "coupling" between Slothrop and Bianca here is clearly not without these elements. Bianca is, after all, very young, "11 or 12" (463), a figure drawn from the "Lolita" section of the official catalogue of masculine sexual fantasies. She is the archetype of the patriarchally constructed "ideal" female form in the postmodern era, the form Rosalind Coward has called "uncompromisingly adolescent." She goes on:

The sexually immature body of the current ideal fits very closely into these ideologies. For it presents a body which is sexual--it "exudes" sexuality in its vigorous and vibrant and firm good health--but it is not the body of a woman who has an adult and powerful control over that sexuality. The image is of a highly sexualized female whose sexuality is still one of response to the active sexuality of a man. The ideology about adolescent sexuality is exactly the same; young girls are often seen as expressing a sexual need even if the girl herself does not know it. It is an image which feeds off the idea of a fresh, spontaneous, but essentially responsive sexuality.

Unaware of the sexual politics of the episode, Siegel is more concerned with the "seriousness" of the "relationship." He writes that "it is difficult to accept Slothrop's relationship with Bianca seriously because of her age." Despite the absence of this apparently necessary seriousness, Siegel goes on to opine, just prior to quoting from the text of Section 1, that "the narrator suggests that this is Slothrop's most poignant and meaningful affair, perhaps the only time he is really moved emotionally during sex."

What the text actually offers is something quite different:

Right here, right now, under the make-up and the fancy underwear, she exists, love, invisibility. . . . For Slothrop this is some discovery. (470)

So far, perhaps, so good. Excepting, of course, that it's all Slothrop's version of things. Bianca probably knows better, for the text moves immediately on in another way:
But her arms about his neck are shifting now, apprehensive. For good reason. Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost. (470; emphasis added)

Even more so than the moment of orgasm, the ensuing "lows" is extremely fleeting. Slothrop doesn't lift a finger to protect Bianca; he doesn't stay with her, not even "for a while"; he doesn't go and hide with her. In no time at all, after a "bureaucracy of departure," he's already forgotten about coming back to her. It's possible that she dies (the text is ambiguous)–and it's therefore possible that she dies as a consequence of Slothrop's neglect. At least, the text itself seems to make such a condescending inference: it is "for this he is to be counted" as lost. But unlike the orgasm, any "poignancy" the "relationship" might have is all Slothrop's. Face it, Siegel: it's only another fuck. And, moreover, one straight from the pages of any wank-mag you might care to open.

It's no big deal that Slothrop can care for a post-coital micro-moment. Even at the point where he does consider going with Bianca, he says they should get off at Swinemünde--and his motives for that should be clear enough. Swinemünde is where Gerhardt von Göll waits with the S-Gerät for sale at half a million Swiss francs. Slothrop knows this, because Gelli Tripping told him (294). Gelli lets this particular one out of the bag in another post-coital scene, the one immediately following an orgasm which occurs, you guessed it, right on the button of ... 

Section 2

Using the value of $g' (0.3819681)$, we can locate Section 2 at page 291, line 12, and, as above, we should quote two lines preceding and following:

He's barely inside her before she comes, a fantasy about Tchitcherine in progress, clear and touchingly across her face. This irritates Slothrop, but doesn't keep him from coming himself.

The foolishness begins immediately on detumescence.

This time the orgasm is somewhat less mutual. But again Slothrop has barely just met the person in question, Gelli Tripping. She, along with her "young man" and sometime Slothropian alter ego, Tchitcherine ("another rocket maniac"), is first introduced to GR on page 290--just facing Section 2.

Gelli is another adolescent fantasy. Like Bianca, she is described as "very young" (290); "she's just a little kid" (294), with "baby fingers" (291). But also, in order to meet the near-impossible demands of the ideal feminine, she's "long-
legged" (294). She mistakes Slothrop, as he enters her bombed out dress-shop, for Trchiterine himself, and Slothrop lies to her about the comparison: "Just a hard-working newshound, is all. No rockets, no harems" (290). Geli either isn't fooled or doesn't care. She comes with a fantasy about Trchiterine "in progress." It's so clear even that Tyrone can see it.

Again, the rocket and the penis overlap in a textually explicit way—though it's much earlier in the piece and not so much can be disclosed as at the major Section. And again, it's in the context of a kind of sexual transfer: this time Slothrop for Trchiterine rather than for the penis/rocket inhabitant (Gottfried). And yet again, the "temporary alliance" seems to be less a "relationship" than a vehicle (a launch vehicle?) for asserting the primary phallocentric image. No part of the text suggests any personal attachment between Geli and Tyrone. Their post-coital (which are also pre-coital) thoughts and talk turn instead to business, to the Schwarzerdt, its price and location. Slothrop (hard-working newshound) practically interviews her, for God's sake.

Okay, it may be paranoid, but it's at least creative. The golden section points can be read as marking off parallel episodes in the central phallocentric nexus of the narrative: the penis-rocket nexus. And at least one of the points, the major point, marks as explicit a connection between penis and rocket as occurs anywhere in the novel. From this point on, Slothrop starts to be "lost," begins his famous disintegration. The passage in question suggests that this is precisely because of his subsumption by the business of the rocket at the expense of something in better faith. Yet, now that the S-Gerdt business has come to prevent him from, for example, "genuine" relationships, he becomes proportionally less and less interested in pursuing his quest. He gets neither, becomes nothing. So we're dealing here with one of the famous binaries of the Pyndustry: the presence or absence of interpersonal ethics and their replacement by obsessional fetish for the inanimate. The binary's central question is: can men (and the gender noun is deliberate--GR has little to say about women), can men genuinely care for others in the postmodern period that GR allegedly "assembles"? And the answer, at least from the Section points, is clear: yes, ephemerally--then the phallus returns."

---Murdoch University

Notes

1 "Telegraphmatology Part I," Pynchon Notes 18-19 (1995): 39-54. A revised version of that essay will appear as a chapter of Writing Pynchon (London: Macmillan, in press), jointly written with David Wills, on the relations between Pynchon's fiction and
the deconstructive criticism of Derrida, the later Barthes and others.

2 All parenthetical page references are to the Viking/Cape edition of Gravity's Rainbow (New York and London, 1973). Henceforth referred to as GR.


5 Writing Pynchon predates the view that Pynchon criticism is unnecessarily bogged down in fruitless structural binaries (e.g., of the nihilism/humanism type discussed below) and that this applies, though in a less drastic way, even to critics of the "re-included middles" school, like Hiltz, who rely on ideas of binarity without choosing from between the oppositions they offer. See M. Hiltz, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983).

6 Incidentally to this, the reading that follows has some, though arguably not much, relevance to one of the major binaristic debates mentioned above and going on within criticism on Gravity's Rainbow: namely, whether or not the novel is "essentially nihilistic, ultimately downbeat in its view of the nature of human experience." For a recent introduction to this "debate," see T. Moore, The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987). The quotation is from page 2. Another source is the introduction to C. Clerc, ed., Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983). It would seem from these two texts that the current move is away from the pro-nihilistic reading. However, pro-nihilism has been largely the prerogative of some reviews and short articles. No book-length work has ever sustained this position. Siegel, for example, took the same side as Moore and Clerc in the first full-length study of GR, albeit that he was a touch strong on the positive virtues ("charisma") of characters like Elicero and Hitler. See M. Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978) 97.

7 The last two decimal places of these calculations of g and g' are clearly suspect. That is, g' should also be able to be calculated as the
square of $g$. This would give $g'$ the value of
$0.3819659$--a discrepancy of $0.0000002$.

8 R. Coward, Female Desire: Women's Sexuality

9 Siegel 53. (This is Mark, not Cleanth or
Jules.)

10 One traditionally celebrated exception to the
absence of "genuine" human relationships in GR is
Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake's. Mexico, that
notorious pisser on conference, is almost always read
as the all-round nice guy, for some reason the exact
antithesis of the American boor, Major Marvy.
Mexico's "genuine" feelings are rarely questioned by
critics, even though he's prone to understanding them
via statistical metaphors. Jessica, on the other
hand--and perhaps predictably, given the usual quantum
of misogyny in the business--is often suspected of
being Pointsman's plant and, for her own part, of
merely using Mexico until she can return to that
Jeremy Beaver of hers. It's more than a little
unbalanced, then, but the affair, at least for a
while, does seem to come close to the Pyn industry's
doubtful idea of the norm. (Though it should be
remembered that the Blitz did some odd things,
sociologically speaking, such as drastically reducing
the suicide rate.) So it's quite refreshing to find
Scott Simon assembling the evidence to undercut this
rosy picture. Simon argues that the whole R&J
episode, as the initials imply, is a satire of
"Romantic melodrama." Wouldn't surprise me--the
relationship does, at least, come off as highly
profanilic. The cutesy scene in the Kent church at
Christmas (127-36) might, accordingly, be read as
parallel to the Disgusting English Candy Drill only a
few pages behind it (114-20). See S. Simon, "Beyond
the Theatre of War: Gravity's Rainbow as Film," R.
Pearce, ed., Critical essays on Thomas Pynchon
I

Taking Thomas Pynchon's critique of the cause-effect mentality as a point of departure, the social or literary critic is reluctant to accept arguments of influence. It may be both correct and interesting to argue that Pynchon has read this or that author, but such an argument also suggests that there is a traceable, even causal connection between the works read and the works produced. By distancing himself as much as possible from this approach, the critic widens his field of research to the point where anything may provide insights into Pynchon's work. The critical act then becomes not so much a proof of influence as a process of juxtaposition. The result is, at best, a series of illuminating observations that are in keeping with the thought processes Pynchon portrays.

In their essay "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," Marcus Smith and Khachig Toğliyan convincingly argue that Gravity's Rainbow is a "reworking of the old Puritan Jeremiad." Using the terms Sasan Bercouitch establishes in Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad, they posit the following:

The basic terms of GR's discussion of the possibility of freedom from history's curse are established here: past and future (the horological) vs. the chronometric Now. ... Pynchon's massive work erodes the possibilities offered by history, Puritan religion or technological achievement, but as these are undercut, the idea of what we shall call the "chronometric Now" is offered as a fragile possibility that is ever-recurring and usually ignored. Such an idea becomes possible only when Pynchon displaces categories from the religious-transcendental plane into the mundane, and finds plausible equivalents for them. The "chronometric Now" is a re-imagining of the possibilities open to us in a secular age. (NJ 176)

Smith and Toğliyan discuss the relevance of Frank Kermode's distinction between kairos and chronos, thus reinforcing the idea that Pynchon's concerns are largely "religious" ones. They conclude that through GR's "recasting of the chronometric-horological nexus it demonstrates the incredibly tenacious hold which Puritanism maintains on the American imagination" (NJ 184).
While Smith and Tahi make very clear their hesitance to call Pynchon "a profoundly 'American' writer" (NJ 185), their discussion of his standing in the Jeremiad tradition nevertheless suggests that there is some truth to the statement. But their hesitation is well-grounded: a reading of the work of Walter Benjamin reveals that the concerns Pynchon addresses, as well as the categories of his thought, are in no way distinctly American. Benjamin's variation on the chronometric—horological nexus—the distinction between "homogeneous, empty time" and the "time of the now" (Jetztzeit) he makes in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History"—clearly anticipates the religious and historical concerns Pynchon addresses in fictional form.

A close reading of other essays by Benjamin, especially "The Storyteller" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," reveals an even closer affinity between the two men than the one that is obvious from a reading of the "Theses." Both Pynchon and Benjamin return again and again to a few central issues: the rise of information, the decline of experience, the sequestering of death, the importance of technological change. But the fact that the two men are concerned with the same issues is not nearly as interesting as the suggestion that their minds somehow work in similar ways. This suggestion is at times so strong that, if there were any direct textual evidence that Pynchon has read Benjamin, it would be tempting to say that Benjamin has been a major influence on Pynchon. But in the absence of such evidence, the critic arrives at a very different, more fruitful conclusion: that any similarities between the two men are much more fundamental than mere influence; that Pynchon's vision is perhaps not so much a product as a determinant of his reading list.

II

Near the middle of V, we find the following passage:

Twenty days before the Dog Star moved into conjunction with the sun, the dog days began. The world started to run more and more afoul of the inanimate. Fifteen were killed in a train wreck near Daxaca, Mexico, on 1 July. The next day fifteen people died when an apartment house collapsed in Madrid. July 4 a bus fell into a river near Karachi and thirty-one passengers drowned. Thirty-nine more were drowned two days later in a tropical storm in the central Philippines. 9 July the Aegean Islands were hit by an earthquake and tidal waves, which killed forty-three. 14 July a MATS plane crashed after takeoff from McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, killing forty-five.4

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin quotes this long passage from Hebel's "Unexpected Reunion":

"In the meantime the city of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Years' War came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished, and Poland was partitioned, and Empress Maria Theresa died, and Struensee was executed. America became independent, and the united French and Spanish forces were unable to capture Gibraltar. The Turks locked up General Stein in the Veteran Cave in Hungary, and Emperor Joseph died also. King Gustavus of Sweden conquered Russian Finland, and the French Revolution and the long war began, and Emperor Leopold II went to his grave too. Napoleon captured Prussia, and the English bombarded Copenhagen, and the peasants sowed and harvested. The millers ground, the smiths hammered, and the miners dug for veins of ore in their underground workshops. But when in 1809 the miners at Falun..." (I 95)

It is difficult to imagine more distinct passages. According to Benjamin, "Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology" (I 95). This carries a special resonance because the verb "embedded" (betten) suggests something of the story's plot: on the eve of his wedding, a young man is killed deep in the mines, and his body is so well preserved by iron vitriol that, when he is found in 1809, his fiancée—who has remained true to him—can able to recognize him before "she too is called away by death" (I 94). Thus Hebel's chronology invokes both a literal penetration to a specific point in the Earth and an inter-penetration of the miners' lives with "history." Neither of these elements, neither the spatial nor the temporal distribution of the story, is found in Pynchon's passage. He makes this quite explicit:

These were the mass deaths. There were also the attendant maimed, malfunctioning, homeless, lorn. It happens every month in a succession of encounters between groups of living and a congruent world which simply doesn't care. Look in any yearly Almanac, under "Disasters"—which is where the figures above come from. The business is transacted month after month after month. (V 290-91)

And so at the novel's end, the place of Sidney Stencil's death remains imprecise, and the surface of the water undisturbed.

Benjamin writes: "Here 'meaning of life'—there 'moral of the story': with these slogans novel and story confront each other, and from them the totally different historical co-ordinates of these art forms may be discerned." For "the meaning of life" is really the center about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life" (I 99). The writing of a novel is for
Benjamin the ultimate expression of isolation. The reader too is isolated, only there able to "look for human beings from whom he derives the 'meaning of life.' Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death--the end of the novel--but preferably their actual one" (I 101).

**Gravity's Rainbow** carries this sense of isolation to its extreme. The death--the "stranger's fate [that] by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate" (I 101)--is not simply that of any one character. It is, instead, global extermination, and it could come at any time. Only through the reading of the novel can we experience this death, and therefore only through the reading of the novel can we understand how, in some way, to escape it. As Smith and Zbigniew indicate, this can be achieved by devoting ourselves to "Here and Now" (NJ 182). Read from this perspective, GR is nothing if not didactic. Benjamin says that the novelist "is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uneducated, and cannot counsel others" (I 87). While Pynchon's work might at first seem to contradict this statement, it must be kept in mind that Pynchon found it necessary to write nearly 800 pages to pass on what is finally a rather simple message. Pynchon's situation is in some ways analogous to that of Proust: "Proust's eight-volume work conveys an idea of the efforts it took to restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation." Benjamin also points out that, whenever novelists have attempted instruction, "these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form" (I 88). This observation, too, applies to GR, and Pynchon's work perfectly exemplifies the crisis in the novel Benjamin saw arising through the "dissemination of information" (I 89).

"The value of information," writes Benjamin, "does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time" (I 90). From this arises GR's frenetic pace; its world, like that of the first passage from which above, is that of the newspaper--fractured, abrupt, incomplete. Facts alone cannot create a coherent vision of the world, but instead preclude the continuum of life so obvious in the passage from Hebel. And just as the novel arose out of the decline of the epic, so too "the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (I 87). This is "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech" (I 87). From here it is not far to the conclusion that narrative will gradually vanish from the written work as well.

For Benjamin, the art of storytelling is passing away simply because "experience has fallen in value" (I 83-84). "For never has experience," he writes,
been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (I 84)

It is thus not surprising that, existing in this "congruent world which simply doesn't care," Benjamin was so out of place in the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt puts it this way in her introduction to *Illuminations*:

His gestures and the way he held his head when listening and talking; the way he moved; his manners, but especially his style of speaking, down to his choice of words and the shape of his syntax; finally, his downright idiosyncratic tastes—all this seemed so old-fashioned, as though he had drifted out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth the way one is driven onto the coast of a strange land.  

It would be easy to imagine this passage appearing as is in *The Education of Henry Adams*. Like Benjamin and the Adama of the *Education*, Pynchon's "heroes" never cross the line to become active members of the congruent world they are faced with; like Benjamin's storyteller and the figure of the flaneur he creates in his essays on Baudelaire, each "finds his way about the world without getting too deeply involved in it." Benjamin quotes and agrees with Jacques Rivière's explanation of Proust's death:

"Marcel Proust died of the same inexperience which permitted him to write his works. He died of ignorance of the world and because he did not know how to change the conditions of his life which had begun to crush him. He died because he did not know how to make a fire or open a window." And thus Benny Profane makes his way along the Street:

Though the street had claimed a big fraction of Profane's age, it and he remained strangers in every way. Streets (roads, circles, squares, places, prospects) had taught him nothing: he couldn't work a transit, crane, payloader, couldn't lay bricks, stretch a tape right, hold an elevation rod still, hadn't even learned to drive a car. (V 35-37)

III

*Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit,  
Ich kehrte gern zurück,*
denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit.
ich hätte wenig Glück.
—Bernhard Schollem, "Gruss vom Angelus"

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is coming out of Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (I 257-58)

This is the ninth of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." It is difficult to believe that its writer had any faith at all in either the Revolution or any type of Marxist programming. It also seems clear that, unlike Schollem, he had no faith in the possibility of a state founded on religious principles. The new angel of history cannot save, redeem, or change the future; all he can do is witness. Or is, of course, filled with references to angels, but perhaps none is more striking than the one that appeared over Lübeck:

Basher St. Blaise's angel, miles beyond designating, rising over Lübeck that Palm Sunday with the poison-green domes underneath its feet, an obsessive crossflow of red tiles rushing up and down a thousand peaked roofs as the bombers banked and dove, the Baltic already lost in a pall of incendiary smoke behind, here was the Angel; ice crystals swept hissing away from the back edges of wings perilously deep, opening as they were moved into new white abyss. . . . 10

Pynchon's angel does not have the anxiety Benjamin's has. While Benjamin's angel cannot escape from the storm, i.e., the horological, the incessant flow of "homogeneous, empty time," Pynchon's stands indifferently outside it: "their faces, serene, unattached, like the Buddha's, bending over the sea, impassive, indeed, as the Angel that stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid, come that day neither to destroy nor to protect, but to bear witness to a game of seduction" (GR 214-15). But for Pynchon, Benjamin, and their angels, the vision of history as wreckage is a similar one.
The wreckage in Thesis IX "grows skyward," thus suggesting
a spatial estrangement from Paradise just as the "store"
suggests a temporal one. After the epigraph by Karl Kraus to
Thesis XIV--"Origin is the goal"--Benjamin writes: "History is
the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty
time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]"
(I 261). What we have, then, is the idea of the study of
history as an intuitive leap back through both time and the
wreckage that attends it: "Thus, to Robespiere," Benjamin
writes in the "Theses," "ancient Rome was a past charged with
the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of
history" (I 261). Not the least of this idea's ramifications
are its stylistic ones: the theses are an extreme expression of
the discontinuity that is characteristic of all Benjamin's
writing. The links between one section and another are vital
even if they are not always discernible. It is as if there is
a truth that does exist but cannot be grasped directly, only
approached, circled, glimpsed from ever changing postures.

GR relies heavily on a similar discontinuous structure.
For example, Tchitcherine departs from the novel in this
unusually sparse passage:

They're in the middle of the bridge. They talk broken
German. Tchitcherine manages to hustle half a pack of
American cigarettes and three raw potatoes. The two
man nod, not quite formally, not quite smiling, Enzian
puts his bike in gear and returns to his journey.
Tchitcherine lights a cigarette, watching them down
the road, shivering in the dusk. Then he goes back to
his young girl beside the stream. They will have to
locate some firewood before all the light is gone.
This is magic. Sure—but not necessarily
fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has
passed his brother by, at the edge of evening, often
forever, without knowing it. (GR 734-35)

Here the "frame" ends. Nothing could be further from
Tchitcherine's concern with the bare essentials of life than
the beginning of the section that immediately follows this one:
"By now the City is grown so tall that elevators are long-haul
affairs, with lounges inside, padded seats and benches, snack
bars, newsstands where you can browse through a whole issue of
Life between stops" (GR 735). Again, the distance of this world
of the elevator from what Smith and Tbiβiyan call "Earth" is
both spatial and, as the inclusion of "now" indicates, temporal.

"It can be argued," write Smith and Tbiβiyan,
that Pynchon's vision of the social world is
impoveryished, and that the appeal to Here and Now
involves the Earth and Love to an overwhelming degree,
while ignoring Society, the relation of more than two
people, the community which was Ecclesiastic to
Augustine. At least one of us thinks there is truth to the charge, which invites further study; such study can begin with the consideration of a sentence from GR: "In each of these streets, some vestige of humanity, of Earth, has to remain. No matter what has been done to it, no matter what it's been used for...." (p. 693). Though the sentence is placed in a section which reports to the reader the bombing of Hiroshima, the word "humanity" receives less attention than "Earth," which quickly becomes the focus of the next sentence, with its ecological overtones. (NJ 182)

I think there is truth to this charge, with one important qualification. While Pynchon does ignore Society in the abstract, groups of more than two—although never a family—are certainly among his alternatives. The most obvious examples occur in the opening pages at Pirate's banana breakfast, where "Death is told so clearly to fuck off" (GR 10), and much later at Sure Bummer's. The real question seems to be what kind of value judgment we are going to attach to the ignoring of Society. While it may seem an act of hopelessness and desperation, is this in fact the case? Benjamin, especially in "The Storyteller," was haunted by this same question. If man is being transformed, if experience is withering away even through an act as simple as reading the paper, or Life, then what is wrong with turning away from this social world, away from "Them," to the small community inherent in the storytelling situation? In the "Theses" this idea is drawn out further in Benjamin's derision of all ideas of progress. This is an issue that must remain central to all analyses of either Pynchon or Benjamin. The major implication here, that political freedom in modern America is as impossible as it was in Nazi Germany, is nevertheless disturbing, and very difficult to accept.

IV

The angel that appeared over Lübeck came only "to bear witness to a game of seduction...." because sending the RAF to make a terror raid against civilian Lübeck was "the unmistakable long look that said hurry up and fuck me, that brought the rockets hard and screaming, the M-2s, which were to have been fired anyway, a bit sooner instead" (GR 215). Here, more clearly than anywhere else in GR, Pynchon makes the connection between sex and war explicit. It is a problem that he returns to again and again, one implied in each of the many scenes depicting sado-masochism.

Engaging in any form of sado-masochism is, for Pynchon, antithetical to focusing on the Here and Now; it perverts what should be the most spontaneous of impulses, the sexual, into a staged and impersonal form of gratification. Sado-masochism is thus the ultimate imposition of order, the abandonment of freedom in the one sphere where the possibility for freedom is
greatest. Pynchon's use of sado-masochistic themes neatly illustrates Susan Sontag's observations in her essay "Fascinating Fascism":

The rituals of domination and enslavement being more and more practiced, the art that is more and more devoted to rendering their themes, are perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society's tendency to turn every part of people's lives into a taste, a choice; to invite them to regard their very lives as a (life) style. In all societies up to now, sex has mostly been an activity (something to do, without thinking about it). But once sex becomes a taste, it is perhaps already on its way to becoming a self-conscious form of theater, which is what sado-masochism is about: a form of gratification that is both violent and indirect, very mental.11

The sexual partner is divested of animation, exists only as a prop to gratification. This is one of the central issues about which all of Pynchon's fiction revolves, the terms having been set most explicitly in this passage from V.:

As for V., she recognized—perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness—the fetish of Melanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike. It was a variation on [..].] the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: "the act of love and the act of death are one." Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Love-play until then becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish. (V 410)

Imperialistic warfare in Pynchon's fiction becomes the national expression of sado-masochism, of the obsession with imposing order. The O0000 with Gottfried inside is the phallus, womb, and coffin of, as Blicaro says, "that special Death the West had invented." Slothrop is thus the herald announcing that "American Death has come to occupy Europe" (GR 722). Throughout the bulk of GR, the reason given for Slothrop's erections anticipating the rocket strikes in London has to do with the behavioral conditioning done by Jamf. But toward the novel's end, this notion is given an interesting twist:

"There never was a Dr. Jamf," opines world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry—"Jamf was only a fiction, to help him explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky... to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in
love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death." (GR 738)

Modern warfare, then, can be seen as an expression of the progressive alienation of the individual from the Here and Now, Love and Earth. As we have seen, Benjamin saw men return from the First World War "grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience" (I 84). He elaborates on this at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (I 242). No, Benjamin does not say "sexual pleasure," and perhaps to say that "sexual" is in many ways truer to his thinking will seem fatuous. But the argument is nevertheless an interesting one. "Benjamin's Friends all agree," writes Peter Demetz in his Introduction to Reflections, that he was a man of quiet, fastidious, and extremely polite manners, and yet there was in his character and in his thought a half-hidden thirst for violence (more poetic than political), ill according with his life in the library and his later will to believe in revolutionary discipline. His studies of Sorel and his defense of anarchist spontaneity (as suggested in his essay on Violence) against any Marxist "programming" of action reveal something in him that precedes all political theory and perhaps has its origins in a mystic vision of a Messiah who comes with a sword to change the world into white-and-golden perfection. His recurrent images of barricades, exploding dynamite, and the furies of civil war (as, for instance, in the essay on Surrealism) have an almost sexual if not ontological quality, and should not be obscured by pious admirers who would like to disregard the deep fissures in his thought and personality.

But it is not quite fair to say that Benjamin led a "life in the library." As Demetz himself points out, an "early fascination with the other world of the red lights" is clear in Benjamin's autobiographical "Berlin Chronicle" (R xviii). The vision of Benjamin wandering through the cities of which he was to write, or experimenting with hashish, is anything but that of the stereotypical academic. And it is more than a coincidence that Sontag's essay on fascism should be followed by the one on Benjamin that also provides the title of her collection, "Under the Sign of Saturn." Perhaps she was thinking of Benjamin's concern about the "violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees" (I 241).

Even if we reject the suggestion that an undefinable sexual element lurks behind all of Benjamin's writing, still it is true
that the basic terms he establishes in "The Work of Art" for the political usurpation of the reproducible visual arts provide a number of useful insights into Pynchon's use of sado-masochistic themes. Benjamin's worries about film and photography in this essay are explicitly anticipated in "The Author as Producer" in his discussion of "New Matter-of-fact" photography:

For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment. For if it is an economic function of photography to restore to mass consumption, by fashionable adaptation, subjects that had earlier withdrawn themselves from it--springtime, famous people, foreign countries--it is one of its political functions to renew from within--that is, fashionably--the world as it is.  

Photography can thus be a means of reinforcing the status quo: social conditions can be depicted in a beautiful, static manner that withdraws them from the sphere of social change. The other major problem posed by this passage is that of "mass consumption." Benjamin was always attracted by the possibility of the anarchistic violence of the revolutionary masses--of the spontaneous dissolution of the individual into the mass. But he was also, and to a greater extent, obsessed with the problem of how to retain uniqueness when confronted with the somnolent, homogeneous masses. The decline of the story and the rise of information, the decline of the value of individual experience, are certainly factors that encourage political somnolence and social homogeneity, but they do so crudely when compared with the masses' passive apprehension of the film.

The crucial argument in "The Work of Art" is that film, because of its inherent reproducibility, because no "original" exists, does not possess an "aura." And "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics" (I 224). Like "The Storyteller," this essay cannot be read without an understanding of Benjamin's consistency in seeing "a new beauty in what is vanishing" (I 87). For what withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is, not merely the aura, but art itself. Whether it be the fascists aestheticizing politics or the communists politicizing art, either way the concept of art is irreversibly transformed.

Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of
things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. (I 223)

Through film, through the "sense of the universal equality of things," uniqueness and freedom are lost. As Benjamin suggests and Pynchon posits, this can even affect sexuality:

How many other men, shuffling out again into depression Berlin, carried the same image back from Alpdrücker to some drab fat excuse for a bride? How many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann that night?

It was never a real possibility for Röker that Leni might get pregnant. But looking back, he knew that had to be the night, Alpdrücker night, that Ilse was conceived. They fucked so seldom anymore. It was not hard to pinpoint. That's how it happened. A film. How else? (GR 397-98)

Here the capabilities of mechanical reproduction have precisely the same outcome as the adoption of sadomasochistic scenarios; individuality is destroyed; the distinction between man and machine begins to fall away; freedom is abandoned. The abandonment of freedom, mankind's progressive self-alienation, receives its ultimate expression in modern warfare:

Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of "human material," the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way. (I 242)

V

Feedback, smile-to-smile, adjustments, waverings: what it damps out to is we will never know each other. Beaming, strangers, la-la-la, off to listen to the end of a man we both loved and we're strangers at the films, condemned to separate rows, aisles, exits, homecomings.

Far away in another corridor a loud drill-bit strain, smokes, just before snapping. Cafeteria trays and steelware rattle, an innocent and kind sound behind familiar regions of steam, fat at the edge of souring, cigarette smoke, washwater, disinfectant—a cafeteria in the middle of the day.

There are things to hold on to. . . . (GR 863)
The "we" of the first paragraph is Katje and Enzian; the man they loved is Blicer. As in his meeting with Tchitcherine on the bridge, there is a fissure here between Enzian and someone whose life has much in common with his own. But the disparate nature in the first paragraph is oddly balanced by the second. Taken individually, each element of the latter is unextraordinary, even ugly, yet together they form a sensuous network in which each loses its individual existence. The scene is a comfortable, unique, almost ritualistic one; it possesses an aura. The final sentence, the last of the frame, is anything but ironic, echoing Enzian's words of four pages earlier: "There are things to hold to. None of it may look real, but some of it is. Really" (GR 659).

The next section begins with the statement that we "will want cause and effect" (GR 663), after which the narrative voice again becomes heavily ironic. The distinction thus established is again between spatial and linear modes of perception. Throughout GR, all concepts of linearity—indissolubly bound with the idea of progress—collapse again and again. The vision is precisely the same throughout the "Theses," but especially here: "Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims" (I 260). And so in GR, where "progress" is applicable to the individual as well as to the strictly political sphere, Blicer plans his transcendence: "But his eyes are too dangerously spaced beyond the words, stunned irreversibly away from real Gottfried, away from the weak, the failed smells of real breath, by barriers stern and clear as ice, and hopeless as the one-way flow of European time..." (GR 724).

The central problem addressed in both the "Theses" and GR is the same: how to subvert linear time by applying a spatial understanding to it. Benjamin writes: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (I 255). Thus any attempt to subvert linear time, to capture the past, no matter how successful it may seem, will in the end fail. Pynchon fictionalizes this theory in a passage about Thanatz:

He lost Gottfried, he lost Blanca, and he is only beginning, this late into it, to see that they are the same loss, to the same winner. By now he's forgotten the sequence in time. Doesn't know which child he lost first, or even—hornet clouds of memory welling up—even if they aren't two names, different names, for the same child... but then in the crash of others' flotsam, sharp edges, and high-spin velocities you understand, he finds he can't hold on to this thought for long: soon he's floundering in the open water again. But he'll remember that he held it for a little, saw its texture and color, felt it against
the side of his face as he woke from a space of
sleeping near it—that the two children, Gottfried and
Blance, are the same. . . . (GR 671-72)

In this structure, Benjamin (not unlike Proust) finds the
salvation of the past:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but
their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops
in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives
that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes
into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a
historical subject only where he encounters it as a
monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a
Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently,
a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed
past. (I 262-63)

Slothrop, too, could redeem the past after seeing the Rainbow,
when "he could make it all fit" (GR 626), but perhaps more
interesting here is the idea of a cessation of happening. In
V., the lights go out on Benny twice—just after he shoots the
alligator he has pursued into Fairing's Parish (V 123), and when
he and Brenda are running through the streets of Valletta:
"Presently, sudden and in silence, all illumination in Valletta,
houselight and streetlight, was extinguished" (V 455). Hugh
Godolphin goes to the South Pole because he "had begun to think
that there, at one of the only two motionless places on this
gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Uwhaisu's riddle" (V
205). In GR, Byron learns Silence (GR 650), and at the
dinner party Mexico tries to sabotage, "the listener starts
actually hearing the pauses instead of the notes" (GR 713). At
novel's end, the screen goes blank. And we also learn that

at night now and then, in some part of the dark
hemisphere, because of eddies in the Soniferous
Aether, there will come to pass a very shallow pocket
of no-sound. For a few seconds, in a particular
place, nearly every night somewhere in the World,
sound-energy from Outside is shut off. The roaring of
the sun stops. (GR 695)

Anyone who should fall under this pocket suddenly finds
himself with an extraordinary receptivity, "hearing, for the
first time, the mighty river of his blood, the Titan's drum of
his heart." (GR 697). Among the places this pocket is likely to
fall is "exactly around a seated individual in a working-class
restaurant where they hose the place out at 3 every morning"
(GR 695). Joining the stranger at this table is

better than cringing the rest of your life under the
great Vacuum in the sky they have taught you, and a
sun whose silence you never get to hear.
Much of the novel poses here, at the convergence of the Here and Now in a preterite place where you can discover that your life is no longer surrounded by a void. The cessation of the sun's roaring is thus a moment of complete anarchy when the ordinary strictures of time and space, and, most important, those of the political world, their world, are suspended. Earlier, we learn of the Fire of Paradise, "operationally extinct," but still surfacing occasionally: "Places where the motors never come close enough to be loud, and there are trees outside along the street. Inner rooms and older faces developing under light falling through a skylight, yellower, later in the year" (GR 119). Pynchon's project of redemption depends on an understanding of time that allows for the reception of transparent moments when the ordinary flow of time is no barrier to an almost instinctive understanding of the past.

There has been much debate about the meaning of Benjamin's discussion of Messianism, an issue raised at six points in the "Theses." One is in reference to the cessation of happenings; another reference is in Thesis III: "Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (I 254). Yet another is in Thesis VI:

In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (I 255)

Benjamin's interest in each of these passages, as in so much that he wrote, is the rescuing of the past from the overwhelming flow of time. But no man is the Messiah: any attempt to subdue Antichrist, to capture the oppressed past, is doomed to fail because homogeneous, empty time cannot be subverted for more than just a moment. In this way, the Messianic power of any generation is "weak."

A similar structure of weak Messianism pervades GR. This is dealt with most clearly when Roger and Jessica go to a church one evening before Christmas (GR 127ff). After a heavily ironic paragraph that tells of the impossibility of redeeming the
world, the narrative is shifted into second person, and we are
counseled to embrace the New Baby anyway: "As if it were you
who could, somehow, save him. For the moment not caring who
you're supposed to be registered as. For the moment anyway, no
longer who the Caesars say you are" (GR 136). Later in the
novel there is this description of the bugs at Sure Bummer's:
"The bugs' atmosphere ends about an inch from the floor, an
ideal humidity, darkness, stability of temperature. Nobody
bothers them. There is an unspoken agreement about not stomping
on bugs in Sure's place" (GR 621). This echoes an earlier
description of the world of "Christmas bugs":

A tranquil world: the temperature and humidity
staying nearly steady, the day's cycle damped to only
a soft easy sway of light, gold to antique-gold to
shadows, and back again. The crying of the infant
reached you, perhaps, as bursts of energy from the
invisible distance, nearly unsensed, often ignored.
Your savior, you see... (GR 174)

In Thesis XVIII A, Benjamin writes that the historical
materialist "grasps the constellation which his own era has
formed with a definite earlier one." Thus he establishes a
conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is
shot through with chips of Messianic time (I 263). Again,
Benjamin has provided terms for understanding the ways Pynchon
uses his own version of the Jetztzeit or "chronometric Now."
"The more you dwell in the past and in the future," Pynchon
writes, "the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your
persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous
you are" (GR 509). This is the theory by which Slothrop
disintegrates. Later he becomes "a crossroad" (GR 626). He
exits from the novel in a photograph on the cover of an album by
The Fool:

There is no way to tell which of the faces is
Slothrop's; the only printed credit that might apply
to him is "Harmonica, kazoo—a friend." But knowing
his Tarot, we would expect to look among the Humility,
among the gray and preterite souls, to look for him
adrift in the hostile light of the sky, the darkness
of the sea... (GR 742)

Slothrop himself becomes a chip of Messianic time, occasionally
breaking back into the continuum of time and space. His power
for redemption is weak: at the end he plays the harmonica and
kazoo, somewhat effective, but finally unsuccessful, subversive
instruments which appear throughout the text. This
interpretation of Slothrop is reinforced by the last moment
Blicero and Gottfried, with all the religious overtones his name
carries, face each other alone:

If there is still hope for Gottfried here in this
wind-beat moment, then there is hope elsewhere. The
spare itself must be read as a card: what is to come.
Whatever has happened since to the figures in it
(roughly drawn in soiled white, army gray, spare as a
sketch on a ruined wall) it is preserved, though it
has no name, and, like The Fool, no agreed assignment
in the deck. (GR 724)

For both Pynchon and Benjamin, taking advantage of these
stray moments is no easy task; it requires the utmost attention.
Losing oneself in time is akin to losing oneself in space; "Not
to find one's way in a city," writes Benjamin in "Berlin
Chronicle."

may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires
ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a
city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for
quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and
street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must
speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his
feet in the forest, like the startling call of a
bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of
a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center.

Until the next moment has arrived, we do not know what it will
bring. A chip of Messianic time may appear anywhere. Thus at
each moment we must be ready for the coming of the Messiah, or
the fall of the Rocket. The "Theses" ends here:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from
investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers
instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped
the future of its magic, to which all those succumb
who turn to the seers for enlightenment. This
does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future
turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second
of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah
might enter. (I 264)

VI

Peter Demetz calls Benjamin's "The Destructive Character"
an "ironic self-exploration" (R xu). "Because he sees ways
everywhere," Benjamin writes, "[the destructive character]
always positions himself at crossroads. No moment can know what
the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble, not for
the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through
it."
Benjamin saw European civilization in ruins; he was both
irrevocably attached to and repulsed by all that happened around
him. Intellectually, he always positioned himself at
crossroads, never committing himself to any religious or
political creed. This is indeed a destructive stance, allowing
no room for plans, goals or progress of any kind. The way
leading through the rubble is finally nothing but wanderings
back through the ruins, combing back through the past, waiting
for it to come alive in the present. Slothrop's disintegration is similarly destructive; it attests to the failure of an entire way of life. Both Pynchon and Benjamin look for something to affirm in this world, and both turn to the Here and Now. But this affirmation is so fragile that it cannot, by its very nature, influence the political world in any meaningful way.

In "The Critique of Violence," Benjamin envisions political history as the oscillation of law-making and law-preserving violence, thus paving the way for his more extreme statement in Thesis VII: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted" (I 255). As Fredric Jameson comments,

Benjamin's slogan is a hard saying, and not only for liberal and apoliticizing critics of art and literature, for whom it spells the return of class realities and the painful recollection of the dark underside of even the most seemingly innocent and "life-enhancing" masterpieces of the canon. For a certain radicalism also, Benjamin's formulation comes as a rebuke and a warning against the facile reappropriations of the classics as humanistic expressions of this or that historically "progressive" force.

There is little doubt that, had Benjamin lived to see the enthusiastic reception of his work over the last twenty or so years, he would not have been overjoyed. Yes, he would have thought that he was finally getting some of the credit due him, but he knew better than anyone else that, for every text that becomes part of an established canon, there exist many others that have been passed over.

Critics of Pynchon, as well as those of Benjamin, would do well to keep this last point in mind, for the deliberate eschewing of institutional and ideological commitments represents much more than a shared eccentricity. Institutions propagate traditions, and traditions constantly threaten to overwhelm the present, as both Pynchon and Benjamin define it. For both, any institutional ties represent a kind of slavery, a deliberate abandonment of freedom. But by no means does either of them pretend to stand outside this structure; thus, in the very fact of publication, in writing with the hope of being published, they both admit that they themselves participate in a system of oppression, unable to incorporate the anarchy of individual moments fully into their own lives. This participation probably accounts in part for the melancholy that marks the work of both men. And perhaps it is this melancholy that finally turns them both to the past, to look for value in that which has been passed over. Having found what they think
is valuable, each weaves it into a net of fragile and usually overlooked possibilities. But the self-doubt is never absent. If Benjamin was mocking himself in "The Destructive Character," perhaps Pynchon's ironic self-exploration is to be found in the passage about the pockets of no-sound: "There's nothing so loathsome as a sentimental surrealist" (GR 696).

"Only in contrast to the helpless compromises of 'sentiment,'" Benjamin writes in "Surrealism" in 1929, "are certain central features of Surrealism, indeed of the Surrealist tradition, to be understood." Here Benjamin invokes "Stavrogin's Confession" from The Possessed, which contains a justification of evil in which certain motifs of Surrealism are more powerfully expressed than by any of its present spokesmen. . . . For Stavrogin is a Surrealist avant la lettre. No one else understood, as he did, how naïve is the view of the Philistines that goodness, for all the manly virtue of those who practice it, is God-inspired; whereas evil stems entirely from our spontaneity, and in it we are independent and self-sufficient beings. (R 187)

Thus Benjamin sees in Surrealism a "cult of evil" that "centers about a violation of children" (R 187), a theme familiar enough to readers of Pynchon. Yet besides joining him in a sane executed suicide, Benjamin shares little with Stavrogin. For all his wavering, Stavrogin is the consummate man of action by comparison with Benjamin, who, though calling for "the revolutionary intelligentsia . . . to make contact with the proletarian masses" (R 191), was himself devoted to solitary contemplation. But not of abstract questions: "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (R 190). In this optic can occur a "profane illumination," a concept which seems to anticipate the encounter with a monad posited in the "Theses." Benjamin attempts to link this profane illumination, as well as the entire Surrealist movement, to the Revolution: "[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded,' in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct" (R 181). But this cannot be taken at face value because, though Benjamin is perhaps speaking of revolutionary action, his own attachment to things, as evidenced by such a work as "Unpacking My Library," strikes the reader as flowing more from a kind of antiquarian attachment than from any feeling we would usually define as revolutionary. And even here in the essay on Surrealism, which is fittingly subtitled "The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," Benjamin reveals that the revolutionary action he is thinking of will not lead to the creation of a new political order.
And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliations: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I. G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force. But what now, what next? (R 191)

The answer is that of Rimbaud, of the Surrealists: a life of Saturnine wanderings, both physical and intellectual. It is only through posturing and positioning, always searching for a new perspective on the world, constantly complicating one's own thinking, that Pynchon and Benjamin see room for growth, for change.

We may speculate about what Pynchon may publish next, but Benjamin's career gives us no clue: Pynchon recently passed the age at which Benjamin committed suicide. To apply Benjamin's discussion of death in "The Storyteller" to his own life, he is forever to be a man who committed suicide at the Spanish border at the age of forty-eight. His suicide so shocked the authorities at the border that they allowed his travelling companions to emigrate illegally (I 18). If Benjamin is right, if the meaning of life is revealed in death, then it is perhaps Pynchon who has the final word on Benjamin's inadvertently valiant suicide:

"Dying a weird death," Slothrop's Visitor by this time may be scrawled lines of carbon on a wall, voices down a chimney, some human being out on the road, "the object of life is to make sure you die a weird death. To make sure that however it finds you, it will find you under very weird circumstances. To live that kind of life..." (GR 742)

But if a movie is ever made of Benjamin's life, perhaps the final frame will not be of his suicide, but of him stepping into the Paris night, thinking of the great Arcades project he would never have the chance to finish, trying to lose himself as he had in so many cities before, seeking what Pynchon has Slothrop find just a few years later in the Rue Rossini:

the best feeling dusk in a foreign city can bring: just where the sky's light balances the electric lamplight in the street, just before the first star, some promise of events without cause, surprises, a direction at right angles to every direction his life has been able to find up till now. (GR 253)

--Winchendon, Massachusetts
Notes


3 Both also in Illuminations.


5 Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Illuminations, 159.


7 The personal similarity between Benjamin and Pynchon's heroes is quite interesting. In "A Berlin Chronicle" in Reflections, cited below, Benjamin gives this self-characterization: It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and if you agree, you will also see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it. Which brings me to the middle period of my life in Berlin, extending from the whole of my later childhood to my entrance to the university: a period of impotence before the city. This had two sources. First was a very poor sense of direction; but if it was thirty years before the distinction between left and right had become visceral to me, and before I had acquired the art of reading a street map, I was far from appreciating the extent of my ineptitude; and if anything was capable of increasing my disinclination to perceive this fact, it was the insistence with which my mother thrust it under my nose. (4)


9 Zohn's translation:
My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.

(I 257)


13 Like the "Theses," "The Work of Art" generates a good deal of controversy. Ostensibly, Benjamin's argument is that film can be used to lead the masses to political action. But the essay makes much more sense when read from the opposite perspective; his arguments all too clearly suggest that the hypnotic effect of film is of much greater service to those already in power who wish to manipulate the masses. Considering that "The Work of Art" is contemporaneous with Leni Riefenstahl's greatest work, it is difficult to believe that Benjamin could have had any faith in the revolutionary character of film. His position is perhaps just that, a position, taken for the sake of a new perspective, for imagining an ideal in order to call an existing order into question.


15 Benjamin's definition of "aura": "a 'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be'" (I 243).


17 Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," Reflections, 303.


21 In Illuminations.
GRAVITY'S NOVEL:
A NOTE ON THE GENRE OF GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

M. Keith Booker

Hugh Kenner, in a discussion of Eliot's The Waste Land, notes how comforting it would be to critics if only one had a name for the sort of poem that The Waste Land is. Indeed, the comfort to be found in categorization of literature is a general one, forming as it does the basis of the whole field of genre criticism. Such categorization is not always easy, however. For example, when Melville's Moby-Dick was first published in England (as The Whale), a reviewer in the Britannia wrote that he was "at a loss to determine in what category of works of amusement to place it. It is certainly neither a novel nor a romance, although it is made to drag its weary length through three closely printed volumes, and is published by Bentley, who, par excellence, is the publisher of novels of the fashionable world, for who ever heard of a novel or romance without a heroine or a single love scene?"ा Indeed, much of the reaction to Melville's perplexing book involved puzzled attempts to classify it and thereby render it tame. American reviewers, perhaps less steeped in tradition than their British counterparts, seemed less determined to fit the book into pre-existing categories, but instead were often content to announce it as the beginning of a new genre all its own, calling it such things as an "intellectual chowder," a "Whaliad," and a "prose epic."5

This sort of reaction, of course, sounds especially familiar to students of Gravity's Rainbow (henceforth GR), which has provoked quite similar comments since its publication a decade and a half ago. Granted, a generation of critics accustomed to Joyce and Beckett and Robbe-Grillet has been a little less concerned over genre designations than was Melville's original audience, and most commentators appear to regard Pynchon's book as a "novel," apparently without stopping to think what such a designation means. Those who have stopped to think, however, have often concluded that part of the difficulty with GR consists in the fact that it is not a novel at all, and that we are applying the wrong interpretive conventions if we try to read it as such. Morgan, for example, is one of many to note the affinity of GR with Menippean satire,4 and Smith and Tbilian (while not necessarily denying that it is a novel) place it in the tradition of the Puritan jeremiad.5 Mendelson, meanwhile, suggests creating a new category called "encyclopedic narratives" (which would also include Moby-Dick, by the way),8 and Fowler simply suggests that Pynchon's book "might profitably be read as poetry."9 Most of these suggestions turn out to be more or less useful in reading GR, but they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the book is above all a novel, and an absolutely quintessential
novel at that. In the attempt to illustrate this point, two arguments can be made: first, that GR adheres in an exemplary way to the truly fundamental characteristics that make a work a novel, and second, that its deviations from less fundamental conventions of the novel only serve to make it all the more effective as an example of the novel form.

Part of this confusion over genre arises from the fact that prose genres are in general confused. Nobody really knows for sure what a novel is, though almost everybody has a certain intuitive feel. The problem is largely one of vocabulary, as Northrop Frye explains: "We have, as usual, no word for a work of prose fiction, so the word 'novel' does duty for everything, and thereby loses its only real meaning as the name of a genre." There are, of course, existing "theories" of the novel, of which the works of Bakhtin and the early (German idealist) Lukács are probably the "classics," but even such theoretical treatments necessarily tend to be rather blurry when it comes to providing strict criteria that must be met by a work in order for that work to qualify as a novel. Still, it is important to note that there is nothing in GR that violates the essence of either of these theories.

The approach of Lukács, with its emphasis on character and plot, would seem to make the fitting of GR into the theory somewhat problematic. However, Lukács himself expresses great admiration for works such as Don Quixote, which he calls a "truly great novel." Indeed, the essence of the Lukács theory is its emphasis on the "transcendental homelessness" of the questing hero in an alien world.

The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality. Thus the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivised as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers. The content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence.

Pynchon's book may not have heroes in the traditional sense, but it teems with seekers, all with a sense of homelessness in the world, and I would submit that it fulfills the essence of Lukács' conception of the novel in an exemplary fashion.

When one turns to Bakhtin's theory of the novel, GR is even more paradigmatic. To Bakhtin, the novel is a special genre, unique in its contemporaneity, its contact with everyday life, its close connection with extraliterary genres. Bakhtin's theory is founded on language, and argues that the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre is the way it
incorporates the various "languages" of society into its own discourse. "Diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre." But the languages in a novel have specific socio-political connotations as well, each language representing an entire world-view. "Heteroglossia" refers not just to the words used by different groups in society but to the entire social, cultural, and ideological context of the novel. In the novel, the languages interact dynamically, typically with the development of an opposition between "high" languages and "low." The dialogue in the novel thus dramatizes ideological struggles in the society as a whole.

Bakhtin defines two stylistic lines of development in the novel, the first, which is single-voiced, as in traditional realistic novels, and the second, which is far richer. The Second Line novel strives for "generic, encyclopedic comprehensiveness," including the heavy use of inserted genres, which "serve the basic purpose of introducing heteroglossia into the novel, of introducing an era's many and diverse languages." It embodies the view that "the novel must be a full and comprehensive reflection of its era . . . must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era's languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia." This Second Line can easily be traced back to Cervantes and Sterne, but its roots go back even further.

Also important to Bakhtin's conception of the novel is the idea of the carnival. Julia Kristeva discusses the highly "carnivalesque" character of many novels that derive primarily from this Second Line, which she refers to as "subversive" or "polyphonic" novels, noting their close affinity with Menippean satire. "Carnivalesque," however, does not connote frivolity. "The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious." She writes that "Menippean discourse develops in times of opposition against Aristotelianism, and writers of polyphonic novels seem to disapprove of the very structures of official thought founded on formal logic." In the subversive novel, "identity, substance, causality and definition are transgressed so that others may be adopted: analogy, relation, opposition, and therefore dialogism and Menippean ambivalence." This last statement reads exactly like something extracted from a paper on Pynchon, and I have presented these extracts concerning the Bakhtinian conception of the novel in such detail simply because their relevance to GR is so striking. "Polyphonic" and "carnivalesque" (just think of Plehazunga) are as good as any adjectives around for describing GR. Indeed, Allon White has noted that all of Pynchon's novels "provide perfect examples of Bakhtin's thesis. The 'high' languages of
modern America—technology, psychoanalysis, business, administration and military jargon—are 'carnivalized' by a set of rampant, irreverent, inebriate discourses from low life—from the locker-room, the sewers (in V.), the jazz club and cabaret, New York Yiddish, student fraternities and GI slang." The emphasis on the encyclopedic character of the polyphonic novel as a genre is particularly interesting in relation to the above-noted work of Mandelson, and indeed the Bakhtinian novel fulfills most of the requirements outlined by Mendelson for the encyclopedic narrative. The emphasis on Menippean satire also recalls the work of Morgan. To Bakhtin, Menippean satire is not necessarily a separate genre, but a form that can happily exist within the novel form. What clearly develops is that the work of Mandelson and Morgan (and of Smith and Töibinyan), while insightful, useful, and accurate, in no way implies that GR is not a novel. Rather, that work simply helps to define exactly what kind of novel GR might be and therefore to inform the reading of the book in useful (but not totalizing) ways.

It appears, then, that when viewed in terms of such fundamental theoretical considerations, GR is very definitely a novel. It is, though, a complex and difficult novel, and a novel that confounds many traditional expectations that readers have developed for novels in terms of style and technique. However, this property of challenging and going beyond the traditions of the novel genre is itself a central characteristic of the novel, especially in Bakhtin's view. Important to Bakhtin is the character of the novel as an ever-evolving and oppositional genre, as "a genre that is both critical and self-critical, one fated to revise the fundamental concepts of literariness and poeticalness dominant at the time." This characteristic of the novel as something that challenges reader expectations is, of course, familiar to readers of the novels of writers like Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, but it may actually be much more widespread than first appears. Frank Kermode, for example, has emphasized that the work of twentieth-century writers such as Robbe-Grillet may in fact not be so revolution ery as it might first seem. "Hermeneutic confusion and problematical closure are not breaches of contract but natural features of narrative; they are found in dreams, in romances, even in Gospels." This view broadens Bakhtin's concept of the novel as a genre of challenge and implies that such characteristics can be found in all genres. The work of Stanley Fish with Paradise Lost20 and of Stephen Booth with Hamlet21 would seem to support this possibility.

This reader-oriented perspective shares a great deal with the work of German reader reception theorists such as Jauss and Iser, who apotheosize literary works (of whatever genre) that challenge the reader's "horizon of expectations." Jauss, for instance, praises works that stimulate thought because they "evoke the reader's horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to destroy it
step by step." This process is a positive one, resulting in an expansion of the reader's consciousness:

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences. . . . The production of meaning of literary texts . . . does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness.

Of course, this effect can be achieved only if one realizes that conventions (such as those of genre) are being violated. Iser again:

Now if a literary text does not fulfill its traditionally expected functions, but instead uses its technique to transform expected functions into 'minus functions'—which is the deliberate omission of a generic technique—in order to invoke their nonfulfillment in the conscious mind of the reader, anyone who is not familiar with these traditional functions will automatically miss the communicatory intention of this technique widely applied in modern literature.

These "minus functions" would appear to play an extremely important role in Pynchon's fiction, particularly in GR. They contribute greatly to the way the reader of Pynchon is involved and implicated in the action in the text, a process that results in a parallelism between the act of reading and certain modes of Western epistemology that Pynchon apparently intends to condemn ("You will want cause and effect . . ."). Linda Westervelt, for example, has written of the strategies with which GR challenges and frustrates its readers:

Up to a certain point, both frustration and surprise increase the reader's participation in creating the text. . . . Pynchon forces the reader to engage in system-building in the process of "realizing" the text, to understand that that process is analogous to his manner of confronting reality (in the sense that men impose order on reality in an attempt to explain it), and, finally, to evaluate the shortcomings and the ethical implications of that activity.
Therefore, any attempts to "ease" the reading process by proposing a relaxation of the expectations associated with the novel as a genre (such as Fowler's proposal to read GR as poetry) would result in a weakening of the effect of the book. It may be useful to keep in mind certain techniques of poetry when reading GR (Eliot particularly comes to mind), but GR is a novel and should be read as a novel. The fact that such reading will result in unfulfilled expectations is part of the point of doing so.

In conclusion, GR should clearly be regarded as a novel. Regarding it as such, complete with the attendant genre expectations, will result in a more effective reading of the book, in spite of (and indeed because of) the fact that the book violates many of those expectations. By adhering to fundamental characteristics of "newness" and by at the same time "laying bare" and opening up for examination many traditional novelistic techniques, GR places itself squarely in the center of the novel tradition. All this brings to mind the well-known comments of Victor Shklovsky on Tristram Shandy:

The assertion that Tristram Shandy is not a novel is common; for persons who make that statement, opera alone is music—a symphony is chaos. Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world literature.2

The application of this statement to GR is obvious.

--University of Florida

Notes


3 Mailloux 176.


George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 161-95.


10 Lukács 104.

11 Lukács 56, 60, 89.

12 Bakhtin 306.

13 Bakhtin 410-11.


15 Kristeva 55-56.


17 It is worth noting that Morgan uses Tristram Shandy as his most central example of Menippean satire for comparison with GR, and Northrop Frye as his major source of information on that form. Frye himself, however, grants that Tristram Shandy can be considered a novel (Frye 312).

18 Frye 10.


22 The emphasis that Jauss places on history is also interesting in light of the importance of history
in Pynchon's fiction, an importance that is also
relevant to the emphasis on history in the later
(Marxist) Lukács.

23 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of
Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: U of

24 Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns
in Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to
Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 290, 294.

25 Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory
of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP,
1978) 207-08.

26 Linda A. Westervelt, "'A Place Dependent on
Ourselves': The Reader as System-Builder in Gravity's
Rainbow," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 22

27 Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's Tristram Shandy:
Stylistic Commentary," Russian Formalist Criticism:
Four Essays, eds. Lee Lemon and Marlon Reis (Lincoln:
U of Nebraska P, 1965) 57.
THE WIND AT ZWÄLFKINDERT
TECHNOLOGY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

Joseph Tabbi

two patterns create a third: a moiré, a new world of flowing shadows, interferences ... 1

In the section of Gravity's Rainbow devoted to the story of Franz and Ilse Pöckler (397-433), Pynchon contrasts two models of scientific thought and perception. Like many characters in the novel, Franz separates the world into subject and object, habitually cutting himself off from outside sources of experience, and grounding his sense of reality in deterministic causal explanations. He is "the cause-and-effect man" (159), thus cast from his earliest appearance in the novel, whose patterns of thought and valuation presume the rigid dualities of Newtonian physics. Against the Newtonian model of the perceiving subject stands the opposing view of modern physics, one which permits no absolute division between the world and its perceiver, and which describes a more elastic reality than previous physical theories, with their reliance on the idea of causality, have been able to allow. 2

These are highly polarized outlooks on the self and reality, and while they are not, as scientists and historians of science have cautioned, available for easy translation into literary terms, they do encourage a literary response. Pynchon's preoccupation with paranoia, for example, as both the perception and the projection of highly structured, ineluctable mechanisms of control transforms an intensely private worry into a powerful expression, and sometimes parody, of the Newtonian world view. Where patterns abound in Pynchon's writing, as in nature, we seek evidence of a purposive meaning within or beneath the connections.

And yet, if paranoid suspicions of all-encompassing mechanism grip the reader of Gravity's Rainbow, there is also the countervailing model of the new physics, a model which, apart from all it implies about how our senses perceive the world, can also reveal something about how we are intended to read Pynchon. Recent critics, aware of the many epistemological concerns shared by writers and scientists, have seen fit to treat the indeterminacy of meaning that we inevitably encounter in Pynchon's text as a structural analogue of Heisenbergian indeterminacy. Such readings are offered, for the most part, in justification of the supposed intractability of Pynchon's text--creating a scientific rationale, as it were, for the novel's resistance to analysis.

Despite such a reassuring formal implication, however, the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics can provide only
a partial analogue for Gravity's Rainbow's world view. The
difficulty is not simply that references to quantum mechanics in
Gravity's Rainbow are rare and, when they do occur, oblique.
These references provide proof enough of Pynchon's familiarity
with the epistemological lessons of the new physics. But they
do not imply a straightforward application of the lessons. As
physicist and literary critic Alan Friedman notes, Pynchon in
Gravity's Rainbow questions the tenets of the new physics at
least as thoroughly as those of former times: "the world views
associated with quantum physics are ultimately considered as an
equal and opposite madness to the paranoia that threatened when
all-encompassing linkages were the model for
explanations. . . ."3 If Friedman is correct, Gravity's Rainbow
does not depend on the accepted truths of contemporary science
for thematic truths any more than it relies on an outmoded
Newtonian vision. The new physics and the old are better viewed
as the complementary halves of Pynchon's vision, simultaneous
orders that are neither affirmed nor denied, but, like the
superimposed lines in a moiré, joined together in a pattern of
tensed opposition.

Like many other components of Pynchon's vast novel, the
clusters of images that constitute the textual reality of the
Pàkhler story appear to have been prompted by a complex
technological setting. In Gravity's Rainbow, the technological
landscape created by human beings is part of the natural
landscape, and its elements influence the characters' sense of
communal and individual identity. Thus Pàkhler, a wartime rocket
engineer at the Third Reich's Peenemünde research facility,
continually brings technology to bear on his conscious
intellectual and emotional life. Franz himself only rarely and
imperfectly intuits his involvement with the people and
conditions of the world outside, but although this character's
alienation and perceptual failure are a recurrent theme, Pynchon
generates an alternative structure of possible human relations
in the narrative's dual symbolism.

... barn-swallow souls, fashioned of brown twilight,
rise toward the white ceilings ... they are unique
to the Zone, they answer to the new Uncertainty.
Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or
wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone
categories have been blurred badly. The status of the
name you miss, love, and search for now has grown
ambiguous and remote, but this is even more than the
bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some
have died, but many, many have forgotten which they
are. Their likenesses will not serve. Down here are
only wrappings left in the light, in the dark images
of the Uncertainty. . . . (303)
In this passage the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow uses the Heisenbergian motif to surprising effect, presenting under the rubric of "the new Uncertainty" a confusion of categories that blurs even the line between living and dead souls. The scene is the underground Mittelwerke in Nordhausen, which, years before the narrative present, Gerhard Degenkolb had built under a mountain to protect the rocket works from air attack. Pökler had come to the Mittelwerke "in early '44, as the rocket was going into mass production" (203) to work at the procurement end of the V-2's fast-expanding bureaucracy. But what was then the scene of frenzied activity is now depicted as a strangely Disneyfied tourist attraction that, since the plant's evacuation in February and March of 1945, has come to resemble nothing so much as a buried necropolis.

... once upon a time lathes did screech, playful machinists had shootouts with little brass squirt cans of cutting oil ... knuckles were bloodied against grinding wheels, pores, creases and quicks were stabbed by the fine splinters of steel ... tubeworks of alloy and glass contracted tinkling in air that felt like the dead of winter, and amber light raced in phalanx among the small neon bulbs. Once, all this did happen. (303)

The factory assembly line is abandoned now—"only the lateness and the absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated"—and the narrative moves, in a passage that recalls the "rush of souls" through an evacuating city at the book's opening, through "[l]akes of light, portages of darkness," as "[e]nterences to cross-tunnels slip by like tuned pipes with an airflow at their mouths" (303).

Here we have forecast many of the central themes and images that will come to define Franz Pökler's textual reality, a reality in which the concrete technological imagery that is so pervasive in Pynchon is made to suggest an almost ghostly presence. In Franz's specific case, "the name you miss, love, and search for" could be either Ilse, his daughter, or Lani, his estranged wife, both of whom were taken by the SS soon after Franz himself had gone to Peenemünde to work under the historical rocket pioneer von Braun and the fictional Major Weissmann. When Weissmann arranges for him to see his daughter, Franz is never sure whether the girl he meets is really Ilse or some hired model, her "likeness" made to serve. This uncertainty becomes, as we shall see, one of the recurrent themes of the Peenemünde chapter. But what is more generally characteristic of Pökler's story, and of the overall story of the research and development that lead to the V-2, is the powerful juxtaposition of the engineers' perfectly ordinary, workaday experience and a vacuous, ghost-like uncertainty that interpenetrates and quite often subsumes that experience.
One of Pynchon's primary images for this uncertainty is the wind at Zwölfkinder, the site of a decaying amusement park where Franz sits waiting at the start of the Peenemünde chapter. Thus early in the story, before Pynchon enters into his masterly description of the V-2's assembly, he introduces his subject with a musical image. Thomas Schaub has written eloquently of Pynchon's "Orphic Voice"—its elegiac concern with "the connections and continuities of loss and separation," its intimations of wholeness in the relations among fragments—and this description applies to the sounds and voices that now impinge on Päkel's consciousness. Like the Romantic metaphor of the correspondent breeze, the wind here represents a predominant theme of continuity and interchange between nature's outer motions and the interior life and emotions.5 But where the central mediating figure for the mind and nature in the greater Romantic lyric was the aeolian harp, Pynchon's mediating image is taken from the technology of organ pipes:

If there is music for this it's windy strings and reed sections standing in bright shirt fronts and black ties all along the beach, a robed organist by the breakwater—"itself broken, crusted with tides—whose languets and flues gather and shape the resonant spooks here, the candleflame memories, all trace, particle and wave, of the sixty thousand who passed, already listed for taking, once or twice this way. (396)

Initially this sentence looks backward to find its referent, "this" motioning to the scene at Zwölfkinder which for Franz is suffused with mystery, its light "precarious to him as candles and goodnight cigarettes." The next word, "it's," does not lead to the anticipated description of the sort of music this scene might call to mind, but instead shifts the prose forward into an alternate description of the scene, a renewed vision of its elements. The rusted iron amusement park animals, "their heads jittering with air currents," turn into windy strings and reed sections; black snakes on a background of painted sunlight become, with a little imagination, the black ties over the players' bright shirt fronts; the breakwater, "itself broken, crusted with tides," at night after ebb tide may become the gathering flue pipe (the ambiguous "whose," like the shifting "it's" before, helps to bring about this transformation).

Pynchon is doing more here than simply introducing music imagery to complete his composition of the scene at Zwölfkinder. The music is less a part of the external landscape than it is created in a process of verbal transformation: "If there is music," if there is an order beyond the initial scene that remains unformed before Franz, then that music is at once called up by and heard in the gathering and shaping of the prose. Independent of any single perceiving consciousness, one world is transformed into a simultaneous, alternative world.
Pynchon uses wind and music imagery in Gravity's Rainbow to transform or shape not only the elements of the fictive landscape but also the substance of time. Impressions from Franz’s personal experience are brought together as the sea wind at Zwölfkinder revives in him a collection of precarious "candleflame memories." These include: his arousal one night in the late twenties or early thirties watching "tonight's image" (397) from an erotic film, Alpdrücken, starring the languid seductress Greta Erdmann; his fantasy at home later that night when he steps into the role of Erdmann’s leading man, "and Leni no longer solemn wife, embittered source of strength, but Margerita Erdmann underneath him" (397) -- such is the effect of Franz's imagination; his six previous visits to Zwölfkinder with Ilse, the daughter he fathered that same "Alpdrücken night" (397); his "wasted time" (155) with Leni ("They fucked so seldom any more"[397]). Perhaps the story of Franz’s years working to help develop the V-2 at Peenemünde (1937-44) and later at the Mittelwerke in Nordhausen goes through Franz's mind at this very moment as he waits for Ilse to return yet again. That Franz's experience is now converging all at once in his memory is expressed through the continuing use of the present tense, which blurs recollections from various times; but this temporal convergence is also expressed in the transitional image of the flue pipe, a mechanism that works by channelling a random and turbulent jet of air at the languet into one resonant current in the pipe body.6

Pynchon's image for an imaginative shaping form, the organist's languets and flues, is thus closely analogous to the transforming or shaping prose. Moving through this transitional passage, both the elements of the scene at Zwölfkinder and Franz's inchoate memories follow the random flow of air through a musical instrument, so that the scene and the memories, as if they were transformed into sound, are given a sense of presence, and the resonant spooks seem to exist literally on the page: "here."

The unique thing about this self-reflexive moment in Pynchon (which distinguishes it from other devices of reflexiveness as they are most often used by other modern and post-modern writers) is its suggestion of outward relations. We hear the narrative voice calling for a transitional music, and that music is the transition itself. The writing is neither wholly mimetic nor self-absorbed and insular. The referents never quite leave the surface of the text, although the effect is not to mire the prose in its own mechanisms but to gather and shape a reality that is external to them.

Pynchon extends the musical image to include not just Franz's memories but memories of "the sixty thousand who passed" through Zwölfkinder before him, and thus suggests a possible relatedness, beyond anything Franz is able to comprehend, of all human experience. The questions that follow the Zwölfkinder
transition reveal the depths of such an image of personal connection:

Did you ever go on holiday to Zwölfkinder? Did you hold your father's hand as you rode the train up from Lübeck, gaze at your knees or at the other children like you braided, ironed, smelling of bleach, boot-wax, caramel? Did small-change jingle in your purse as you swung around the wheel, did you hide your face in his wool lapels or did you kneel up in the seat, looking over the water, trying to see Denmark? Were you frightened when the dwarf tried to hug you, was your frock scratchy in the warming afternoon, what did you say, what did you feel when boys ran by snatchng each other's caps and too busy for you?

Few readers will recall from some 250 pages back that Leni grew up in Lübeck. It is rather more likely that we experience Lübeck as one of several concretizing details in this passage that shift the prose away from mounting abstractions and into a vivid scene. This shift, along with the use of the second person, invites the reader herself to be gathered among the sixty thousand, "the other children like you," and perhaps enacts within the reader's response the perception, so rarely attained by Pynchon's characters, of interlinked human experience.

Franz himself, though he doesn't see it, is also gathered among the Zwölfkinder revenants. Earlier in the novel a brief parallel passage had described him as a child with his parents riding a train, not from Lübeck to Zwölfkinder, but to the Rhine falls, where he "held on to both their hands, suspended in the cold spray-cloud with Mutti and Papi, barely able to see above to the trees that clung to the fall's brim in a green wet smudge [...]." (160). The connections that the prose only hints at are never perceived by Franz. His own memories remain for him apart from the sixty thousand and from Leni, though he does at times think of her as "his own ghost" (399). Franz's childhood memory was called up in response, not to other people, but to a static test at the rocket field in Reinickendorf: "These were the kinds of revenants that found Franz, not persons but forms of energy, abstractions. . . ." (161).

The rare warmth at the start of the Reemönd chapter depends largely on Pynchon's use of wind and music imagery to depict Franz's isolation from people, memories, and a precarious physical reality. From the reader's point of view, the musical figure suggests that an individual's isolated subjectivity and the haphazard elements of the world outside are to be reconciled to one another in an imaginative order of art. But even as Pynchon gathers the dual elements of the fictive landscape into a finely coherent unity, Franz's own relation to reality remains uncertain. Considering himself to exist independent of what is
outside him, he will be compelled to alternate between his accustomed sense of isolation in an emotional vacuum and, as during the static test at Reinickendorf, the sense that he is threatened by a wind of energy and abstraction.

As Pynchon elaborates Franz's uncertain relation to the fictive landscape, this character's incompatibility experiences combine to form a single coherent image of human subjectivity. To a large degree, however, the construction of a perceiving subject or subjective identity in the Pökler story has already been anticipated by the figure of the robed organist at Zwölfkinder: "whose laments and flutes gather and shape [. . .] all trace, particle and wave." The scientific theme, though it is voiced quietly, constitutes a pervasive organizing motif in Gravity's Rainbow. The modern conception of the dual nature of light (particle and wave) admits two seemingly contradictory hypotheses within the scientific canon: the limitations of the concept of light as a particle are revealed by considering the concept of a wave, and vice versa. This "principle of complementarity," so named by Niels Bohr, is not restricted to the interpretation of light but applies to all forms of matter (electrons, protons, and other elementary particles) and to the description of particle interactions at the atomic level. (Although it is not intuitively obvious, a short derivation takes one from Bohr's idea of complementarity to Heisenberg's relation of indeterminacy between the position and momentum of a particle.)

The scientific allusion at the start of the Peenemünde chapter, with all it implies for the interdependence of conflicting modes of description, may stand as a loose analogy for Pynchon's representations of complementary realities to be perceived by the self. So much should be apparent at the conclusion of this essay. The point I wish to stress here is that the ultimate vision in Gravity's Rainbow of human relatedness, as it is expressed early in the Peenemünde chapter's opening scene at Zwölfkinder, exceeds even the terms set in place by Pynchon's scientific analogue. That the controlling theoretical conception of complementarity should contain only a limited part of Pynchon's fictional reality should not be too surprising. In the words of Werner Heisenberg, the existing scientific concepts themselves will inevitably cover "only a very limited part of reality, and the other part that has not yet been understood is infinite." For Heisenberg, as for Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow, "modern physics has perhaps opened the door to a wider outlook on the relation between the human mind and reality," but such an expanded outlook is irreducible to "the closed frame of scientific thought." The reading which follows, though it organizes itself through the Heisenbergian perspective, tries not to substitute this theoretical framework for the picture of reality that ultimately emerges in Pynchon's narrative. It is only through language, Heisenberg argues, that "we can be certain to touch reality"—not, to be sure, the idealized and technical reality
of particle physics, but that subjective, representational reality which human beings create in the very development of a natural, communal language. The final picture of the real in Gravity's Rainbow will likewise emerge only when the reader has experienced the imaginative force of Pynchon's own language.

In a moment of inspired paranoia, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow asks us to consider the following possibility:

What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is—what if They're using it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's in Their interest to have you believing that? (697)

Although this remark is not specifically addressed to Franz, it suggests an appropriate consideration for understanding his condition: unable to penetrate the mystery behind a scene that moves him or to hear a music outside his range of imaginable frequencies, incapable of connecting his own individual experience with the experience of others, Franz lives most of his life as a self-contained consciousness embedded in a void. More than a simple case of alienation or spiritual depression, this is a condition that is rather well suited to the Reich's projects, for as Joachim Fest points out in The Face of the Third Reich, "the self-chosen isolation of the technological mind is one of the keys to its total readiness to serve." (9)

Yet even though Franz's subjective universe is empty of other people and lacking in imaginative substance, he cannot escape feeling threatened by "forms of energy, abstractions." At such moments of vulnerability the vacuum imagery that describes him is internalized to express his emotional hollowness. When he is confronted, for example, with the unsettling possibility of experiencing a selfless love for Ilse, Franz feels the void inside, and "[t]he vacuum of his life threatened to be broken in one strong inrush of love" (407). Franz maintains his internal vacuum, however, with seals of paranoid suspicion, inventing complications to insulate him from forces that threaten to subsume his isolated self. He imagines that the girl who after years of separation has appeared at his quarters in Peenemünde is not Ilse at all, but an Ilse look-alike sent by Weissmann for reasons he will never fully understand. Franz opts to wait out this game to see what variations Weissmann is going to try next, glad in the meantime to have his anger at Weissmann "to preserve him from love he couldn't really risk" (408).

But are the complications merely invented, or does Franz have cause for his suspicions? It is no matter; either way Weissmann and the Reich have an emotionally detached chemical
engineer they can count on for minor but crucial work on the V-2. We are never told outright to what extent Weissmann actually masterminds the plots. Franz attributes to him, but we do learn that Franz has been saved for nothing more than the fitting of a plastic fairing "of a certain size, with certain insulating properties" (431), which is presumably the Impolux shroud lining Weissmann's Rocket 00000. There is a subtle irony, probably intentional, in the parallelism between Franz's emotional self-containment and the literal containment he helps to engineer. The irony becomes more pronounced at the end of Gravity's Rainbow, where, as if to suggest the disastrous consequences of putting up emotional barriers that only serve the Reich's destructive purposes, the doomed astronaut Gottfried is trapped inside the plastic shroud that Franz had helped to retrofit.

Franz thus resists losing himself emotionally in love for Ilse and Leni only to face the related threat of losing himself to the developing V-2. "Pökl is an extension of the Rocket, long before it was ever built," and with this intriguing inversion of Marshall McLuhan's idea of technology as the extension of man, Pynchon inverts the rocket into the very substance of Franz's perceptions. The emptiness that Franz recognizes in himself after Leni leaves him begins gradually to be replaced by the rocket's parameters: "Temperatures, velocities, pressures, fin and body configurations, stabilities and turblences began to slip in, to replace what Leni had run away from." The rocket beckons Franz to shed his personal identity, calls him to enter a "monastic order" of sorts (402), and he does his best to control this "assumption" (405) of himself into the rocket by constructing with the aid of his engineering skill a "secular buffer." This construction involves planning and building cutaway models of the rocket to lay bare its logical working connections, converting the "terror" of exponential curves—swiftly nearing but never reaching infinity—into "the linear, the safe" representation of the logarithmic scale, and finding a specious safety "among the indoor abscissas and ordinates of graphs" (399). The graphical analogy is particularly appropriate to Pökl because, just as data graphics are relational and not of necessity tied to coordinates of time or space, so too does Franz's personality shape itself abstractly, without sufficient regard for the concrete ends and applications his professional experience must imply.10

Useful as these engineering activities are in his job, Pökl's immersion in them puts him out of touch with the emotional and human demands of life; instead of protecting him from the rocket's very real dangers, they draw him further into the service of its impersonal technological requirements. Feeling the rocket take hold of his subjective reality, Franz seeks refuge in fanciful analogies: the lines of his graphs resemble "the grid of grooves between cobblestones in "the streets of Ant City," where Franz could move, "finding the
points he needed not by running the curve itself, not up on high stone and vulnerability, but instead tracing patiently the xs and ys, [. . . ] moving always by safe right angles along the faint lines..." (399).

Thus terrified by both life's moment-by-moment curve and the rocket's "obstinate and palpable mystery" (402), Franz in his work methodically replaces them with something less real, with artificial maps of reality on Cartesian grids. He dreams of the rocket, not as a literal, moving rocket with a payload, not as a weapon which could be used in the field to kill people ("That hadn't ever been the point"), but as "a street in a certain small area of the grid" (400). Franz associates the street with the anti-Nazi street actions that had terrified him before the war, so by translating the daytime image of safety in abscissas and ordinates into the dream vision of the street, Pynchon deftly evokes the fear that underlies and silently motivates the engineer's work.

In an earlier passage, Leni embraces the street as a place to shed one's sense of self and time in the midst of violent political action. She tries to get Franz to come out of his protective self-enclosure by explaining to him about

[. . . ] the level you reach, with both feet in, when you lose your fear, you lose it all, you've penetrated the moment, slipping perfectly into its grooves, metal-gray but soft as latex, and now the figures are dancing, each pre-choreographed exactly where it is [. . . ] (158).

Here, as in the Zwölfkinder passage cited in Part 1 above, an abstract and difficult idea finds its concrete verbal expression in Pynchon's remarkably sensuous prose. Leni imagines entering the moment like a stylus first moving into a long-playing record, and Pynchon enacts the merging process in the prose by first returning periodically to the subject, "you," and then, after an unobtrusive shift of tense, quietly dropping it. With the grammatical subject thus effaced, we can imagine Leni being drawn by the balletic action centrifugally outside her oppressive center of consciousness, remaining alive to change and yet smoothly embedded in a continuing present."

In pre-war Berlin, when the German Society for Space Navigation had just begun accepting Army funding to go forward with its experiments in rocket propulsion, Franz's rationalist discipline and an engineer's "deep conservativism" (239) equipped him with reasons enough for rejecting Leni's revolutionary mysticism. Moreover, he simply didn't possess the intense subjectivity demanded by the intuitive moment. Leni's street is a locus of intuitive experience that cannot be mapped, but that can be expressed only through a subtle language of transformation. But Franz, to protect his own island of consciousness from being subsumed in either the street-moment or
the street-rocket, continues to build models, trying to locate the rocket early in its development at a certain street on the Cartesian grid. And yet, despite all his attempts at rationalistic de-mystification, the image of the street would come to dominate his nighttime consciousness. In his dreams, the rocket resists positive location by a static, objectifying language: "The coordinates were clear in his mind, but the street eluded him" (400).

As another barrier to place between himself and the rocket's inner, threatening mystery, Franz uses that most powerful tool of the secular positivist's world, the engineer's limiting calculus, which cares nothing for "the penetrata of the moment, or last mysteries" (428). To hold back what must appear to be the most absurd of all this mystical rocket's strange powers—the culminating blast at the end of its airborne arc—Franz uses calculus to create the illusion of stillness. He integrates twice to convert acceleration to velocity, velocity to the paper safety of static distance: "The moving vehicle is frozen, in space, to become architecture, and timeless. It was never launched. It will never fall" (391).

In practical, technical discussions, when engineers or scientists need not really understand the subtle inner workings of a device but need only know its functional characteristics at the outputs, they will often refer to such a device as a "black box." It is hardly possible to move far in any engineering environment (and Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, where Pynchon worked while writing V., is probably no exception) without hearing this generic phrase occasionally tossed about. The engineering term is a good one for describing Franz's perception of the rocket; to avoid understanding it (physically and symbolically, to avoid "getting inside" its working mechanisms) Franz constructs models that keep back the rocket's mysteries and restrict it to a rational, narrowly functional status. But these empirical, reductive models tell the engineer nothing about that which is still functional and "black" inside. Pynchon is very likely playing on the mysterious overtones carried by this common engineering term by calling the elusive Rocket U90000 the "Schwarzerkt."(12)

Despite the protective workaday buffer of his engineering craft and language, at the outermost edge of Franz's senses and emotions remains the fear of losing himself entirely to the rocket. During an early test rocket blast at Reinickendorf, there was "no way for the moment of knowing if he was still inside his body" (161). During a later test at Bizina, although "[c]hances are astronomically against a perfect hit," Franz can't help imagining that Weismann has provided for a cooperation of all flight tolerances, the collapse of the ballistic Ellipse of Uncertainty onto Pökler's center of observation, to obliterate for good "his own personal ass whose quivering sphincter is centered right on Ground Zero" (425).
Though usually able to suppress the cold knowledge that all of his work and many of his actions will ultimately contribute to human death on a vast scale, Pökler does have a moment when he senses the full implications of his "guiltmaking craft":

Because something scary was happening. Because once or twice, deep in the ephedrine pre-dawns nodding ja, ja, stimmt, ja, for some design you were carrying not in but on your head and could feel bobbing, out past your side-vision, bobbing and balanced almost—he would become aware of a drifting-away ... some assumption of Pökler into the calculations, drawings, graphs, and even what raw hardware there was ... each time, soon as it happened, he would panic, and draw back into the redoubt of waking Pökler, heart pounding, hands and feet aching, his breath catching in a small voiced hunh—Something was out to get him, something here, among the paper. The fear of extinction named Pökler knew it was the Rocket, beckoning him in. If he also knew that in something like this extinction he could be free of his loneliness and his failure, still he wasn't quite convinced ... So he hunted, as a servo valve with a noisy input will, across the Zero, between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation. (405-06)

Alternation between a sense of self embedded in a silent and lonely void and a sense of self lost in an overwhelming aether (not of sound and imaginative warmth—the "Soniferous Aether" [695]—but of energy and abstractions [161]) sets up a fragile tension at the nighttime edge of Franz's perceptions.

But these are edges that Franz only rarely glimpses—"in the ephedrine pre-dawns" when vision penetrates the illusions of waking reality—and the alternative to his loneliness and failure is uncertain. Does the rocket promise transcendence or extinction? Franz draws back from the vision in fright and lives most of his days using "the gift of Daedalus," the first engineer, to fortify his labyrinthine redoubt against the rocket.

Franz engineers his emotional life with the same care. His bursts of love for Ilse are renewed at each of the yearly summertime visits the Reich allows. Franz, whose engineer's training alerts him to analogies and correspondent models, is quick to find images that imply "his own cycle of shuttered love." The nearest at hand is the wind-tunnel at Peenemünde, where Franz would stand "listening to the laboring pumps as they evacuate the air from the white sphere, five minutes of growing void—then one terrific gasp! 20 seconds of supersonic flow." By an act of will comparable in its exertion only to the force of the pain it holds back, Franz broadens his time base to a year, and so builds the "illusion of a single child" (422). The
Kay thing for him is always to perceive his daughter's identity as an illusion, and he is willing to go so far in this as to allow that the child he sees may not be the same child every year, but one of several thousand acceptable IIs available to the Reich. For as long as Franz suspects Ilse's status as a single identity, his periodic bursts of love can be dampened out by suspicion to safe, controllable levels. The vacuum of the wind-tunnel represents for him the subjective void surrounding and preserving his lonely center of personal identity, and if it is to remain intact, he can't risk an unrestrained emotional contact with another person. Franz attenuates his perceived reality of a daughter's single identity so that he can preserve the constructed, daytime reality of his perceiving self.

The ontological status of Franz's perceptions is made more uncertain by another analogy for his relationship with Ilse. A great movie buff, Franz thinks of the persistence of vision that holds between successive frames as they flash from the screen to create for the viewer an illusion of continuous movement. Back in Berlin before the war, he would "[nod] in and out of sleep as he watched ordinary movies, using not the physical connective of persistent vision but extraordinary powers of cause-and-effect thinking to bridge "the fragments he saw while his eyes were open" (156). By thus threading occasional glances of moving pictures, he would construct his own rarefied but continuous story.

The film metaphor expands to include other, less bizarre ways of constructing artificial continuities: the technicians at Peenemünde, for example, use cinetheodolite photographs--pictures of the rocket taken at discrete points along the continuous arc of its movement--to "counterfeit" an image of the rocket's flight. Using a related analytic technique, which was to result in the invention of calculus, Leibniz had broken up the trajectories of cannon balls in flight, imposing artificial divisions in time to bring the infinitesimal moment into the realm of rational analysis. At one point the narrator asks whether this is not "every paranoid's wish, to perfect methods of immobility?" (572), and this characterization is well suited to Franz's dissection of motion, for he employs the technique to help fight his growing fear that Weissmann and the rocket are "out to get him."

The movie analogy, then, as it is used in the Peenemünde section to describe Franz's relation to Ilse and the rocket, is one of Pynchon's devices for calling into question our insistence on framing experience according to traditional mechanistic (i.e., Newtonian) notions about causal connections. It seems reasonable to conclude, with Mark Siegel and others, that Franz and the other paranoid or scientific analysts, because of their insistent imposition of artificial causal connections onto the flux of experience, compromise reality. Robert Nadeau adopts something resembling this view when he writes that "Päkler as a rationalist is incapable of intuiting
that all human activity is interconnected and also that much of that activity is irrationally motivated."  

And yet, if Pynchon portrays Bücker and the other Peenemünde engineers as compromising reality, he makes it difficult for readers to go beyond this accusation and determine just what, in the context of Gravity's Rainbow, this violated reality might be. For if Franz's perception of Ilse as a single identity is illusory, ours is apt to be little better should we attempt to construct for her a stable and coherent identity as a character in fiction. We are never told, of course, how valid Franz's suspicions are, but the uncertainty about Ilse's identity is even more deeply ingrained in the narrator's presentation of her. At one point, for example, her identity is commingled with that of Gottfried, Weissmann/Blicero's catamite; for just as Ilse once delighted her father with dreams of building a house overlooking the "seas" of the moon (410), so would Gottfried whisper Blicero to sleep "'with stories of us one day living on the Moon'" (723). Franz and Blicero each laments his child's abandoning of the dream.

This connection is not an isolated coincidence, but part of a large and bizarre complex of analogies stemming from film director Gerhard von Bühl's erotic thriller Alpdrücker.15 Greta Erdmann, the star of that movie, conceived a daughter, Bianca, during the filming of the eminently realistic gang-rape scene, and Franz, as was noted above, had Erdmann's image in mind when he fathered Ilse on Leni. The narrator suggests that Franz wasn't the only viewer so affected ("How many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann that night?"); perhaps the film spawned an entire generation of German children.

At one level, then, Ilse and Gottfried are linked to each other as versions of Bianca on this side of the screen. But the analogies keep proliferating. The Alpdrücker scene, far from being the "real" source underlying the creation of illusive characters, is itself patentely illusory, because in filming it von Bühl, who was experimenting at the time with gnostic symbolism, used a double lighting technique that gave each actor two shadows, one for Cain and one for Abel. At this point Pynchon has sufficiently undermined the usual distinctions between film and reality to halt the profusion of layers and invite us into a world grounded in analogical correspondences, insisting that above all of von Bühl's expressionistic imagery the connections between the living shadow-children are real; the children persist on this side of the mediating screen beyond the film's end, "not out of any puerile Bühlerei, but because the Double Light was always there, outside all film, and that shucking and jiving moviemaker was the only one around who happened to notice it and use it" (429). The double connections between characters that exist "outside all film" are then adopted as a disorienting but consistent analogical construction of reality inside Gravity's Rainbow. It is thus possible, when
working under such a conception of reality, for the narrator to make a comment like this: "Ilse, fathered on Greta Erdmann's silver and passive image, Bianca, conceived during the filming of the very scene that was in his thoughts as Pöskler pumped in the fatal charge of sperm--how could they not be the same child?" (576-77).

The relation between reader and character in this new mode of reality is, in effect, the inverse of the relation between Franz and his daughter: whereas Franz connects multiple year-to-year images of a child with a single name, Ilse, we are led to blend into the same person a series of characters with different names. For us Ilse's stability is no less illusive, her identity no more particular or coherent than it is for Franz.

"Not produce," she tried, "not cause. It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems, I don’t know . . . " She didn't know, all she was trying to do was reach. (159)

Leni's image of a single parallel movement represented on "different coordinate systems" is a good one for describing Pynchon's analogical treatment of character whereby two characters with different names may appear simply to be different representations of the same person. As Leni suggests, such a world of analogy and metaphor cannot be apprehended by following a linear unfolding of narrative sequences bound together by causal relations. It is not possible, for example, to explain the coincidence of speech between Ilse and Gottfried—who may pass by each other but never meet (see 429)—in terms of one utterance causing the other.

Leni's argument thus places opposing modes of constructing reality and character identity in direct confrontation. We have seen in some detail how Franz, using the rationalist mode to create comprehensible structures, protects himself from the risk of love for his daughter and from the threatening aether outside. Pynchon devotes a chapter to another character, Miklos Thanatz, who is plunged into a world constructed from the second, metaphorical mode. The chapter opens with the narrator's weary submission to our rational expectations:

You will want cause and effect. All right. Thanatz was washed overboard in the same storm that took Slothrop from the Anubis. He was rescued by a Polish undertaker in a rowboat, out in the storm tonight to see if he can get struck by lightning (863).

The narrator's conciliatory gesture, however, is merely gratuitous, for although Thanatz's story is told in a narrative
that sticks to a linear and sequential pattern of causal connections, everything in this world works against such connections. The Polish undertaker, for example, who is the vehicle for one of the first causal links, is out looking for a point of discontinuity along the accustomed curve of life, a vanishing instant outside the grasp of all rational calculation and only approached by the methods of calculus, which only the lightning-struck (the enlightened? "Those who know, know") have experienced. Thanatz has been thrown overboard into a sea of metaphor and accident, and "[t]here's no counting on any positivism to save him" (668). We can think of this sea-world as another image for the subsuming, non-rational aether which Franz, in that epileptic pre-dawn, draws violently back from.

In this disorienting world, analogical relations become for Thanatz a reality, and through a moment of precarious insight when Thanatz understands the implications for human identity that such a reality holds, we can get some sense of how we are to take this strange counter-world to the rational. Thanatz knows that he has lost both Bianca and Gottfried, but he is not sure "even if they aren't two names, different names, for the same child...":

but then in the crash of others' flotsam, sharp edges, and high-spin velocities you understand, he finds he can't hold on to this thought for long: soon he's floundering in the open water again. But he'll remember that he held it for a little, saw its texture and color, felt it against the side of his face as he woke from a space of sleeping near it—that the two children, Gottfried and Bianca, are the same... (671-72)

Thanatz's uncertain insight, like the ambivalent insight that comes to Franz at the threshold of sleep, is only momentary, and then he returns, not to an isolated waking vigilance, but to a life "floundering in the open water again." And once again we return to the inverse image of Franz's island of isolation: is Thanatz's sea of shadows and accident a more valid or humane reality?

Thanatz escapes the insular world that Franz makes for himself, but he does not approach anything like the intense intersubjective connection with others, the communion with "the other children like you," posited at the start of the Peenemünde episode. His connections with other people merely place him lost amidst the flotsam of an indistinguishable and lost humanity. This condition is no better than Franz's; where Franz maintains a suspicion about Ilse that attenuates his own love, Thanatz feels himself suspended before Bianca in "perpetuate doubting of her love—" (672; note the inversion of their situations in even this detail). Thanatz is not isolated; he is never in doubt as to his own self-consistent reality, but he does question the reality of the indistinguishable others:
"when mortal faces go by, sure, self-consistent and never seeing me, are they real? Are they souls, really? or only attractive sculpture, the sunlit faces of clouds?" (672; my emphasis in each of the last two quotations).

Taken alone, either of the two modes of representation in Gravity’s Rainbow, causal connection or analogical integration, will ultimately reveal characters in perpetually uncertain relations to their world. And since the novel never explicitly denies or sanctions either mode, but simply presents both, this uncertainty extends to the relation between the reader and the text. As Franz chooses between personal identity and impersonal salvation, so we are left choosing between a world and its inverse; but rather than encourage us to settle at last on one or the other, Gravity’s Rainbow sustains our uncertainty. Its representations of reality require a dual reading in which the inverse constructions are held together, not as separate truths, but in mutual dependence, to describe an unnamed truth that is different from either mode of description.

if the web were perfectly pre-set,  
the spider could 
never find 
a perfect place to set it in; and

if the web were 
perfectly adaptable, 
if freedom and possibility were without limit, 
the web would 
lose its special identity."16

Pynchon sets simple, binary possibilities into intricate patterns indeed. Relying on causal connections blinds Franz to real connections between himself and other people and leads him to build a fragmentary image of his daughter’s identity—though neither can tracing a proliferation of analogies lead of itself to a stable perception of reality. Franz in his rigid solitude heads toward that precarious state of paranoia in which gaps take substance along rarefied lines of continuity: long years of absence cling to the brief periods of Ilse’s visits; blanks between movie frames fill with a persisting vision; the trajectory Franz charts along points of the rocket’s flight stands motionless in space. For Franz as for many other characters in Gravity’s Rainbow, this state of mind is "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation." It may be a valid and necessary insight into the novel’s world—the discovery of a certain operational method that seeks out connections under the assumption that there is a pre-set, all-encompassing master-plot; but this insight is only "a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected" (703). Franz’s paranoid construction of
deterministic connections is what enables him to sustain his sense of a personal identity.

The alternative state of mind, in which one envisions analogical relations and character doublings in such proliferation that psychological particularities begin to blur, is not a saving alternative to paranoia. In the section of Gravity’s Rainbow just following the Pennaände episode, the narrator gives this alternative state a name: "If there is something comforting [. . .] about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (534). Such infinitely adaptable fictions of continuity in Pynchon’s novel, as in Ammon’s poem, are associated with a loss of all distinctions. One such plastic fiction causes, for example, the shadow-children Ilse, Bianca, and Gottfried each to lose her "special identity."

Pynchon’s dual symbolism is similar to the dual images embodied in Ammon’s web:

the row-strung garden web
keeps order at the center
where space is freest (interesting that the freest
"medium" should
   accept the firmest order)

and that
order diminishes toward the
periphery allowing at the points of contact
entropy equal to entropy.

This is no simple dichotomy, but a complex and multifaceted description of reality. The web exists neither in the firm order of its center nor fully in the infinite adaptability at its periphery. But even these equations of center with order and periphery with adaptability break down, because, paradoxically, "space is freest" at the ordered center, and disorder and order coexist at the periphery, "entropy equal to entropy."

Just such a coexistence and interaction between inner, constructed orders and a mysterious, accidental space of possibilities has infused Pynchon's fictions from the outset. His very first published story, "The Small Rain," sets in opposition to a monochrome mental landscape "these wondrous colors and x-rays and ultraviolets going on outside."17 And Pynchon had already sought to merge the two orders in "Entropy," where at certain significant points of contact—between Callisto’s enclosed order and the random happenings in Meatball Mulligan's open apartment—the binary elements of the story are juxtaposed in a fugal consonance.18
The inverse relations I have traced through *Gravity's Rainbow* are similarly constructed to suggest, not a binary, irreconcilable opposition, but a situation in which opposite modes of perceiving the self and reality partake of each other. Pynchon's binary consciousness (personal identity as a substance-in-vacuum and impersonal salvation as a death-like void-in-aether), the novel's dual integrating constructions (causal connection and analogical integration), and the complementary states of paranoia and anti-paranoia: each pair is shaped by a pervasive and internally consistent pattern of inverse imagery.

The interpenetration of opposite states of awareness is beautifully pictured in one of Franz's earlier dreams. Seeking safety among the rational coordinates of a Cartesian grid, Franz finds himself kneeling in prayer on "the lavatory floor of his old rooming house in Munich":

He wore a robe of gold and orange brocade. It was the only light in the room. Afterward he ventured out into the house, knowing people slept in all the rooms, but feeling a sense of desertion. He went to switch on a light—but in the act of throwing the switch he knew the room had really been lit to begin with, and he had just turned everything out, everything... (400)

Franz attempts to make sense of his dreamy situation by applying the kind of logical thought processes that serve him in his daytime engineering activities, polar conceptions of reality that exclude a coexistence of opposites; yet at the precise point where logical connections ought to yield a luminous insight into his solitary being, "in the act of throwing the switch," his logic fails and he returns to the void.

Franz's dream of the deserted rooming house in Munich, like the image two pages earlier of the robed organist at Zwillfkinder, may serve as a symbol of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s pervasive complementarity, a symbol that can help to illuminate both Pynchon's mode of characterization and his representation of the relations between language and reality. Pynchon derives from the new physics an internally consistent structure of complementarity that reveals the intrinsic limitations and artificiality of fiction constructed from a linear, causally related narrative, and that also reveals as artificial any mode of characterization that relies exclusively on threading disconnected images of individuals. Yet, although a deterministic causal model of personal identity proves inadequate to Pynchon's project, neither can the alternative analogical approach of itself create stable fictions. The narrative form of *Gravity's Rainbow* is the result of Pynchon's merging the two approaches, just as a character's psychological awareness finds expression through a superimposition of
seemingly irreconcilable states (as in P&kler's "two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation").

In The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory, Werner Heisenberg maintains that light and matter are both objectively real and unified entities, but that "the apparent duality arises in the limitations of our language."

This formulation corresponds well with Pynchon's dual mode of symbolic characterization, for while he retains the premise that P&kler has a coherent identity grounded in the fictive reality, he abandons the assumption that this identity can be reconstituted by following any one psychological or mimetic model within the text. (In the case of Slothrop, it would appear that even the premise that he has a coherent fictive identity is dropped.) The structural application of this principle also defines the texture of language in perpetual difference from that which it describes: the duality is a condition of language, not of its subject. Pynchon's structural complementarity thus reflects an awareness that reality is not commensurable with any single narrative form, but will inevitably take to itself opposed forms of verbal apprehension. In terms of Ammons's web imagery, the shape of reality is only discerned in the interstices, never appropriated to the material texture of the web that is language.

--- Massey College
The University of Toronto

Notes


2 The accurate exposition in recent Pynchon criticism of concepts from modern science has shed light on Pynchon's difficult narrative technique. Robert Nadeau, who was among the first to notice the central role of ideas from the new physics "in the determination of both design and meaning" in Pynchon's novels, claims that these ideas underlie a "radically new conception of the nature of human identity and societal organization" (Readings from the New Book on Nature: Physics and Metaphysics in the Modern Novel [Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987] 135). Following Nadeau's lead, Carolyn S. Pyuen calls for a critical approach to Gravity's Rainbow that will treat Pynchon's narrative, not as a "closed linguistic system describing a Newtonian universe," but "as an extension of reality embodying interdependency and indeterminacy" ("The Transmarginal Leap: Meaning and Process in Gravity's Rainbow," Mosaic 15.2 [1982]: 35-36). I am also indebted to a paper by Molly Hite


7 Bohr goes through the derivation in Nature 121 (1928): 580ff.


14 Nadeau 144.

15 Brian McHale's discussion in "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of Gravity's Rainbow," Poetics Today 1.1-2 (1979): 85-110, is the first to treat the subject of Pynchon's analogical correspondences. McHale concludes that Pynchon's proliferating analogies constitute a parody of the modernist device of analogical integration. Leo Bersani, in an article that appeared after the present essay was completed, demonstrates how the cammingle and replication of identities in Gravity's Rainbow not only undermines the notion of a unique personal identity, but also ruins "the very notion of Real Texts." ("Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature." Representations 25 [1989]: 112.)


I first encountered Gravity's Rainbow at about the same time I began to paint, in mid-1977. At the time, I was just looking for any big book to help keep me awake at my job as a motel night clerk. At random, I selected GR from the local library and read it episodically, between the arrivals of the red-eyed tourists.

The words were fascinating. Pynchon seemed to know everything. No notion was too small for his attention, and no concept was too large to be encompassed by his vision. His use of myth and technology corresponded to my own interests; however, the depth of the sympathy, emotions, and memories he conveyed was new to me and provided solid lessons to a young art worker. What is stunning to me even now, after more than a decade of living with the book, is recognizing the staggering intensity of the effort that must have been required to corrall all those facts and inventions into a coherent story line.

Having acquired this interest in GR, I naturally began to occasionally make paintings that comment on the book. One of the earliest of these is Return to the North Sea (1982). It shows poor, lost Bianca as if she had been returned to life. She is wearing a swimsuit and is diving head first into a featureless sea. Like Charles Dickens' Little Nell, she had to die; but if she had grown up innocently, she might have had the chance to dive trusting and eyes-closed into the North Sea, instead of being lost during the storm.

In Rocket Girl (1983), Katje Borgesius is shown superimposed on or perhaps embedded in an Atlas rocket test stand during a launch. To illustrate that she is fundamental to the effort, she is in the lowest part of the painting, the foundation of the stand. Since it is her role to act only as a catalyst, bringing men and money to the rocket, she remains unaware of the pyrotechnic fury depicted above her.

The Rocket paintings, dating from 1985-86, are a series of studies of the V-2. In order to further examine this central image of GR, it was necessary to produce a simple and mythic view of the rocket that would have the educational and meditative functions of a religious icon.

A narrative series of paintings begun in 1986 introduced a character named Atomic Bob. Atomic Bob began the series as a radio announcer who worked from a number of increasingly chaotic locations. He presented his broadcasts from his home, the road, the air, Hell, and the Void. Then, believing he had broadcast it all, he left the microphone to become a full-time seeker of
truth. Like Tyrone Slothrop, Atomic Bob notices patterns, projects dreams, and avoids near disasters. From his observations he draws far-reaching conclusions that are, as often as not, wrong. Like Rocketman, he has settled into a routine of fact-finding and omen-reading, but more like Benny Profane, he does not have the comfort of being on a proper quest, nor does he have the motivating terror of an unspeakable past.

Recent paintings of Atomic Bob place him with figures that are meant to refer to the Floundering Four in the Raketen-Stadt sequence of GR. Atomic Bob himself takes the part of Slothrop. A guardian angel plays Myrtle Miraculous. The cartoon character Astroboy takes the part of Marcel. The part of Maximilian has yet to be cast. So far, the major achievement of the three seems to be the creation of a sense of uncertainty mixed with wonder.

These are some of the pictures I have painted while under the influence of Pynchon. I hope he does not mind too much if we comment on or build with his inexhaustible body of work. Those of us who were impressionable at the right moment really do not have much choice in the matter. Just the same, I am inclined to think that the people who have learned Pynchon's lessons the best will go on to make inexhaustible worlds of their own.

--Sandusky, Ohio
Homage to Selfridge (from the Rocket Series)
24” x 36” Acrylic on Masonite  1986
Selfridge was the first man to die in an airplane accident.
Atomic Bob and the Small Wind

36" x 48" Acrylic on Masonite

1988
Waiting for the Monorail

36" x 48" Acrylic on canvas 1989
WHO'S TALKING HERE:
FINDING THE VOICE IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

Jacqueline R. Smetak

It goes without saying that Gravity's Rainbow is one of those books which resist, almost diabolically, traditional critical approaches. It has no plot that anyone can follow. One critic, Douglas Fowler, has even gone so far as to say that, because the novel "is unsatisfactory in the resolution of its sub-plots," it is less a novel and more an enormous lyric poem or perhaps a series of "minutely detailed romantic fantasies" à la Mad Comics.1 The other problem with the novel is that it also has no single consistent narrative voice. The voice seems, rather, to be a veritable cacophony of fragmented voices.

Some critics try to control this fragmentation by seeing the narrator of the novel as a variant of an omniscient, or perhaps omnipotent, narrator. Joseph W. Slade speculates that the narrator could perhaps be a Vietnam veteran "strung out on mysticism and dope."2 Similarly, Mark Siegel believes the narrator to be omniscient and, in a sense, "the only character in the novel," in that the consciousnesses of the other characters are accessible only as projections of the consciousness of the narrative voice.3 Molly Hite has noted that Pynchon's fictive "reality" is a multiple one in which "multiple means of putting things together manage to coexist without resolving into a single, definitive system of organization," and that Pynchon's narrator contributes to this by being a "Proteus who can change tone and attitude so completely that his utterances appear to emanate from separate personae."4 Thomas Schaub writes:

Pynchon's voice retains the advantages of the intrusive, visible guide, but undermines the stability commonly associated with it, for his knowledge of the world of Gravity's Rainbow is fragmentary. He does know a good deal about the fragments he describes, however, and can move about among them at will . . . providing . . . the coherence of an accompanying voice.\5

The problem with these readings is that they place the narrator outside the text either as observer, like Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, or as creator, like D. J. "the friendless voice" in Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam? However, the voice in Gravity's Rainbow is not external, coming from an omniscient or quasi-omniscient narrator, but internal, coming from within each character and indirectly reflecting the story by communicating only what any given character can know, think, feel, or perceive.
The technical name for this way of telling a story is indirect free style or speech, or, as Henry James called it, third person narrative limited. This style is marked by the use of words denoting mental processes, by use of the features of direct speech, by idiosyncratic idioms and exclamations, and by a sense of heightened subjectivity. It cannot, however, always be recognized on formal grounds and is often a matter of tone and context. It differs from direct speech in that phrases such as "he said" and "he thought" and the quotation marks are omitted, and it differs from indirect speech in that the conjunction "that" is not used. For example, the sentence "He's afraid of the way the glass will fall" (GR 3) is free indirect speech. Not only do we have a word, "afraid," denoting mental processes or feeling, but the sentence can be rewritten either as direct speech or as indirect:

He thought, "I am afraid."...
He was afraid that...

Speech in this style of narration is covert because the story is told through what Franz K. Stanzel calls reflector, as opposed to teller, characters. Teller-characters are "fully aware of being engaged in an act of narration," whereas reflector-characters are "completely unaware of being involved in an act of communication." In other words, they show rather than tell the story. And, since they are unaware of themselves as telling the story, they also stand separate from what can be called an authorial voice," which, through stylistic devices, comments on these characters, thus creating an inherently ironic dual-voiced text.

Gravity's Rainbow is written almost entirely in free indirect style, and not, as it has usually been read, as if told by an omniscient or quasi-omniscent narrator. Shifting "voice" from characters to such a narrator can shift meaning, sometimes substantially. The book begins in medias res: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now" (GR 3). The tense is present, the effect one of immediacy. More than that, the whatever it is that is happening is happening to someone. The event is described in terms of sense impressions ("a screaming" is something heard) and of memory: "It has happened before." The point of view is internal. The who it is happening to is identified in the second paragraph: "Above him lift girders" (GR 3). The tone of panic in preceding sentences--"It is too late," "but it's all theatre," "No light anywhere" (GR 3)--has a source, "him." The use of the third person pronoun to name the character implies the absence of a traditional narrator. First person "I" would place the voice in the "I"; a proper name would place it outside in an omniscient narrator. Point of view is also limited. We can know only what "he" can know or guess. He "sits in velveteen darkness" (GR 3); he cannot see, but he feels "metal nearer and farther rub and connect, steam escaping in puffs, a vibration in the carriage's frame, a whooping, an
uneasiness" (GR 3). Even the descriptions of the people around him, the "feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time" (GR 3), which would, in another kind of text, come from an omniscient narrator, are his observations and assumptions. The clue is in the sentence "exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone" (GR 3). This is what they seem to be to him.

In the next paragraph we have sentences which could be addressed to us by an omniscient narrator--"Is this the way out?" No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into"; "It is a judgment from which there is no appeal" (GR 3, 4)---but which are, more or less obviously, free indirect speech. The question is direct speech without the quotation marks. The second sentence has the interjection "no" peculiar to direct speech. The third is not distinguishable from direct reporting, but the context gives it an implicit introductory "I feel that this is ...", which would make it free indirect speech and not the voice of an omniscient narrator.

Two paragraphs down we have another of these sentences, "Invisible, yes, what do the furnishings matter, at this stage of things?" (GR 4), followed by a series of commands, "Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet" (GR 4). The "you" is implicit, but is this a "voice" speaking to us, or is "he" talking to himself? "He" seems the more logical choice because the commands are followed by questions--"Will the light come before or after?" and "But it is already light. How long has it been light?" (GR 4). This is not an omniscient narrator speaking to us but the befuddled fumbling of a man, Pirate Prentice, waking up. The opening section of the novel has all been a dream.

But does it make any difference? Obviously what the opening section is talking about---war, evacuation, air raids, and death---is clear no matter who is doing the talking. What can change is tone, emphasis, and context. The opening section is a dream, and the dreamer's voice is disembodied but reading it as coming from an omniscient narrator blurs the transition from sleep to waking and problematizes the status of the dream as dream as well as the question of whose dream, or vision, it is. It also produces a measure of confusion as to exactly what is going on and how we, the readers, are supposed to react. Are we inside the evacuation, feeling the panic, or outside, distanced and dispassionate observers? Are we dealing with a world unified by a single consciousness or with one breaking apart, shattering beyond anyone's ability to order or reassemble it?

Or is Pynchon playing games with us, creating anxiety in the reader by blurring the status of both dream and voice and by presenting us with even more problematic choices? Assuming, however, that we can make these choices, shifting "voice" in other sections will also produce changes. For example, Schaub has read the Advent section (GR 127-36; Roger Mexico and Jessica
Swanlake attending a Christmas Eve church service) as an example of the "Over Voice," what Schaub calls the "Orphic Voice," which sings to us of the "Other Side" (Schaub 124-25). And indeed it is difficult not to see this as an "Orphic Voice," for the style, as Schaub notes, quickly "modulates to oratory." The question is, however, not whether or not this is an Orphic Voice, but whose Orphic Voice it is. It is Roger Mexico's. To complicate things, however, the section begins from the point of view of the twenty-year-old Jessica Swanlake--"Well, that surprised her, but def, after weeks of his snide comments? (GR 128); it then shifts to that of a Jamaican corporal in the choir--"quarter of a stick of dynamite man" (GR 128)--before it becomes that of Mexico: "not to mention the Latin, the German? in an English church?" (GR 129). But this persists only briefly, and then the point of view shifts back to Jessica--"He wasn't looking nihilistic, not even cheaply so. He was..." (GR 129). Finally it becomes Mexico's voice again, oratorical, Orphic, a soliloquy dealing with, trying to deal with the War."

Unfortunately for ease of argument, the evidence that this is Mexico's voice exists not primarily in the Advent section itself but elsewhere in the book, in every section that contributes to establishing who and what Mexico is and what kind of language and tone is peculiar to him. For example, the last paragraphs of Book I are, without question, spoken by Mexico:

She is his deepest innocence in spaces of bough and hay before wishes were given a separate name to warn that they might not come true, and his lithe Parisian daughter of joy, beneath the eternal mirror, forswearing perfumes, capeskin to the armpits, all that is too easy, for his impoverishment and more worthy love.

You go from dream to dream inside me. You have passage to my last shabby corner, and there, among the debris, you've found life. (GR 177)

This, combined with the rage of a previous sentence--"Jeremy will take her like the Angel itself, in his joyless weasel- worded come-along" (GR 177)--and the despair of those following--"You're catching the War. It's infecting you and I don't know how to keep it away" (GR 177)--gives us a man who is poetic and deeply pained. From the Advent section we also have an image of Mexico as one who wishes to shelter others from pain even though he cannot:

But on the way home tonight, you wish you'd picked him up, held him a bit. Just held him, very close to your heart, his cheek by the hollow of your shoulder, full of sleep. As if it were you who could, somehow, save him. (GR 135-36)

The similarities in sentiment and tone between "before wishes were given a separate name to warn that they might not come
true" and "As if it were you who could, somehow, save him" are too close to ignore. The language of the Advent section is that of Roger Mexico.

Schaub has read this section as a unifying overview of the war, as an "elegiac elaboration of the connections in his [Pynchon’s] vision of war’s arrival and the signs of its Advent" (Schaub 127-28). But Schaub’s reading of the "voice" as that of an external narrator has forced him to read the last sentences of this section and the choral "praise be to God!" (GR 136) as bitter direct-address criticism of how insufficient that cry is. If the Advent section is told to us by someone who is not in its situation but outside it, as an observer, this would encourage a reading of the voice as bitter because unmodulated by the despair and doubt of the character, Roger Mexico, who actually has to live the scene. Such a reading ignores the fact that Mexico has been established as a character who reacts to pain and loss by wrapping himself in a protective cover of phony cynicism. Schaub has also neglected to quote the final sentence: "Whether you want it or not, whatever you have crossed, the way home..." (GR 136). The choral cry is insufficient, but it is the way home because, in Gravity’s Rainbow, salvation comes in small and incomplete ways. Whether we like it or not, we go on living in an incomplete and imperfect world. Thus the cry is not a denunciation but, rather, the despair of a man who wants to believe but cannot accept the terms of salvation in this world. It is the cry of one who, earlier in this section, as if, though briefly, accepting those terms, had said, "this is the hillside, the sky can show us a light--like a thrill, a good time you wanted too much, not a complete loss but still too far short of a miracle" (GR 133).

If the novel as a whole is to be read, as Pynchon indicates on the final page it should be, as being about the fumbling, frustrated attempts characters make to touch each other, to try to connect with something or someone because that is all they can do, then Schaub’s reading of the Advent section contradicts this by emphasizing the cynicism of the passage and ignoring that cynicism’s function as a defense mechanism. His reading also contradicts the way Schaub himself wants to see the book. He ends his own with:

His writing therefore keeps us company and awakens in us the possibility that we are not alone. This awakening is the "physical grace" of Thomas Pynchon, at once communal and incomplete, a continuity of song that never resolves. Listen. (Schaub 152)

And Pynchon ends his with "Now everybody--" (GR 760).

This last is spoken by a "Voice" which belongs to no one in that it cannot be attached to any of the characters in the novel and which, according to Schaub, has been speaking to us all
along. But in spite of Schaub's contention that this is a
standard omniscient (with modifications) narrator, he talks
about what it does to the text as if it were free indirect
style:

The comfort we were feeling, sitting back and
listening to the narrator tell his story, is lost.
The separation and distance of 'story' are gone; the
reader-narrator-character triangle has collapsed.
(Schaub 129)

The "reader-narrator-character triangle" has collapsed because the
narrator, or "voice," and the character—or in this case
characters—merge, and the reader, hearing the story as if an
echo inside his or her own head (because the narration echoes,
to a degree, normal thought processes), becomes one with the
other two. The section of the novel Schaub is referring to--
Edward Pointsman trying to pry out of Kevin Spectro just "One,
little, Fox!" (GR 47-53)—does have the shifting, nightmarish,
oratorical quality Schaub associates with the "Over Voice":

Whenever the narrator adopts this second-person
address, the tone becomes meditative, nightmarish,
oratorical. The reader inevitably feels himself to be
the object of this address. (Schaub 128)

But there are specific signals that the digressions,
meditations, and nightmarish fantasies are Pointsman's. For
example, a paragraph on Pavlov's "ideas of the opposite" (GR 48-
49) is answered "You're putting response before stimulus!"
(GR 49), as if Spectro had heard these thoughts, which indicates
that, even though the paragraph looks as if it were either
interior monologue or spoken by an omniscient narrator, it was
actually spoken aloud. Further on, a direct quotation from
Pointsman, "so he [Slothrop] might turn a particular corner,
enter a certain street, and for no clear reason feel
suddenly . . . ." (GR 49), merges into "Silence comes in,
sculptured by spoken dreams" (GR 49) and a fantasy about a
bombing out theater, "you could hear them crying from the rows
either side but couldn't move . . . ." (GR 49), about death, about
seductive, pretty children, about "thousands going away," to be
as if closed by "Yet for all his agonizing all Pointsman will
score, presently, is an octopus" (GR 51). And the rhythm of the
prose of this section, with its peculiar hesitations, is that of
Pointsman's speech:

"he's always springing his . . . senile little
surprises. . . . ." (GR 48)
"Not at all. Think of it. He's out there." (GR 49)
but couldn't move . . . the sudden light filling up
the room. (GR 49)

Gone, the war taking them, the man behind already
presenting his ticket. (GR 51)
Damn it. One, little, Fox! (GR 53)
What this means is that the "you" in, for example, the sentence "You have waited in these places into the early mornings, synced in to the on-whitening of the interior, you know the arrivals schedule by heart, by hollow heart" (GR 50) is spoken to us not by an omniscient narrator but by Pointsman ruminating to himself about his peculiar habit of waiting in bus stations for orphaned little girls. One of the functions of this section is to establish our sympathy with Pointsman, despicable as he is. If the fantasy about these children were told us by another "voice," then indeed it would be, as Schaub says it is, an accusation, and any kind of sympathy with Pointsman would be hard to establish. But sentences like "One by one, gone. Those who happen to be smoking might last an instant longer, weak little coal swinging in orange arc once, twice--no more" (GR 51) don't work in Schaub's kind of reading. Because of the poetic nature of the language, the focus of the moral judgment blurs, and the accusation takes on an inappropriate lyrical tone which renders it merely sentimental. Also, Pointsman is a lonely man. If we do not understand this, his reaction to Spectro's death (GR 138-40) will make no sense, and assessment of himself--"women avoid him. He knows in a general way what it is: he's creepy" (GR 141)--will elicit no pity. But it does elicit pity:

He's even aware, usually, of the times when he's being creepy--it's a certain set to his face-muscles, a tendency to sweat . . . but he can't seem to do anything about it. (GR 141)

He is trapped in this situation, inside himself, and we are trapped inside him. As readers, we can see, hear, feel, think, experience only what he sees, hears, feels, thinks, experiences. There is no "voice" here except that.

Other passages which Schaub credits to the "Over Voice" because of the use of the direct-address "you" reveal, on a closer reading, only the "voice" of a character. For example, near the end of the novel when the last V-2 is about to be fired off with Gottfried strapped inside, the reassuring "Come, wake. All is well" (GR 754) is not the "Over Voice" speaking to the reader but Captain Blicero heard through a tiny speaker in Gottfried's ear. As he has done before, Blicero is alluding to Rilke: "Want the Change . . . O be inspired by the Flame!" (GR 97); "At last, something real [. . .] Now it is time to wake, into the breath of what was always real" (GR 754). Earlier in the novel, the section which begins "In Germany, as the end draws upon us" (GR 72 ff) is from Brigadier General Pudding, although it is several pages before this becomes clear. The clichés, the outdated slang--"that is, dotty?" (GR 74)--the gossipy tone, and the old man's "or was that--who was the ginger-haired chap who slept with his hat on? ahhh, come back" (GR 75) all establish this as Pudding's voice. Further, what Schaub calls the "voice" looking forward in time, for example, Bloat being "too busy running through plausible excuses should
he happen to get caught, not that he will, you know" (GR 17; Schaub 131), is just Teddy Bloat talking to himself. Bloat has already been established as a foop—"Bloat, who's nearest, takes it, forkful of bananee gleeepes poised fashionably in the air" (GR 11)—and the "you know" along, with the preceding sentence—"erected to gratify curious gods' offspring indeed" (GR 17)—is Bloat's characteristic idiom. The "voice," as Schaub defines it, does not seem to be there.

The "voice" does, however, make its presence felt in the novel. It does speak to us, but it is difficult, though not impossible, to pinpoint it in any specific technique or stylistic signal. It seems to exist, for the most part, in the tone of ironic and sorrowing pity which pervades the novel. Schaub is not entirely mistaken when he states that the direct-address "you" signals the presence of the "Over Voice." Often it does signal this "voice." Where Schaub makes his mistake, however, is in assuming that the "you" is always used as a direct address to the reader. It is not, but there are points where the "you" is not a colloquial interjection or the character talking to him or herself but this "voice" speaking to us:

But the sound is greater than police. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains further than any mortal could ever move... could move in time..."
"I don't think that's a police siren." Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the knob of the AM radio.
"I don't think--" (GR 757)

Although the "Over Voice" is present throughout most of the novel, its appearances up until the last hundred or so pages are brief and fleeting, rifts in the narrative. The presence of the "Voice" is signaled by the "you" when it is used as a direct-address and by anachronistic references to what would be, in 1945, future events:

no need even to be there, at the office, for visitors may tune in from anywhere in the Convention to his passionate demonstrations, which often come in the midst of celebrating what hep humorists here are already calling "Critical Mass" (get it? not too many did in 1945, the Cosmic Bomb was still trembling in its earliness, not yet revealed to the People, so you heard the term only in the very superhepact-to-hepact exchanges). (GR 539) 13

But not all of the anachronisms come from the "Over Voice." For example, the Sixties era drug slang used by Bodine in his song "The Doper's Dream" (GR 369) is his own. So even with these, some care must be taken.
But there is one more signal, more subtle, which must be caught in conjunction with these other two. In the last sections of the novel (GR 626 ff), the mode of narration changes from free indirect style to a virtual first person narrative as the "Over Voice" becomes the dominant "voice" and takes on Slothrop's function as the organizing thread of the narrative after Slothrop thins, scatters, and finally disappears:

in the Zone, later in the day he [Slothrop] became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall [....] (GR 626)

The change in tense from the present, the dominant tense in the novel, to the preterite, "became," tells us that this is the "Over Voice" speaking, sharing, as it were, the sentence with Slothrop, the sentence which shifts back to present, "doesn't," and to Slothrop as he fades out, "not a thing in his head, just feeling natural" (GR 626).

Slothrop's function is given to the "Over Voice" because, if Slothrop and his quest had remained the central thread, either the novel would have continued in a line forever, like The Crying of Lot 49, assuming that Slothrop does not find what he was looking for, or it would have come to an end, that is, closure and death, assuming that Slothrop's quest is successful. And if Slothrop did find his "grail," his rocket, his answer, what then? The point of the novel (of most of Pynchon's fiction for that matter) is that there is no answer in any conventional, definitive sense of that word. Indeed, for Pynchon, it is scrabbling for an answer with a capital "A" which kills, as it spiritually destroys characters like Pointsman, Blicero, and even Franz Bäcker, in part because the pursuit is quixotic, and in part because such an answer means an end.

But Gravity's Rainbow does not end, does not resolve. The disparate voices remain, distinct and separate, telling us that there is no answer (indeed, what, pray tell, was the question?), no way to bring these voices together, no world that can be unified, no way, no truth, no Path. It tells us that the nature of the "Real" is multiple, that our knowledge of it can only be limited and subjective. That the "Over Voice" functions not as an omniscient narrator but as a virtual first person narrator, in other words, as just another "voice" in this fragmentary universe, underscores this point. The "Voice" can know only what the "Voice" can know. This is a scattered, chaotic, and multiple world, and what Pynchon seems to be doing is trying to get us to break out of our sensible and orderly systems, our rationalized living death, and live with what is, respecting the multiplicity of the true nature of things.

--Iowa State University
Notes


2 Joseph W. Slade, "Religion, Psychology, Sex, and Love," Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 160. Slade is interested in the novel as an exploration of the alienation of modern European (and American) man from natural wholeness. He believes that this impulse toward alienation and fragmentation is expressed in the peculiar nature of the narrative voice in the novel.


4 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 10, 142.


6 Jane Austen was the first major writer to use extensively this particular way of telling a story. In spite of the fact that an American writer and critic, Henry James, was the first to identify and talk about the style, few American critics have dealt with it. For more extensive discussions of free indirect style, see: W. J. M. Bronzwaer, Tense in the Novel (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1970); Kate Hamburger, The Logic of Literature, trans. Marilyn J. Rose (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973); Roy Pascal, The Dual Voice (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977); Franz K. Stanzel, Narrative Situations in the Novel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977); "Toward a Grammar of Fiction," Novel 2, 1978; "Teller-Characters and Reflector Characters in Narrative Theory," Poetics Today 2.2 (1981).

7 Parenthetical references to GR are to Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973/Penguin, 1987). All Ellipses, except those in brackets, are Pynchon's.


9 Stanzel 249.
10 One of the advantages, and one of the peculiarities, of free indirect style is that the author can shift out of it when necessary to introduce a character or to introduce information a character may not be privy to. For example, Pirate Prentice is presented via direct authorial voice—"His name is Capt. Geoffrey ('Pirate') Prentice" (GR 5)—but the text returns to free indirect style almost immediately—"His skull feels made of metal" (GR 5).

11 The sentences quoted mark where the voice shifts from one character to another. Such shifts can also occur in mid-sentence. For example, Authorial voice: "So the pure counter-tenor voice was soaring, finding its way in to buoy Jessica's heart and even [shift to Jessica] Roger's, she guessed, risking glances [. . . ]" (GR 129).

12 As quotations from Jessica indicate: "snide comments"; "nihilistic, not even cheaply so" (GR 128, 129).

13 The "you" in "so you heard the term" is not a direct address to the reader but merely a generalized pronoun that can be replaced: "so one heard. . .". Even the "Over Voice" does not always speak directly to us. Although it does start out with a direct address (jabbing us in the ribs as it were—"get it?"), it quickly withdraws.
DEATH WAS NO ENEMY: A NOTE ON THOMAS PYNCHON,
WILFRED OWEN, AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR
Roger A. Berger

In his discussion of Gravity's Rainbow, Michael Seidel suggests that Pynchon uses the "interface" between the First and Second World Wars to demonstrate the radical shift in the world to "a new order that conspires to annihilate permanently what remains of humanity in the race" (204). In particular, Seidel, like Paul Fussell, points to Brigadier Pudding as Pynchon's prime exemplar of a decaying world order (Seidel 205-07; Fussell 328-34). I would like to note another way that Pynchon emphasizes the differences between the wars—especially how the Second World War represents the beginning of the bureaucratized and cartelized state. In discussing the differences between the wars, Pynchon makes an allusion to the sonnet "The Next War" by Wilfred Owen—perhaps the archetypal heroic poet of the First World War—and employs it to help show what has happened to heroism, human bonding, and love in the contemporary world.

At the end of Part III of Gravity's Rainbow, we see Clive Mossmoon and Sir Marcus Scammony, representatives of the new postwar corporate mentality, sitting in their club discussing Polyvinyl Chloride Raincoats, homosexuality, Pointsman, and Slothrop. In response to Mossmoon's fear of a national crisis over Slothrop, Scammony reassures him:

"Dear chap," smiling angelically, "there isn't going to be any crisis. Labour wants the American found as much as we do. We sent him out to destroy the blacks, and it's obvious now he won't do the job. What harm can he cause, roaming around Germany? For all we know he's taken ship for South America and all those adorable little mustachios. Let it be for a while. We've got the Army, when the time is right. Slothrop was a good try at a moderate solution, but in the end it's always the Army, isn't it?" (615)

To Mossmoon's further question—"Are we going to fail?"—Scammony replies, "We're all going to fail, Sir Marcus primping his curls, "but the Operation won't." (616). The "Operation" thus takes precedence over human beings, and by letting oneself be subsumed by the "Operation," one abandons human feeling and fear and assumes an "authoritarian personality":

Yes. Clive Mossmoon feels himself rising, as from a bog of trivial frustrations, political fears, money problems, delivered onto the sober shore of the Operation, where all is firm underfoot, where the self is a petty indulgent animal that once cried in its
mired darkness. But here there is no whining, here inside the Operation. There is no lower self. The issues are too momentous for the lower self to interfere. Even in the chastisement room at Sir Marcus's estate, "The Birches," the foreplay is a game about who has the real power, who's had it all along, chained and corseted though he be, outside these shackled walls. The humiliations of pretty "Angelique" are calibrated against their degree of fantasy. No joy, no real surrender. Only the demands of the Operation. Each of us has his place, and the tenants come and go, but the places remain. . . . (615)

In the section's final paragraph, however, Pynchon indulges in some romanticizing of the past, particularly of the trench world of the First World War. Just how ironic Pynchon's valorization of trench warfare may be is unclear; but compared to the bureaucratic war state that developed after the First World War and especially during and after the Second, some vestige of humanity did remain under the horrific conditions of the Great War. As Pynchon writes:

It wasn't always so. In the trenches of the First World War, English men came to love one another decently, without shame or make-believe, under the easy likelihoods of their sudden deaths, and to find in the faces of other young men evidence of otherworldly visits, some poor hope that may have helped redeem even mud, shit, the decaying pieces of human meat. . . . (616)

Pynchon does suggest that a new world was then in the making—"It was the end of the world, it was total revolution. [...] an English class was being decimated, the ones who'd volunteered were dying for those who'd known something and hadn't" (616)—but he nevertheless suggests that some form of human bonding remained: "[. . . ] despite it all, despite knowing, some of them, of the betrayal, while Europe died meanly in its own wastes, men loved" (616). Unfortunately, in the Second War—and particularly in men like Mossman and Scammony—such human responses have all but disappeared or scattered:

But the life-cry of that love has long since hissed away into no more than this idle and bitchy faggotry. In this latest war, death was no enemy, but a collaborator. Homosexuality in high places is just a carnal afterthought now, and the real and only fucking is done on paper. . . . (616, my emphasis)

This last passage contains a brief yet significant allusion to Wilfred Owen's "The Next War";
Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,—
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't wither.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorused when he sang aloft;
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death—for lives; not men—for flags.

(86, my emphasis)

In this sonnet, Owen humanizes Death, making it a part of the trench world camaraderie. He emphasizes everyday activities—eating and shaving—and juxtaposes them with the absolutely immediate threat of Death. Owen even foresees other wars in which Death will no longer be so chummy and when war itself will lose the personal dimension still found in the trenches. By way of his allusion, Pynchon calls to mind many of Owen's other poems—like "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "Greater Love"—in which homo-erotic references emphasize not only youthful male bonding but also, as Fussell points out, the irony of prewar Edwardian sentimentalism (330). In "Greater Love," for example, Owen writes:

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.
O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead! (41)

Such sentiments contrast with the "bitchy faggotry" of Mossmoom and Scammony and highlight once again the difference for Pynchon between the First and Second World Wars. The Second, Pynchon implies, would have been no place for a Wilfred Owen. The ironically romantic Owen, who was killed during the last week of the war, was at least spared Brigadier Pudding's humiliating attempts to reenter the world of the First War. And as Pynchon tells us, in the Second World War, "the real and only fucking was done on paper."

--Wabash College
Works Cited


PYCHON'S PARKER PASSAGE:
A SOURCE AND SOUND ANALYSIS

Gerhard Westerath

In his influential article on the encyclopedic character of Gravity's Rainbow, Edward Mendelson challenges readers to look for background material which Pynchon used for the construction of his book. Mendelson himself not only identifies the source for one "local cluster of data," the NTA episode, but also explicates the author's ways of adapting such material to his own purposes. Here I want to present another case where Pynchon uses a--more or less obscure--source to add yet another voice to the polyphony of voices that makes up Gravity's Rainbow.

The significance of music is obvious in all of Pynchon's work and has been widely discussed. J. O. Tate suggests a more general concern in his article "Gravity's Rainbow: The Original Soundtrack." Except for one sentence in the opening part, however, Tate basically restricts himself to listing the various sources and uses Pynchon has for music. That one sentence is worth repeating, defining as it does the wider context for the present study:

The "aural interface," the totalitarian background noise of civilization, is represented in the text--or on the tape--of that "acoustic collage," Gravity's Rainbow.

To treat Gravity's Rainbow as an "acoustic collage," however, is a worthwhile project. The following pages are taken from a longer study in which I have tried to analyze the acoustic texture of Gravity's Rainbow with regard to four aspects of sound: environmental sounds, voices, music, and silence--an attempt to read Gravity's Rainbow which takes a listening approach. In this sense the following argument is meant not only to demonstrate what background material Pynchon put into his book but also to advocate a postmodern approach in which a listening reader completes the text by putting his imaginative power into the book as well.

The local cluster to be discussed here exemplifies the use of jazz, an area Tate neglects completely. Pynchon includes references to famous jazz musicians in most of his writing. If V. alludes discreetly to Ornette Coleman--the name is changed to MeClinic Sphere--it and Gravity's Rainbow both refer explicitly to the most influential alto-saxophonist in the history of jazz, Charlie Parker.

Jazz constitutes an "art outside the realm of written fiction" of the sort Mendelson sees as typically featured in his canon of encyclopedic narratives. Furthermore, jazz is
exceptionally well suited to convey Pynchon's most positive values, the "affirmation of life" (N. O. Brown) emerging from an anti-establishment, preterite perspective. Jazz is essentially a personal music, an affirmation of individual life, in its best forms working against the limiting codes of convention.

The one sentence on Charlie "Yardbird" Parker in Gravity's Rainbow evokes Pynchon's most prominent codes of meaning and value. Moreover, it provides a close look at Pynchon's technique of quoting even obscure sources and working these into a deeply metaphoric and extremely sensual language. Pynchon writes with an essential awareness of the acoustic quality of all writing. He seems to enact Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the content of writing . . . is speech," as becomes more than evident in the Parker passage below.

The passage is spliced into the chapter in which Slothrop recalls his adventures at the Roseland Ballroom in Boston. The "hook [ . . . ] to hang the story from" is the sound of a tune Parker played frequently.

"Cherokee" comes wailing up from the dance floor below, over the hi-hat, the string bass, the thousand sets of feet where moving rose lights suggest not pale Harvard boys and their dates, but a lotta dolly-dum redskins. (63)

Departing from the name of the tune, Pynchon charges the incident with his codes of meaning. "Cherokee" evokes the American Indian and his preterition, from a white perspective. "The song playing is one more lie about white crimes" (63). But Pynchon knows the music, too, and he connects the level of verbal association with the actual sound of the tune.

But more musicians have floundered in the channel to "Cherokee" than have got through from end to end. All those long, long notes . . . what're they up to, all that time to do something inside of? Is it an Indian spirit plot? (63)

Pynchon plays with the idea that preterite peoples, Indian subjects evoked by the title and black musicians, come together in the medium of jazz to counteract white structures. Thus a certain atmosphere is established before the actual Parker passage comes in. The passage itself takes up this atmosphere and intensifies it in a very complex way. Pynchon has packed a lot of information into one long sentence in which he leaves the setting of the Roseland Ballroom completely.

Down in New York, drive fast maybe get there for the last set--on 7th Ave., between 139th and 140th, tonight, "Yardbird" Parker is finding out how he can use the notes at the higher ends of these very chords to break up the melody into have mercy what is it a
fucking machine gun or something man he must be out of his mind 32nd notes demisemiquavers say it very (demisemiquaver) fast in a Munchkin voice if you can dig that coming out of Dan Wall's Chili House and down the street--shit, out in all kinds of streets (his trip, by '39, well begun; down inside his most affirmative solos honks already the idle, amused dumb-dumming of old Mister Fucking Death he self) out over the airwaves, into the society gigs, someday as far as what seeps out hidden speakers in the city elevators and in all the markets, his bird's singing, to gainsay the Man's lullabies, to subvert the groggy wash of the endlessly, gutlessly overdubbed strings. (63-64)

This breathtaking long sentence reveals a number of Pynchon's basic concerns and techniques. He clearly projects his admiration for the virtuosity and musicality of Parker's playing, and by means of changing perspectives he allows the reader to share the experience directly. Starting with a narrative diction, he brings the scene to our immediate experience ("tonight") to go without introduction into an expression of stunned admiration ("have mercy what is it a fucking machine gun or something"). Still in the same flow of language he includes an invitation to the reader to share the admiration by repeating a word out loud (32nd notes demisemiquavers say it very [demisemiquaver] fast in a Munchkin voice"). All of this is part of the same sentence, if that grammatical category still fits this outpouring of words.

At this point at least it becomes clear that the encouragement to read aloud should be taken to apply to the whole passage. To read aloud is to realize that Pynchon uses his own virtuosity in yet another way. Arguably, the streaming flow of words—not interrupted by any regular punctuation except for two dashes as indications for "what the Germans call 'breath-pauses'" (713)—not only tells about but actually evokes Charlie Parker's long and fast saxophone phrases. A reader who is willing to follow the encouragement will hear the acoustic, even musical, element in Pynchon's language that is here foregrounded so explicitly.

Thus by actively listening to this passage, we can be sure that Pynchon is familiar with the sound of Parker's music. At the same time, however, we can demonstrate once again the encyclopedic approach Pynchon also takes to his material. The musical and historical details included in this "language solo" are not so much heard but read. In other words, Pynchon has a written source that he used and changed for his purpose. Most probably, this source is the famous Chili Parlor interview published as a special edition of the jazz magazine Down Beat, and reprinted in an influential collection of interviews entitled, interestingly for us, Hear Me Talking To Ya. In this interview Parker explains the essence of his harmonic and
melodic innovation, and describes the musical context and the
time and place in which this innovation occurred. Comparing
passages reveals that Pynchon not only imitates Parker's music
but also paraphrases his words. This is Charlie Parker talking:

I remember one night before Monroe's I was jamming in
a chill house on Seventh Avenue between 139th and
140th. It was December, 1939. Now I'd been getting
bored with the stereotyped changes that were being
used all the time at the time, and I kept thinking
there's bound to be something else. I could hear it
sometimes but I couldn't play it.

Well, that night, I was working over "Cherokee,"
and, as I did, I found that by using the higher
intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them
with appropriately related changes, I could play this
thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.¹⁰

In many ways, Charlie Parker and his alto saxophone
represent the forces of life. This affirmation of life,
however, is overshadowed by the inevitable presence of death,
the basic ontological condition in Pynchon's cosmos. In a
parenthesis, as we have seen, Pynchon refers not only to
Parker's untimely death but also to the atmosphere of his music,
which, in spite of its life-affirming intensity, breathes an
awareness of death, an awareness that is also essential to
Pynchon's art.

[...]

This appearance of death personified echoes Roger and Jessica's
experience in the preceding chapter, where after a rocket blast
they realize "Death has come in the pantry door: stands
watching them, iron and patient, with a look that says try to
tickle me." ⁵⁰ At the same time, it anticipates other
passages where Death is also presented as playing a terrible
music. Parker's music is an affirmation of life under the
shadow of destruction.

Like McClintic Sphere, alias Ornette Coleman, Parker
represents the truth of life that has to maintain itself against
a white world of negativity and lies. In musical terms, the
white lie is in covering up the truth with a "groggy wash of the
endlessly, gutlessly overdubbed strings," thus turning the
immediate reality of black, improvised, creative music into
white, artificial, sterile "Muzak." As a representative of real
life, then, Charlie Parker and with him all real musicians form
a counterforce against the white plastic world of the
establishment. Their function is to "gainsthe Man's
lullabies," "the Man" being the generic name for white society
as seen from a black, preterite perspective. And Pynchon
includes an optimistic view that this counterforce will in some way be effective. With a statement of hope he wraps up the passage on Parker and takes us back to the Roseland Ballroom and to the sounds of "Cherokee:"

So that prophecy, even up here on rainy Massachusetts Avenue, is beginning these days to work itself out in "Cherokee," the saxes downstairs getting now into some, oh really weird shit . . . . (84)

Music in general but especially jazz clearly comes out as a positive force in the Manichean struggle of "Life Against Death," which is at the core of Gravity's Rainbow. Although even music can be tinged with the presence of death, or even be used to carry Western Man's obsession with death (as in the case of Wagner), it still speaks to our senses immediately, thus defying the cold, sterile, dead world of abstractions.

It is a major concern of Pynchon's not only to transport his ideas on the level of meaning and content but to transcend the limitations of his medium and speak to our senses directly. He does so not only by alluding to musical or, more generally, acoustic phenomena but by playing with words as if with acoustic objects in a manner that charges his language with sound even on a formal level. In this sense Pynchon calls for a listening reader, and whoever is willing may experience Gravity's Rainbow, that "acoustic collage," as a polyphonic text, a rich sensory world, full of sound, teeming with life.

--Mainz

Notes


5 Mendelson 164.


8 Compare also Charles Clerc's remark: "Many of its passages are so extraordinary that they ought to be read aloud." Charles Clerc, introduction, Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 12.

9 For this information I am grateful to Thomas Hirschmann, Wiesbaden, who is currently finishing a doctoral thesis on Charlie Parker.


11 Compare Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan UP, 1959).
A HIGH SCHOOL RECORD
FOR DISTURBING THE PEACE

Michael Hartnett

Pynchon finished writing V. when he was twenty-five; he had begun, in effect, preparing to write V. when he was fifteen. In addition to some recognizable characterization, the premise that twentieth century life is so controlled and lifeless that it turns destructive is evident in Pynchon's serial story "The Voice of the Hamster," published in his high school newspaper, Purple and Gold.

Pynchon's characters often find placid normality unappealing. His modern technological man seeks an escape from suffocating routine, an escape which indulges the primitive urge to ignore history and abandon consciousness. Liberated from control, he senses the possibility of altering his environment. Even in high school, Pynchon created characters who believe that a wild outbreak is all that one needs to make the past distant and the future irrelevant. In the first "Voice of the Hamster" column (November 13, 1952), narrator Boscoe Stein starts off his tale to Sam by reminding him that they had met at a party; that party initiates a string of chaotic events during which Pynchon's characters desperately look for a release from everyday life.

The "slightly odd" Mr. Faggiaducci, for example, "always tells be-bop jokes" in class:

There's nothing actually wrong with him, it's just that he used to be a bop drummer, and now he wishes he were back with the boys at Birdland and Eddie Condon's. He talks to himself a lot and I've heard rumors he takes heroin. A real "gone guy." (P&G 13 Nov.)

The jazz musician McClintic Sphere in V. has the bumper sticker motto "keep cool but care." The former jazz musician Faggiaducci appears to face a similar dilemma, trying to find a refuge or a formula where none seems available or applicable.

Characters looking to escape proliferate. Coach Willis "drinks a lot" and "smokes like a fiend, too." Boscoe's narrative conveys what such troubled characters experience and suggests what to expect from them. "[A]nd I have a lot of trig homework to do. Not that it has to be done for tomorrow, as chances are Mr. Faggiaducci won't be there; he's out on another binge." The desire for release or escape through musical binges, alcohol or drugs is not peculiar to the adults. "And remember me to Bear-belly Mac Pherson and the rest of the mob. Your drunken amigo, Boscoe Stein" (P&G 13 Nov.).
Such desires to break loose develop further in the next installment of "The Voice of the Hamster," which prefigures the opening of V., in that both the story and V.'s opening scene present a primal release that eventually succumbs to the power of authority. Both episodes involve holiday parties—New Year's Eve in the story, Christmas Eve in V.; both are disrupted by social insurrections that afford a kind of release; and both conclude with the law smashing down upon the characters.

Though Pynchon's party fiction in high school is not nearly as salacious as his later work, it has a kindred spirit, juggling overstated and understated in a breakneck reporting style. Boscoe Stein tells Sam in a letter that he is in the "midst of recovering from a party" he attended on New Year's Eve: "It was what can only be called a riot, and that's about what it ended up as!" Pynchon makes a point of detailing the progression from controlled serenity to increasingly wild spontaneity, romping release, liberation.

Everything was quiet until Crazy Harrigan, with some mob from Queens, started a conga line sometime around 1:30 in the morning, and that was about all it took to start an argument. Marge objected to the noise, and Sid agreed with her. Sid got pretty mad and started shoving Crazy around; Crazy threw a punch at Sid, Sid threw one back, Crazy hit Sid over the head with the punch bowl, and pandemonium broke loose—before we knew it we had a full scale free-for-all on our hands. Marge was crying, Sid was sitting on the floor clutching his head and swearing a blue streak, and their St. Bernard, O'Malley by name, was gaily romping through the whole mess and wrecking chairs, lamps—anything that happened to be in the way. The men from Queens, evidently suffering from delusions that they were musketeers or some thing, were happily duelling with the curtain rods, with Mr. Scully's imported Oriental drapes as cloaks. Crazy Harrigan was dashing around with a chair like a lion tamer, screaming some nonsense about how he was a jolly good fellow and if anyone denied it Crazy would bash his head in. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)²

The eruption by Crazy Harrigan and some mob from Queens is a performance not unlike that of the crew of the aptly named Impulsive in V.

"Boys," Mrs. Buffo announced, "it's Christmas Eve." She produced the boatswain's pipe and began to play. The first notes quavered out fervent and flutelike over widened eyes and gaping mouths. Everyone in the Sailor's Grave listened awestruck, realizing gradually that she was playing It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, within the limited range of the boatswain's pipe. From way in the back, a young
reserve who had once done night club acts around Philly began to sing softly along. Ploy's eyes shone. "It is the voice of an angel," he said.

They had reached the part that goes "Peace on the earth, good will to men, From Heav'n's all-gracious king," when Pig, a militant atheist, decided he could stand it no longer. "That," he announced in a loud voice, "sounds like Chow Down." Mrs. Buffo and the reserve fell silent. A second passed before anybody got the message.

"Suck Hour!" screamed Ploy.

Which kind of broke the spell. The quick-thinking inmates of the Impulsive somehow coalesced in the sudden milling around of jolly jack tars, hoisted Ploy bodily and rushed with the little fellow toward the nearest nipple, in the van of the attack. (15)

So much for the nurturing warmth of the Christian nativity scene. The characters feel no such warmth, but rather a coldness under an uneasy peace.

In his high school writings, Pynchon depicts an era in which those with a sense of individualism look for release or sanctuary. In the 1955-56 of V., a fictional time three years after the actual time of the high school writings, characters trapped in this same era seek liberation by means that can be both extreme and pathetic. But even in high school Pynchon understood that the peace cannot be disturbed without precipitating trouble.

About that time the men in blue arrived, and we started to calm down a bit--all, that is, except Moe Klork, who climbed up on a chair and started yelling about how that was capitalistic oppression and bourgeois tyranny, etc. Finally he got acquainted with the business end of a nightstick the hard way, and that sort of put an end to the party. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

From his high school writings on, Pynchon shows how disturbing the peace during an age steeped in control leads to pain, isolation, even paranoia and death. The opening section of V. also presents a clamping down by the authorities.

Outside came sirens, whistles, running feet. "Oh, oh," said Pig. He hopped down from the shelf, made his way around the end of the bar to Profane and Paola. "Hey, ace," he said, cool and slitting his eyes as if the wind blew into them. "The sheriff is coming."

"Back way," said Profane.
"Bring the broad," said Pig. The three of them ran broken-field through a roomful of teeming bodies. On the way they picked up
Dewey Cland. By the time the Shore Patrol had crashed into the Sailor's Grave, night sticks flailing, the four found themselves running down an alley parallel to East Main. "Where we going," Profane said. "The way we're heading," said Pig. "Move your ass." (17)

Though such a release may temporarily seem liberating, both "The Voice of the Hamster" and *V.* show release ending in futility.

The actions of the "Boys" in Pynchon's *Purple and Gold* pieces are more than just high school pranks; they are psychological experiments in persecution—the "Boys" are trying to see how much Faggaducci can take before he flips his lid" (P&G 22 Jan. 2). One key difference between Pynchon's high school stories and his later works is that his earlier protagonists are the masters of their environment, inducing paranoia in their alleged superiors through a calculated series of tricks, whereas the later protagonists are victims of conspiracies real or imagined. While hope progressively drains out of Pynchon's narratives from novel to novel, his high school writings exude an optimism rarely found in his professional fiction. In three of the four segments of "The Voice of the Hamster," the "Boys" triumph by undermining authority figures, who are sent to psychiatrists, put in mental institutions, and stuffed into dumbwaiters. Meanwhile, the "Boys" take control of the classroom, leading to their passing the trigonometry Regents with flying colors. But in Pynchon's novels, the environment prohibits the protagonists from having such power and success. Though not as dark as *Gravity's Rainbow, V.* begins bleakly enough: "Underfoot, now and again, came vibration in the sidewalk from an SP streetlights away, beating out a Hey Rube with his night stick; overhead, turning everybody's face green and ugly, shone mercury-vapor lamps, receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it's dark and there are no more bars" (10). And in *V.* bars seem to be one of the few alternatives to—or sanctuaries from—the "inanimate."

In his high school works too, Pynchon seems to be groping toward some alternative to the ultra-conservative environment in which he grew up. That environment was characterized as much by the weekly recurrence of air raid drills as by President Eisenhower's visit in 1953 to Pynchon's neighborhood, Oyster Bay on Long Island, to celebrate that village's three-hundredth anniversary. Steeped in a traditional conservatism, Oyster Bay was typical of the early 1950's. But an editorial in the same issue of *Purple and Gold* that contains Pynchon's party blowout story indicates what was simmering beneath this layer of fearfu

peace. Although the editorial calls for "faith in the principles of God" and democracy to combat the "godless doctrine of communism," its writer discards this shrill tone to make a personal response of vulnerability and disillusionment.

We hear much talk by educators and sociologists on the surprising, almost alarming maturity of our
generation. They have called us cynical and apathetic and bitter, and many learned treatises have been written concerning the teen-ager, his psychology, his habits, his morals.

These men are absolutely right; for to adapt to the frightening technological and sociological changes in this world into which we have been born, to try to live with the horror and rottenness that is screamed at us every day by newspaper headlines, to try to retain some semblance of sanity in a world which shows increasing signs of madness, all these require us to be hard and cynical. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

The tension in that writer's tone is what is released in Pynchon's riotous "sophomoric" prose. Aside from serving as places where people can let loose and enjoy themselves, Pynchon's parties bring chaos into controlled environments and bring hope, albeit temporary and illusory, of finding a liberating alternative.

One of Pynchon's greatest skills is charting the results and repercussions of what remains after the party's over. The final party in the movie theater on the final page of Gravity's Rainbow marks the end of following the bouncing ball. Pynchon's high school writing strikes the initial note and rolls the first reel. After disturbing the peace, "Sid had to have two stitches taken, and there were a lot of split lips and bloody noses, and Marge was almost in hysterics. Happy New Year!" (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

--Holtsville, New York

Notes

1 The parties Pynchon presents in his fiction contrast markedly with the tamer type of senior parties reported in Purple and Gold. One of the most exciting events of a trip to Washington was when "Ray Knight was scared to death with a barrage of paper which came flying into his room" (Senior News).

2 Details of character, behavior, and situation may suggest other parties in V. and in, for example, "Entropy" as well.

3 By the time of V.'s New Year's Eve party, an SP is already incessantly battering a fire controlman, who got out of control, in the stomach with a nightstick until a "final clobber" sends him down (22).

Works Cited


THE LIGHT BULB FAKE*
Helke Schwan
Translated by Erich Ritter

"Grace comes from God; everything else one can learn."
---Nijinsky

Reading Pynchon, I learned about "The Story of Byron the Bulb," which originally was to be "manufactured by Fungsrall in Budapest," but then, "at the last minute," was reassigned to Osram in Berlin." This light bulb, as a matter of fact, was an "immortal" one that was persecuted by an organization named Phoebus and was to be destroyed. Concealed behind Phoebus was an "international light-bulb cartel, headquartered in Switzerland. Run pretty much by International GE, Osram, and Associated Electrical Industries of Britain, which are in turn owned 100%, 28% and 46%, respectively, by the General Electric Company in America. Phoebus fixes the prices and determines the operational lives of all the bulbs in the world" (649). I read this story about the chase of the immortal light bulb with suspense, yet as a fairly unimportant aspect of Pynchon's entire novel, and I soon forgot it.

Some time later I happened to come across a copy of Die Zeit in which Ulrich Greiner conducted an interview with Hans Magnus Enzensberger. I was reading pretty much without concentrating on anything in particular. However, a completely ridiculous sentence remained stuck in my head, precisely because it was so ridiculous: "Enzensberger got up to turn the light on. One of the table lamps beside the sofa made a clicking noise and remained dark. Enzensberger disappeared for a moment into the hall, came back with a new light bulb, and screwed it in. Then he sat back down on the sofa again, etc., etc." Perhaps this sentence in this ridiculous interview would not have gotten stuck in my memory, but a little later I read in the Transatlantik an "Interview mit einem Münnerficker" in which exactly the same sentence I just quoted from Die Zeit occurred; this time, however, the author was a "Jimmy Cooko." Banal, isn't it? But in the February edition of the New York Review of Books—I got hold of the issue somewhat later—there was an article by Sven Birkerts about the book Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale, an Italian poet, who had died in September 1991. The article began with the sentence, "Literary traffic

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between Italy and America has always been fitful," in order to render its opinion two paragraphs further down about the "fact" that Eugenio Montale had shocked his friends and guests on certain occasions by crushing burned-out light bulbs with his teeth. Their shards he then spit out. This not being enough, the article, at another place, dropped a remark about the "light bulb": "Of Campaña, for example, whose excessive Rimbaudian style was far from Montale's own ideal of compression and clarity, he wrote: 'Dino Campaña, who, as Cecchi has said, "passed like a comet," has written one of the greatest Italian poems about incandescent bulbs!'" The author of the review—Sven Birkerts—quoted this passage as an example of Montale's "objectivity" (or what have you). For me, however, it was simply proof that, during my recent reading excursions, the light-bulb-metaphor popped up strangely often. Yet this went on.

In Stern magazine I then read about a "mysterious fire" in a corset factory near Fürth, "mysterious," according to the Stern author, because an insurance swindle was supposed to have been covered up. For me, however, the whole thing was mysterious because the fire that destroyed the company's whole warehouse had caused all the light bulbs and neon tubes to burst. Then—I had gone for a few days to Berlin—in the editors' office at the taz, one of the editors for the culture section gave me an article to read about a strange "alternative Etablissement." The article was not signed. In the midst of it I caught, once again, the bulb sentence I had first caught in the interview with Enzensberger; only this time it was, instead of the poet, a woman without a name who went to the hallway to fetch a bulb etc. And then, as temporary end of this light-bulb-assassination-series, on my paranoid intuition I saw a film by Pakula on TV, Witness to a Conspiracy. In a rather unimportant scene, the star—Warren Beatty—screwed a light bulb into the socket of a floor lamp which stood beside his chair. I would have let it go at that and wouldn't have bothered any more, but then somebody showed me a video about the Rolling Stones, The First Twenty Years. In it, they showed a short interview with Bill Wyman—the last of the Stones, who still lives on the Côte d'Azur—and he had nothing else to say but "I change my light bulbs myself!"

That was enough. What the hell... I drove to the taz editorial offices in the Wattstrasse, went to the office of the editors for culture, sat down at an empty desk and started to phone around—one calls it "research" there. First of all, I listed all my light-bulb-experiences in a neat column. First stop: "Thomas Pynchon"—the Rowohlt publishing house. I asked (on the phone) for the editors' office of the series "neues buch" that Rowohlt publishes. Delf Schmidt, who was on the line, connected me with his boss, Jürgen Manthey, not, however, without mentioning beforehand that "Pynchon" is a "Jahrhundertwerk." This, however, did me no good at all as far as my light-bulb-request was concerned. Manthey, too, could
not help me any further, yet he connected me finally with Ledig-Roewholt himself. This fellow immediately said, "Pynchon—you have come to the right place. This is my man. I discovered him!" Unfortunately, all contacts with the author had to be made via Viking Press, but actually there was no contact at all with the author; even Viking Press itself would not know where he was hiding; even high-paying and reputable literary awards he would reject, and taken strictly, there was no human being around who knew him. All searches would somehow "end in the sand." On top of all this, it happened that a fire destroyed all the records in the college where he once studied; and the documents in the US Navy, where he once served, cannot be found anymore. "Mysterious": this was the word Ledig-Roewholt used. For me, that was even more "suspicious."

Now back to the Enzensberger interview by Ulrich Greiner. He could not be reached anymore in the editors' office of Die Zeit. His secretary, however, gave me his home number. I was lucky. As he remarked somewhat hastily, he was just leaving to attend a boar hunt to which he had been invited, and thus stood like a soldier at attention, rifle at the ready, so to speak. ... The latter I only thought of; I didn't say it. I asked him about the Enzensberger interview. Actually I was going to ask him about the light-bulb-passage and what he had in mind with it; maybe I could get some more information—not the "wattage" of course. But he was a little quicker than I, even a little more rushed, already somewhat grumpy. This, he said, was simply his style; to catch something atmospheric, mainly to quote from writings of the interviewee, not to ask questions and suggest answers, he said, but "to record." I did not even get to where I could clarify the misunderstanding when he had already taken his gun, cocked and aimed. The latter, of course, I only pictured. Already somewhat discouraged, I called the next address, the Transatlantik. Someone connected me immediately with the new publisher, Marianne Schmidt. She was more accessible. Yes, sure, they had already dealt with the author more than once, actually only with the office in which he worked. Office? I did not quite understand. "Just a moment, please, I will try to find the correspondence for you. Here it is: 'Standard Text, Inc., German Branch.'" And then followed the exact address. I copied it, thanked the publisher, and put the receiver down. In order not to skyrocket the fax phone bill, I did not call the New York Review of Books. The Stern article was signed by Werner Metzger. They told me in the editors' office in Hamburg that he was a correspondent in Ulm; they also gave me his address and phone number. I called there. A rather sleepy voice answered, "Media Matrix." I asked for a Mister Metzger. "Agh, the article about the corset factory is actually not by me," he said. "I only received a phone call; from whom it came I actually cannot tell anymore. Is there anything wrong with it?" I calmed him down and thanked him for the information. But he was by no means calmed down. I interrupted the phone call and put the receiver down. I myself was not calmed down either.
In the late afternoon, I looked for the address of Standard Text. Its office was in Frankfurt-Bockenheim. When I arrived there, it proved to be located in the former office of a dentist, it seemed; there was a white dentist's chair at the end of the hallway which was painted black. About five people worked in different rooms; one could hear the hammering of typewriters. I was asked what I wanted and requested to talk to a Jimmy Cooke, saying I wanted to get more information about an article that was signed by him. A woman joined in and said that they normally did research about other people; it had not happened before that anybody ever did research about them themselves. There was, by the way, no writer by this name working for them; this was a pseudonym they would use once in a while, who were "they," I asked back—stupidly enough, I admit. "They" are a text agency, branch of a firm in Berlin. She gave me the address, and I left.

When I called the taz the next morning, the cultural editor told me he had found out whence had come the article about the strange "alternative Etablissement" in which the light bulb quotation had occurred: "From Standard Text, Inc.—office Berlin." He had already been there, a first class address; Uhlandstrasse/corner Kurfürstendamm 1. They, however, did not tell him anything at all; rather, they threw him out politely; he should go, if he had questions, to the office in Amsterdam. They gave him the address, though. The editor gave it to me. And then he told me that, while he was sitting in a waiting room for a while in the Berlin office, he had leafed through an issue of the magazine Aktuell, in which he happened to come across a marked article that dealt with, if not the end, then the ongoing decline of the Parisian striptease establishments. Nothing particularly exciting, except that there was a passage saying that the artists must constantly have new ideas in order to attract a minimum of attention and interested customers. There was, for instance, at Chez Tout, a Jewish stripper named Sarah on stage, who would, as the crowning climax of her performance, get a light bulb to glow in her vagina. Could this be of any help, the editor wanted to know, in our research? The article, by the way, was signed by a (male or female) K. Jaubenstern. If I drove to Amsterdam, I asked, how could I recover my expenses? I should go there first, answered the editor; about the expenses we could talk later. And that was what I did then—the next day. I stayed several weeks in Amsterdam.

The ominous Standard Text agency could indeed be reached at the address I had, in the Herrengärtchen, right next to the Institut voor Sociale Geschiedenis. But there they were even more suspicious than in the branch offices in Berlin and Frankfurt. This time, however, I remained tough. And finally I was lucky, or they just felt pity for me: the manager of the European Branch, Ruth Halberstan--she looked like a friendly copy of Margaret Thatcher—received me for a half-hour talk out of which grew an entire series of talks during which she told me
just about everything about her company as far as it was necessary for the "enlightening" of the light-bulb-events.

Ruth Halberstam was only one of three managers; the other two—Jacky Coyben and Dorothy Tither—worked in the United States. The Standard Text agency was the cover for a "society"—the Arensberg Foundation. Since I had not heard of the name Arensberg, Ruth Halberstam read, during one morning session, a sequence from an interview with Marcel Duchamp in which he had spoken about Arensberg.

Duchamp had been a close friend of Arensberg, who had bought several objects from him; he had also provided him with a studio. Duchamp said about him:

He was a nice guy, actually a poet. A graduate of Harvard who had enough money to live and who wrote imagistic poems. There was at that time an English literary school in New York, the Imagists, to which he belonged together with a whole bunch of other American poets, all of whom I later got to know.

But he was a difficult person, the wretch. He was somewhat older than I, not much, but since his rapid and widespread acknowledgement as a poet failed to materialize, he soon became tired of making poetry and stopped writing as early as about 1913-1915. He turned, then, toward a crazy hobby, cryptography, by means of which he attempted to decipher the secrets and enigmas of Dante in his Divine Comedy and of Shakespeare in his plays. Well, you know this anyway: who was Shakespeare, and who was he not, etc., etc., etc. . . . ? With this kind of stuff, Arensberg busied himself for the rest of his life. He also published a book about Dante, at his own expense, of course, because no publisher cared about it. And, finally, he founded a company, the Francis Bacon Foundation, or something like that, with whose help he tried to prove that Bacon was the author of the Shakespearean plays. His system consisted of deciphering in at least every third line of the texts allusions to all sorts of things. The whole thing was a game for him, like a chess game of sorts, and he had a lot of fun with it. He had three secretaries working for him, and he bequeathed them so much money that they were able to buy a little house in California and continue his Shakespeare research. There you have the whole man.

I must admit I found all this rather amusing, however, it did not get me very much further. Ruth Halberstam explained to me: Arensberg bequeathed them more money than was actually necessary to continue his strange Shakespeare research, and they soon got tired of this work and started to look around for other projects. They were still young and ready for new things, back
then in the thirties and forties. They remained residents of California, but stayed, most of the time, in New York. Here, they got to know a group of young poets who were inspired by Rimbaud, Lautreamont, and the Surrealists. Most of them, however, had to join the service when the US entered the war, and they disappeared in the direction of Europe. Two of them even managed to get to their Mecca—Paris—which was declared a Forbidden Zone after all the Allies landed in Normandy. With full jerry cans and several cartons of Lucky Strikes, they deserted the 3rd Army and went underground in Paris, in the bookstore "Shakespeare & Company." Later on they were captured as deserters and were sentenced by a military court to several years in prison, where one of them died under mysterious circumstances; the other one came to New York after he was released, and soon the group met regularly again with their three supporters: Ruth Halberstam, Jacky Coyben, and Dorothy Twither. Together, they began to compile and publish a volume of poetry. When it was finished, Jacky Coyben proposed to publish it under the name of Jack Arnold, in memory of the private who had died in prison.

The poetry was mostly anti-war lyrics, and, contrary to all expectations, it became a big success. During the readings which Jack Arnold then was supposed to hold in bookstores and cafés, each single member of the group in turn read his or her own poems, and nobody ever noticed the non-existence of the poet Jack Arnold. All this encouraged the group to attempt some more coups with Jack Arnold. It was exciting to promote an author of whom oneself was a part. And then, of course, the academic critics and the reviewers were constantly trying to interpret the Arnold story by means of the data from either pre-adolescence, high school, or the military. Nevertheless, the group—poet disintegrated pretty soon, and each one now tried to make his or her own name on his own. Only one of the group became known as a poet: Ken Patchen, who, in the forties, published the novel Sleepers Awake, which had previously been written collectively as a pacifist pamphlet, under his own name. The three women continued their work—actually they now really began—began to write. And again, they signed texts with fake signatures, simply for the game's sake, and maybe also "because we were less out to get our names printed in bold letters than were the men," as Ruth Halberstam added. Besides that, they wanted their texts to be read instead of being grouped around or placed under the name of an author. During the forties and fifties they were thrilled and inspired by Beatnik poets. Then Ruth Halberstam moved to London. There she organized a so-called "Fait-Divers" department of their common project; e.g., she furnished certain ready-made aspects—mostly American ones—for any kind of books and articles by English writers who here and there lacked precision as to details and imagination. The authors paid for that. As time went on, an entire business emerged out of this for Ruth Halberstam and was similarly taken up in the United States by Jacky Coyben and Dorothy Twither. Afterwards Ruth Halberstam moved to Amsterdam; she had already
had to employ people there—mostly young writers, who, together with her, took care of the ever-increasing flood of jobs. Soon, they furnished, if ordered, theses for diplomas, for masters' and doctoral degrees, as well as little speeches and texts for authors already somewhat known who, for whatever reasons, had no time or were not able to do this—young writers who had been overvalued for a first, overrated publication and who had the whole world watching them from behind and looking over their shoulders, so to speak, and who therefore became unable to produce a single line; but also older, already more established writers who were shaken by their fame and were no longer able to do anything but mumble.

"I still remember the first text of this kind. We had put an awful lot of effort into it in order to capture the right tone, style or sentence and narrative structure of the person who finally had to sign that thing. But we had been by far too careful. Nobody ever came up with the slightest doubt; often writers thought they themselves had produced it." Ruth Halberstam laughed. At the beginning of the seventies there were similar groups in Germany and France which all worked under the company name Standard Text, in Düsseldorf even a group of painters—Standard Oil Painting—which, however, did not survive very long. "In order to reach an ever-increasing mobility, we had to furnish all sorts of texts, to channel them into all sorts of levels. In the United States, for instance, we produced some rather demanding texts under the name Pynchon, but also we produced commercial slogans, news, and pacifistic and Beatnik-like poems, some of which were even incorporated in anthologies. Furthermore, we wrote scripts for commercial spots, film scripts based on novels, novels based on films, eulogies, interviews—invented ones and real ones—etc., etc. In Germany we even worked for a while as 'informers': somebody, for instance, called up the FRG customs officers at the border with the GDR and asked how border traffic was being managed by GDR officials—reluctantly or otherwise, how long the car lines were—and then we called radio stations and news agencies and gave them the information. Each time they put that on air or on TV on the 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 o'clock news, we earned 30 Marks, thus 150 Marks per day. And after a while one did not even have to call the customs officials any more; rather one could 'hallucinate' the truth right off, or however you might put it.

"But not only that kind of stuff. All news is being delivered by informers, even the weather forecast and the traffic. And something like this is slowly crossing the borderlines into concrete poetry." I would have liked Ruth Halberstam to tell me which well-known German and French writers were among her clientele, but she did not want to tell me any names. To lift the cover from Pynchon, on the other hand, would not pose any big problems, since even reviewers and critics in the United States have become convinced meanwhile of the collective authorship of his books. "Any indiscretion in this respect would harm our business (how many people do you think
would have to give back their academic degrees?) as well as the idea itself." But then, I wanted to know, wouldn't what she had already told me be too much? "First of all, we would have to check this here before it got published, and second, whatever I have told you so far is by the same token also publicity for us. Because of you, I made very expensive phone calls, but since in the end only Jacky Coyben opposed it . . ."

I was moved, yet I had some more questions to ask. Has it ever happened, I wanted to know, that one of your clientele was caught? "Yes, sure," Ruth Halberstam smiled and pushed her butterfly glasses up into her hair. "But most of the time, such things happened because of some sort of sloppiness. Many of our collaborators are free-lance writers, and sometimes we have to rely on somebody who just is not able to handle the job. The mistake, of course, is ours; of our offices which had not checked carefully enough before handing out the thing. There is, for example, the book The Fate of the Earth, which had been put together in the United States by a free-lance writer, under the name and by order of Jonathan Schell, and which had become a great success. Too great a success, for an Australian theologian--Grover Foley I think was his name--discovered in it several ideas, even entire passages which were copied from a book by the German philosopher Günther Anders. Anders' agent, therefore, sued our client Schell, who, then, on his part, came back to us for compensation, and not too small a compensation, for that matter. The trial ended with a compromise, but Schell's reputation as author seemed to have suffered somewhat from this. The next job for him, therefore, will be one that is going to be most carefully carried out--this much I can promise. A similar case was that of an academic work in the field of history which was produced in a German office for one of the princes of Hohenzollern and in which also a lot of plagiarism had been done, which caused the prince quite a bit of trouble. Another case was the job we did for Harald Szeemann, some kind of exhibition catalog for a Monte-Vérita/Ascona exhibition. We did a sloppy job there too. Something like this is, of course, awful. Just botch! And I would not mention this, or only very reluctantly; however, I have to add that these are mere exceptions of which we do not have many. On the other hand, we have already received more than 500 literary awards worldwide, among which there are four Pulitzer awards and six Goncourts, which, of course, we do not possess. They dwell in the hands of the glass cases of our clients, who, however, paid us a certain percentage of the award money they received. The same is true for the ancillary rights and similar things; for instance, if the work is going to be translated and is being published in another country. In this respect an idea of Dorothy Twither's proved to be very useful, and we practice it these days more and more often. Suppose we are to furnish a publication for a geneticist about some aspect of Drosophila research or, for that matter, do a research job about the assassination attempt on the Pope and its background (the result, however, should be that the curia stands behind all this), and both are supposed to be
published in German-speaking countries. For a little more money, we also supply, while we work on them, English translations which we will place in advance in the Journal for Genetic Studies or wherever, and in Playboy or the New Yorker, respectively. There are, of course, always cases where we are turned down, but these are only postponements for us. And later on, we offer these articles in German to the respective media as translations from English. This, then, has an effect on our reputation which almost always pays off."

Yet I wanted her to get to the center of my problem. But I had to be patient, for Ruth Halberstam had scheduled a conference with her staff which I was not allowed to attend. Meanwhile, I went to an Indonesian restaurant for lunch. Later on—my interview partner had ordered coffee sent to the visitors' room—I went right back to the core of my problem: what was all that with the light bulb story? I had already presented her with my light bulb list at the beginning of our talks. The only thing she said about it was that the list was by far not complete, but she did nevertheless pat my hand in acknowledgement. I blushed. Then she said, "Actually, the entire thing is rather banal, as you might have recognized in the meantime. One of our staff in London, Jack Moore of the Video Heads, who had worked for a long time in the office in Amsterdam, experimented for a while, together with Dorothy Twither, with several new media. Our problem is, where are we going to invest our profits—as deficit-write-off? With respect to this, the two of them wanted to come up with a Standard Film, together with some other people, Ed Sanders, for instance. But that thing never really got off the ground. Nevertheless, we had some nice little projects among them.

"Now you know the idea which stands behind our Standard project. This idea, however, never caught on as to our film thing. We only got some more or less decent stuff out of it, but this seemed not to be good enough for them. Well, then. Ed Sanders at least could realize a little bohemian idea: in each film project produced by Standard Film, some actor had to say at a random moment something in connection with the word 'light bulb.' And if not say, at least he or she had to screw a light bulb into or out of a socket. Ed had noticed that such a banal gesture had never occurred in a film; another banal act—to poop, for instance—would have been blown up into a trade mark. Imagine, there suddenly pop up films here and there in which people shit. That would have been too obvious. This gesture with the light bulb, this was a tiny hint that Standard was the originator. By now it has become an insider joke, which means that once in a while somebody in one of our offices smuggles a light bulb into our texts, and his or her colleagues giggle when they catch a light bulb during their daily reading. That's all there is to it. I have to admit, however, that once in a while this has taken a horrible form, and often enough we have had to throw these light bulbs out of our finished texts."
"There are, however, a lot of other banal things or gestures left," I dared to intervene. "Sure," Ruth Halberstam grumbled. "If you really want to know, then I have to look for a book next-door; it's in there." She went to her office and came back after a little while with a book by Ed Sanders. While she was looking for a certain passage, she told me briefly what this was about: "We circulated at that time in poets' circles in the East Village, as Ed Sanders did, and years later he wrote an article about the scene, about the beginning and the high times of the New York Beatniks, rather ironically and intending to demystify the whole thing, but, of course, also because he needed money. Well. One event of that period he obviously rather liked, never mind whether it was true or not. But this thing he then elaborated in an article. I'll try to summarize it briefly. There they sat, the geniuses of poetry, already long-haired at that time and also besuited, in their usual café, the Rienzi, and suddenly a girl walked up to one of them who was sitting at a table. With trembling hands she fiddled a pile of papers out of her purse and stuck it under his nose, asking him whether he would mind reading it. At that time, women were even less tolerated on the battle front than these days. And this comic revolutionary poet, Levine by name, reacted accordingly. He skimmed over the stuff with a professional attitude and then pulled out his long fountain pen with eyes that did not look promising. This scene was watched by another poet from the next table, a guy named Barrett (the name was also invented by Ed Sanders!), and this guy also had a fountain pen in his hand with which he jotted down notes. There was a real fountain pen culture going around among these poets. Typically, the poetess did not have any name—probably also a former Standard contributor." Ruth Halberstam laughed grumpily. "But let me read you a passage from the Sanders article; then you'll have it precisely." She began:

"I hope you don't mind," was about all Levine said, and hastily he cut several things, crossed out phrases and sentences and even—horror of all poet-horrors—rewrote entire lines. In short, he created a terrible chaos. She observed him quietly and with a pale face. "Do you see this line," he asked and turned the page a little so she could read it better. "I have understood nothing," he quoted. "You see, instead of nothing I usually write nil or zero, you see? Because nothing is so, ah, so common, but nil is . . . more like, simply more like a poet would express himself!" She seemed not to be so sure about that. And when one saw how carelessly Levine crumbled the pages in his hand, then one knew for certain that he did not consider her a poetess at all. "I understood but nil," he read and seemed to be content and scribbled a new version on the paper. At the same moment Levine read the sentence aloud, another one of these guys with a worn red felt hat bent over from behind him towards the face of his female companion,
stuck an ordinary light bulb under her nose and cried, "Prove to me that this light bulb exists. Prove it!"
Barrett, completely beside himself, fumbled for his notebook and jotted down this unusual pair of pearls: I understood but nil. Prove to me that this light bulb exists. (Rienzi, July 1, 1959)

"You can check this in the manuscript collection of Brown University." Ruth Halberstam closed the book. Thus, this was the light bulb. "Isn't it a nice story?" she asked me. I was impressed, I must admit, and also somewhat satisfied. "Ed Sanders, by the way, is presently brooding over a new bohemian idea: Standard Pure. But don't press me for what this is going to be all about. I only recently heard of it from Dorothy." Now I had an idea: perhaps this is going to introduce a change in the Standard production, I suggested, which would mean that more and more clients will insist on signing the texts with S.P.—Standard Pure—because it will bear the seal of quality from the beginning. Like during the Renaissance in shops of certain craftsmen or later in the writing office of Dumas Père ..." Ruth Halberstam interrupted: "This would be the 'K.D.' for Standard Text, Inc. ... This is stupid—excuse me, but something like that is certainly not on Ed Sanders' mind. He already put that aside during his Beatnik-era. ... Nevertheless, you almost touched upon a point, upon a development in our project, in our offices, which we haven't been able to get an overview of yet, but which more or less points in exactly the opposite direction from the one you just pointed to. During recent years we have had more and more top-notch contributors who have offered us their collaboration. I mean really established names, sometimes academic chairholders who have worked in our offices on the side, and this not only for financial reasons. And by no means do they pick, as far as their contribution is concerned, the raisins off the cake, so to speak. No, they too work within the entire range of what is there, like everyone else in their respective offices—at least as far as they are able to, or think they are able to. What tickles them about such a form of production is the anonymity that goes with it. By far the biggest share of our order we order ourselves, and it should stay like this. What this means is that we think up some kind of text, which we then place somewhere, perhaps under a real, established name, who is informed about this ahead of time. Then we draw up a contract, and the respective person gets the money, and we bank a certain percentage. Our contact with media and our overview, those probably are what attract these top-notch writers to us. And then too, which is good, there is this idea that challenges these writers: 'I want to circulate a text and see what it does, as text, without my name that has already been introduced anyway.'"

"What names, for instance, are these?" I insisted, wanting to know which well-known writers were among Standard Text's contributors. "This does not necessarily have to remain a
secret," replied Ruth Halberstam indifferently. "But I do not know them all by any means, and then there are, of course, many staff members who, besides their work in the office, contribute for themselves, during their hours off, so to speak. Then it happens now and again that somebody publishes scientific studies under his or her own name, about a dispute over nuclear energy, if you will, about astrophysics, or about the deciphering of Babylonian cuneiform, thus taking sides, so to speak; and then, in the Standard office he or she writes respective responses to his or her scientific counterpart as ordered articles. And for this job, s/he, I think, is probably the best equipped. However this may be, it happens at least as often that somebody gets the job of reviewing his or her own book, and don't you believe that they are not willing to write a biting review, that they are squeamish with themselves. Rather the opposite is the case. But names, yes I can give you names, of course: in the Paris office, for instance, are a few people from Critique, among others Michel Foucault and Michel Serres, both for different reasons. The latter knows an awful lot of philosophy professors who are stuck with a certain kind of anxiety that, in Paris, is called 'anxiety of white paper.' And because he does not want to publish all their ideas under his own name, he, once in a while--anonymously--writes for us.

Barthes often wrote for us. But this everyday-mythologist was unfortunately run over by a vegetable truck. It was important for him to work for Standard Text, Inc. because of his semiology, or his arnthology, to be more precise. Eric Ambler would be another one that could be mentioned. Some time ago Régis Debray worked off and on for us. But he, again, had different reasons, if you will. He got rid of things via our office which he could not have placed somewhere else under his name—probably because he was scared. That, too, happens once in a while; it is mostly Communists and Social Democrats, and it happens often in Germany, but also in Holland. Basically, however, a collaboration with this kind of people is not satisfying; that snuck in somehow, and we will get rid of it again. Very satisfying, however, was our cooperation with Jorge Luis Borges, which took place quite a while ago. That was a deal between him and our office in New York. He has been blind for many years, you know, and when that was not widely known, he had gotten occasional requests from editors and publishing houses, high-paying offers, to write something for them. However, he was not at all in the mood for doing this, was probably also a bit overburdened by it, even though he could have dictated this stuff, since he has everything worth quoting from Western culture in his head. Anyway, he then asked our office in New York, where a young Jewish (female) journalist who was friends with him worked, to write that stuff for him, and they later got full payment from him. In exchange for that, they then wrote some little things for him which were incorporated into his collected works. Isn't that something? But the most amazing thing about it is that a short story by Gombrowicz is among them. He had worked once for our office in
Berlin. Something happened there, however, on the other hand, which is not so amazing. In our Berlin office, we had somebody working—Kurt Bartisch—who published a book under his own name containing all the more or less accomplished plagiarisms which the staff there had compiled during the recent years. That he was vain (greedy) enough to do this, I don't give a shit, but he sabotaged by the same token a very interesting project of the office in Berlin: The Pierre Menard Project. This writer from Nimes who had died meanwhile had worked all his life long on Don Quixote, which would be fairly easy; no, he wanted to write the Quixote. To do so, he did not focus on a mechanical transcribing of the original; he was not after a mere copy. His admirable ambition aimed at bringing forth a few pages which—word for word and line by line—coincided with those of Miguel de Cervantes. And, except for a few little mistakes, he had achieved this. To bring this work of his to an end, as well as to begin other, similar works, was the objective of the Menard Project of the office in Berlin. And this lunatic Bartisch had made something ridiculous like this out of it. Oh, well. Let's forget it."

After this story Ruth Halberstam had the feeling of having told me enough about her firm. She emptied the rest of her coffee, which had gotten cold in the meantime, with a sweeping gesture. Then she accompanied me and my recording machine to the office of accounting and guided me toward a desk that had just become vacant, where I sat down to summarize all our talks and to type them. It took me two days. After I had finished it, I had to give her the finished manuscript for two days—to be checked. Then I could take it and go home, that is, drive back to Germany. I had an arrangement with the cultural editor of the taz to send him the material, which I did. In return, he forwarded a letter from the Berlin office of Standard Text, Inc. to me. In the letter, they asked me whether I would like to work for them—once in a while.
THE CASE FOR ETHICAL RIGHTNESS

Judith Chambers


"Obey, Obey," a critical study which dares to grapple with a critically unpopular though not insignificant idea: the determination of ethical rightness in fiction. At a time when literary critics question the validity of ascribing meaning, Truth, or morality to fiction, when philosophers explore the ability or lack of ability of language to convey meaning, and when science suggests that the notions of Truth and reality are at root far more paradoxical and problematic than they once may have seemed, Brian Stonehill's The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon takes an admirable risk. In examining the combination of "esthetic neatness and ethical rightness" in modern and contemporary self-reflexive novels, Stonehill sets out to prove that self-consciousness, far from being merely self-indulgent and meaningless, "may in fact be one of the most convincing and compelling forms available to our writers for the expression of what is truly important today" (19).

This ten chapter study begins with an examination of the writer's impetus for writing self-consciously, for producing writing which calls attention to itself as artifice. Stonehill next relates the particular elements which identify this writing as self-depicting in his "Repertoire of Reflexivity." Then, using this Repertoire, he offers a historical overview of self-conscious fiction, finding evidence of the elements he has detailed all the way back to Pilgrim's Progress. He follows this overview with separate chapters on the self-conscious style of Joyce, Nabokov, Gaddis, Pynchon and Barth, and concludes with a broad brush analysis of what he terms "practical criticism" devoted to several of those authors and "theoretical criticism" focused on the self-conscious novel in general. The final chapter both summarizes the study and perhaps more importantly suggests a changing focus of more recent self-conscious novels in what Stonehill claims is a return to the mimetic; the "shifting from the limitations back to the imitations" (187).

An intelligent and ambitious work, Stonehill's study evolves from a thesis which is at once provocative and important in its attempt to redeem self-conscious novels, and the novelists who write them, from charges of nihilism. His plan is to show that these writers are in fact not writing strictly self-indulgent, narcissistic works but are instead creating works which offer their readers a sense of possibility within the limitations of our world. Throughout the study, Stonehill
suggests that the works' very self-consciousness harbors the
value that redeems them. John Gardner's now infamous attack
against literature that was not moral indicted "narcissistic"
fiction, insisting on a narrow and prescriptive formula that
demanded fiction be moral and then allowed for only a clearly
mimetic work to fulfill this charge. Opposed to Gardner's
notion that literature must be a "blunt weapon" to teach
morality, Stonehill's view that self-conscious fiction does have
an important ethical dimension embraces the very styles that
critics like Gardner would be loath to deem either valuable or
serious. By contrast with the kind of criticism for which
Gardner pled, most post-structuralist criticism, rejecting any
try to prescribe morality, has emerged as an almost starkly
intellectual exercise that largely eschews humanistic ends. In
this study, however, Stonehill's philosophical thesis promises
to combine the intellectual with the humanistic. Stonehill has
the courage to argue that self-conscious fiction is most
important when it transcends pure esthetic play to address the
concerns of "real men and real women" in the real world, when it
becomes jazz--improvisational play with heart.

Stonehill's seriousness of purpose is evidenced by more
than his thesis. Four of the writers he has chosen as exemplars
of that thesis--Joyce, Nabokov, Gaddis, Pynchon--are
distinguished as the acknowledged difficult masters of this
century, each, except for Gaddis, eliciting a continual
wellspring of critical response. Critics have made no secret of
the delightful drudgery that accompanies untangling such works,
from Ulysses to Gravity's Rainbow, though some have labeled
Gaddis's and Pynchon's novels dense, turgid, and impossible to
read. For those who love these novels, Stonehill's study offers
important insights; for those still skeptical about Gaddis and
Pynchon, Stonehill becomes a valuable advocate for why and how
their novels should be read. Thoughtful and thorough in his
analysis, he demonstrates a sure knowledge of the works he
studies, resurrecting characters, themes, styles, and structures
to reaffirm each author's individual ludic sensibility and to
speculate on evidence of ethical purpose.

Like any ambitious first book, however, Stonehill's study,
though its thesis is provocative, is plagued by a few demons.
While the book's strengths center around its thesis and
Stonehill's willingness to take philosophical and stylistic
risks, its weaknesses revolve in large part about Stonehill's
failure to present a balanced analysis of a balanced thesis and
to offer answers to some important questions which the premise
of his book raises. What is "truly important today"? What is
ethically right? What exactly is the Repertoire? And while
Stonehill does offer at the end a few paragraphs which reassert
that his chosen texts teach us "how to be," he resists
explaining fully how they teach us how to be.

Arguing that, even as the self-conscious novel "exposes its
own artifice, and professes itself to be an invention, it is
still able to fire our imaginations and move our emotions as do events in real life," Stonehill suggests that novels like Lolita which make us feel for the characters are more ethically right than those like Alphabetical Africa which merely assert their own artifice (14). Although the example of Abish's book suffers from being too extreme, in his study of Nabokov, Stonehill does convincingly explore the notion that self-conscious fiction can move us. But the novel's "moving us" by itself does not constitute its ethical rightness. Stonehill's obvious erudition should keep him from using such a notion as the standard for ethical responsibility, especially since it could easily be interpreted as a restatement of the Pathetic Fallacy, the carrying over of a vague emotional touchstone (are we moved by pathos, bathos, sentimentality, fear, joy?) to a realm that demands fine discriminations. To avoid misinterpretation, his idea requires that he both delineate specific emotions the novel "moves" and explain how these emotions are ethically significant.

In his chapter on Joyce, Stonehill argues that Ulysses "commends democracy" and "makes not elitists, but esthetes, of us all" (68). Stonehill believes that this democracy counts as ethical, but he needs to explain this notion more carefully to his readers, who might more readily agree if they came to this chapter armed with a clear definition of ethical rightness. In the chapter on Gaddis, Stonehill recognizes The Recognitions along with J.R as "only faintly, just suggestively self-conscious" (174). But his desire to have The Recognitions fit his thesis keeps him from acknowledging, for example, that Wyatt's death is arguable, not given. At the end of this chapter, Stonehill offers the conclusion that "The Recognitions asserts the value of love, and displays love's rightful context in both life and art" (138). This reading no doubt implies ethical rightness, and yet this reference to love suffers both from the lack of an earlier definition of ethics and from its appearing so late and offhandedly at the end of the chapter.

Another implied answer to the question of what constitutes ethical rightness is couched in Stonehill's description of the "intimate honesty" the writer has with the reader. But how does, if it does, such an honesty make the work itself ethical? Finally, if these novelists do teach us "how to be," how specifically do they teach it, and what philosophy or philosophies of Being do they propound? Although Stonehill raises these questions, he stops short of adequately answering them, once again, mainly because his book lacks a clear, straightforward definition of one of its obviously central concerns--ethical rightness--a phrase whose meaning and application Stonehill needs to clarify every bit as thoroughly as he does aesthetic "neatness" if his study is to be balanced.

In fact, though his thesis bespeaks a symmetry, his analysis belies any real balance. Stonehill's stated purpose is to show how the self-conscious novel (a term that perhaps should
be more openly acknowledged as Robert Alter's, from Partial Magic can be both "aesthetically neat and ethically right" (IX), balancing the ludic with the serious, effect with value, and the anti-mimetic with the mimetic. To this end, he should have kept his own study balanced by avoiding such a predominant concern with what makes a text self-conscious, especially since Stonehill himself acknowledges that this issue has already been explored. Nor need he have proved so thoroughly that the novelists he chose as exemplars of his thesis use a self-conscious style, since he also acknowledges that this too has been done. Rather, his task should have been to provide his readers with clear definitions and equal applications of both terms of his thesis throughout the specific analyses.

Instead, in each of the chapters analyzing the work of specific novelists, Stonehill devotes almost exclusive attention to how the works manifest the self-conscious style he has detailed as the paradoxical aspect of the self-conscious novel— its ability to balance esthetic play and ethical responsibility. But without rigorous reasoning this idea is doomed. One cannot logically say that the ethical power of the self-conscious novel resides in its balance of the esthetic and the ethical, especially without first carefully defining both of its key terms, else the thesis and the reasoning from it fall victim to circular reasoning. However, the paradoxical power that Stonehill alludes to is in fact an important point. By employing the touchstones of contemporary science or philosophy more fully, he could have argued that, by mirroring the balance of randomness and pattern, irrationality and rationality, chance and cause-and-effect, thought and experience, life and death, the novels in question teach us how to live in a world that since Descartes has seen fit to ignore that necessary balance.

In the chapter on Pynchon, Stonehill comes closest to such a theory, playfully beginning by telling us how self-consciousness "can also sharpen the edge of a particular wedge of paradox" (141). But then he often confuses paradox with its poor relation, contradiction, and assumes rather than demonstrates that paradox is ethical. He identifies "the specific esthetic effect which I shall call the Power of Paradox" as "the peculiar suspension of the intellectual and emotional faculties between two equally plausible but mutually exclusive modes of perception or belief. The novel's self-consciousness reinforces its paradoxical effect" (142). Does Stonehill mean that paradox is only esthetically powerful? Apparently not, since several pages later he identifies the texture of Gravity's Rainbow as "ethically paradoxical" (146). But how? Again, a clear definition of ethical rightness would have been invaluable to this pursuit, allowing Stonehill to prove Pynchon's paradoxes more than mere puzzles.

Gravity's Rainbow certainly is paradoxical, and Pynchon's prose does create "Paradox by embracing within individual sentences a diction that is base, obscene, and suggestive of
disorder and decay, and a diction that is lofty, spiritual, and evocative of transcendent harmonies" (149). This observation alone provides Stonehill with the perfect vehicle for an in-depth discussion of Gravity's Rainbow's ethical dimension. But ultimately he demurs, saying that "Pynchon's fiction is not an ethical statement in disguise" and that it "allows itself no such direct moralization." Instead it offers "a sense of possibility: that perhaps there is a choice to be made, but perhaps not" (155). Returning to his implication that a novel's self-consciousness informs its ethics, Stonehill insists that "without its self-consciousness Gravity's Rainbow would be less paradoxical, and not itself. We have also been able to learn from paradox why the novel is preoccupied with paranoia, with entropy, and with its own relation to the reader's life. Not everything is lost to equivocation, then, for by displaying its own art, Gravity's Rainbow obliges us to affirm its value" (156).

Unfortunately, at this point Stonehill's own equivocation muddies the waters and keeps his readers guessing at what he should have made clear. First, when he says Pynchon allows no direct moralization, does he want to imply that perhaps the other writers he studies do? I doubt it. Second, some confusion exists about whether it is the novel's possibility or its self-consciousness that confers value, and if it is the latter, the same problem of circular reasoning infects the observation. Since the earlier direction of his study does suggest that both a novel's ethical dimension and its possibility rest in its "displaying its own art," Stonehill needs to offer the reader a clear unraveling of and thorough support for how self-conscious fiction, with any of its effects, manages this. Then, he can demonstrate this point in Gravity's Rainbow without accusing renegade Pynchon of being even discretely moral.

In his final chapter, Stonehill notes a recent change in self-conscious fiction. He explains that the "trend among self-conscious novels" is "toward a new balance among the elements of self-depiction" where "the characters, accorded more respect, assume more narratorial responsibility, while the implied author is less disruptive and insistent in asserting his own, ultimately responsible presence"—a trend which Stonehill locates in JR, Carpenter's Gothic, Creator, and The World According to Garp" (188-87). (The claim that JR and Carpenter's Gothic illustrate this new balance made me wish Stonehill had examined one of those books in his chapter on Gaddis.) Self-reflexive fiction, then, as Stonehill sees it, "is moving away from a preoccupation with self-consciousness to an accommodation with it," a movement he says that Barth, Carver and Levi exemplify. Such a view, given Stonehill's thesis, elicits the question of whether Stonehill feels that these writers are also by extension moving toward a more definite concern with ethical rightness. Such an implication, however, might move him closer to Gardner than he would like to be. Yet, since he has made the
distinctions throughout the book between the esthetically neat and the ethically right, between effect and value, between the anti-mimetic and the mimetic, between ludism and seriousness, and finally between fiction and Truth, and has maintained that the writers who manage more than esthetic play are the more ethically responsible, it would seem that he may indeed believe fiction is also moving toward a greater concern with ethical rightness. Rather than suggesting that the more mimetic fiction is the more ethical, however, the overall argument of Stonehill's study suggests that the self-conscious novels with the greater balance are the greater novels because of their ethical dimension.

Besides balance in the study and definitions of its key terms, two other additions to this book would have helped Stonehill keep to his thesis and helped the reader see its validity. First, a section--up front--that acknowledged contemporary critical schools such as Reader Response, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Hermeneutics, and De-struction would have been very helpful, especially since each of these schools addresses questions about meaning and value and would thus have provided useful fodder for Stonehill's argument about ethical rightness. Such a section would undoubtedly have led to the second and perhaps more important addition: a thorough discussion of language and its relation to ontological concerns, especially since self-conscious fictions do "play" with language. The argument can be made that writers like Joyce, Nabokov, Pynchon, and Gaddis purposely disrupt our expectations of conventional narrative patterning, not only to expose the limitations of this "prison house of being," but also to revitalize language whose primordial and experiential power is redemptive. Insights about language from Martin Heidegger, Georg Gadamer or Walter Benjamin would have proved useful here.

Definition and clarification of key terms and a more predominant focus on the claim of "ethical rightness" would have strengthened Stonehill's study, but it is nevertheless a welcome contribution to our understanding of fiction. To Stonehill's credit, he tackles a philosophically difficult and even unpopular premise in dealing with fiction and value. Also to his credit, he confronts difficult writers and difficult works and analyzes them thoughtfully. Certainly to his credit is his willingness to experiment stylistically in his own writing by varying his generally rich but conventional style with playful alliteration, for example, and even traces of elegance. Since, as Stonehill so aptly acknowledges, "the critic's work is never done" (133), we will no doubt be hearing more from him--perhaps addressing the now wave in those novels and novelists he cites in his last chapter.

--Hillsborough Community College
THE APOCALYPTIC ANGEL

Theodore D. Kharpertian


As its title and subtitle announce, Charles Hohmann's book is, in effect, two studies with a single purpose: first, an analysis of the "conceptual structure" of Gravity's Rainbow; and second, a study of the influence on that structure of Rilke's Duino Elegies. At both these efforts the book is largely successful. It thus fills a significant gap in Pynchon scholarship.

In the first part of the study, comprising five chapters and nearly 70% of the overall text, Hohmann discusses the desirability of approaching Gravity's Rainbow through the "referential code" in order "to 'naturalize' the novel on the plane of its ideological references, i.e. to relate it to a contemporary 'vision of the world' or a modern 'system of values'" (45). As Hohmann points out, his notion of the referential code is derived from Roland Barthes's S/Z, while his treatment of the five levels of naturalization is based on Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics. It is in particular Culler's second level, "cultural vraisemblance," adapted from Gérard Genette's Figures II (the phrases "vision of the world" and "system of values" are in fact Genette's), that Hohmann establishes as his book's method of naturalizing Gravity's Rainbow "on an intellectual or notional plane" (45). Such an approach, Hohmann argues, "yields significant insights into the novel" (45) on a variety of levels.

Although Hohmann acknowledges the presence of Menippean satire in Pynchon's book, he hesitates to label it summarily as such and describes Gravity's Rainbow instead as a "satiric 'anatomy' of paranoia" (42) in order to identify paranoia as the book's thematic center. Using Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's definition of "implied author" as a "set of implicit norms" (29), Hohmann establishes the norm of Gravity's Rainbow's implied author as the rejection of paranoia, and it is against this standard that Hohmann judges the reliability of the book's "several anonymous narrators" (29).

Distinguishing clinical paranoia from that of Pynchon's characters, Hohmann defines the latter as "a drive to impose patterns on an intolerably contingent phenomenal world" (76). While ancient questers evinced "positive paranoia" (56), a sentiment of "being at ease in one's projected world" (57), their modern counterparts practice "negative paranoia" (56), a sense of suspicion in a universe they perceive only as hostile.
In Pynchon's world, according to Hohmann, there occurred in fact not one but two falls: a conventional first fall of original sin, which Hohmann extends to include the Romantic and post-Romantic dualisms of Self and not-Self resulting from ontological and psychological disintegration; and a more insidious and alienating second fall into a modern order of science and rationalism, both of which vainly attempt to (re)unify experience by repressing difference. In short, negative paranoia predominates in Pynchon's vision, particularly because in the modern world sacred terms and their referents have between them "an unbridgeable abyss" (58) that did not exist in preliterate communities.

Although negative paranoia serves to structure the world, lurking ominously behind this world are two far more frightening possibilities: the utter chaos of "total randomness," and, alternatively, the cosmic malevolence of "total control" (72). Moreover, the successful outcome of Pynchon's characters' compulsive quest for ultimate meaning would be "annihilation" (72), for if truth exists—and Hohmann concedes Pynchon is, finally, inconclusive—it exists not in transcendence of the human condition but in waste. Waste, however, represents what terrifies Pynchon's characters most: "the Heraclitean flux of matter" (83), decay, and death. Thus, Hohmann regards as authentic those characters who have accepted guilt, pain, and death; those who, on the other hand, suffer from "a primal existential anxiety" (80) resort to what Hohmann terms in a key concept "the self-transcendence of 'paranoia'" (81), a "dynamism" (81) that rationalizes emotion and leads to sadomasochistic rituals of dominance and submission. The dualistic alternative of anti-paranoia being a form of equally untenable "perceptual anarchy" and "insanity" (81), however, Hohmann argues that Pynchon offers in place of dualisms not dialectics—its satirized as a type of teleological salvation—but paradox, a form of the acknowledgment of difference:

While the dialectical process itself is ruinous since it always implies the partial destruction of a thesis, paradox, from the perspective of the implied author, creates a tension which although ill-suffered by the "paranoid" mind is basically of a creative nature.

(111)

Key affirmations like "hope, grace, and mercy" (120), chiefly in the province of children and primitives, constitute Pynchon's "the universe" governed by straight motion which is contingent and asymmetrical," opposed to a "baneful universe subject to cyclical processes" (141), which Hohmann, in an especially informative section, analyzes as a modern version of Gnosticism originating in the Romantic movement. Ultimately, Pynchon refuses to adjudicate between these antithetical visions of the universe, a radical paradox signifying on the thematic level ambivalence and uncertainty. Similarly refusing to
resolve the antithesis, Hohmann interprets Gravity's Rainbow consistently throughout his book along both trajectories of meaning. Also in this first part of Hohmann's study are illuminating discussions of McLuhan, Sartre, the Kabbalah and Moby-Dick, each developing and expanding this basic argument.

In the book's second, shorter part, Hohmann claims that, among Pynchon's many literary references, those to Rilke, especially to the Elegies, Sonnets to Orpheus, and Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, "carry the greatest weight" (277). With no previous studies of Rilke and Pynchon to serve as guides, Hohmann tries to steer a middle course between diachronic-genetic and synchronic-poststructuralist approaches: "The reading suggested in this study will only give a tentative genetic explanation after having approached the texts as synchronous entities, exploring ways in which they can be brought to illuminate one another" (278). Drawing in particular on Harold Bloom, Hohmann calls Rilke's presence in Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon's "Oedipal struggle" (277), one that takes place between Modernist and post-Modernist sensibilities over the possibility of successfully reviving Orpheus.

Although differing in their conclusions about the possibility of this revival, both Rilke and Pynchon center their discourse in "the general concept of a split at the core of human existence" (285). Psychologically, this ontological split manifests itself through consciousness as a string of dualities such as "life against death" (285), but the necessarily unsuccessful attempt to repress or deny each duality's less desirable term only worsens the dilemma.

Rilke presents this dilemma as rooted in a human consciousness that, in paranoic Pynchonian fashion, imposes distorting patterns on experience. In the Elegies and Gravity's Rainbow, Hohmann argues, such fallen consciousness contains the same four elements—a singular perspective, rationalized time, utilitarian possessiveness, and paradisiacal nostalgia. Similarly, Rilke's world undistorted by human perception includes four basic Pynchonian forces: "a dionysiac and chaotic dream, an overpowering cosmic will, suggestively akin to Pynchon's cosmic 'They', and the forces of entropy and gravity" (292).

For Pynchon, accommodation to the "postlapsarian predicament," not transcendence of it, represents man's only hope in a "reality" that may be disconcerting but also full of comforting possibilities" (288). For Rilke, likewise, if man accepts his condition instead of futilely attempting to escape it through angelic transcendence, poetical transformation of earth and man is possible. In Rilke's Modernist poetry, then, man and nature may cooperate to effect salvation, but in Pynchon's post-Modernist fiction, "the universe is probably heading towards a cataclysm" (289). According to Hohmann, Major Weissmann is Pynchon's satiric representation of "the historical
misreadings of the Fliegles' theme of heroic transcendence" (353), as Slothrop is Pynchon's parody of Rilke's Orpheus. Rilke's Angel, "which is outside human experience but which nevertheless makes human experience meaningful" (317), stands in contrast to Pynchon's V-2, a metaphor for all totalizing and therefore malevolent systems. Rilke's unapproachable Angel becomes Pynchon's approaching Rocket.

In his "Afterword," Hohmann neatly epitomizes his study. Reaffirming that Pynchon alternates between "mythopoemia and mythoclasm" (387), Hohmann ascribes this alternation to Pynchon's belief that fictions are necessary but in some cases undesirable, an ambivalence signified by the oscillation between paranoid characters' logocentric metaphorization and self-conscious narrators' metonymic discourse.

Hohmann's book, however, is not without dilemmas of its own, although these are perhaps attributable in part to the unavoidable contradictions into which Pynchon's fiction leads all his readers. For example, Hohmann argues that Pynchon's "novel clearly rejects the traditional liberal views of man and society as unauthentic and self-deceptive" (89); yet he cites textual evidence that the novel promotes, if only in local and momentary ways, "sympathy" and "true compassion" (122), values derived from those "traditional liberal views" repudiated at the level of collective myth. More problematic, however, is Hohmann's assertion that Pynchon displays a "nostalgia for the first postlapsarian predicament" (97), that is, a "nostalgic sympathy with the early Puritans" (57)—problematic especially since Hohmann also initially claims that Pynchon makes the Puritan-transcendental "vision of the world the target of his attack" (53). It is possible, of course, to resolve such critical dilemmas by resorting to paradox as the privileged trope and theme of Gravity's Rainbow's implied author, but a "conceptual structure" resting essentially on contradiction may not be a "structure" at all. Or if it is, a productive line of inquiry might involve what Fredric Jameson (whose essay "Post-Modernism and Consumer Society" Hohmann himself uses in his discussion of post-Modernist subjectivity) identifies as "a system of antinomies as the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of . . . a social contradiction" (The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981] 83).

Whatever the final status of such questions, Hohmann's book is profusely researched and documented, aware of both its theoretical premises and their implications, and judiciously argued. It is a valuable study of Pynchon and Rilke, one much needed and now, happily, available.

--Hudson County Community College
NOTES

In July 1988, Pynchon—a novelist noted for his power of language and theme, and for his mastery of history, the sciences, politics, and art—was awarded a $310,000, five-year fellowship by the MacArthur Foundation. He apparently accepted it. "MacArthur Fellowships have no strings attached. Recipients are free to use the awards as they wish. The MacArthur Foundation imposes no reporting requirements or restrictions on MacArthur Fellows." The Foundation's initial press release said that Pynchon lived in Boston, but that statement was later said to be an error.

***

Pynchon's next novel, Vineland, will be published by Little, Brown in February 1990. So ran the brief, early reports in Book World on March 12, 1989, and USA Today on March 14. Little, Brown's recently published catalogue for September 1989—March 1990 contains a description of Vineland which makes it sound entirely different from either of the novels Pynchon has generally been rumored to be working on. J. O. Tate was quick to point out that Vineland will be "V-3."

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Brian McHale suggests that readers ought to consider having review copies of their own books sent directly to the editorial offices of Poetics Today at the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, P.O.B. 39085, 61390 Tel Aviv, Israel. Books received at the editorial office are reviewed briefly but promptly in the New Books at a Glance section of the journal. Appearing in the New Books at a Glance section does not, however, preclude a book's being reviewed more fully later on in a review commissioned by one of the review editors.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
(--1999)

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 noteworthy with regard to Pynchon. We also welcome news of work in progress, circulating manuscripts, and forthcoming works.

PYNCHON:

Reprinted in Mead below, 157-58.

Reprinted in Mead below, 159-60.

Reprinted in Mead below, 160-61.

Reprinted in Mead below, 163.

Reprinted in Mead below, 163-64, 166.

Reprinted in Mead below, 166-67.

"¿Está Bien Ser un Luddita?" Trans. José L. Moreno-Ruíz.
Quimera 69 (n.d.): 12-19.


FORTHCOMING PYNCHON:

CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


"The problem, common to scientists, poets, and other people, which Pynchon here [in *Lot 49*] disturbs is how to represent chance without knitting it into a language whose conditions inevitably imply teleology.... [W]e zealously uncover multiple systems which will not accord; this systematic or asystematic dance becomes itself the narrative figuring of narrative's problem."


"Perhaps it's best to read books like *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* all in one swoop, because the evidence suggests that, once the reader stops, he doesn't necessarily go back."


Compares Pynchon’s work favorably with Conrad’s, and compares Lot 49 with Villette.


“After Thomas Pynchon, American literature seemed increasingly unwilling or unable to accommodate ideas, or history, or culture.”


GR is “assuredly” one of America’s great novels.


"There is no mistaking that Pynchon is writing about the horror of the nuclear age... yet there is barely a mention of nuclear weapons in [OR]."


LA in Lot 49 "seems a lunatic semiotic system, both immanent and indeterminate, the breath of some universal paranoia... Semiosis unending: can we wonder that the city, that all existence, turns for Oedipa into a cryptogram?"


Mentions Pynchon.


"Collectors should be reminded that Pynchon letters are already at the Ford Foundation Library in New York City, that proofs are at the University of Texas, and that a manuscript is held by the Ford Foundation Library."


Pynchon is "so committed to the highest or longest leap in his effort to escape gravity that the novel becomes an act of invitation where our belief in the magician is crucial."


Bloom's "aesthetic (and aestheticist) allegory of sin [in The Anxiety of Influence]... is masterfully parodied" in BM in a passage that destructs its psychopathology of interpretation. Mexico "commits an extremely radical reading against the rhetoric of the violence he is subjected to: he is subverting its conventionality by exposing the arbitrariness of its tropes. His reaction can be seen as a dramatic enactment of Foucault's idea of resistance because it is political, local, pertinent, nonconformist, recalcitrant, and rhetorical."


"The novel of the sixties that most directly treats the idea of the West" is Lot 49. It "presupposes that the Puritan, middle-class, commercial, capitalistic, industrial, technological process is subject both to thermodynamic entropy, which creates waste, and communication entropy, which creates silence. The by-product of this process is a third kind of entropy, human."


Reprints a reading of QR at Princeton.


"It has been said that if Thomas Pynchon were a muppet, he would write like Tom Robbins."

"The grand style has come, since Faulkner's passing and Thomas Pynchon's silence, to feel foreign, and has been replaced by plainsong, a nouvelle prose bordering on the anorexic."


"The continual imponderability and indefiniteness of Pynchon's writing, even in his early novel The Crying of Lot 49, if Pynchon has any connections to modernity and its ethics and/or their absence, leads constantly to the sort of post-ethical universe that poststructuralism inaugurates but refuses to mention. The post-ethical in contemporary philosophy seems, that is, not to be so much a debated counter-ethics as an absence, a refusal of the ethical."


Also reprints Pynchon's juvenilia, and reproduces high school yearbook material.


"Recall everything the Sixties were about by reading Gravity's Rainbow... in which Pynchon shamelessly shows off his huge knowledge of European history."


["The horrific post-World War II visions of Heller, Vorngut, and Pynchon, despite the new historical data they incorporate, should be read as the updating of an established tradition, the use of the blackest comic voice to respond to real threats to Indigenousism and democratization." GR contains "the germ of a new agenda, the irreducible stuff of moral fiction—albeit a new and nerve-rattling variety."]


Weissmann's launching of Gottfried "is yet another sacrifice of the body as enactment of individual and/or collective violence." GR "is, among other things, one of the great ecological novels of our time."


Contrasts temporality at Slothrop's crossroad with "Elliot's attempt [in "Little Gidding"] to bring some measure of temporal order once again to the West--and thus verify a use for history."


Reprinted in slightly revised form from Partisan Review 44.2 (1977): 235-44.


"A codex [to My Strange Quest] listing the details of possibly apocryphal sightings of the absent Mensonge Mr. Bradbury owes to the disappearance of Slothrop" in GR.


Richwell, Adrian Emily. "Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49."


Lot 49's "open-endedness is a stance of cultural suspicion; it precludes pat answers while avoiding cynicism, demanding collusion and complicity from the reader. It assumes the power of cultural scripting over our existences, but also challenges these preestablished texts...[I]t provides a motive for the recreation of history."


Brief remarks on Pynchon's novels and on his place at the "center" of the canon.


"Tanks for the Memory." New Statesman 1 Apr. 1988: 25.

Announces publication of Cold Obstruction, a collection of three early novellas by Pynchon [but note the date].


"[T]he full-fledged cybernetic discourse of control engendered within the realm of novelistic narrative by Pynchon's fusion of Burroughs and Norbert Wiener uses science and technology as its handmaidens. They figure and are metaphors for a genuinely authoritative discourse of control."


"Though he is yet to write a work as prodigious as Gravity's Rainbow or as sensational as *An American Dream*, Don DeLillo has, with nine novels to his credit, supplanted both Pynchon and Mailer as chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction."


GR is "a book that completes [Dickinson's] project, "a treatise on the phenomenology of 'Crumbling.'"

Zlobin, Georgii Pavlovich. *Po Tu Storony Mechy*. *Stranitsy Amerikanskoi Literatury XX Veke* | *On This Side of the Dream*

FORTHCOMING:


CONTRIBUTORS

ROGER BERGER is currently the Fulbright Lecturer at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone. His most recent publications appeared in Research in African Literatures and Film/Literature Quarterly. He is planning a research project on the Hereros in Gravity's Rainbow.

M. KEITH BOOKER spent fourteen years (1974-88) on the research staff of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where he was Director of the Mechanical Properties Data Analysis Center. In 1988, he saw the light and returned to graduate school in English, receiving the M.A. from the University of Tennessee in 1988, having written a thesis on Pynchon. He is currently a doctoral student in English at the University of Florida pursuing research on the intertextual dialogue between James Joyce and a number of other modern authors, including Pynchon.

JUDITH CHAMBERS received her Ph.D. from the University of South Florida, where her dissertation was "Gravity's Rainbow as Hermeneutic Text." She teaches a variety of literature and writing courses at Hillsborough Community College and the University of South Florida. She is currently writing a book on Pynchon for the Tuswyne Series.

PAUL COLEMAN received his B.A. from Heidelberg College (1975) where he majored in Fine Art. He has been producing paintings and exhibiting since 1977. His work has been included in exhibits at the Cleveland Museum of Art and C.A.G.E. (Cincinnati Artists' Group Effort), as well as elsewhere.

MAURICE COURJERIE, Professor of American Literature at the University of Nice, has also taught at La Sorbonne and a number of American universities, including Notre Dame and San Diego State. His books include translations of Nabokov, studies of Nabokov and Barthes, and two novels. He has written some thirty articles and edited a number of special issues of journals. His Textual Communication: A Print-Based Theory of the Novel is forthcoming from Routledge.

WILLIAM DAUERS received his M.A. in Literature and History from Washington University, where he wrote his thesis on Benjamin. Most recently, he has taught English at the Winchendon School in Massachusetts.

MICHAEL HARTNETT received his M.A. from Long Island University, where he wrote his thesis on Mailer and Pynchon. An English teacher and local journalist, he is the author of "Thomas Pynchon's Long Island Years," Confrontation 30-31 (1985).
THEODORE KHAPPERTIAN, an assistant professor of English at Hudson County Community College in New Jersey, received his Ph.D. from McGill University. His "A Hand to Turn the Time": Menippean Satire and the Postmodernist American Fiction of Thomas Pynchon is forthcoming from Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

ALEC McHoul teaches in the Communication Studies Program at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia. His most recent book is a commentary on Wittgenstein's On Certainty. A collection of essays with David Wills, Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis, will be published by Macmillan (London) and the University of Illinois Press later this year.

ERICH RITTER is an assistant professor of German at Texas A&M University. He has worked as a copy editor, and has taught at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Shanghai. In 1987, he received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Texas at Austin. He has been working on Hegel, Kierkegaard, Poe and detective fiction, and is currently editing the private diary of Charles Preuss, Fremont's cartographer on his explorations of the American West.

JACQUELINE R. SMETAK, an assistant professor of English at Iowa State University, received her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1986. Her dissertation was "Essays on the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon." Previous publications include essays on "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" and on Steven Spielberg's films. She is currently at work on a study of Coover's films and fiction.

JOSEPH TABBI, a frequent contributor to The Review of Contemporary Fiction, has written articles on Pynchon, William Gaddis, Joseph McElroy, and Norman Mailer. He studied English and engineering at Cornell University, and recently completed his doctorate in English at the University of Toronto.

GERHARD WESTERATH received his M.A. from Mainz University in 1985. His thesis was "The Acoustic Texture of Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow."

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