

## Pynchon's Eve of De-struction

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In the epigraph to Gravity's Rainbow, the German rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun tersely declares that "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation."<sup>1</sup> Even before his fiction begins, Pynchon offers a chilling instance of the supreme Cover-Up, the Ultimate Rationale which, in effect, excuses the human race in advance for inflicting unimaginable atrocities upon itself, culminating in its own annihilation. So long as the brute and brutal reality of extinction can be rationalized or fictionalized as a mere episode of transformation from one stage to another in some idealistic evolution of the spirit, mankind can plunge ahead mindlessly towards its own destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Pynchon's most ambitious work to date deals precisely with the dialectic announced in its epigraph--of extinction and transformation. If Tristram Shandy could claim that his narrative is informed by "two contrary motions"--that his "work is digressive, and it is progressive too,--and at the same time" (Tristram Shandy, I, 22)--the view of history presented in Pynchon's fiction is propelled by the (counter-)forces of extinction and transformation. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that extinction and transformation are the motivating forces behind historical dialectic itself; doesn't their combined interaction perfectly describe the process of Aufhebung in Hegel whereby a subject cancels and supersedes itself at the same time? But by simultaneously negating and conserving itself, by negating itself in order to conserve itself, doesn't the Hegelian subject preclude the absolute finality, the irrevocable loss entailed in the phenomenon of extinction, that "mute and nonproductive death" which Jacques Derrida has discerned in his critique of Hegel as "death pure and simple, absolute negativity"?<sup>3</sup> In the dialectical movement of Aufhebung, what is negated is not eradicated but, on the contrary, raised to a higher level of life. Nothing in the idealist schemes of Hegel, von Braun, or the latter's fictive parallel in Gravity's Rainbow--Captain Blicero--is irrevocably

lost; rather, all being is repeatedly transformed to a higher power. Yet, of course, something is lost, forgotten, passed over; some excess invariably escapes the closed idealist schemes of dialectical self-realization. That excess, that waste which is excluded from idealist salvation-schemes, is the recurrent point of reference in Gravity's Rainbow.

Extinction in the sense of absolute negativity-- that which is suppressed in all idealist salvation-schemes, sacred and secular--is unquestionably a major preoccupation in Pynchon's text. Dodoes and Hereros alike are the collective victims of genocidal colonial invasions. The former are wiped out in the seventeenth century by the Dutch settlers on Mauritius; the latter were nearly exterminated in 1904 by General von Trotha's troops in South-West Africa. Nearly exterminated, but not quite. The descendants of the surviving Hereros are today allied with the descendants of their former exterminators in a joint effort to suppress a common enemy--a new generation of African rebels. Ironizing these shifting alliances between victims and their victimizers still further, Pynchon transplants the Hereros who survived von Trotha's rampage from Africa to Germany, where, far from being raised to a higher level of being, they are transformed into the Schwarzkommando, the slave-troops of the German rocket-industry during the Second World War. Yet despite this transformation, this apparent co-opting and amalgamating of the victim into the oppressor's historical program, the victim's impulse to extinction is still active: "Inside the Schwarzkommando there are forces, at present, who have opted for sterility and death. [. . .] The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904. [. . .] But to the Europeans, conned by their own Baby Jesus Con Game, what they were witnessing among these Hereros was a mystery potent as that of the elephant graveyard, or the lemmings rushing into the sea" (316-18).<sup>4</sup>

Because Gravity's Rainbow presents conventional versions of historical events like von Trotha's suppression of the Herero rebellion in the Südwest, and convenient scientific rationalizations such as von Braun's denial of extinction in nature as the fictions

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

If, in the eighteenth century, the encyclopedist Diderot and his Enlightenment colleagues succeeded in expelling all the old religious deities (and bogies) from the domain of scientific knowledge, they also facilitated the process whereby the work of art was deprived of its ancient affinity with the ideal, or of what Walter Benjamin called the work's "aura"--a kind of luminous halo surrounding the non-reproducible, inimitable art object.<sup>5</sup> Pynchon employs a strikingly similar image in Gravity's Rainbow, namely, the rainbow, to indicate, among other things, the former integrity, centrality, and gravitational presence of earthly objects--all of which privileged qualities have been irrevocably lost through the mechanical, reproducible operations of modern technology.<sup>6</sup> Art is exposed as artifice; it has been demystified by modern self-conscious and self-critical "artists," and revealed in its original sense of technē, of praxis. Pynchon's encyclopedic fiction presents itself bereft of any privileged structural or gravitational center, and consequently bereft of an aura. The book's very title commemorates the sacral nature of the classical conception of "fine art" which Gravity's Rainbow is incapable of appropriating for itself.

For the leading post-structuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, the absence of the Center or "the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."<sup>7</sup> There is no longer a stable "center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions."<sup>8</sup> As a de-centered metafiction which perpetually dis-places its own assertions, Gravity's Rainbow ironically undercuts and undermines itself, becoming ultimately an open-ended discursive play-ground. Pynchon thematizes this play-ground in Gravity's Rainbow with the topos of the "Zone"--the area in war-torn Germany of frenzied reconstruction and re-alignment at the tail-end of the Second World War. There are moments when Pynchon's protagonist Tyrone Slothrop is able to envision this wasteland as a playground in which all the polar principles which animate history are abrogated and transcended, and the Zone is de-centered:

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

Finally, however, modern history is enacted neither in the de-centered play-ground of Slothrop's imagination nor in Pynchon's de-centered text, but in "our crippled Zone" (760); and even Slothrop's own body is, if not exactly crippled, nevertheless a zone of carefully mapped out, intricately surveyed regions which any number of experimenters--forerunners of today's Central Intelligence agents--have monitored since his childhood for purposes of industrial research. In this respect, Pynchon brilliantly dramatizes Martin Heidegger's insight that "Man does not only stand in the critical zone . . . He himself, but not he for himself and particularly not through himself alone, is this zone."<sup>9</sup> There is nothing original, different, alien, isolated, or sacred about Tyrone Slothrop; this is, in fact, what makes him such an ideal subject for experimental research. He is eminently substitutable;

he is always already caught up in a secular, encyclopedic, reproducible network of references and cross-references. He lacks both the aura of the hero and the gravitational center of the founding patriarch. He is merely Raketemensch: a primitive prototype of the rocket.

Having been the helpless victim of scientific experimentation upon his own body, Slothrop is related to other crippled modern anti-heroes ranging from Georg Büchner's Wozzeck to William Gaddis' protagonist Wyatt Gwyon in another American encyclopedic fiction, The Recognitions. Both Gwyon's and Slothrop's adult sexual behavior is strangely influenced by their physical maltreatment as children. Wyatt Gwyon suffers no end of mortification and medical abuse to his body during a bout of childhood fever: "Week after week, he continued to provide an outlet for this conspiracy of unconscionable talents and insatiable curiosity"<sup>10</sup> on the part of his "healers." As for Slothrop, his exposure as a human guinea pig in an experiment in the '20s to test a new elastic polymer later used in German rocket technology appears to have conditioned him into a state of heightened sexual response in anticipation of the imminent impact of Hitler's V-2 rockets. As an unwitting victim whose body literally becomes a playground for unscrupulous scientific conspiracies, Slothrop represents a peculiarly modern fictional obsession with the mechanization of the human body. As the anti-heroine of Pynchon's first novel, V., had been a self-made bionic Venus (who in the end is taken apart--deconstructed--piece by piece by the children of Valetta), so Orphic Slothrop's intimate connection with the Germans' V-weapons of the Second World War confirms Gravity's Rainbow as Pynchon's V-2.

Slothrop's scientific victimage, like that of Wyatt Gwyon, is related to his inherited Calvinism with its closed structures of election and rejection, predestination and preterition. Slothrop's ancestors are New England Calvinists; the earliest, William Slothrop (modeled on Pynchon's own colonial forebear, William Pynchon), wrote a heretical tract called On Preterition which advocated the holiness of the many souls passed over by God when the elect few are chosen. William's

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scheme is grounded in a notion of redemption which he conceived during his repeated treks to Boston to lead his pigs to slaughter: "William must've been waiting for the one pig that wouldn't die, that would validate all the ones who'd had to" (555).<sup>11</sup> According to William Slothrop, some form of payment is necessary to redeem the sufferings and the ultimate extermination of the preterite. This, of course, implies an economic system of exchange which can somehow balance extinction with the transformational mystery, the transubstantial sacrifice of some greater "Elect" individual. (Ironically, the account of William's religious reflections in the seventeenth century interrupts a comic scene in Pynchon's text describing a wild goose chase in which the American serviceman Tyrone helps a German youth find his lost pet lemming--an animal species as prone to racial suicide as the Erdschweinhöblers, or Aardvark [earth-pork]--people of the Zone [315ff.].) Like his ancestor William Slothrop/Pynchon, Tyrone/Thomas is greatly concerned with the problem of preterition. Very much in doubt of his own election, Tyrone comes to realize that as a potential victim of the rocket, perhaps it's better to be passed over and saved from History's inscrutable selective operations where the chosen few are simply obliterated out of existence.

Slothrop's associate in wartime intelligence, Roger Mexico, responds to the threat of rocket attack in purely secular terms: "'Everyone's equal. Same chances of getting hit. Equal in the eyes of the rocket'" (57). According to Mexico's statistical training, no particular individual or race is marked or selected for annihilation by the rocket (or, therefore, by its launchers); there is, in other words, no hidden agenda of extinction--it is all a matter of chance. When Mexico is criticized for this sanguine refusal to pay his dues in dread like everyone else, he snaps back, "'it's the damned Calvinist insanity again. Payment. Why must they always put it in terms of exchange?'" (57). As a secular statistician, Mexico believes only in the relative assurances provided by probability and credibility, not in the sheer possibility or the absolute certainty (or, amounting to the same thing, the pure chance) of the inevitable "truth."<sup>12</sup> There is a kind of comfort--one of the few

forms of consolation available in a secular world-- in such a modern creed of probability which leaves aside the metaphysical problem of divine destiny or purpose, of the deity who all too easily transforms himself into a demon.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

Contrary to utopian Marxist scenarios, Pynchon's fiction implies that the existing exploitative economic and political system will not be reversed through a revolt of the oppressed masses; these are portrayed, rather, as merely passing from one form of victimage

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

Perhaps the earliest example of secular transcendence out of a closed system of exchange can be found in the Romantic theory of art which envisions the artwork as a unique, mystical creation complete with internal center and surrounding aura, and which envisions the artist himself as an original creator-god who is able at will to produce infinite quantities of value out of nothing at all. In the essay "Economicism," Derrida has characterized Kant's proto-Romantic view of the artist-creator as just such a purely metaphysical, noumenal confabulation transcending the materialist, phenomenal circuits of discursive exchange proposed by Marx and Maxwell in the next century. The artist-god "gives more than he promises, he submits to no exchange contract, his over-abundance generously breaks the circular economy." And regarding the Romantic concept of poetic discourse, Derrida observes that "By breaking with the exchange of values, by



giving more than is asked and more than it promises, poetic speech is both out of circulation, at least outside any finite commerce, without any determinate value, and yet of infinite value. It is the origin of value."<sup>14</sup> As always, however, Derrida implies that this price-less value which originated all actual values, this super-signifying poetic discourse which is at the origin of all other discourses, is itself a necessary postulate required by the inadequacy, the internal contradictions of any actual system of value or discourse. Insofar as any value can be considered surplus, it is also a supplement with respect to a void which makes it possible in the first place. "The overabundance of the signifier, its supplementary character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented."<sup>15</sup> In the case of Gravity's Rainbow, harmonica-playing Slothrop's Romantic quest for his own origins, his hidden link with the rocket/phallus, does not bring him any nearer to an Orphic reservoir of Value or Being; on the contrary, his actions merely supplement his own inner void, and ultimately he suffers the identical fate of Orpheus and V. His regressive journey towards his beginnings ends not with self-knowledge, but with his infinite dispersion. "[S]ent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly [. . .]. He is being broken down instead, and scattered" (738). The yarn--both ball and tale, textile and text--is unraveled only to dis-close the Center that is always no longer there.

The protagonist of Gravity's Rainbow is indeed "a fascinating combination of crude poet and psychic cripple" (738), possessed by that "Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (188). Again, like the Calvinist hero of Gaddis's The Recognitions who has been taught "that there was no more hope for the damned than there was for the Elect,"<sup>16</sup> Slothrop performs a perpetual pas de deux with a demonic Center or Other. For Pynchon's protagonist, however, the problem is not--as in The Recognitions, or even Hamlet for that matter--the artist's secret struggle to hide himself in order to escape the guilt of imitation, usurpation, and repression of a worthy precursor whom he intimately knows. Pynchon portrays the other side of the Oedipal situation--the para-

noiac's struggle to discover a guilty secret, some unforgettable, unforgiveable knowledge that is kept hidden from him by some unknown central intelligence agency. Though he never learns the full extent of this secret, he becomes acutely aware that as one link on a chain of substitutable supplements to the void, he risks imminent annihilation by a technologically superior supplement, the concretized product of his culture's most profound repression, the embodiment of evil in its radical symbolic form, western man's own phallic substitute--the rocket. Indeed, the Platonic recognition of the evil of symbolism,<sup>17</sup> and of the transgressive nature of all artistic creation and fiction-making, may be said to be a chief concern, if not the chief concern, of postmodern American fiction.

Pynchon seems to come close in Gravity's Rainbow to liberating his fiction (and one might even say all fiction) from the nemesis of narrative, the western mania for order and control. The digressions, section divisions, epigraphs--all the encyclopedic paraphernalia that constitute Pynchon's text--seem to tend ultimately toward entropic randomness, toward decentralization. Almost as a compensatory effort to reassert some control over his increasingly unwieldy encyclopedic narrative, Pynchon has evolved a more or less identifiable, ironic narrating persona, reminiscent in a way of the sportive narrators of eighteenth-century picaresque fiction. This use of the narrative voice as an overt means of control provides the minimum orderliness necessary for organizing the encyclopedic text which comes perilously close to becoming a free zone of random activity, as well as for the documentation of the detritus of the Empire, the Third Reich. The rambunctious love in the ruins of the Reich, however, the seemingly unrestrained carnival antics in the bombed-out zone with all its familiar landmarks gone, disguises an imperceptible articulation of a new set of rules of the game, the organized deployment of the post-war's covert systems of control, centered around a new Center, as the CIA was to emerge after the war from the older intelligence network, the OSS. The visionary paranoia of the Schwarzkommando leader Enzian drives him to find the new (or old) Order lurking behind the Disorder, the Text beneath (or before) the Pre-text:

This serpentine slag-heap he is just about to ride into now, this ex-refinery, Jamf Ölfabriken Werke AG, is not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order. Only waiting for the right connections to be set up, to be switched on . . . modified, precisely, deliberately by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both sides--"sides?"--had always agreed on . . . (520)

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

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

Empire is conspicuous in its absence here, or perhaps as absence--the absence of a Center. Though the German hegemony has been dismantled, the trace of Empire persists subliminally in, or beneath, the legible text as conspiracy. The secret Empire never emerges directly into view because, like the emperor's new clothes or the machinery of the Wizard of Oz, its power, efficiency, and effectiveness depend precisely on its remaining invisible, concealed behind the scenes. Pynchon's fiction is accordingly haunted by the imminence of a secret Empire with its totalizing gospel of extinction and transformation. Pynchon is obsessed by secular structures of control from above left over intact from ancient sacred hegemonies and newly supplemented by and valorized through the occult legitimacy of scientific and economic interests. By the end of the work, Slothrop has completely vanished, the young redemptive hero Gottfried is sacrificed, and

the audience/congregation witnessing the novel/sermon/film is about to be wiped out by a falling missile so that all the reader is left with is the ironic narrator--his master's voice, the disembodied voice of the Empire, urging us to sing along as we too are about to be dispersed and disembodied.<sup>19</sup>

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

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

Note that the identity of the suicidal maniac behind the wheel of the bus, the Demon in the System, is not specified in this passage. It is not necessarily the technocrats in the service of the Empire who are in charge; the Empire itself is only a part of the entire System. The maniac at the wheel may just as easily be a revolutionary terrorist as a reactionary totalitarian. This possibility is what throws the Empire's leaders into a panic--their suspicion that the client- and slave-populations which they have sought to co-opt have in turn gone underground, and even decided to opt out of the System altogether. The Hereros' program of racial suicide--like its real-life parallels as practiced by Japanese kamikaze pilots, Iranian suicide

squads, or the Jonestown commune--must prove incomprehensible and terrifying to the Empire's strategists since they call into question its most basic assumptions about the value of self-preservation and the deferral of death. Of what use are strategies of deterrence--as a rationale either for capital punishment or for the arms build-up--when increasing numbers of human beings no longer seem to want to buy (or bide) time or postpone death, but are bent instead on accelerating the advent of Domsday or the Millenium, whichever it happens to be?

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

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 1. Hereafter references will be cited in the text.

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

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

"We'll all use it, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend."

She laughed. "Transcend," from Pökler?

"Someday," honestly trying, "they won't have to kill. Borders won't mean anything. We'll have all outer space. . . ."

"Oh you're blind," spitting it as she spat his blindness at him every day, that and "Kadavergehorsamkeit," a beautiful word he can no longer imagine in any voice but hers. . . . (400)

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

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

<sup>5</sup> "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn; with an intro. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-51.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin's thesis of the infinite reproducibility of the artistic object as a socio-historical product ("the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" [ibid., 224]) is occasioned by his reflections on the newest artistic medium which was being developed at the time of his writing--namely film, that most representational and reproducible of art forms. In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon exploits the paradox that film is the most realistic artistic medium precisely because it is the most artificial--using "the rapid flashing of successive stills to counterfeit movement" (407). But Pynchon goes beyond Benjamin in revealing film to be not merely a medium of artistic reproduction, but a literal mediator of sexual reproduction. Franz Pökler impregnates his wife Leni while fantasizing about raping the pornographic film-star Margherita Erdman, whose sadistic film he had seen only hours before in a Berlin theater. Thus, his child Ilse "was conceived because her father saw a movie called Alpdrücken one night and got a hardon" (429)--exactly in the manner of Slothrop's erotic pre-reactions to the V-2 strikes in London. During the war, Ilse is incarcerated by Pökler's German superiors, who allow her to visit her father once a year as a reward for his work on perfecting the A4 rocket. In effect, Pökler experiences the life of his "movie-child"

(398) as a very slow slow-motion film: Pokler's love for his daughter becomes "something like the persistence of vision, for They have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child . . . what would the time scale matter, a 24th of a second or a year (no more, the engineer thought, than in a wind-tunnel, or an oscillograph whose turning drum you could speed or slow at will . . .)?" (422). And of course, Gravity's Rainbow ends with the freeze frame of the rocket just before its impact on the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles: "And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t"(760).

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, Writing and Difference, 280.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, Writing and Difference, 289.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, The Question of Being, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, bilingual edition (New York, 1958), 82f.; cited by Gayatri C. Spivak in the "Translator's Preface" to her translation of Derrida's Of Grammatology (1974; rpt., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), xiv (ellipsis in Spivak).

<sup>10</sup> William Gaddis, The Recognitions (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 42.

<sup>11</sup> As a point of biographical information, it should be noted that Pynchon's own ancestor in the American colonies, William Pynchon, was the first American "meat-packer," and pork was his specialty. See Boston Globe 7:8 (Sept. 23, 1982), "Calendar," 5.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Derrida's distinction between play and chance (Writing and Difference, 292) "For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace."

<sup>13</sup> Thus Enzian, the Schwarzkommando leader whose people were nearly wiped out by the demon von Trotha and who now maneuvers against his personal demon Titcherine, takes cold comfort in "A sense for the statistics of our being" (362).

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, Economimésis (Paris, 1975), trans. R. Klein, Diacritics, 11, No. 2 (1981), 3-25; 11 and 18. Similarly, Gaddis's The Recognitions is also obsessed with the problem of returning to origins and of creating original works of art. The painter Wyatt Gwyon struggles with his demon-originals, and turns to forgery when

he recognizes that to be an original creator is already to be an impostor, a counterfeit of the inimitable Divine. See my article, "The Paper Empires and Empirical Fictions of William Gaddis," in In Recognition of William Gaddis, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1984), 162-73.

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

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

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

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

<sup>16</sup> Gaddis, The Recognitions, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Contrast the title of Paul Ricoeur's book, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. E. Buchanan (1967; rpt., Boston: Beacon, 1969).

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

<sup>19</sup> Gravity's Rainbow actually closes with a disembodied "voice"--the choral refrain to William Slothrop's seventeenth-century hymn sung by whatever twentieth-century survivors are left after the final blast.