

A Weird Death: The Schwarzkommando and the Symbolic Challenge in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Toward the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in a passage closely related to the "scattering" or transformation of Tyrone Slothrop, we find this strange and rigorous maxim: "'the object of life is to make sure you die a weird death. To make sure that *however it finds you*, it will find you under *very weird* circumstances. To live that kind of life. . . .'" (742). Although the maxim is obscure, it clearly conveys an antagonistic stance. Weird death is set against the notion of natural and rationalizable—that is, medically, biologically and conceptually determinable—death. A weird death, like Slothrop's, is indefinable, resisting all attempts to locate it in space (the body) or in time (the moment of death). The elliptical fragment at the end of the passage makes it clear that there is no conception of death without a certain conception of life and the conditions under which it is lived, and thus any attempt to have control over death entails having control over life. So the passage on weird death is political in its absurdity: the escape from rationalization becomes a moment of resistance, resistance not only to any univocal meaning of death but also to control over the transition from life to death.

Many characters in Pynchon's fiction indeed die a weird death. Often characters who die seem to continue their existence in some liminal state between life and death, as if what has happened to them takes the form of death but does not involve actual dying—something "'like death, only different'" (Pynchon, VI 170). And characters who live constantly feel that they are, in a sense, already dead, that they have changed into machinic beings that only resemble humans, or that they hover like ghosts between existence and nonexistence. Lady V., Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas, Tyrone Slothrop, Weed Atman, Ortho Bob Dulang, the Thanatoids, Rebekah Mason—ontologically indeterminate characters are a persistent strain in Pynchon's fiction.

The following reading of the story of the Schwarzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow*—one of Pynchon's most striking stories of weird death—shows how Pynchon makes death a profoundly political issue by openly aligning ontological separation with social separation. The Schwarzkommando are a paramilitary group wandering about the Zone in the summer of 1945. It consists mostly of people whose origin is in

the Bantu tribe the Hereros. In the years before the Second World War, some Hereros were given a military education in Germany to prepare them to establish Nazi-leaning black juntas in Africa, and they also then served with the Wehrmacht and the SS. But in the postwar chaos, the Schwarzkommando have cut their ties to the German military, and are now pursuing a military and political goal of their own. The Zone-Hereros, as they are also called, are the descendants of those Hereros who survived a massacre in South-West Africa (now Namibia) two generations earlier. In 1904–1906, the Germans carried out a genocide in their protectorate to suppress a Herero rising, nearly exterminating an entire race.¹ After the failed rebellion, the number of remaining Hereros slowly diminished due to a negative birth rate. In the narrative present, at the end of the Second World War, the Zone-Hereros are planning to bring their extermination to a conclusion with a collective suicide.

But there are several hints in the novel that the Schwarzkommando verge on the supernatural: that the black soldiers may exist in the Zone only as a fantasy, or a deliberate hoax, or a myth, and that, since they are the descendants of a race that should have been exterminated, they also should be dead. This latter way is how Enzian, their leader, sees them, as he explains:

“I think we’re here, but only in a statistical way. Something like that rock over there is just about 100% certain—it knows it’s there, so does everybody else. But our own chances of being right here right now are only a little better than even—the slightest shift in the probabilities and we’re gone—schnapp! like that.” (GR 362)

To analyze how the Schwarzkommando’s devotion to death is related to their indeterminate position as both a real/unreal and a primitive/modern community, I read the story through Jean Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange. In *L’échange symbolique et la mort*, Baudrillard traces the genealogy of the modern notion of death, and formulates the difference between modern and premodern notions of death in terms of exchange. In Baudrillard’s analysis, exchange is both a socioeconomic practice and a mode of thinking. He parallels the historical emergence of modern political economy and coded exchange value with the strict ontological separation of life and death characteristic of the modern era, and argues that the notion of death as mere negativity (nonvalue) in relation to the positivity of life is due to repression. What is repressed is the social dimension of death that was still prevalent in premodern communities, where death was conceived not so much as a biological event but rather as a social one. Baudrillard

sees an intrinsic bond between the continuity or reciprocity of life and death characteristic of premodern communities and the social institution of the gift exchange. Collectively and symbolically articulated, death emerged as a form of gift exchange, as something given and received (ESM 203). In the modern era characterized by death's gradual disappearance from social life, the elements of subversion and return associated with death still betray this older form of exchange.

From this perspective, the death mission of the Hereros in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be seen as a symbolic gift of death—a symbolic offering with which they return the death imposed on the Hereros in Africa to the heart of the empire. The collective-suicide mission of the Zone-Hereros has often been seen as an outcome of colonialism and a tragic submission to death-promoting European culture. Deborah Madsen, for example, sees the Hereros in the Zone as “tak[ing] to its extreme the colonial project of abjection: in the absence of the colonizer, they colonize, subject and deny or erase themselves” (39). But conceived as a symbolic offering, the death mission becomes a more ambiguous project. By deliberately risking their lives, the Zone-Hereros make death a challenge to the power structures of the Zone, a symbolic wager with the highest possible stakes, life. In the story of the Schwarzkommando, Pynchon has made this symbolic death-pact also a cultural and historical one, for it involves both the symbolic debt colonialism has entailed on Europe and the challenge death represents in relation to social power.

In the Zone, in the postwar chaos in which the new social and political order of Europe has just begun to take shape, the Zone-Hereros are outcasts. Doomed to perish, they have made death their only mission in life. Or is it the other way round: are the Zone-Hereros a marginal community because of their exceptional relation to death? The Schwarzkommando's death mission is not only a sad story about colonialism and the infliction of European death-promoting culture on the Hereros. It conveys a critical rethinking of the modern conception of death and its historical and cultural determinations.

“Where are the Hereros Tonight?”

The Schwarzkommando seem to come out of nowhere. They enter the narrative as a myth invented by Allied intelligence for purposes of psychological warfare. A fake film made by Operation Black Wing and at least one propaganda broadcast are intended to frighten Germans with the threat of alien, specifically black, military troops in their midst. The basis in reality (“real Africans” “indeed in Germany” [GR 74]) of the Schwarzkommando (“no one is sure who suggested the name” [75]) is

a mere pretext. The mythic element is paramount from the beginning. Myron Grunton, one of the fathers of the myth, wants at first to name the imaginary threat "'Wütende Heer,' that company of spirits who ride the heaths of the sky in furious hunt" (75). Psychical researchers at PISCES will later believe that the Schwarzkommando were "summoned, in the way demons may be [. . .] called up to the light of day" by a magic "spell" (275-76).

In the occupied Zone of Central Germany in the summer of 1945, it turns out that the Schwarzkommando are a group of Africans, formerly troops of the German Army, "somehow active in the secret-weapons program" (74), but "a people now" (315). Soldiers and civilians, they live in the mountains around Nordhausen and Bleicheröde in "several underground communities [. . .] known collectively as the Erdschweinhöhle" (315). Their aim is to work out their collective destiny. But, as always in Pynchon's quest stories, the search is everything, and the goal vanishes somewhere along the way.

Back in South-West Africa, the Hereros' aim was collective suicide after the failed rebellion against their German colonial masters. In practice this meant racial extermination through a negative birth rate. In the Zone, the descendants of Hereros brought to Europe by German missionaries and soldiers as well as those brought more recently by the Nazis continue this extermination in another way. The assembly of a rocket of their own becomes a symbol of this collective project, but in what form is open to question, since the launch of the rocket they deploy at the end of the novel is never narrated. Will that rocket take them to the Moon, from where death came to the world "in mythical times," to learn "the Moon's true message [. . .] at last" (322)? or will it blow them all up and finish "a collective history fully lived" (318)? Or will it somehow do both? A radical minority of the Zone-Hereros, the Otukungurua or Empty Ones, have openly "opted for sterility and death" (316) by performing abortions, provoking miscarriages and practicing homoerotic and other nonreproductive sex. The Schwarzkommando leader, Enzian, dreams of "the Center," a place of stillness beyond time and history, as their true destiny (318-19). However diverse or paradoxically similar their aspirations, the Zone-Hereros are engaged in what the narrator describes as a "political struggle" (316). This struggle has several layers. First, it is the struggle of those whom history and the present have forgotten.

In the wake of cultural, technological and political modernization, Baudrillard argues, death has become more and more a social exile, a realm strictly separated from life, seen in terms of negativity and finality. The modern conception of death is characterized by individualization (death cannot be shared; it is something that everyone

has to face alone), medicalization (death is defined as a biological event), naturalization (death being natural, everyone is entitled to a life of just duration and to a society that can guarantee it), and exterritorialization (the site of death is displaced from home to hospital, and the sick and the dying disappear from public space). This social exile of death also means the exclusion of the dead. The dead have no place in modern society and its functioning; during the modern era the physical place and the mental space for the dead have been gradually vanishing (ESM 195). The sick, the mentally disturbed, the criminal all have their places in modern society and in the modern metropolis, but the dead have none. The dead disappear, Baudrillard argues, because being dead is seen as not normal; it is a deviance that cannot be cured (196).² The Schwarzkommando and the other Erdschweinhöhlens, who may or may not really exist in the Zone, occupy this culturally and physically impossible place of the dead.

Looking for a death that is collective and in many respects indefinable (for what does biological or natural death mean to a community that may not exist at all?), the Zone-Hereros also represent a tradition in which the passage from life to death is primarily symbolic. To Baudrillard the crucial distinction between modern culture and primitive cultures is that death in the latter is always defined as a social relation. In primitive cultures, he argues, death is never “natural,” but a social, public, collective event, a ritually ordered process in which the biological event of dying is of secondary importance because the actual change of status takes place in the symbolic—in the realm of symbolically articulated social relations. The irreversibility, objectivity and exactitude of biological death are characteristics created by modern science, and specific to our own culture (ESM 243). The social dimension of death emerges in modern society only in perverted forms—violence, suicide, accidents, catastrophes—that require a collective and symbolic response. Whenever death escapes the rationality of natural death, it turns into a public affair (251–52).

With Pynchon as with Baudrillard, we are not dealing with traditional anthropology but with a “hypothetical primitivism,” which is used as an “open space where one [can] think alternative forms of living” (Levin 21). This space is no doubt utopian, but it proves fruitful when thought in relation to a writer like Pynchon, whose fiction is pervaded by the loss of distinctions and by “the radical-thought-plausible-violation-of-reality” (GR 704). What unites Baudrillard’s “utopia of the symbolic” (ESM 220) and Pynchon’s alternative worlds is that, in both, death is not a separate realm but forms a continuity with life.³

Death as a Gift

It was a simple choice for the Hereros, between two kinds of death: tribal death, or Christian death. Tribal death made sense. Christian death made none at all. It seemed an exercise they did not need. (GR 318)

After the rebellion of 1904–1906 in South-West Africa, during which sixty percent of the Hereros were killed (323), the diminishing population of the survivors seem to have chosen a voluntary death in opposition to the Christian death taught by missionaries. Whereas tribal death is collective suicide, Christian death can be inferred from the context to involve, as it has traditionally involved, personally dedicating one's life to the Christian God in hope of individual salvation in the afterlife. What is the purpose of the Hereros' choice, of using their own death as a response to systematic extermination by Europeans?

Theodore Kharpertian answers that Pynchon's narrator "proposes the existence of irrational, 'sinister' motives of 'a tribal mind at work,' which effects through suicide a hopeless, violent repudiation of European manners and morals." To the Hereros, according to Kharpertian, the choice of tribal death is a "paradoxical affirmation" (116): rather than accept the death that awaits them in the German colonies, the Hereros die voluntarily. From the perspective of Baudrillardian symbolic exchange, however, this affirmation is actually an offering.

In cultures that do not share our conception of death—the cultures we call primitive—the terms "life" and "death," Baudrillard observes, are not mutually exclusive. Being dead does not mean being nonexistent. The dead are indeed different from the living, and thus require certain ritual precautions,⁴ but they exist in the midst of the living. Being visible (living) and being invisible (dead) are only two possible states of a person. The dead are considered a distinct but integrated element within the primitive *socius* (ESM 205). So is it with Pynchon's Hereros, who, as Edwin Treacle remarks, "'carry on business every day with their ancestors. The dead are as real as the living'" (GR 153). In the Zone the symbolic place of the ancestors is recalled by the Empty Ones, who signify their commitment to tribal death with a "knotless strip of leather," a reminder of the ritual untying of the birth-knot, back in South-West Africa, of each soul lost to the tribe through conversion to Christianity—"a bit of the old symbolism they have found useful" (316).

Pynchon's Hereros are also linked to primitive communities documented in anthropological studies by the role of death as a symbolic response. In explaining why the Hereros conceive tribal

suicide as an act of political struggle, Steven Weisenburger quotes Hendrik Luttig's *Religious System and Social Organization of the Herero*, according to which the act of suicide is a kind of "blood vengeance": "A person who commits suicide . . . is also actuated by the thought that the dead are capable of bringing about evil and death more effectively than the living" (qtd. in Weisenburger 162). An incident in "Mondaugen's Story" in *V.*, where Pynchon describes the genocide of the Hereros for the first time, also hints at this phenomenon:

[T]hey came upon an old woman digging wild onions at the side of the road. A trooper named Konig jumped down off his horse and shot her dead: but before he pulled the trigger he put the muzzle against her forehead and said, "I am going to kill you." She looked up and said, "I thank you." Later, toward dusk, there was one Herero girl, sixteen or seventeen years old for the platoon; and Firelily's rider was last. After he'd had her he must have hesitated a moment between sidearm and bayonet. She actually smiled then; pointed to both, and began to shift her hips lazily in the dust. He used both. (264)

Conceived as blood vengeance, voluntary dying is not a form of submission, but a guarantee that the imbalance of power can be redressed on another level.

Baudrillard formulates the difference between primitive and modern cultures in terms of exchange. While modern society is dominated by the logic of equivalence (exchange value), primitive cultures are dominated by the logic of reversibility, or *symbolic* exchange. Reversibility, or reciprocity, is crystallized in the primitive gift-exchange, in which certain objects circulate endlessly within the community as gifts. Anthropological theories of the gift, most notably Marcel Mauss's, usually distinguish two kinds of exchange. The first is the economic exchange of useful goods. The second, often not clearly distinguishable from the first, is a system of exchanges conceived as reciprocal obligations which include all aspects of social life. Baudrillard observes that a characteristic of the primitive exchange institution (*potlatch*, *kula*) is constant reversion: every gift is always reciprocated with a counter-gift, which offsets its value, so that all gifts are always already counter-gifts, parts of a symbolic exchange that leaves no value untouched (ESM 291–92).

Death, too, is a gift that is symbolically given and received within the community, and it unites the living with the dead through two kinds of symbolic practices: sacrifices and initiation rites. The sacrifice is an offering to the gods or the forefathers intended to acknowledge and

reciprocate a benefit or to solicit a benefit. In the other kind of exchange with the dead, the initiate experiences symbolic death and rebirth. In primitive communities natural birth is conceived as a gift which, if not reciprocated, will cause a dangerous disorder in the form of a symbolic death. Therefore the inequation between life and death must be solved by the initiation rite, in which the life of the initiated is symbolically given back to death (ESM 203). This rite is reciprocal: after the symbolic death, the initiate receives new life as a social being.⁵

By the logic of the gift, then, the voluntary dying of the Hereros in both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* is a self-sacrifice, a symbolic *gift of death*. Such an offering is also a challenge, because according to symbolic thinking a gift always has to be returned, reciprocated with a similar gift. In *Gravity's Rainbow* this challenge is apparent in South-West Africa, when something is required from the white colonists, something they do not quite understand:

Some of the more rational men of medicine attributed the Herero birth decline to a deficiency of Vitamin E in the diet—others to poor chances of fertilization given the peculiarly long and narrow uterus of the Herero female. But underneath all this reasonable talk, this scientific speculating, no white Afrikaner could quite put down the way it *felt*. . . . Something sinister was moving out in the veld: he was beginning to look at their faces, especially those of the women, lined beyond the thorn fences, and he knew beyond logical proof: there was a tribal mind at work out here, and it had chosen to commit suicide. (317)

The white men feel only a vague guilt (“Perhaps we weren’t as fair as we might have been, perhaps we did take their cattle and their lands away[. . .] Perhaps they feel it is a world they no longer want to live in” [317–18]) without recognizing the challenge. This challenge is directed against a party that cannot react without risking its own existence, and so it represents a reversal of power. Baudrillard emphasizes that vengeance, neither primitive nor natural, is an elaborate symbolic form of obligation and fatal reciprocity (ESM 265).

“Sold on Suicide”: The Hereros and Europe

The Zone-Hereros, although split off from the tradition of earlier generations, carry on with this symbolic challenge of death:

Inside the Schwarzkommando there are forces, at present, who have opted for sterility and death. The struggle is mostly in silence, in the night,

in the nauseas and crampings of pregnancies or miscarriages. But it is political struggle. [. . .

T]they mean to carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed. They want a negative birth rate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904. (GR 316–17)

But this time everything has changed. The Zone-Hereros are now hardly an African tribe. “[T]he bloodlines of mother and father were left behind” (316), and “the old tribal unity” (318) has changed into a collective of several factionalized underground communities with “an identity that few can see as ever taking final shape” (316). “Europeanized in language and thought” (318), the Zone-Hereros are, like their ancestors, devoted to racial self-extermination, but their reasons are more complicated and more opaque, even to themselves:

[T]he Empty Ones [. . .] have found the why of it just as mysterious. But they’ve seized it, as a sick woman will seize a charm. They calculate no cycles, no returns, they are in love with the glamour of a whole people’s suicide—the pose, the stoicism, and the bravery. (318)

The Zone-Hereros’ African origin and strikingly non-European appearance mark their otherness—a racial otherness associated by Westerners via “the color white folks are afraid of” (688) with death—even though many of the Erdschweinhöhlers are, in fact, of mixed ethnicity. Similarly, the Zone-Hereros hold several, partly overlapping attitudes toward death, perspectives which do not necessarily converge. First, there is the conscious refusal of reproduction. The proponents of this strategy are the Empty Ones, a subgroup of fundamentalists:

These Otukungurua are prophets of masturbating, specialists in abortion and sterilization, pitchmen for acts oral and anal, pedal and digital, sodomistical and zoophilic—their approach and their game is pleasure: they are spiling earnestly and well, and Erdschweinhöhlers are listening. [. . .]

It is all seduction and counterseduction, advertising and pornography, and the history of the Zone-Hereros is being decided in bed. (318)

Given such polymorphous perversity, exaltation of libidinal impulses cut off from the prospect of reproduction, we may see the Zone-Hereros as representing a hedonistic civilization that has come to its end. In this

respect, the Empty Ones have an affinity with the passengers on board the *Anubis* indulging in an endless orgy—except that there is little evidence of pleasure in anything the Empty Ones do. The sexual realm emerges as purely operational.

Theorists of modern cultural decadence are numerous, but Oswald Spengler will serve here as a representative of German thought because he was interested, like Pynchon, in the morphology or “metaphysical structure” (DW 1.3) of world history—history as an organic development, one in which specific forms emerge, flourish and fail according to their own inner logic. His end-oriented morphology, the notorious *Decline of the West*, was written largely during the First World War, and, saturated with turn-of-the-century cultural pessimism, it emphasizes the unavoidable finality of the modern way of life. Spengler distinguishes “culture” and “civilization” thus: culture, always local and limited, is the prototype of every developed human collective, bound by relations of blood, prestige, religion, region, etc.; civilization, the degenerate outcome of culture, tends toward universality and represents cosmopolitanism, scientific rationality, the masses, the power of money and, most of all, a hostility to the values of culture. Every culture has its civilization, the “most external and artificial [state] of which a species of developed humanity is capable” (1.31). Civilization is characterized by a comprehensive terminal quality; it is the final phase preceding a collapse (which, however, can last several centuries). Thus civilization is synonymous with decline.

From a Spenglerian perspective, the Zone-Hereros’ programmatic refusal of reproduction represents the problematics of civilization. The civilized “brain-man” is characterized by mental and physical unfruitfulness, which is a sign of fulfilled destiny (1.359). Childlessness is, of course, not a unique phenomenon in world history. Spengler mentions that it was common also to the last phase of the great cities of Imperial Rome and Imperial China (1.359). But childlessness is a concrete proof that civilization has no future, and in all civilizations it is first explained by economic reasons, then after a while no longer explained at all. The absence of proper explanations means that

the sterility of civilized man . . . is not something that can be grasped as a plain matter of Causality . . . ; it is to be understood as an essentially metaphysical turn towards death. The last man of the world-city no longer wants to live—he may cling to life as an individual, but as a type, as an aggregate, no. . . . Children do not happen, not because children have become impossible, but principally because intelligence at the peak of intensity can no longer find any reason for their existence. (2.103–04)

Spengler even uses the expression “‘race-suicide’” (1.359) in reference to the negative birth rate typical of the great modern world-cities. “City” need not be taken literally; rather than an exact location, it is a state of mind. Unlike “primitive folk,” who can “loose themselves from the soil and wander,” “intellectual nomad[s],” like the Schwarzkommando, are always bound to the city, or the Raketen-Stadt, wherever they go: “Homesickness for the great city is keener than any other nostalgia. . . . They take the city with them into the mountains or on the sea” (2.102; cf. GR 724ff.).

But the analogies between Spenglerian philosophy of history and Pynchonian historiography are soon exhausted. The ambiguous position of the Zone-Hereros as both primitive and civilized cannot be grasped through Spenglerian dichotomies and ethnocentrism. Spengler binds culture to the ideas of nation, destiny, time and history; although primitive peoples are the only ones to persist after civilization has collapsed, they are of minor interest because they do not have a sense of history, and therefore they remain “a mere joint being without depth or historical dignity” (DW 2.172–73). The Zone-Hereros, however, do not represent something anterior or posterior to Western civilization. Their historical dignity emerges in the paradoxical attempt to put an end to history—a radical symbolic act by which they oppose the ideals of civilization from within.

Eventually, all of Pynchon’s searchers become aware that what they are looking for leads to their own destruction. For the Zone-Hereros, however, destruction has been the goal all along, which puts them in a peculiar position. The Schwarzkommando’s quest for death has often been seen as representing a collective deathwish that symptomatically reflects the need for destruction inherent in Western culture, the “culture of death” (GR 176). For example, in the collective suicide of the Hereros, “the suicidal nature of the System is ironically refracted” (Kharpertian 115). In this respect, there is no difference between the “structures favoring death” noted earlier and the Empty Ones’ “doctrine of the Final Zero” (GR 525). Enzian’s dream of the Center and the eternal return, “where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place” (319), also recalls Freud’s definition of the death instinct as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” (Freud 43). Enzian is aware of these analogies: “The Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement toward stillness is the same” (GR 319). The notion of the death instinct is also openly ironized—for example, when Enzian suspects that Joseph Ombindi, the leader of the Empty Ones, plans to have him murdered: “‘You’re a hallucination, Ombindi[. . .]

I'm projecting my own death-wish, and it comes out looking like you. Uglier than I ever dreamed'" (732).

Besides these explicit references, Enzian's past with Captain Blicero indicates that the death mission, with its ironic linking of death and truth, is in many ways bound to European thought. Jeffrey Nealon argues that the Schwarzkommando's attempt to build a rocket of their own reveals their appropriation of the European technological worldview, a "technological order of analysis and death [that] was inflicted upon them and coerced them into believing there was a determinate 'truth' to the moon and to death, a deadly truth that enslaved them to the project of the rocket" (123). This deadly truth suggests not only the rationalization of death through science and technology but also the linking of death and authenticity. Nealon argues that the death-worshipping affirmation of dying that Blicero has found in Rilke's poetry—and passed on to Enzian—shows that dialectical thinking can characterize death only in a binary way (124). Captain Blicero, caught in this metaphysical trap, manages to launch his "angel of death" (GR 760), Rocket 00000; but Enzian's Rocket 00001 changes into something else. Thus the Zone-Hereros' project proves to be, not a mere imitation of Blicero's weapon and the tradition Blicero represents, but more a double and, like so many other doubles in literature, a matter of ironic reversion and death.

If the Zone-Hereros are, in fact, not Others but exemplars of European decadence and the idealization of death, why are they a target of the Allies? The Schwarzkommando's position in the Zone illustrates that Pynchon's use of primitive notions of death in *Gravity's Rainbow* is not simply a matter of different perspectives or alternative worldviews. The question of death is an ideological question, essentially linked to power.

Death and Power

Toward the end of the novel, Enzian begins to understand that the Zone-Hereros' mission is not an isolated phenomenon, but a direct response to the ideology of the ongoing war. Searching for a death of their own, a death whose time, place and manner they themselves have determined, the Zone-Hereros oppose the legitimized violence of the regime—no longer the Third Reich, but the anonymous They, an immense multinational coalition of governments and corporations. Death that has significance only to the community of the Zone-Hereros is unthinkable in a historical situation that witnessed the gratuitous slaughter of so many millions. The Empty Ones' goal of a negative birth rate is also a political one, because it violates the basic value of modern

society, life. During a hallucinatory vision, Enzian realizes the paradox that the motive for the war is not death but the principle of life, in the name of which massacres are carried out. But life, abstracted as a principle, is as terrifying as death:

[T]his War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated by the needs of technology . . . by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake," but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more. . .* (GR 521)

Enzian here sounds much like Michel Foucault, who argues that power in modern society is situated and exercised at the level of life. In premodern societies, the sovereign had the power of life and death; in modern society (the beginning of which Foucault places in the seventeenth century) this social power is more and more directed to the preservation and control of life, to the extent that the power of death is that not of mere killing but of the disallowance of life (Foucault 137–38). The power of the state is based on the capacity to ensure and multiply life, and yet, Foucault remarks, wars between states, meant to protect the lives of citizens, were never before as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century (136–37): "Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital" (137).

As we have seen, what characterizes the modern conception of death for Baudrillard is the fundamental and rigorous separation of life and death. This separation, at the level of conceptual discriminations and social practices, is ideological and, as Baudrillard argues, inherent in the functioning and ends of Western culture. Other cultures maintain that death begins before death, that life continues after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death (243). To Baudrillard the social exile of death reveals the symbolic counterforce that death represents in relation to the principles of modern rationality: unlimited progress, unlimited growth, individualism, control over nature, and so on (245). What Baudrillard sees as the radical otherness of death is that it is one of the few things in modern society that cannot be determined in terms of value.

The "law of value" is a crucial theoretical formulation in Baudrillard. The principle forms a system of coded differences which permeate our

culture, our entire social, political and economic structure. We speak of value whenever we speak in terms of measurement, calculation, comparison, exchange, signification, production. When invested with value, everything can be seen as a parcel of capital—a number of rationally segmented units that are calculable and exchangeable according to a certain code. Thus in the conceptual opposition life vs. death, life is capital that can be divided into segments that can be saved or lost, and death is the haunting adversary of life and the absolute positive value it is invested with. Baudrillard links dialectical thinking about death to the metaphysics of economy, a connection Pynchon also makes in *Gravity's Rainbow*. To keep production going and to make profit, they transfigure death and destruction into productive negativity; but this process results in the constant reemergence of death in the system that tries to exclude it: “The persistence, then, of structures favoring death. Death converted into more death. [. . .] The process follows the same form, the same structure” (GR 167). Baudrillard invokes Freud’s notion of the death instinct in delineating this paradox. In its form, endless repetition of the same, the death instinct is a mirror of production inscribed in the system of values. Death, endless repetition of the same, turns out to be what drives the system and what the system tries to exclude—the system and its double, simultaneously (ESM 245). Foucault, too, points out this power of reversal, observing that although social power is inclined to death, it also escapes all control: “death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it” (138).

In the story of the Schwarzkommando, Pynchon places death against death: the Schwarzkommando, considerably Europeanized, stand in the novel in the position of the double. Their mission is terrifying because it openly mirrors the alliance between technology and death, as Nealon (116) has pointed out, without any abstracted goal (such as life or nation) by which that mission could be legitimated. But the Schwarzkommando have also inherited a different notion of death, a vaguely understood but powerful idea of symbolic challenge. The death the Schwarzkommando are looking for is collective, and as such it represents enormous waste without any clear political purpose: in the postwar chaos and among millions of fallen, who would care about them? From a rationalist perspective, their entire mission is insane or absurd—weird. But this weirdness turns out to be a quality of their misplaced symbolic offering. What makes the Hereros “Revolutionaries of the Zero” (GR 316) is their attempt to reinstate a realm of symbolic exchange in a world from which it has almost completely vanished. This attempt, seemingly doomed to failure, paradoxically also makes them untouchable. The Zone-Hereros, once active with the Wehrmacht and

the SS and now autonomous, cannot be loyal to a state anymore because they now realize that Their control over human life is premised on the illusion of control over death: “‘They have lied to us. They can’t keep us from dying, so They lie to us about death. A cooperative structure of lies’” (728).

Baudrillard argues that, in a society saturated with the law of value, suicide represents an act of fundamental reversion. As long as people retain the choice of life and death, they retain the possibility of a symbolic challenge to the system. This possibility is the “accursed part” (*la part maudite*), irreducible to the system of values, and, therefore, its only real adversary (ESM 273). This challenge works both ways: if every suicide within a highly integrated system is subversive, then all subversion of and resistance to the system is, reciprocally, suicidal (268). Here again, what Baudrillard stresses is not the actuality of suicide but its symbolic impact.

No Sense of an Ending

By the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* it has become unclear whether the Schwarzkommando destroy themselves after all. The likelihood of their collective death seems to diminish as the assembly of the 00001 Rocket proceeds. Yet only the approach to the end of their story, not the end itself, is narrated. We never learn whether their rocket brings escape, return, suicide or something else. Enzian last appears (he will be mentioned in passing once more [GR 749]) in the scene of his casual meeting with Tchitcherine, his half-brother, on a bridge. Tchitcherine, blinded by a magic spell, does not recognize the man he has intended to kill, and the two part after a brief exchange (734–35). Signs of Enzian’s frustration with the Empty Ones and of his possible displacement from leadership have increased. He wants to redirect the death mission from the search for the Rocket and the idea of collective death to the search for truth, the “True Text”; and this search for “more information [. . .] about the enemy, more connections” “will mean more Zone-Hereros, not fewer”: “the tribal numbers will have to increase” (525), not decrease. But he feels vulnerable, fearing that his own people will eventually turn against him: “His people are going to demolish him if they can” (731).

When the Schwarzkommando finally arrive on the Lüneburg Heath, the “Secret of the Fearful Assembly” of their rocket is said to be comparable to those secrets given “to the Gypsies[, . .] the Kabbalists, the Templars, the Rosicrucians” (737–38). As if the curtain had been pulled down, the narrative slides away from a description of the 00001 Rocket to a kreplach joke, the point of which is that no

piecemeal or rational account can take away the inherent horror of the *Unheimlich*, the reemergence of something “we all know” (760). So we do not know whether Enzian and the Schwarzkommando ever achieve their goal. It hangs in the air as a possibility never actualized within the narrative. Seen another way, the entire question of a solution or an ending disappears, since the linear dimension of the narrative becomes weaker and weaker until it virtually vanishes at the end of the novel. The effect of the fragmented narration of the novel’s final passages reflects Enzian’s dream of stepping outside history:

What Enzian wants to create will have no history. It will never need a design change. Time, as time is known to the other nations, will wither away inside this new one. The Erdschweinhöhle will not be bound, like the Rocket, to time. The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place. (318–19)

Enzian’s vision of the Center is utopian in the sense that the Center is a place that cannot be located—not even in the Zone—and his longing for a state that somehow precedes or exceeds differentiation can be seen as logocentric (Berressem 126–27). But one can also see in Enzian’s vision a resistance to history, and from this perspective the urge to find a place or state outside time is revolutionary. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord argues that when time in the modern era is defined in terms of economy (time as the time of production, cut into equally segmented units), any attempt to transcend it represents a threat to the social order. To Debord the temporalization of man and history is essentially political. Time in nomadic and agricultural societies was cyclical—an enclosed space where things returned over and over again—and eternity, as the return of the same, was internal to this cyclical time (92–93). The emergence of the notion of historical—passing and irreversible—time is inherent in the power structure of class societies. First, irreversible time was important to the dynastic succession of power. Second, the ruling class, which organized social labor, thus gaining the surplus value from the work of the other classes, also appropriated the temporal surplus value that resulted from the organization of social time. The ruling class gained possession of the irreversible time of the living, and thus became owners and masters of historical time. And those who possessed history gave it an orientation, a direction and also a meaning (94).

[H]istorical time flowed independently above its own static community. This was the time of adventure, of war, the time in which the lords of

cyclical society pursued their personal histories. . . . For ordinary men, therefore, history sprang forth as an alien factor, as something they had not sought and against whose occurrence they had thought themselves secure. (94)

The emergence of the bourgeoisie meant the victory of a profoundly historical time over cyclical time, which changed society permanently. When the bourgeoisie became the first ruling class for which labor was a value, time became the time of production (103-07). The movement of historical time was governed by the idea of progress. The progress of labor, the quantitative growth of knowledge, commodities and capital transformed the sense of time so that historical, irreversible time was defined more and more in terms of economy. As a result, the historical time that had previously belonged only to the ruling class was "democratized" to concern everyone. In a society governed by economic history, then, historical time in the old sense is no longer available. Or, any attempt to gain access to the historical time of events is by definition revolutionary (105).

The assembly of the 00001 Rocket, "the only Event that could have brought [the Schwarzkommando] together" (GR 673), represents such an attempt insofar as it promises the fulfillment of Enzian's dream of a return to the Center, of opening a space where an alternative way of living (and dying) might be possible. The Zone-Hereros seem to stand on a threshold between two notions of time and death. As Hereros they have inherited a cyclical notion of time in which the distinction between here and hereafter is not decisive, but, being partly Europeanized, they have also internalized a linear notion of time and an idea of death as the End—terrifying, perhaps, but glamorous in its absoluteness. There is no simple return to their lost traditions: "To allow the tribal past to disperse, [. . .] there's no point in preserving history with that Final Zero to look forward to" (320)—or so Ombindi of the Empty Ones preaches. Nor is there any future prospect to cling to. What will happen after the launching of the 00001 is impossible to say, even for Enzian: "Enzian [. . .] shudders at what's going to happen after it's over—but maybe it's only meant to last its fraction of a day, and why can't that be enough? try to let it be enough . . ." (673).

So what is left to the Zone-Hereros is the importance of what is happening at the moment, the act of gathering together and meeting their destiny, whatever that will be. It does not necessarily mean death, but death is the only way through which it can be articulated. All this is enough to make them the enemies of any institutionalized power and to make their existence extremely vulnerable: "'I have the feeling that the occupying Powers have just about reached agreement on a popular

front against the Schwarzkommando. [. . . T]hey're trying to shut us down'" (364).

Even before the modern era, Debord remarks, attempts to realize nonchronological notions of time were suspect. Some heretical movements in the Middle Ages, for example, envisioned an immediate eternity, the immediate actualization of heaven and hell on earth, attempting to realize a mythical realm in an already historical world (Debord 102). The urge to reinstate a cyclical notion of time in a world bound to Christian eschatology and the linear notion of time inherent in it represents to Debord a political struggle—although still within a religious framework. Baudrillard also sees the importance of heretical movements in their distributing and exchanging the principles of salvation and afterlife symbolically among themselves, that is, without relying on the authority of the church (ESM 222). Instead of waiting for eternity beyond time, the heretics believed in the immanence of salvation by collective faith.

The last chapters of *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasize the mythic and symbolic element in the Schwarzkommando's quest. What finally happens on the Lüneburg Heath is simultaneously real and nonreal, actual and textual. To Mircea Eliade, the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world, because it reveals an absolute reality opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse (21). The sacred is real, while its opposite, the profane, is unreal or pseudoreal. The sacred is also equivalent to power. According to Eliade, what characterized religious life in archaic societies was the tendency to live as long as possible within the sacred sphere, because that meant being saturated with power and, through it, being a part of reality (12–13).

Eliade's sacred sphere resembles Baudrillard's symbolic, in which such oppositions as life/death, nature/culture, body/soul lose their reality in symbolic exchanges (ESM 205), which means that the notion of reality as an ideal reference point disappears. This is what seems to happen to the Zone-Hereros, to whom the reality of death, the biological event of dying, is no longer important. Actually, reality has never been on their side. Their real existence is questioned several times in the narrative by reference to their nonnatural (fictitious) status or supernatural (mythic) origin. Their historical existence is said to be a statistical anomaly: "[T]he slightest shift in the probabilities and we're gone—schnapp! like that. [. . . T]hose of us who survived von Trotha [. . .] have learned to stand outside our history and watch it, without feeling too much'" (GR 362). Furthermore, "reality" is a dubious concept throughout the novel. Reality is something They control and manipulate. By giving up the notion of reality—and the

question of the reality of their life and death—the Zone-Hereros exist, at least partially, within the sphere of the Baudrillardian symbolic. Within the symbolic sphere, death is not a separate realm. The symbolic knows neither “this side” of existence nor a hereafter (ESM 220).

In the apocalyptic final scene of the novel, Pynchon returns to the theme of collective death. The preceding scene of Gottfried’s death inside the 00000 Rocket is, among other things, a study of an individual experiencing death. But in the last scene death is, again, a public affair: the presence of death is what makes the audience in the movie theater a community. From Gottfried’s isolated “*Now—*,” we move to the concluding “*Now everybody—*” (GR 760). The narrator’s invitation to sing does not imply nostalgia for times past; it is instead an invitation to enter the sphere opened up by the approaching death and to share in the collective ritual singing the hymn enacts. This invitation also concerns the reader, since in a ritual there are no spectators, only participants. And what is the song about? It is about an open, vitalistic, even animistic sphere, “our crippled Zone,” where the binary notion of life vs. death does not apply: “a face on ev’ry mountainside, / And a Soul in ev’ry stone. . . .” (760). This sphere cannot be mapped: it opens wherever there is a collective, whenever there is something to be shared.

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Notes

¹The story of the genocide of the Hereros in 1904–1906, after a rebellion in the German colonies, is based on historical fact. In this “African holocaust,” sixty thousand people, seventy-five to eighty percent of the Herero population, were exterminated (cf. GR 323)—an operation Pynchon explicitly compares in V. (245) to the European Holocaust thirty-five years later.

²To Baudrillard an important symptom of this profound social exclusion is modern town-planning, from which the physical place of the dead—the cemetery—has already disappeared. In villages and small towns, the cemetery can still be found at the center, in the midst of the living; but when small towns become big cities, the cemetery is rejected, pushed more and more to the periphery, until it totally vanishes from the urban site (ESM 195–96). This process can also be seen in Pynchon’s fictional cities. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Metzger briefly and harshly dismisses the destroyed cemetery “in the path of the East San Narciso freeway”: “it had no right to be there, so we just barrelled on through, no sweat” (61). The description of the city of Vineland in *Vineland* does not include a cemetery, the place for the dead, and maybe that is why the dead in the novel are so restless.

³Describing Pynchon's use of Native-American culture in *Vineland*, Rosita Becke and Dirk Vanderbeke argue quite similarly that what Pynchon provides is

a version of primitive society imaginable as a counterpoint to modern experience, yet not a pure, more virtuous one basking in a glorified innocence à la Rousseau. . . .

Mythic thinking is not an alternative capable of counterbalancing the deficiencies of a logocentric culture. . . . It is merely the product of different, sometimes undecipherable, social processes. (73–74)

⁴The well-known taboo against uttering the name of the dead is one of them. See, for example, Frazer chapter 22.

⁵Describing the importance of initiation rites in religious life, Mircea Eliade notes:

when a child is born, he has only a physical existence; he is not yet recognized by his family nor accepted by the community. It is the rites performed immediately after birth that give the infant the status of a true "living person"; it is only by virtue of those rites that he is incorporated into the community of the living. (184–85)

Similarly, the passage from life to death is

not only a "natural phenomenon" . . . but also a change in both ontological and social status; the dead person has to undergo certain ordeals that concern his own destiny in the afterlife, but he must also be recognized by the community of the dead and accepted among them. (185)

If these passages are not undertaken ritualistically—for example, if the burial is not conducted according to a certain custom—the person is not considered dead.

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