

Thomas Pynchon<sup>1</sup> and Aleatory Space  
 Pierre-Yves Petillon\*

Translated by Margaret S. Langford with Clifford Mead

29. Looking back upon 19th century work in American fiction, closing accounts on it, on that cabalistic summa, obsessed with the Letter, completely caught up with glossing it, with exploding it into a rainbow of multi-colored fragments, deciphers, as does Moby Dick, in one compact hieroglyphic sign the great encyclopedic wheel [whale/wheel] of documents and fables of the times. Its Aleph is the open triangle, the clandestine V sign of the dark years, a shortwave Morse code signal, scrambled by interference, four signals, three dots and a dash, that people whistled as if by accident, the muffled rhythm of a finger knocking at the door, a clock stopped at five minutes after eleven, graffiti on a wall, the furtive gesture made by a woman as she passed by--childhood, they say, but I was just a snot-nosed kid. Here, we no longer have that scarlet letter, that old original first letter when, in the

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We take a very real pleasure in presenting to our readers Margaret S. Langford's translation of Pierre-Yves Petillon's review essay, which appeared after Gravity's Rainbow was published in French. Petillon, the author of numerous articles and a book on American literature, is a major French Americanist. His essay was published in Critique, a prestigious and long-established journal which functions as a cross between The New York Review of Books and Diacritics: reviews in it are more than the usual combination of paraphrase and brief explication or commentary. Rather, they are independent essays written as a panoptic response to a textual phenomenon. Many of our readers, we suspect, are not receptive to the critical idiom that dominates much of French scholarship, in which puns, images, metaphors, allusions, playfulness are wed to a demanding inclination to theory. We feel that this style has its rewards: the suggestiveness of Petillon's piece is undeniable; half a dozen essays could be written to work out the possibilities his prose throws off in its wake.

There are small problems. No matter how exceptional, this is still a review in one sense: an occasional piece. Clearly,

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beginning, everything spelled "America;" it points to the eschaton being created on Baltic shores in the dunes of the Peenemünde peninsula under the watchful eyes of rabbits and red squirrels hidden in the thickets. The parabolic trajectory of the V2 from its launch point to the point where, tearing through the London skies, it collapses in the gravitational pull, contains within its span that text--continent--both global [whale/whole] fiction which encloses us [whale/wall] and the breach which the quick explosive flash of the whale (there are breaches!) makes in the wall. Explosion of a nova reddening over the white cliffs of Kent, one Advent evening, the enervating vibration of the captive balloon moorings, down to the split second,  $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$ , where the cry [whale/wail] breaks through the whiteness of the screen, but the impact has already happened, and, when the sound finally follows, a fraction of a second later, a split second whisked out of time, there is no one left to hear it in a devastated,

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Petillon did not reread the whole of Pynchon's work before he wrote it; under the same circumstances and deadlines, few scholars would or could. As a result, there are a number of slips, which we have not corrected -- this is a translation, not an edited version of Petillon's text. Even a relatively inexperienced reader of Pynchon will catch some of the slips. For example, there is not a portrait of Jay Gould over Pierce's desk, but rather a bust of him over the bed. The bus in San Francisco is a city bus, not a Greyhound, etc. These are small matters. Elsewhere, as in the reference to Slothrop and a woman sleeping snout to snout, memory has conflated two scenes separated by a couple of pages.

What is really important is that Petillon's rich essay weaves Gravity's Rainbow into a theory --or, if you prefer-- a vision of the proper relation between literature and criticism. This vision differs from ours, challenges and complements it. It proposes that not explication per se, but writing in response to literature is the proper reading of literature. In a sense, Gravity's Rainbow engenders this essay upon a French critical and theoretical mind steeped in American literature. Its special value is that it can teach us, simultaneously, something about American literature and about French thought.

--The Editors

vanished world. The huge shadow of Henry Adams, orphan of the century, registering between 1893 and 1900 the "cataclysm" his world would founder in and probing his bewilderment before the sudden irruption of aleatory chaos in the square field formed by his grammar, henceforth torn asunder, hovers over this vast, glacial romancero, a document recording the persistence in American fiction, the disturbing lineage which goes back, by way of T. S. Eliot, Henry Adams, Henry James, Melville and Hawthorne, to the first Puritans.

28. The nth, last?, version of pastoral, Ishmael seeing the Sunday crowd on the Manhattan wharfs scanning, the Midrash for shore people, the sea's edge: "Are the green fields gone?" Lieutenant Slothrop, whose wanderings this picaresque novel follows, is descended from a long line of conquering Puritan ancestors, and descended he has, to the very depths of failure. His ancestor William came from Essex to the New World during the great migration of 1630 as ship's cook on board the Arbella, Governor Winthrop's ship. Slothrop has behind him three centuries of Yankees from the Berkshire swamps and hills: the first West, the 17th and 18th century Frontier. He, of course, belongs to a wild, backslidden, almost ruined branch of that famous family, but through his genealogy we see the great Calvinist Frontier and its untamed lands unfold. A scorched earth policy: forests are cut down, soil depleted, the Redskins deported and exterminated; then, when everything has been cleared, and when the surrounding land, blue hills where wild fennel once grew, are nothing but a worn-out wasteland of dust and ash, they go further, towards the West and virgin lands, all along the road that they hack out violently, raping lands, leaving nothing where before there was that wilderness whose flamboyant diversity they wasted. The Slothrop family forgot somewhere along the road that once it had been devoted to green living things [the living green] and that it made its fortune pillaging the woods to transform them into paper, betraying the living green for the white death and its writings. The same assault which Pynchon traces throughout successive waves beginning with the Dutch Puritan Franz Van der Groov's extermination of the dodos on Mauritius Island in the 17th century, through the Vernichtungsbefehl [extermination order] issued by

the German General von Trotha against the Herero people of South West Africa in 1904, carries us back to Europe of 1944 -45 when the Calvinists return to the Old World whence it came, the white "Kingdom of Death." Next step, the Moon? From the lowlands, and the sandy wastes of the former Cape Canaveral.

27. From Hawthorne to Faulkner the original sin has always been the winning of an inheritance: the grabbing of a piece of American soil, clearing and enclosing so as to bequeath, from beyond the grave, precisely what cannot be bequeathed: America as shifting, open space. In The House of the Seven Gables [Hawthorne, 1851] Colonel Pyncheon covets the few acres of land that Matthew Maule has cleared, along a cow path, in front of his cottage. A soldier and judge and iron-handed man of law, stubborn Puritan, Colonel Pyncheon claims that land not because he had lived on it in the past, but because he can claim a property title in the King's name, an inclusion of the lot in the land survey. A nobody, but stubborn in his own way, Matthew Maule, the "squatter" (but in "America" these rights have more weight than a lord's grant), holds out until the day he is accused of witchcraft. The clan of the "Elect" in the colony is unleashed against him, and in the pack of notables none cries louder than Colonel Pyncheon that the land must be purged of the brood of familiars of the occult. Excluded from the orthodox community, Matthew Maule is hanged. Judges and clerks form a ring around the gallows raised on the square, at the crossroads. Colonel Pyncheon plows this bit of cursed land and takes possession of it. He wants to found a dynasty, and to erect, as does Colonel Sutpen [Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 1936] later, a house which will stand as a solid bulwark against shifting space and eroding time. As obsessed as Hawthorne was by his weighty ancestry, Thomas Pynchon is one of those who, like Ike McCaslin [Faulkner, "The Bear," 1942], renounces his heritage. He is an unfrocked inheritor who wants to atone for the original sin by taking the part of the dispossessed and lowly, the "Preterite" whom America, bound and determined to win salvation through the conquest of space (Max Weber), failed, in Preterition, to write in its register, renouncing, in Slothrop's case, the exercise of all prerogative willed by his father, allowing himself to be dispossessed

rather than be possessed. For, so the legend goes, only when the earth falls into abeyance, back to the time before there was any claim on it, will "America" be saved.

26. This Puritan survey acts as a protective barrier against the terrors of wilderness and savagery. We must impose a phantom topography on the country, project a Baedeker grid onto it, to protect against the savage without and to exorcise the savage within. Here Pynchon rereads the master of the Beat generation, William Carlos Williams [In the American Grain, 1925], underlining the price to be paid so that the Child's History of America could vaunt those two examples of success, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin: for Washington, the taming of his anarchic passion by enclosing his animal spirits and their violence in the sanctity of this garden; for Franklin, the foreclosure on savagery with his program for exterminating the Red Man through rum and his obsession for saving: "Money is like a bell that keeps the dance from terrifying, as it would if it were silent and we could hear the grunt--thud--swish." (W.C.W.) The Puritan ecclesiastic Cotton Mather institutes a reign of terror in the land, and that terror makes people blind to the many-colored spectacle of America's lands, makes them deaf to their polychromatic song. Enclosed by the settlement stockade, watching the forest's edge through slits and loopholes, the Puritans want to tear themselves away from the land and its pull, to conquer space and survey it--and as they do, "America" deserts them, straw men, hollow men: exterminate them all, Kurtz says in an abridged version of that story as he lies dying in the white heart of the African darkness. We must rummage in the American past to find roots other than that withered stock--let America escape the Puritan tyranny (that was written in the '20's, during the presidency of Calvin Coolidge, the austere Calvin from Northhampton, Mass., "A Puritan in Babylon," Silent Cal, "Keep Cool with Coolidge," "Coolidge or Chaos") by unearthing buried manuscripts, by returning to the lost fork in the road to take routes not taken, such as Thomas Morton's, as he danced around the maypole: come here, come here, lasses in beaver skins, you will be welcome day and night; the route proposed by Daniel Boone crossing the Cumberland Gap to go live among the

Indians: for there must be a new wedding, and if we are to possess this country, we can only do so by going native. The alternatives Williams outlines between weld and wed, between the technological violence used by the Puritan line (Mather, Davy Crockett, Ahab) grafting itself on the earth with steel and rail [weld] and the voluptuous wedding [wed] with the Indian lands, still sweep the field where Pynchon's fiction is inscribed.

25. By building a settlement-enclosure in space, we exorcise more than grimacing masks; we exorcise another terror also, as the empty lands unfurl right to the enclosure's very edge. Slothrop's Puritan legacy is also able to be alive to, bones and nerves secretly on the alert, to the emptiness of things while the languorous melody of a sax plays through the cigarette smoke on a spring night on the terrace of a Massachusetts yacht club, Cape Cod in the thirties, tufts of sea-grass on the dunes, snatches of the tango carried by the wind, mixed with the smell of dried algae and those traces of lipstick on the broad lapels of white blazers. He experiences this vertigo again in the spring of 1945, in that Reformation country, in Zwingli's city ("What better place than Zürich to find vanity again?") where at twilight, when day moves imperceptibly to its close, he wanders among the acres of deserted streets that a Harvard quad bell tower dominates in the half-light, Harvard, whose old boys spent the war in the same town plotting and deciphering coded information for Allen Dulles' O.S.S. Filled with worldly vanity, the "vanitas" that his Calvinist ancestors knew, Slothrop then feels tempted to let himself slide towards the gripping terror of "the nameless hour." In the Odeon Cafe, where Trotsky, Joyce and Einstein used to meet, he meets Squalidozzi and his motley crew of anarchist gauchos. In remembrance of Martín Fierro, the Twilight cowboy, they've come to find in a Europe torn apart and in ruins the lost opportunity squandered in the Argentine Pampas. We too, they tell Slothrop, we tried to exterminate the Indians. We wanted "the closed, white version" of reality. But that also is nothing but vanity and chasing the wind: in smoky labyrinths such as Borges scribbles in his pages, the country doesn't let itself be forgotten, doesn't let either its vastness or its

emptiness be forgotten. Thistles in a wasteland, we spin under a turning sky in a world without sea or landmarks. Then, to anchor us to the lands, we proliferate checkerboard squares and labyrinths; we put enclosures everywhere, for who can abide this great vastness for long? Nevertheless, under the checkerboard of streets which remember when they were once country, under the rectangular, America, in her heart of hearts, wants to go back to the wide open spaces void of works or scribbles [wordless and unscribbled]. In the ruins of defeated Germany, the Gauchos from the Pampas want to rediscover the wide-open spaces of the plains, fences and walls fallen into ruins.

24. American fictions, vacillating between two kinds of risks, 0/1:

0. Unsheltered by any enclosure, without the grid of an ordinance map, without the possibility of my being enconced in the heart of a labyrinth filled with quietude, the mental locus my private grammar has mapped for me now, I run the risk of being invaded by the white, empty space which surrounds and lays siege to me on all sides and whose corrosive glare blinds me, of being torn apart by the chaos of scattered impressions, unfurling wave from which no dam or dike protects me.

1. From the enclosure I have constructed for myself, at the same time a grammar to decode (or, more properly, to encode) the chaotic and savage world, and a grid that I project on the blank screen of space so that I can take my bearings through a system of coordinates, I am the captive, trapped, nagged suddenly by the paranoid suspicion that there has been a conspiracy [plot] to shut me up in this fiction, a plot which surrounds me and to which "someone" has the clue. Especially since, in this enclave, my world, through entropy lapses down to steady state, zero information, and there is once again emptiness and chaos, but in my heart of hearts, this time, inside my private stand.

23. To write, then, means to project fictions on the blank screen, but to escape from each before it takes and sticks, to call forth with fear-taunted delight a merry-go-round of fables and masks, to place a painted umbrella, an opera house ceiling between the empty earth and the blank sky--and that the swift fugue of stories, their endless drift through shifting images

and words might hold, albeit for a split second (but already I can hear the count-down, time closing in), the instant when the rainbow will collapse and fade out, rubbing out down to the "ultra-white," the flimsy, shaky architecture of our world. It's like writing Moby Dick, a white handkerchief embroidered with flags and pavilions from around the world, archipelago of systems and codes each one self-contained. For Ahab, the white whale he chases is the exploded prehistoric center of this archipelago; as he captures him, he finally remembers his world. But for Ishmael, the fleeing monster only marks the line of flight, the illusory zero point of the stories. He catches her flash as she passes but knows that she is not to be captured; he threads his way through the islands in the encyclopedia, exploring the sporadic eruption of stories, marking the boundaries of each, surviving (to be the only one to tell the story) in the interstices between the small islands and solitudes because he suspects (or, to the edge of the maelstrom, desperately wants to believe) that the interstice,  $\Delta \rightarrow 0$ , will not close and that there will still be that infinitesimal gap, that breach through which the shifting world, instead of being nailed tight, will keep on flowing (leakage) from under the grids and charts of the written word.

22. "Woe unto them who join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!"

--Isaiah, 5:8

As early as The Crying of Lot 49 (Thomas Pynchon, 1964-66), we found the pastoral theme of barbed-wire fences stopping the world's shift/drift, the obsession with enclosures halting all that roving across the lands, being taken up again, via Ahab, through information theory. Against a background of time-worn skeletons, the empire of Pierce, building tycoon in the tradition of the giants of conquering capitalism in the 19th century (the icon above his desk: A portrait of Jay Gould, the railroad financier) took us back to the desolate country where we followed the trail of the hunters and conquerors of the West, Davy Crockett leading off: carcasses of whales foundered on the



beaches, meat from skinned buffaloes rotting on the Great Plains strewn with bones bleaching in the sun. But, zooming away from that grand vista, we detected death in the very heart of that enclosure, Pierce's domain which he bequeathed from beyond the grave to Oedipa Maas, who was his lover for a short time. Travelling through the space which, she discovered, belonged entirely to Pierce, Oedipa saw extending as far as the eye could see the network of California freeways and the evenly-divided checkerboard of subdivision lots and neighborhoods like a printed circuit reproducing itself ad infinitum and continually repeating the same message. She wondered then, "How had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?" Like a mirror, all this reflects the image of Pierce the conqueror. San Narciso is the name of the industrial perimeter overlooked by the watchtowers. Echo Courts is the name of the motel where Oedipa spends one night. Slowly, this world sinks into its own reflection as Ahab was swallowed up by that "space without world" (M. Blanchot) into which the fascination by a single image drew him. The high road is no longer an opening that leads to open new lands, and there are no longer any gaps closing between fictions and the space they strive to cover and hold fast. All breaches are stopped, the conquest of space is complete, the world is as tightly enclosed as a casemate. The homogenization of possibilities: Whatever play randomness still allows has disappeared from this ossifying survey, a sclerosis for which the bones bleaching in the sun are only the emblem. The obsession with decline and fall, which we can follow throughout American fiction from Cotton Mather's "declension" to the entropy of language in T. S. Eliot, evoking "the years of l'entre-deux-guerres," that lost and wasted time, and describing writing as "a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating," is here turned against the Puritans, thanks to Norbert Wiener's pointing out, right in the age of suspicion, when the Puritan madness of the "conspiracy" returned with Joe McCarthy and the witch hunt (Thomas Pynchon's adolescent years), that the more we stop the breaches of the Maginot Line to protect secret information, the more information gets lost in this dark, enclosed field sliding [lapsing] towards isotropy. From this, there

stems in Pynchon that lyrical delight in the aleatory, which, as it topples over into a fascination with cataclysm, leads him back to the Puritan fold.

21. Since the 1840's, the obsession with the line has run through fiction as it has through the American landscape, a path that the iron rail traces across space, seen as either a violent clearing of a new track through the lands, or a ghost survey map, floating above them, or both, as the case may be. Tracking the White Whale across the ocean prairies, Captain Ahab keeps his eye on the furrow his ship leaves; the waves swell to obliterate its traces [tracks], "but first he passes;" the wheel of his soul, grooved to run, grooved with a furrow which holds him to his path, he speeds along, he pushes ahead on his rails, fist clenched and shaken at his one objective, to force the Whale "without obstacle or angle," unerringly rushing, like a train steaming through a gap, "through the rifled heart of mountains." On the sea chart he plots the lines, gridding [Pynchon's linear grid] the blank spaces to locate and capture the whale with the harpoon "line" whose slipknot causes the hunter's death in the end. Pynchon plays out all the possibilities of this line, which along with the cogs and wheels and the heat of the forge proves to be one of the three major tropes in this 19th century pastoral. The novel's first werewolf is Dr. Pointsman [pointsman], the Pavlovian scholar who is looking for the secret of Slothrop's mental processes and who channels his observations according to the binary mode 0/1, puzzled to the point of fear ("No links? Is it the end of history?") when he sees the statistician Mexico disrupt the linear linking of cause and effect. Then, strangely enough, Leibnitz also makes his appearance among the werewolves because he cut the curve of the parabola into linear segments, surveying and fixing what had been pure thrust, stifling the aria that that lyrical flight, a Rossini tarantella, would cause nevertheless to burst forth on a morning filled with meadowlarks' song. Linearity imposes a territoriality which stifles the polyphony of the lands, dries up the vocal outburst, breaks up the total language: thus Beethoven and his music "to invade Poland by" are strangely opposed here to Rossini's bel canto and Wagner's total opera. Pynchon, a reader of McLuhan, finds the linear paradigm

of our times in the alphabet and linear perspective that, given the atrophying of our other senses, the alignment of the letters on the printed page imposes on our eye. Instead of ligneous lands, lined paper: here we discover again the agrarian theme of American populism in the version the Southerners of the twenties of I'll Take My Stand (1929) and Eliot-Pound give it--McLuhan's sometimes half-forgotten background. At the beginning of the Stalin era, Tchitcherine is garrisoned in the Kirghiz and Kazakh Steppes of Central Asia, splendid episode mirroring the entire novel, "Clouds [. . .] sail in armadas toward the Asian arctic, above the sweeping dessiatinas of grasses, of mullein stalks, rippling out of sight, green and gray in the wind," riders bivouacking in a scene recalling the rodeo version of the West. He wanders on horseback, moving away from the iron track; as he crosses the Steppes, he sees white and black stars explode and, in the center of each of these novae, a stark circle white and void: this is the coming of the Kirghiz light, and the natives shake their heads at noon by the side of the road. Tchitcherine's mission is to instill the rudiments of the alphabet in these faraway tribes who only know speech, gesture and touch, and will sit round-eyed as they see slates with signs scribbled on them with chalk. Thanks to the alphabet and to the diacritical marks that he manages to perfect, Tchitcherine takes down stenographically a wandering singer's rhapsody about the Kirghiz Light, and he knows that that stenographic recording also means the end of the song. The tentacle that the bureaucratic octopus of the great cartel which the state forms, another populist theme, reaches out to enslave the faraway Steppes; the linear alphabet replaces the illuminations of the Book of Hours formed by oral splinters, smashes the icon, the global sign. But then the suspicion grows that here, as in McLuhan (or in Eliot) the territorial is opposed not so much to the extraterritorial, the continual movement and opening of American space, as to pre-Newtonian Thomist Catholicism ("May God us keep/ From Single vision and Newton's sleep") and the second Fall into the sleep of linear vision.

20. "God's finger lifts me up . . ."

-- Agrippa d'Aubigne, Tragiques, VI

Descended from a long line of Puritans, Slothrop, like them, eagerly scans the Heavens, awaiting the critical moment when they will burst open with a tremendous cracking sound, doomcrack, and through that crack will burst the apocalyptic cry which will at last reveal the secret meaning of the Scriptures. On the eroded stone of the old slate tomb where, in a small Massachusetts cemetery, one of Slothrop's ancestors, Constant, who died March 4, 1766 in the 29th year of his age, is buried, we see the forefinger of God parting the cloud screen, pointing out across the void the true meaning of the scattered, opaque indices, skins and husks, Qlipsoth, the scoriae our world is strewn with: perhaps the time has come to restore the Text to its original clarity. This cracking sound was revived in the imagination of an entire generation (Updike, Coover, Pynchon, and yet others) by the big Crash of 1929, when the bottom fell out, and, memories of early childhood, by the flash on the newswires announcing the raid by Japanese Zeros on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, at 7:02 a.m. local time. Slothrop is the child who was awakened during the night and taken, bundled in a blanket, eyes puffy with sleep, to watch an aurora borealis in the winter sky. On another night during the winter of 1931, the sound of feet thundered through the house; the sirens of Lenox and Pittsfield were heard wailing: the Aspinwall Hotel is in flames, and sparks fall far and wide like a rain of meteors on the Berkshire countryside. The same outbreak through the twilight, the same aurora borealis as when on an autumn evening, in London, a scream rips apart the sky, and at 18:00 hours 43 minutes 16 seconds local time, September 8, 1944, the first V2 falls on the borough of Chiswick. They will keep falling day after day until March 27, 1945, when at 16:00 hours 45 minutes the 1115th and last V2 crashes near Orpington in Kent ("Hill Report," London Gazette, 19 October 1948). That winter Slothrop keeps an accounting of his prowlings and trolling expeditions in that city on the alert and, to pinpoint each instant of bliss, puts on a wall-map of the city the exact place, date and time of each of his orgasms: oh the beautiful tracings, the scattering of multicolored stars, all the colors of the

rainbow, reds, blues, the constellation Gladys, Katharine and Alice, then a violet-colored constellation around Covent Garden, with the tail of a nebula going towards Mayfair and Soho which trails off towards Wembley and goes back up by Hampstead Heath in a pulsating trail of intermittent occultations and flashes-- Caroline, Maria, Anne, Susan, Elizabeth. In Slothrop's world, people were always very sensitive about things coming from the heavens: Slothrop's "star" map and the map the statistician Mexico keeps showing the V2 strikes on the City of London have a strictly isomorphic distribution, as if Slothrop intuited what was happening up there, his sorcerer's rod dowsing the still empty sky to decipher, beforehand, sap rising, tree reaching up to the clouds, the as yet secret text written there. The world is God's palimpsest; the secret text is written in invisible ink, the kryptosam which only semen will reveal. This is Slothrop's riddle: through each crack, each hole, go not n blades of grass but n strikes. To track down the derivation of that crack, we will turn to the cabalist Updike: in that fissure [crack] which is at the same time catastrophe, the abrupt edge of the cliff where the world ends [cliff's edge] and the crevasse [cleft], where I lodge myself and tenaciously sink my roots, that is where the key [clew] to the cryptogram is found; and then, in a cataclysm which is, dies irae, a celebration (don't wait for me tonight, the night will be white and red), the veil [whale/veil/wail] is rent, and a scream bursts through the screen.

19. Hanging from Slothrop's family tree are a whole bunch of Puritans--crazy about the Word, obsessed with deciphering it, roaming the blue Berkshire hills and carrying in their packs Bibles from which they could quote chapter and verse by heart. Each New World happening was, if correctly deciphered, no more than the phantom, transferred type of an episode recounted in the Scriptures. Image and shadow of the writ divine, America was interpreted as a text, and, from Mather on to Edwards through Emerson, the mastery of America came about through an exegesis of the landscape so as to detect the hidden pattern within that space. It is Puritan reflex, so Slothrop says, to search for an order hidden behind the visible world. As he

gradually works his way deeper into the chaos of a Europe in ruins, he feels himself closer to his ancestors "who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn." With God now far away in his withdrawal, and the Puritans still living under his henceforth enigmatic eye, the original text that everyday hermeneutics attempts to elucidate, the American genesis, continues to elude the interpreter's grasp. Thus, in Lot 49, Oedipa Maas, thinking she sees in an Elizabethan verse heard in a theater, and that despite the distortion produced by the fake Old Vic accent of the Middle Western actors, the clue that will put her on the track, attempts to determine the right version, the original text of this verse which will, so she thinks, if she deciphers it, give her the key to the riddle which holds her prisoner in spite of herself. Yet the further along she gets in her research, the more lost she becomes in a forest of reproductions, torn and marked photocopies, apocryphal versions with lacunae, mutilated or forged, obscene parodies, variants, distortions, alterations and various corruptions of the original text which eludes her even as she thinks she's getting nearer to it. Again, the sign theory can be used here to reread the Puritan tradition. In the rime the children sing while they play hopscotch on the sidewalks of San Francisco, she hears, or thinks she's hearing again, the echo--garbled, confused, transformed by chance--of the key text that she's spent her time hunting for. Is there a plot which, by continually garbling the text, tries to hide the key to the enigma from her? Are we dealing with the entropic erosion of information all along the channel where aleatory noise makes the message progressively more undecipherable? Or is there another plot, which, through the Finneganswalian distortion of the text, might try to transmit a forbidden message, obliquely, clandestinely, over the official airwaves, and would we then have to change the way we are listening to it and see it, not any longer as an alteration and an entropic erosion of information, but as a cypher that she hadn't been able to decipher up to now?

18. Following in the footsteps of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, who rummaged around in the same California landscape before her, Oedipa Maas investigates the will of the tycoon Pierce, using techniques appro-

priate to a private detective, the private eye, suddenly faced with a whirl of scattered clues that she begins to think will lead her to the center of a labyrinth where all the loose ends are tied up. She shudders in excitement as she senses a revelation hovering nearby, just beyond the threshold of her understanding. That eye seeing just the edge of the puzzle, overwhelmed with a confusing mass of enigmatic data that must be sorted through, by Oedipa acting like a small Maxwell's demon, and evidence marshalled into order so as to chart the unknown landscape which extends, both alluring and terrifying, beyond the known frontier. We recognize the plan used in James' novels and their strategy of the "bewildered" eye. Like Maisie, Maas finds that in spite of herself, innocently, she gradually begins to see an "other" world, a disquieting, wild jungle [wild] where her old geometry [settlement/wilderness] is shattered, and the novel follows her expanding field of consciousness. But the missing piece in the middle of the puzzle remains, Kirghiz bedazzlement in the midst of the nova exploding on the steppes, and the eye must stay blind if it doesn't want to see the tiger in his burning glory suddenly jumping into its field of vision or the shadows where the primal, original act is buried, blotting it out. However, in going over the edge we have the feeling that in the center everything comes together, everything is attached to everything else [hold]. This is the definition Thomas Pynchon gives of that key concept in American fiction, paranoia: the feeling of being on "the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected," but being systematically held back [held at the edge]--Marlow on the fringes of the African continent, seeing only snatches and glimmers of light through the interstices of the boundaries where, if one were to cross that threshold, one would find the growing suspicion that everything holds together, but that burst of blinding light would be so intense that it would obliterate the world.

17. Thus the sinister blossoming of signs pointing to the Tristero system begins for Oedipa Maas: she weaves into the Tristero web [maaswork] all the clues, signs and graffiti, fragments of texts, children's rimes and coded documents that she has collected on the way, and she discovers (or builds up) the story of

Tristero y Calavera, where all these separate pieces fit together, match up [hold together]. The story begins at the end of the 16th century when the Netherlands were fighting to throw off the yoke of Spanish Catholicism. In 1615, the title of grandmaster of the Postal System had been bestowed by Emperor Mathias as a hereditary imperial fief on the Thurn and Taxis family.<sup>2</sup> When William of Orange came to Brussels at the time of the Beggars' Rebellion, he drove out all the Holy Roman Imperial dignitaries, including Leonard, first Baron of Taxis, grandmaster of the Postal System. Then a madman, rebel, or crook, hard to tell which, comes into the picture: a certain Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera proclaims himself the legitimate heir to the postal monopoly. When the Duke of Alba retakes Brussels, Tristero takes to the hills and clandestinely sets up his own system for delivering the mail. Presenting himself as the desheredado, the disinherited, the man who moves in the shadows and at night, he chooses as his emblem the post horn used by the Thurn and Taxis couriers, but this post horn has a mute signifying the imposed censorship and silence, the buried and forbidden voices. A guerrilla war of skirmishes and obstructive actions then begins to be waged against the couriers in the imperial network. A parasite network secretly living off of the official network, the Tristero System also constitutes a conspiracy attempting to subvert it. However, in the 19th century, as States appearing on the map of Europe claim each in turn their right to control the movement of mail within their "national" boundaries, they impinge on the imperial demesne of the Thurn and Taxis men until finally, in Frankfort, on June 28, 1867, the Prince of Thurn and Taxis is forced to hand over to Bismarck's Prussia the remnants of his imperial privileges. Excluded bit by bit in its turn from its shrinking territory, reduced to occupying the interstices between the state boundaries and quadrilaterals, the Thurn and Taxis postal system would have had to, in order to survive, route the mail for all sorts of rebels and anarchists, and would have allied itself then with its enemy and clandestine double, the Tristero System. A subversive ferment, the network surfaces each time there is an uprising, a riot, a revolution somewhere: just as the sorceress V periodically made the historical



crust rise with her volcanic eruptions, just as the V2 calls forth a latent eruption under the city as it falls. After the failure of the revolutionary outbreaks of 1848 in Europe, the network emigrates to America just when the U. S. Mail begins to establish a monopoly on postal traffic through a series of federal decrees. We find its messengers, masquerading as Indians, speaking the various Indian languages, blending into the scenery, harassing Wells Fargo and Pony Express couriers. Did they stir up dissidence in the South? In the course of its shadowy, clandestine existence, the Tristero System survives until summer, 1964, when Oedipa discovers its existence in California, where it organized a phantom postal system, W.A.S.T.E., whose mailboxes are trash cans (waste) placed along the highways.

16. As an analyst of the great McCarthy nightmares, the historian Richard Hofstadter traced throughout the course of American history a persistent thread of "paranoia." America is in the clutches of a vast conspiracy which lurks in the shadows and secretly conspires to bring about its destruction. The Reds have infiltrated Washington security jobs; they must be uncovered before disaster strikes. Already during the 1890's, this was the leitmotiv of the populist rantings against "the Gold Cartel" fomenting to cause the ruin of Western farmers; the Greenbackers who hoped to find in inflation a way of lessening their debts to Eastern bankers used it. At that time, the agrarian theme of the decadence of a world corrupted by "usury" was grafted on to it (Adams, then Eliot and Pound, readers of Spengler). Before that time, there had been the terrible fear of the Masonic plot, the rumor that Metternich had infiltrated the country by using black-robed Jesuit commandos, the Jacobin conspiracy, the Illuminati conspiracy: amateur of conspiracies that he is, having grown up at the time when paranoia gripped the States, quite familiar also with Californian hallucinatory sects, Thomas Pynchon takes their inventory. And in the same fashion he must go back to Salem, where "An Horrible Plot against the Country by WITCHCRAFT" was discovered just in the nick of time (Cotton Mather, 1692). The conspiracy is the last bastion for bewildered Puritans, the bulwark against chaos in the eclipse of God who is the key to all

things. American fiction oscillates between these two polarities: integration: everything is connected; and disintegration: everything falls apart [hold/shift, drift].

15. In this literature of conspiracy, the Whore of Babylon sending her lustful sbirri, thighs moist under the heavy cloth of their cassocks, to seduce young Vermont girls through the grilles of the confessional or in the convent alcoves, plays an important role: this, so Hofstadter says, is the Puritan's pornography. Even in Pynchon's work, the Church (Roman and Catholic) remains--along with Baedeker's guide, the German conspiracy to plot the world out in grids--the paradigm of the Conspiracy: the key to the Tristero System is buried in the Vatican Library. The Church is the first multinational Cartel: by dint of investigation, Slothrop ends up by discovering that "everything is connected," and that the history of the Western world since the twenties (IG Farben was founded in 1925) is completely explained by the secret manipulations of a metacartel with a hand in everybody's life, especially Slothrop's. A masterpiece of integration, the metacartel whose birth Slothrop follows in the politics of Walter Rathenau during the Great War, then during the Weimar Republic, and whose complex overlapping he explores (IG Farben, Stinnes, Siemens, Krupp, Thyssen) also "integrates" Slothrop by locating in him, implanting in him, a "dead point" Pavlovian version of the voodoo practice of sticking pins in dolls. If Slothrop exhibits that curious seismographic sensibility to what's afoot up there, it's because his father, working hand-in-glove with the Cartel and its stooges, sold him at some time in the past "like a side of beef," and for a mess of pottage (he understands now how, although coming from a ruined family, he nevertheless studied at Harvard). IG Farben and the diabolical Dr. Lazlo Jamf made a guinea pig of him by implanting in him when he was a child the conditioned reflex that causes him to react today to the arrival of the V2's and the disturbing aroma of Imipolex-G that precedes them. That erection is implanted in him like an "outpost" of "Their white Metropolis far away," a deadly harpoon. Since his childhood, he has been watched by the Cartel, a surveillance system transferred in London to the equally diabolical Dr.

Pointsman. Because of his erection, "everything is connected;" because of his erection, They keep their hold on him. Now he explains to himself this "senti-ment d'emprise" he senses, Tom Thumb handed over by his father to the Cartel Ogre: in Pynchon's work there is something that resembles an elegiac lament for little children lost and betrayed by the terrifying specter of a Father who violated their trust, a lament which echoes Hawthorne. But, adolescent though he was in the McCarthy era, Thomas Pynchon also belongs to the Sixties, the time of the great "children's" crusade [the kids: term designating the militants in the movement at that time, even if they were honorary kids] off to exorcise the Pentagon. Don't get it up, get it down. Been down so long it looks like up to me. Renouncing his paternal inheritance, breaking away from his background, Slothrop will run away, like a mole traveling underground, to listen to the growing clamor of the counter-conspiracy of betrayed children.

14. Hidden graffiti put Oedipa in Lot 49 on the trail of Trystero, an underground communication network, the hub where everything comes together. The first time she spots the hieroglyphic sign depicting a muted posthorn, it's hidden among obscenities scrawled on the walls of public toilets; it's accompanied by a message: get in touch through WASTE. Next, a man absent-mindedly doodles the same design on the corner of an old envelope. It's engraved on the signet-ring that old Mr. Thoth's grandfather had once torn from the finger of a so-called Indian who had attacked the Pony Express. She finds it in the watermark on a three-cent stamp issued in 1940 for the centennial celebration of the Pony Express. Then the initials begin to appear everywhere, a geometric expansion--Brassai in the streets of Pigalle, Restif de la Bretonne finding the inscriptions at night on damp docks, she sees it, this very abbreviation, on a badge a passer-by wears on his back. In a Chinatown herbalist's display window she thinks she sees it in the half-light among the ideograms. It's the same design children draw on the sidewalk to play hopscotch while singing their tune, "Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three, / Turning taxi from across the sea . . ." where we still hear, confused by time and distortion, the echo of the

same old story, just as we hear the story of the Fall reverberate in Finnegans Wake. It is drawn on a 1904 issue of the Mexican anarcho-syndicalist newspaper Regeneración. She deciphers it among the messages posted at the laundromat. It's the sign someone carved with a knife on a bench in the square; it's the sign that a little girl traces with her nail in the mist forming on a Greyhound bus window. It's embroidered in gold thread on the shirts the motorcycle freaks wear. Last of all, she finds it appearing, as a tattoo in blue ink that the drizzling rain washes off, on the arm of a sailor sprawled in a doorway near the Embarcadero. Now her eyes detect everywhere this previously invisible sign.

13. She thinks she's getting information and working her way into the center of the labyrinth where the secret surrounding Trystero lies. The further she penetrates into the dark plot, the more the clues become part of the great Tristero story, the very essence of the clandestine postal system WASTE. Soon everything refers to Trystero. The probability that the initials would appear on a section of wall, on the bark of a tree, in the pattern a seagull traces in the sky, increases with each passing minute; and, inversely, the information the sign gives diminishes, lessens [waste]. The increase of entropy caused by her perception is greater than the decrease in entropy she creates in sorting over the clues she finds (Brillouin). The more information she acquires, the greater the chaos becomes. The information tends to move towards zero, each sign referring to another identical sign, an infinite drift of signs, a closed circle, without even once, in the tautological duplication of signs, the investigator ever being able to get near the secret she's trying to track down. Her perception of a plot where everything is connected and which holds and ties together the scattered clues is no more than the symptom of her own withdrawal into her solitude, into the entropic silence of her own private language. Suddenly the initials W.A.S.T.E. aren't the crux of a plot anymore. They simply point out here and there, everywhere, in the city a small island of solitude; they represent the last signal still sent out on illegal frequencies by those who in the city, an archipelago of self-enclosed "I's," have sunk below into

silence, a signal which says everything and nothing at the same time, the "I" encompassing nothing now but an empty (w)hole. It's the signal that a man about to commit suicide sends into the night when he begins to dial telephone numbers haphazardly [at random], in hopes that he'll stumble on other anonymous voices and will make contact with, somewhere in the central relay system, the "cry" which will abolish the night. For if I lapse into aphasia, trapped in my private idiom, cut off from the daytime plot which structures patterns, space and language, then there must be somewhere, buried in the night, still hidden, another plot, a phantom network I can tap into, listening to a silence impregnated with still unborn voices.

12. This reversal turns round the two fold reading that American fiction has always given the word "waste"

1. Waste--the wasteland, dismembered carcasses. An empty lot strewn with shaving chips and debris, the white-hot sun beating on the corrugated iron of abandoned hangars tumbling down among the scrub-grass and weeds, a pile of metal rusting in a demolition yard at the edge of town, a desert full of rubble, a crust of cooled lava, a dull stretch of asphalt looking mournful in the moonlight, a world of disjointed fragments which has deteriorated to the point of being below the embankments, no more than a no man's land of scoriae and bones, an ashy, devastated land.

0. Waste--the vague and empty land before the fencing of space, a space open to vagrancy, empty lands, pasturelands on the fringes of the enclosure, vast moving space which hasn't yet been stabilized, shifting like the sands, vaga arena, shifting sands, on the edge of the cleared grounds this still fallow steppe, chaotic moor filled with brambles and brush where we can still wander in the dusk; wander and roam.

As for the leprous and delapidated zone which stretches to the edges of the city, for Pynchon it represents the two faces of the wasteland, a space appearing as it was both before and after the fences went up.

11. Escaping after a night's wandering from the fascination of San Narciso, Oedipa Maas opens a breach [neerl: Maas: the interstice between the warp and woof] and discovers in the "zone," along the highway, the vast kingdom of Waste, the fringes where the squatters, their claim on the land shaky, still semi-nomadic, the losers, the outcasts, the American pariahs, camp. Lot 49, which takes place during the summer of 1964 at the time of Goldwater's electoral campaign, was written when Michael Harrington's book, The Other America (1962-1963), a report on the "invisible" country peopled with misery and dereliction, had just come out. After the drowsiness and rigidity of the years of Republican respectability, the Eisenhower-Nixon era, a whole generation discovered what only the Beats had gone on seeing during the fifties, that is, that the America of the Depression years lived on, but in clandestine enclaves that Society carefully sought to keep hidden. This was no longer Cotton Mather's "invisible world," but the fourth world excluded by the land survey's binary coding, relegated to darkness and oblivion. Uprooted country people sheltered temporarily in tarpaper shacks or in abandoned cars, hillbillies who had wandered far from the hills of Appalachia to the wastelands of the Chicago suburbs, Okies who had come to California during the great "Grapes of Wrath" migration and who had never managed to gain a foothold, Mexican agricultural workers migrating from the San Joaquin Valley vineyards to the Nebraska cornfields, wrecks from a vagabond flotilla cast adrift haunting Times Square at dawn or picking up butts in the Greyhound bus station waiting room, the Harlem jobless, barefoot drifters up from the Deep South, bums getting drunk on Sterno on the Bowery sidewalks. Pictures from Kerouac crossing "the line" [across the tracks] right down to the hobo camp, the thirties' dream, the campfire made by burning old crates down behind the freight yards. Oedipa Maas also walks along the line, tripping over ties and cinderbed; Pietà of the lost, she sees beside the tracks a people of the shadows: an old Pullman car abandoned right in the middle of the countryside, right in the cultivated fields, with wash hanging on the line and smoke coming out of pieces of stove pipe stuck

together; squatters living in tents pitched behind big billboards along the highway which hide them from people crossing the country; "squatters" hunkering in junkyards or nesting in tents left by linemen at the tops of telephone poles; exiles coming from an "invisible land," wandering at night by the side of the road, quickly moving in and out of the headlights, going nowhere. They are the gray dead souls of the "Preterite," that the Elect, as they grabbed America and plotted to take hold of the land, have "passed over," and who, off the official map, sleep, long-forgotten, the silent sleep of the waste land.

10. In Calvinist theology, the "Preterite" are distinguished from the Damned in that God never even intended to save them in the first place. Here, rising with the night wind, these people from the catacombs listen on the lower frequencies of the clandestine network to the sound of "a different drummer" (Thoreau), like the deaf and dumb who dance to the sound of a bossa-nova which only they hear. At the other end of the spectrum, in the ultra-sound frequency, the shrill cry which will abolish the night is about to be raised. Shadowy phantasma, Trystero is, for this great army of the dispossessed, the still-hidden conductor, the charismatic leader who will rise out of the confusion to lead them, as once did Peter the Hermit, to reconquer the Holy City. Somewhere they have a secret rendezvous [tryst] with this silent herald, Trystero, who represents both silence and terror. Saudade of a solo by Stan Getz heard on the outskirts of town, on the outskirts of the gypsy section where the great plain begins: the nocturnal world revolves around the black sun of that very sadness, but soon the Prince of the ruined tower [Thurn and Taxis] will appear, and the world will be "turned upside down," the black sun replacing the wan sun of the "white death." Thomas Pynchon tilts from silence to revolt, moving back and forth between the silent generation of the Eisenhower years and the tumultuous Sixties. The stamp of chiliast schemes upon the hippie movement has already been noted (J. Le Gott). Heirs who have thrown their heritage to the winds disregard all social conventions (this is the last indelible mark of their social origin--to not notice it) in order to set against the Establish-

ment's pentagonal fortress a vast, loose, and ill-defined movement of outcasts and disinherited who, as narodniki in the "zone," will be called upon to speak out and whose Jacques they will lead off to conquer the lost Kingdom. Waste is therefore to be read as We Await Silent Trystero's Empire, Trystero the crook, the impostor, the pseudo-Frederick, Emperor of the Last Days, who will cause the shout to swell from the silence. Aroused by a handful of disenchanting country squires and clerics, the "people" await the surge of violence, the spasm which, exacerbating chaos to create a tabula rasa, will hasten the coming of the kingdom, and "from the ruins of the old order will spring the new order" (Alfred Rosenberg, Munich, 1933). It's no accident that, in Gravity's Rainbow, the great trek of the wandering Hereros starts in Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains. There, after the bombing of Peenemünde, was buried the Mittelwerk V2 factory where the slave laborers from the Dora concentration camp worked in the bowels of the earth. But it was nearby also that, like Rip van Winkle whose legend he inspired, the Emperor Frederick "slept"; and also nearby, in the village of Stolberg, Thomas Münzer, prophet of the Peasants' War, was born (cf. Ernst Bloch, Norman Cohn).

9. If we trace Slothrop's ancestry, we find at its inception a fork, a sharp deviation from the Puritan norm: the first Slothrop failed to play the game of conquest and exclusion, and, until the end of the 18th century, the Slothrops still kept alive the memory of this ancestral dissidency; for example, when they sided with the poor farmers during Shays' Rebellion, that Peasants' War, against Governor Bowdoin of Massachusetts (in 1786), they wore sprigs of hemlock in their hats as identification, as they patrolled the hills, while the governor's militia wore slips of paper. Only later in the 19th century did the Slothrop family betray its past by destroying forests. Arriving in America during the great founders' crossing of 1630, William Slothrop, tiring very quickly of Winthrop's authority and his circle of worthies,<sup>3</sup> convinced besides that he could preach the Scriptures as well as anyone ordained by the Hierarchy, seceded and took off, his Bible in his



pack, for the Berkshire hills where he settled down with his son John to raise pigs. When he had fattened a small herd of them, he would set out at dawn for Boston to sell them at market. After they had galloped up hill and down, the poor beasts didn't weigh in very heavy, but Slothrop loved neither the profit nor the good fortune that would have been the manifest sign of his Election: he loved the trip, the "mobility," the chance meetings with Indians, women on the way. He came back with his pockets empty, but this time he had heard the grunts on the highway, and, I imagine, on the sunken roads, by the way-side, "the thud" and "the swish." As for Henderson [Saul Bellow, 1959], the aristocrat whose father knew Henry Adams and Henry James and who wrote a book on the Cathars, raising pigs is here a wonderful way to thumb your nose at the Puritans, blasphemy to their writings and ethics. Winthrop/Slothrop, opposing tropisms, win/sloth: challenging the urge to conquer and compete represented by Winthrop, Slothrop, a drop-off before the word was coined, opts for what was, in the Puritan catalogue of vices, the worst of the deadly sins, sloth: that kind of lethargy, of Oblomov torpor which gets you into the rut of sleeping instead of staying wide awake to earn salvation and paradise by winning it the hard way, through secular success. Slothropic degradation: the ancestor William stays buried in the hills among his pot-bellied, paunchy animals, wallowing under the noonday sun, in the mud of sunken roads, with his companions in lechery, ribaldry, revelry, and this gross animal pleasure, this snout that burrows in the earth, this gluttony, this grunting. Instead of standing defiantly erect under the empty heavens, the voluptuous collapse in the depths of the earth; having written a theological opuscle about Preterition to plead the case for those whom Election has excluded from salvation, William Slothrop barely escaped the gallows, and his book was burned in the Boston marketplace. He then went back to die in England, far from the gaunt Don Quixotes of Boston and Salem, amid memories of his blue hills: the cornfields, the parleys with the Indians in the smoke of tobacco and hemp, the girls in petticoats in the hay lofts, the clatter of horses' hooves against the planks, the drunks carousing all

night long, the departure as dawn was breaking, the rain on the Connecticut River and the return, dead tired, one evening as the sun set in the tall, still warm grass. Here we find the "singular point" where America jumped off the track, the fork where America, by ostracizing Slothrop, took the wrong road. Buried in the past is this cusp point which we can find, perhaps, by retracing our steps, when "A screaming comes across the sky" and when the catastrophe (the film where the piercing scream surges forth only after the impact has occurred, so we should remember, backwards) unreels back to the lost fork.

8. Between the 1 of the linear structure that the rigidity of a land survey may impose and the 0 of emptiness where everything comes apart extends the interspace which is the domain of the statistician Mexico, so named in honor of a country able to survive although it borders the gigantic gringo empire on the other side of the Rio Grande. For Mexico it's Calvinist madness to want to decipher in the trajectories across heaven the univocal voice of the Lord. He contents himself with marking the points of impact on the map, clusters, masses of stars that no chain of cause and effect links together. He wants to strike off at some other angle. For him the whole interstitial gamut 0.37 which is seemingly excluded by the binary choice: he outlines the new geometry of the "multiverse" whose emergence disoriented Henry Adams. He camps temporarily in a space between two worlds, into which he slipped incognito. He lives with Jessica, whom he met one night on the street when both were out roaming about in spite of the curfew, and this is the only love story in this sinister book--Jessica and Mexico, Jessica and Lorenzo on a Venice night, an evacuated house in the forbidden zone to the south of London just under the barrage balloons. In the garage, Mexico raises chickens; Jessica brought her old doll, some sea shells, her grandmother's lace in a wicker grip. Privately, they said their farewell to arms, fuck the war, make love, outlaws for a season, for an escapade, to last as long as the war does. The war that suspends the normal flow of time and fleetingly opens up a vista of summer holidays is home for Mexico, and he knows that henceforth his days and Jessica's are numbered,

as are the war days--in spite of von Rundstedt's surprise counter-offensive in the Ardennes (December, 1944). There's nothing but time left now: galloping by, I hear hard on my heels the tick, second by second, of the backward count, countdown. He knows that when the war ends he must lose Jessica, fresh as the hedges and hay, smelling sweetly like a pony when the sea-wind blows over the snow-covered English countryside. In the meantime, Mexico charts the score of indeterminate space, and like John Cage he hears the music of the stars.

7. As for space, surveyors cover it all, squaring it off into lots without leaving any gaps. So the only chance we can hope for is to find again the shifting margin, the brief interlude as one grid breaks apart and fades out while the next one has not yet settled down, those brief in-between-time days when the evacuated world is like a freight yard waiting empty under the moon. The countdown,  $\Delta t$  moving imperceptibly towards zero, began for Slothrop in 1840, when his family began its decline. During that same period in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson wrote that no fall is abrupt and that the slow slipping away is the law governing collapse ["slipping is crash's law"]. Ever since, curled up in the heart of the hills, in this straw-colored country where everything turns to dust, Slothrop's lineage, whose inertia has never stopped pulling it downwards, slips towards extinction along a curve of extinction long since asymptotic, from which now only a last-chance gap, a snag in time between almost zero and zero, separates it. From Henry Adams to John Updike, the Puritan tradition has run through all the declensions of the modalities of this world exhaustion [dwindling towards zero], coming to nothing: erosion of time which erases all to chaotic nothingness, the ground failing under the horseman's hooves, over-exposure which whitens the landscape to nothing. Hence the hold on the imagination of the great Crash of 1929, when the stock market crashed in panic and when the spiral, the maelstrom, started whirling down. As a child, Slothrop grew up in the midst of desolation and failures. In the Berkshires, the hedges and fences were falling into ruins around the great abandoned estates where the Harrimans, the Whitneys, the

great New England families, no longer came. In the fall, no more foxtrots in the distance, no more lanterns over the steps, only crickets, the odor of rotten apples, then the October wind, a world lapsing back to the wilderness, at one and the same time dead lands covered with dry straw and lands gone wild again, where the green of old comes alive again among the brambles. Each fall must have its tempo: in Berlin, to give more dramatic intensity to the moon-shot [*die Frau im Mond*, 1928] Fritz Lang<sup>4</sup> had just invented the countdown, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, Fire.

6. The "Zone" is, for a summer, the Summer of 1945, this world in abeyance, all fences down, as in the "deep yesteryear" of the great migrations, the moving theater of a gigantic Völkerwanderung not seen since the 5th century and the barbarian invasions. After the collapse of the Third Reich, long lines of fugitives, exiles, deported people move across the gray and green earth, across a world out-of-joint, evacuated hordes of vagabonds, camps in the morning breezes, fragments of failing history for a brief season drifting off into the open. This summer everyone is on the roads, unrestricted wanderings where American hoboes from Josiah Flint to Vachel Lindsay to Jim Tully to Harry Kemp to Clancy Sigal to Woody Guthrie<sup>5</sup> and down to Slothrop (who follows their trail here temporarily) rediscover the lost space of the Oregon Trail: a whole people has taken to the road as if it had returned to the nomadic state: the German folk crossing back over the Oder chased by the Poles going towards Rostock along the Baltic coast; Poles fleeing the Lublin regime meeting people who, on the contrary, are returning home; Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians trekking northward, packs on their shoulders, shoes in tatters, humming enigmatic songs; Sudetens, East Prussians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Macedonians, Magyars, Brownian movement of nationalities on the surface of the "imperial cauldron" reviving underneath the ruined Prussian ordinance map the ever present ghost of the Empire and its loose demesne. Gypsy wagons whose axles break are abandoned on the roadside near carcasses of horses: someone else will spend the night there tomorrow. White Russians going towards the West, former prisoners of War going to the East, Wehrmacht

veterans in ragged uniforms, agricultural workers who are supposedly going to Hanover to pick potatoes, a whole crowd on the march, on the move, on the immense Mecklenburg plain hauling behind them the debris and remnants of a Europe that they don't yet know is destroyed forever. The old paths suddenly obsolete, for a time outside of ordinary time all roads are the same in a multi-dimensional space where each road is a crossroad. But this is only a hiatus, the brief interlude between a defunct Herrschaft and another one already looming ahead of us. In the chaos of the defeated Germany a new cartel which will impose its own map is in the process of being born: the V2 cartel. On May 5, the Russians occupied Peenemünde, where they found only rubble. They get ready to occupy the Harz and Nordhausen, which fall in their zone. On October 30, 1947, a V2 will be launched from Kazakhstan. Everyone roams and madly runs about as long as there aren't "zones" yet, but just the Zone. Operation Paperclip: Americans hunt the V2 scientists and technicians; Wernher von Braun rides his bike down from his mountain refuge to surrender to them; he will be at White Sands on March 15, 1946, to see his V2 rise in the New Mexico skies, and the hardening frost of the Cold War is already there; on July 16, 1969, he will be in the thistle-covered wastes of Cape Canaveral for the great moon launching-- in some ways the true, though unacknowledged topic of this book. Then the cartel will have regained its hold, and the Calvinist assault against the Frontier will have taken on new momentum, beyond the zero. Meanwhile, there is this wasteland in ruins where, with all the systems temporarily halted [in abeyance] from distress and disarray (Max Weber), in the infinitesimal instant at the interface between collapse and sclerosis, the charismatic lightning might leap forth, the lightning which will arouse us from the lethargy old maps have lulled us into, and open, for this is the age of Prophets, through the breach like a flash from elsewhere. From Stralsund Slothrop looks at the lowlands bordering the shore: this morning must be like the one the astonished Vikings saw when they debarked wide-eyed and found, as the Dutch sailors did later as they landed on Manhattan island, the immense plain, waves of grass like a sea driven

before wind, where you could sail without boundaries or borders as far as Byzantium and the promise of a second coming. By the bank, plates of camouflaged armor rise above the late dandelions whose round heads wave back and forth waiting for the wind to disperse their spores to disseminate them across the nomadic steppes, a chance, in the bewilderment of aleatory space, for a new germination and a new branching off.

5. On this fragmented chessboard, at last in their proper space, the characters move across the continent, each mirroring the other, just as has always been the case in American fictions ever since Sleepy Hollow: 1) the schlemiel drifting from catastrophe to catastrophe, wandering aimlessly [at random] towards a nowhere which sometimes turns out to be an elsewhere, in a moving world carrying him in its drift, a cork bobbing along the highway--that's Slothrop; 2) the shifty confidence man of fables and bedtime stories, hustling and living by his wits, prosperous and flourishing in shaky times, both virtuosos of mobility and metamorphosis--the confidence man, Gerhardt von Göll. The intimate and equal, before the war, of Pabst, Lang and Lubitsch, the scenario-writer von Göll works during the war for various allied secret service agencies. He's the one who hatches the scheme which consists of having the Germans find a film, apocryphal and made in Kent, proving the presence of the Blacks, the Schwarzkommando, in the ranks of the SS--all this in order to demoralize the people by bringing back the old twenties terror (die Schand am Rhein: the Senegalese units occupying the RhiineLand). However, it happens that the Schwarzkommando composed of Herero soldiers really exists: the story invented by von Göll has, so he thinks, become a reality, and during the summer of 1945, he travels through the Zone, traveling day and night, here one day, someplace else the next day, sleeping in his truck, everywhere and nowhere, taking advantage of his wandering to organize a vast black market network in order to sow other stories and pictures, seeds which will grow hard facts in time. He has no fixed destination or itinerary. He advances by leaps and bounds. His pseudonym: der Springer: the tumbler, the knight. The Queen, the King, the fools are no

more than magnificent invalids. The pawns can only creep about a two-dimensional space; the rook does not move vertically. Only der Springer, the knight, wonderful Luftmensch that he is, knows how to fly [flight]. He has been here, he will (perhaps) be there; he rides through the Zone pursued by the other wandering character, Slothrop, who doesn't have a definite name or home, or perhaps his home is the American locus par excellence, the floating white square called nowhere.

4. Sent on a mission to the continent to locate the V2 sites, Slothrop, his clothes stolen and his papers burned, deserter without credentials or past, escapes his master's surveillance to wander about using one disguise after another and various aliases. This happens in May, 1945, amid crashed Stukas and burned-out tanks. If God grants one hundred more days of sun, the harvest will be good. At the crack of dawn he lands in Nordhausen in the Harz region. Barefoot (someone stole his shoes while he was asleep), he had crossed Bavaria in a boxcar. The person who stole his shoes left a tulip between his toes. Trains in the night, ghosts wailing as they cross through deserted cities, ragged lost souls moaning, their cracked lips singing the Ballad of the Displaced Persons. From Nordhausen, Slothrop, in a bright yellow and red silk balloon (a flame from a G.I. Zippo lighter, and he flies off, all moorings loosed) flies over the Thuringian prairies and the Harz mountains, a holy place for legends as are the Berkshire Hills in America. The sun sets. Floating about in its luminous halo without landmarks to guide it, the balloon still captures the sun's last rays, and Slothrop watches as the line of demarcation between night and day rushes across the fields: at this latitude, the earth's shadow crosses Germany at 650 miles per hour. The further south we go, the faster the shadow moves, breaking the sound barrier somewhere above the South of France, in the very region where Slothrop himself broke the sound barrier to find himself on the other side, hovering very high on the Zone's vertical. But unlike the rider, der Springer who flies off, Slothrop, in the Brownian movement of his meanderings through the Zone, if he has his ups and downs, is only losing altitude, like

a yoyo that goes up and down and then goes up again, but whose kinetic capital dwindles to inertia. The same inertia that makes Slothrop--the schlemiel fortune has made its plaything--run will slow him down to a standstill, deep into the earth. Here he is in the moonlight celebrating with a quartet of goblins and spirits in a Berlin in ruins with every bridge blown up. He ambles about the ghostly studios of the U.F.A., crosses no man's land, spends the night in a shaky wooden house with its roof blown off, and at midnight he hears some Russian soldiers singing in their barracks against a background of wailing accordion music. On Saint John the Baptist's day, fern seed fell in his shoe. He wanders among rubble and barbed wire; Berlin like an American scrap-iron works, a world gone back to wreck. The early morning drizzle finds him in the slums near the Jacobistrasse. He walks along the tow path, travels by barge along the canal from the Spree to the Oder. Along the way, the Russian demolition crews are blowing up wrecks with T.N.T. On the Oder, there are Chinese lanterns, a happy garland, and the accordion again; a Fellinian yacht, a traveling village which has sailed all summer in sight of the lowlands with the last bunch of fascist survivors aboard. The rain patters, Saint Elmo's fire in the mast, and Slothrop on his ghostly vessel wends his way along the Oder towards the North. The ship radio picks up the sputterings of Russian broadcasts. Radio interference comes like gusts of rain. The yacht passes the silent ruins of Stettin. He can see the ruined derricks, the burnt warehouses in the rain. Then there's the Baltic, Swinemünde, Peenemünde finally; a light fog over the devastated site, shell craters full of blue water, Messerschmitt carcasses like beached whales on the shore. Then he rounds Rügen, fragments of islands with chalk cliffs. At Stralsund, Slothrop debarks, striding like a long-shoreman down the wharf where grey horses look for bits of grass between the cobblestones. Then he walks alone along the coast. He's trying to get to Cuxhaven, where the British are going to reconstruct a V2. In the evenings he stops at abandoned farms, sleeps in the hay, and, when there happens to be a mattress, in a bed. Birds sing on the thatched roofs. Slothrop walks across the fields humming a Fred



Astaire tune. Arriving one evening in a small town near Weimar, he sees a procession of children carrying lanterns and singing Laterne, Laterne, Sonne, Mund und Sterne, round moons in the evening light. The feast of the pig is being celebrated in memory of the legendary Plechazunga, the giant pig who in the 10th century stopped the Viking invasion single-handedly. The shoemaker who usually plays the role of the pig was mobilized in the Volksgrenadier and didn't come back from the war. Slothrop is persuaded to don the plush costume padded with straw and painted with garish expressionist colors. The logic of metamorphosis dictates that the occasion bloom into carnival. When the celebration ends, Slothrop, still in his costume, leaves with a girl across the fields of tall white daisies, and in a farmyard and with the wind in the pylons and sails of a creaking windmill, they sleep together snout to snout. His sinking into burlesque gravity is also for Slothrop the anamnesis which brings him back, as he digs, deeper into the earth, to his ancestor William, the first of the American Slothrops.

3. There is, in every trajectory, a passage that serves no purpose [through emptiness] that stops the heartbeat and tears asunder [quarters] time.

-- Julien Gracq, Paris at Dawn

In the uncertain, dangerous hour before morning, Oedipa finds herself near the embarcadero: Alcatraz is still no more than a faint outline in the fog. Soon the city will wake up, and people, grabbing their tools, will get back into the familiar groove of their habits and trips: rush hour, retracing under their feet the survey-map of streets and lines; but at daybreak, for a very brief space of time, the ploughshare jumps the furrow, the phonograph needle leaps its furrow [groove], and its harsh grating sears the eardrums. A momentary tear in the thread of time, a rip, a dead beat, a momentary discontinuity in the curve. On a porch overlooking a slum, Oedipa finds a drunk and delirious sailor who talks to her about the other world, the clandestine world of W.A.S.T.E. His old carcass trembles in Oedipa's arms as she rocks him tenderly; she recognizes the symp-

toms: delirium tremens, D.T.'s. But for the decoder who tries vainly to project another world, d.t. is also the last gap to span when  $\Delta t$  tends towards zero and you can no longer square the parabola, breaking it up into surfaces and tail-planes, nor hide the upward thrust in a rate of acceleration. The fractions of time become shorter and shorter; we're getting closer, count-down, to the point where the catastrophe must be faced, discontinuity suddenly breaking out,  $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$  merging here with the image of the singular point. The Polish undertaker who rows alone in his boat and who passes in front of the ghostly yacht in the middle of the Baltic one stormy night wanders in these waters in hopes of finally being struck by lightning. Most people have highs and lows in their lives, but most often all this forms is a sinusoidal curve with first derivatives at every point. These people will never be struck by lightning. For that there must be a discontinuity in the curve, a cusp point. A moment of risk which is at the very same time the spasm of the epileptic cry, the irruption of another world through the breach, and the fading away to white. The indices and signs that Oedipa spent the night spotting are like the signals warning the epileptic that his attack is coming on. After the fact he remembers these signals, but they are no longer anything more than scoriae and dross that memory stores away. The convulsive brilliance of the cry is too dazzling to permit memory to register it--explosion which destroys the film impression of its own image, lightning bolt which leaves, when we return from the high light of that spasm to this lowly world, no more traces on the Agfa film taken Sunday afternoon than the white blankness of an overexposed negative. Yet it is only in this critical spasm that  $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$  and that the gap is ended, an ever-postponed closure between the Scriptures and the "naked word" snatched from the glosses, the "unscribbled" cry that the writings can't grasp, and from which, as they bring us closer, they exile us. The old pallet where the old drunk sleeps off his wine at dawn is like the palimpsest of his life: traces of vomit, sperm, urine, tears, sweat and blood. As she goes away, Oedipa imagines that this mattress stuffed with memories is burning, a

Viking funeral for all those years coded and stored away in a memory that a conflagration erases. Once again, the world white without imprints, the cold dead lands of Newfoundland where, after returning from Africa, Henderson [Bellow, 1959] dances with his lion in the icy silence; the chalky plateau where the centaur [Updike, 1963] gallops, blinded by the dazzling sun on the gravel and the snow near the edge of the cliff where the world vanishes. Everything is erased [erasure of data] amid the piercing cries of the seagulls, and with  $\Delta t$  moving towards zero, the infinitesimal breach affords access to "spectra beyond the known sun" to a "music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright." Discovery of a new world to the West, these empty lands. But also, what is death if not this passage to "ultra-white"?

2. Scattered in the wasteland of the Zone, broken up space whose fragments, drifting towards red [red-shift], flee at infinitely high speed the infra-historical center where the original explosion took place, the survivors of the Herero people, seeds scattered in exile, try to reintegrate the dense, compact original point [the Borges-Friedman Aleph] from which this universe is expanded. These are the Hereros that survived the extermination order given by von Trotha in January 1904, and then the great trek Northward led by Samuel Maherero to seek refuge in British Betchouanaland. Many are descended from the Ovatjimba tribe, so poor that they found their food by rooting in the earth, and whose animal-totem was the aardvark [Erdschwein]. During the war, inducted into the Schwarzkommando, they lived in the bowels of the earth working on the construction of the V2 in the subterranean Harz factory. Following the German surrender, they begin to wander around the Zone; no one really knows who these Blacks wearing tattered SS uniforms are; they are allowed to move on. They dream of the kraal of their childhood and cattle pens in the veld as Flaubert's Celts used to think of three rough rocks under a rainy sky at the far end of a gulf full of islets. Their leader, Enzian, has a "vision"; like a Brigham Young leading his Mormons to Utah, he wants to march to the North, his march towards the star, after having gathered up the fragments of a V2 in order to have a ghost launch,

a rocket cabalist trying to find in the ruins of Europe the fragments of the original text, the Key which will allow them to find their roots [root/shift] and, taking them out of their unhappy history, will give them back that dead calm point [still point], omphalos of their lost tribal enclosure. Among the Herero, one sect wishes, on the contrary, to bring the cycle of Herero history to a close, to finish what began in 1904 in South West Africa, the Hereros letting themselves die behind barbed-wire [where the Germans who put them there sadly watch this phenomenon, which was as puzzling to them as elephant cemeteries], through total extinction, the final zero when there will no longer be in the archives any traces or memories of what was once the Herero people. But in the eschatological scheme in which this story is caught, final zero and still point are almost one and the same; both are outside of time and its curve. Clandestinely, in the Zone, the Herero commandos organize, communicating with one another on low frequencies in their cryptic language, and the great trek to the North begins, from Nordhausen towards the coast. The Herero intone a mantra: mba-kayere, I am forgotten and ignored [passed-over]. Preterition, according to an already classic trope, reverses itself [passover] to open up to survivors of the massacre the route leading to the promised land of the frozen North. The film of the Diaspora also runs backwards to the gravitational collapse which, on the other side of the world, will cause the origin to gush forth in a shower of stars.

1. "Thy joy is far above the kingdom,  
and we scarcely comprehend its riches;  
like the pure night of the vernal equinox  
you rise and separate day from day."  
--R. M. Rilke, To the Angel<sup>6</sup>

Heading North: when the Barbarians saw, amid the piercing cries of the seagulls, the high cliffs of Kent rise in the mists, they knew they had arrived at the end of the world, at the edge of the kingdom of death. Towards this travel Enzian and his people, arctic expedition beyond the icy promontories and the blue sea, a washday blue sea where the icebergs float towards the North whose inhabitants preserve a culture, a language and an

ancient history that an external silence cuts from the rest of the world; Tsalal island where Pym lands as he drifts towards the South Pole [tsal-ma-veh: the shadow of death]. The Master of this hallucinatory North is Lord Blicero, whom we knew in V. by the name of Lieutenant Weissmann in the Süd-West in 1922 when he deciphered the message which gave the go-ahead for the massacres: die Welt is alles was der Fall ist. Formerly in Röhms S. A., then Himmel's SS, he now presides over the Harz Mittelwerk, where the V2 is being built, at Nordhausen, dwellings in the North, and at Bleicheröde, where echoes the bleached vacancy [bleich, bleach] of uninhabited "waste" [öde: öd & leer das Meer, T. S. Eliot]. Blicher, "Latinized" here as "Blicero," was the name the ancient Germans gave death: the other world glimpsed in the blink of an eye. For the Schwarzkommando, the white Ogre: in the colonial cloaca of the Süd-West, far from Europe, from its white cathedrals and its Virgin Mary, where everything was permitted, he raped children at night. American obsession with anal rape (Mailer, Coover, Pynchon); Blicero gets ready to launch his lover Gottfried crucified in the nose of the phantom V2 00000 into sidereal space. Golgotha: at the vernal equinox, the green point of cusp, we drank to summer which transforms the aquatic sleep [watersleep] into a fiery awakening [firewaking]. At Bleicheröde, Wernher von Braun, his broken arm in a cast (a car accident), gets ready to celebrate, hosanna in the highest, his 33rd birthday. But on that Golgotha he isn't the one who is going to die: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." (W. von Braun, sentence quoted as an exergue of G.R.) In one quick legerdemain, the Archangel will be at White Sands, New Mexico, then on July 16, 1969, in the desolate Florida dunes where the flight 00000 (which in this book remains a ghost flight) will take place, the flight on the 0° heading which will actually take the V2 out of the earth's gravitational field. In the dawn excitement, as in the hours before landing on an atoll, like a prison yard on the morning of an execution day, Norman Mailer watches the launch towers which look like prehistoric monoliths beached on the desert-like moors where once the Indians sang

to the moon. Then, like a Leviathan in the fog, the rocket climbs, blazing like a "new sun," the new sun that Ahab, tracking the whale from equinox to equinox, saw himself bringing to the world. For Norman Mailer is the one who first, in the great book of the 1969 sublunary summer, Of a Fire on the Moon (of which Pynchon's novel is, in certain respects, an outgrowth), placed Wernher von Braun, now an American, in the lineage of Puritan conquerors which extends from Mather to Ahab, then to Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. The Schuss ins Weltall is right in the spirit of the trails blazed towards the empty lands and unfenced spaces. Escape out of this low world which is always world and never a "nowhere without anything:" (Rilke: Nirgends ohne Nicht. In the desert crushed by the Kalahari sun, Lieutenant Weissmann had in his officer's kit a copy of the Elegies Rilke wrote on the Duino Cliffs.) The project of being loosed, all anchors cut, finally thrust alone in space [los im Raum], tilts over into the obsession of sweeping clean the inhabited world, making it a tabula rasa: exterminate them all, Kurtz's programmatic cry that, four years later, von Trotha will carry out to the letter. The Puritan adventure: tear out the roots, wrench ourselves away from the soil and its stench, so we will no longer smell the corruption of this place where we are born, inter faeces & urinum. To no longer live on this provisional, decrepit, depraved earth, but following "the gigantic cry which rises from the earth," fly away towards "a space without a world," away from gravity and the risk of falling. The Ahab of the book, Lord Blicero, sings the white rhapsody, the Cathar's song of the tearing away from the shadows of the flesh and the gravity of the history we are buried in [grave]. The trajectory of the V2 00000 is a steel erection, an entire system won from, torn from the darkness of the feminine continent ["won away from the feminine darkness," and Pynchon stresses won: Winthrop], a project held up in order to snatch a form from entropic chaos and dispersion [scatterbrained Nature]. I want, says one of Blicero's henchmen, to make a breach and escape from this cycle of pestilence and death. Flight which is supposed to snatch Lord Blicero from death. Saved in

extremis from the pregnant earth which he has made into a wasteland of ossuaries and charnel houses.<sup>7</sup>

"father Time & mother Species"  
-- Finnegans Wake

0. The farther he goes into the shifting space of the Zone, the more lost Slothrop the vagabond becomes. Mondaugen's Law stipulates that the density of the ego [ego, egg, Ei, I] is a direct function of temporal bandwidth. If the band extends far into the past and the future, the Ego is firmly in place, but if  $\Delta t$  approaches zero, the Ego, shriveling as it nears the singular point of Hic & Nunc, is, in the end, swallowed up and disappears, whisked away from the woof of time. Two readings for the point which we near as  $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$ : for Blicero, it's the breach through which he is escaping, far from the world of surveyed lands, by taking off for external space [outer space]; for Slothrop, Ishmael to this Ahab, as  $\Delta t$  approaches zero, we are approaching another singular point, the dead still point, the fixed point around which the world whirls, and the silent heart around which the fictional carousel swirls, with its painted fictions, the multi-colored whirlwind, the central point "where the dance is" (T. S. Eliot). It's the point that the double integration localizes--the double integration which allows us to detect, though hidden in the secret place, the center of gravity, or to calculate, given the acceleration, the point of the trajectory where the Brennschluss will occur, which will deliver the V2 to the forces of gravity--and for an infinitesimal moment, the V2 will be neither thrust upward nor pulled down by gravity, but will appear as if suspended outside of time. While Blicero tears himself away from gravity to go off to deflower the vacant sky, the entropic Slothrop slowly falls inside himself. Penetrating the pre-pubescent Bianca, he suddenly feels that he is no longer blazing a trail in another space, but, like a dwarf, he lives in that space and is ensconced there as if in a roomy burrow. He shrinks, collapses on himself, implodes towards an inner space [Innenraum], Slothrop slipping [slip, lapse] off to sleep [sleep, slip from slaepan], Slothrop in free fall then crosses another singular point where local gravity moves towards infinity.

Gravitational collapse: while Blicero escapes through a white hole, Slothrop escapes into a black hole [whale/wall/whole/hole]. The world whirls around this silent point from which no more signals come. The eye of the master, which has watched Slothrop since his childhood, no longer detects him; no radio picks him up any longer. He's escaped the plot. Burrowing deeply, he has left the weft of fiction which has held him captive until now. Incognito, unknown and unrecognized, he walks along the Baltic coast towards Cuxhaven. On a farm to the south of Rostock, on a sultry summer day with a flight of cranes passing overhead, he takes refuge in the hollow of a valley near the river. It rains; Slothrop goes to sleep in a rocking chair on the porch. When he wakes up, he looks at the sun coming out of the clouds to gild the damp fields and the haystacks. In the distance, the cows that someone has forgotten to milk low sadly. Others come to get drunk on fermented forage. Following riverrun, the course of the river, he picks up again the harmonica he left soaking between two stones in a pool. Water slides over the square holes of the old Hohner like a visual blues melody that the clear water plays. Lapse of riverrun: the streams are full of musicians playing raucous blues laments; cante jondo of the forgotten. The orphan of Puritan times now becomes the Orpheus of the forsaken earth. Cut off from space, he blows into his harmonica, and his breath enlarges a space born from him (Rilke). Having skipped out of time, his  $\Delta t$  approaching zero, he "spaces" himself and now begins his dismemberment in scattered fragments [scatter]. Coiled in his arborescent phallus, renouncing the great rut, he is nothing now but one tree, he whose ancestors laid waste to the earth, one tree among the many trees in the forest where the girls in flowered scarves come looking for mushrooms, where squirrels leap in the beech trees. With the shipwreck, the drift, riverrun: zu der stillen Erde sag, Ich rinne. Slothrop's dismemberment as he is expropriated, scattered until he becomes the polytopical site open to a variety of spaces, is at the same time a remembering of forgotten lands. Unknotting himself, he recreates the alliance and celebrates his wedding with the miscellaneous species of flora and fauna. Scatter-pater: he has



escaped "the plot in which our penises were caught." Everything hung together; now everything is falling apart, and Slothrop gets lost in the general stampede of this broken-up space, the Zone in the summer of 1945. He's let his beard and hair grow. He spends his days naked in the valley with the ants climbing all over his legs, butterflies landing on his shoulders. He makes friends with the magpie, the grouse, the badger, the marmot. "Teach us to sit still" (T.S. Eliot): Slothrop doesn't feel like moving any more; his swift run through space has slowed down to a standstill as he slumps into sloth. He no longer has a roof or umbrella over his head: the world is going to take him over, but before that defeat he will be the Ishmael who gives back to the world that leeway which Ahab had denied. One afternoon, in the full sun, somewhere in the moors to the south of Cuxhaven, at the gates of one of the ancient cities that the plague once ravaged, Slothrop, the descendant of a long line of Puritan conquerors, becomes a crossroad. "Be, in this immeasurable night, the magic power at your senses' crossroads" [die Zauberkraft am Kreuzweg deiner Sinne] (Rilke). It was at the meeting of the ways, before the fork, that America once took the wrong path. There the judges placed the gallows of a criminal who was to hang at noon. But who could this criminal be but Matthew Maule? And who is this person with her tucked-up petticoats, this fat gnädige Frau, death prowling about? A splendid crimson erection, and just as the neck of the hanged man breaks, a jet of burning sperm, which finally falls right in the middle of the cross, where, during the night, it changes into a mandrake root. The wizard of Salem has become once again the wizard of dark and hidden strata. The sterile lands of the Puritan enclosure become impregnated again for a new germination. Later, after a rain storm, Slothrop, having become a crossroads in the zone, sees, as does Ursula Brangwen [D. H. Lawrence, The Rainbow, 1915], a rainbow: a stray meadowlark risés from the earth towards the foam of the rainy sky, and it's the sign of a new covenant such as the Puritan tradition has never ceased to perceive in the ruins of a devastated world. Slothrop's rainbow no longer tears itself away from gravity like the trajectory of the V2 00000;

on the contrary, as it leaves the pubis of the clouds, it buries itself in the moist green earth. Slothrop, who "spaces out" more and more, has this last vision, then fades away. Passerby, look for him among the buried and forgotten souls and, failing to find him there, under your foot-soles.

"and a babbled of green fields"

--Shakespeare (death of Falstaff)

Fire. William Slothrop, ancestor of the family, must now hear the chimes ringing "in the frames of the dark belfry." Babbling the hour of Babel [0 Plurabelle] night and day. As the catastrophe  $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$  nears, something in us must shrivel with fright, or else "leap and sing," for in this novel, to this date and without doubt the only one to have emerged from the Wake's obscure matrix without falling under its shadow, the crossing of the singular point brings us back before the fork, before the multiple splitting off that made languages into so many little islands, to the Aleph of an infinity--gravity. As Pym, approaching the white lands of the Pole, fell into a black hole and discovered, beyond the falling through, the language before Genesis, the chaotic babel, here, when a nova explodes and implodes at the same time, there gushes forth on the other side the jubilation of buried voices, the cry [sperm-wail] of spermatikos logos. Flowering of tongues of flame in pentecostal promiscuity. The screen of the little Los Angeles movie house stays empty, but from the depths of entropic soup rises a swelling rumor, William Slothrop's forgotten hymn ("till the riders sleep by ev'ry Road"). In a great many-voiced din, a scream surging from the maelstrom comes across the screen, and the sinister romancero closes as it fades away. Still, Jessica my love, we have seen fireflies at night in the London sky.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Born on May 8, which wasn't V-E Day then, in 1937 in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York, Thomas Pynchon, descended from a family of 17th century Puritans, studied physics at Cornell, where he also took courses from Vladimir Nabokov, before working briefly as a technical writer for the Boeing Company in Seattle. Since 1959 ("The Small Rain," The Cornell Writer, March 1959), he has

published various works: "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (Epoch, Spring 1959); "Low-lands" (New World Writing, 1960); "Entropy" (Kenyon Review, 1960) and a report on the summer 1965 riots in Watts, the Black section of Los Angeles, as well as three novels published in translation in France by Plon: V. (1963; French translation by Minnie Danzas, 1967), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; French translation by Michel Doury in 1976 as San Francisco Cry) and Gravity's Rainbow (1973; French translation by Michel Doury in 1975 as Rainbow).

<sup>2</sup> Une Poste Européenne, les grands-maîtres des Postes de la famille de la Tour et Tassis, Catalogue d'exposition, Musée Postal, Paris, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> All this plays out in the intimate family circle of pre-historic days, and then of the first days of Puritan America. Among the men who met again at Cambridge University during the month of August 1629 (the daffodil season had passed, the winter winds were not yet blowing, unimpeded by any obstacles after the Urals, over the lowlands of Denmark, then over the marshes and ponds of the fenland where Vermuyden and his Dutchmen had not yet constructed dikes, ditches, to the chilly reaches of the cloisters-- "in Grandchester, had they already run out of honey for tea?") to sign the agreement to emigrate together "in seven month's time" to New England were Thomas Dudley, Simon Bradstreet (who had married Dudley's daughter Anne), Thomas Leverett, Boston magistrate in Lincolnshire, whose Puritan pastor John Cotton, the grandfather of Cotton Mather, was the former Dean of Emmanuel College, Sir Richard Saltonstall, and Theophilus Eaton, London merchants, as well as William Pynchon, "Squire" of Springfield in Essex, and a forty-year-old lawyer, John Winthrop. The expedition, led by Winthrop, would arrive in America on June 12, 1630. Among the immigrants, William Hathorne, twenty-three years of age, ancestor of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Until his death in 1649 (as in the twelfth chapter of The Scarlet Letter), John Winthrop served several terms as governor of the colony. As for William Pynchon and his son John, as in this instance William Slothrop and his son John, they were among the first, after 1634-35, to make contact with the Mohawk Indians and to open the fur trade routes towards the Merrimack River, then further to the west as far as the Connecticut, where in 1636 William founded the city of Springfield, so named in memory of his far-off Essex. Past the Connecticut River are the Berkshire Hills. In 1650, while his son was in charge of the beaver trade, William, who had taken part in the witch trial of Hugh and Mary Parsons, had a bone to pick with the notables and clerics when he published a theological opuscle that year on The Meritorious Price of our

Redemption, which was judged heretical and condemned to be burned in the Boston marketplace. He went back to Essex to die (cf. Samuel Eliot Morison, Builders of the Bay Colony, and Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion).

<sup>4</sup> This reversal from fall to flight when the countdown reaches zero occurs at the novel's center of gravity. To my knowledge, Willy Ley was the first to recall that Fritz Lang was the inventor of the countdown classic. Rockets, Missiles and Space Travel, Note 1 of the 1961 edition published by Viking Press; this press also publishes Pynchon, who appears to have used this book extensively.

<sup>5</sup> Halleluia, I'm a Bum!; Jack London, The Road (1907); Vachel Lindsay, A Handy Guide for Beggars (1916); Harry Kemp, Tramping on Life (1922); Jim Tully, Beggars on Life (1924); Woody Guthrie, Bound for Glory.

<sup>6</sup> Poem that we can dedicate posthumously to the "striped specters" of Camp Dora, cf. Michel Jean, Dora (Editions Lattès, 1975, in collaboration with Louis Nucera); reading it allows us, among other things, to extrapolate the whole story from the Calvinist legend that I'm doing my best to follow in Pynchon's work.

<sup>7</sup> His eye riveted on space away from the perfume of the old lands: the night before his last hunt, Ahab experiences his Gethsemane. He has, so he says, deserted the peaceful land for forty years of solitude on the ocean. He is like a city protected behind its ramparts, a fortress whose captain, guarding his solitude jealously, allows peasants to enter from the outside, from the green countryside, only on rare occasions. Starbuck, who senses the flaw, tries to make him turn back and get on the route to Nantucket again. The wind that blows smells as sweet as if it had blown over a meadow; somewhere on the slopes of the Andes they've been haying. Starbuck and the reapers sleep. "Sleep, yes, and rot amidst the green" where last year's sickles rust beside the stubble. But Ahab continues propelled by his great rut. For a long time he has been a dead man [gifted with high perception, I lack the low enjoying power]. He blazes like dry straw.