

A Short Note on Pynchon's Sources
for "The Firm"

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As a backdrop to the multiple conspiracies in Gravity's Rainbow, "The Firm" is a silent presence on almost every page of the book. A world-spanning net of political and financial power, it has been recognized as Pynchon's metaphor for the political and technocratic apparatus of our time. My presentation of a text which Pynchon might well have used as a source for his concept of "the Firm" will only confirm this interpretation, providing some more clues as to Pynchon's intentions for the use of the concept.

In a book that is of importance, not only for Pynchon, but for a lot of modern fiction in general, Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West, we find in a chapter dealing with "state and history" the following footnote:

R. Walpole, the organizer of the Whig party (since 1714) used to call himself and his secretary-of-state Townsend "the Firm," which reigned with a number of different proprietors with absolute power until 1760.¹

Spengler gives as his source Hatschek's book Englische Verfassungsgeschichte,² in which Hatschek interprets the rise of Walpole's Whig party as the birth of the predominance of the party-organization over the different party-programs. The survival of "the Party" becomes the most important factor in its politics, an aim to which the individual party-members, as well as the different programs, have to submit totally. "The party preserves itself by nature of its gravity" (Hatschek, 590, my emphasis). Spengler sees a similar tendency towards the self-perpetuation of the Party or other structures:

The will to power is stronger than all theory. In the beginning, the leadership and the apparatus (of the party) come into existence because of the program; then they are defended by the proprietors because of the power and of the booty, as is generally the case today, when in

all countries thousands of people are living from the party and the offices and business-deals it gives out, and in the end the program fades from memory, and the organization works solely for itself. (Spengler, 1126)

For Pynchon, this is of course prime material for a metaphor. In GR, he expands this concept of "the Firm" to world-spanning magnitude. He stresses its anonymity and its inhumanity. All of GR's cast are in some way or other connected to this power, be it as employees, as V-men, or as victims (often more than one of these).

In Part Four of the novel, Pynchon sets a Quixotian army, the Counterforce, against "the Firm's" sphere of influence and power. The Counterforce, which attracts most of the "good" characters in the novel, tries to disrupt, in imagery recalling many of the political "poeticized" provocations of the 60's, the "They-system" of "the Firm" with its own "We-system," which runs on the idea of "creative paranoia." Pynchon's personal attitudes come out in one of the passages in the book in which one can hear, almost without distortion, without mediator and without the usual detachment, Pynchon's own voice:

"They have lied to us. They can't keep us from dying, so They lie to us about death. A cooperative structure of lies. What have They ever given us in return for the trust, the love--They actually say 'love'--we're supposed to owe Them? [. . .] Before the Rocket we went on believing, because we wanted to. But the Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point. No-where is safe. We can't believe Them any more. Not if we are still sane, and love the truth."³

His hopes, which are of course always hopes voiced against better odds, he has put into song, a song that might still be sung today at many peace demonstrations, if only it were better known:

Once you cuddled 'em and kissed 'em,
But we're bringin' down Their system,
And it isn't a resistance, it's a war. . . .

(GR, 640)

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Notes

¹ Oswald Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1980), 104q

² Julius Hatschek, Englische Verfassungsgeschichte (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1978).

³ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 728.