

The Life We All Really Live: German References as Metaphors in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Why would Pynchon, a North American author whose works are all, arguably, first and foremost about North America, use Western Europe (and Germany in particular) near and just after the end of the Second World War as the setting for a novel? To a considerable extent, Pynchon's project in general (not just *Gravity's Rainbow*) aims to ironically anatomize (or deconstruct) the Enlightenment idea that the world could be reduced to binary oppositions and dichotomies (such as elite vs. preterite) and thus adequately described. Pynchon seems to suggest that the pseudoscientific hope of total and unconditional rationalization brings about many problems humankind has been striving to resolve.

In this framework, sociopolitical phenomena such as Nazism, Leninism-Stalinism, even religious hysteria and xenophobia under the auspices of Puritanism in colonial North America fall within one essential category: they were all created or pursued by those who, to quote *Gravity's Rainbow*, "believ[ed] in a State that would outlive them all" (338)—an immortal State. Thus the ironic difference between the two Tchitcherines, Pynchon's fictional colonel, Vaslav, and the historical diplomat, Georgi; thus also, perhaps, the difference between Pynchon and some of his Puritan ancestors.

An uncritical belief in the omnipotence of human reason is revealed in the (ironically unrestrained) desire to draw arbitrary lines through space and time, delimit the world around us, curb our spontaneity and alienate us from one another. A major tool for implementing this intention is, of course, modern analysis. From the linguistic standpoint, Pynchon identifies modern analysis with "the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer." Here is the whole passage, in which the narrator ruminates on the sympathy Tchitcherine feels for Slothrop and on what Harry Levin, following Melville, would call "the power of blackness":

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Is there a single root [. . .] from which Slothrop's Blackwords only appear to flower separately? Or has he by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words. (391)

Focusing on Germany allows Pynchon to criticize imperialist/colonialist practices and discourses. The Third Reich is the ideal setting for an examination of relations between state authority and individual volition. *Gravity's Rainbow* makes it clear that the exercise of influence or power—personal, institutional or governmental authority—to compel others to obey or follow, even for the seemingly best of motives, is harmful to the led and the leader alike. Even the desire to lead or the belief that others should follow or might want to is harmful, imperialistic. Pynchon's oeuvre offers a wealth of examples, by no means confined to *Gravity's Rainbow*: “[c]olonies [as] the outhouses of the European soul” (GR 317), the extermination of the Dodos (GR 108–11), the German genocide of the Hereros (V 229–79, GR 314–29 and passim), Pointsman's scientific aim to destroy hope (GR 86), Mason and Dixon's mapping points into lines and thus destroying the subjunctive (M&D 345), the Wolf of Jesus's fervor about drawing right lines to imprison souls (M&D 522), the state-sponsored demoralization and murder of Weed Atman—Vineland the Good destroyed by agents judicial and extra-judicial (VI 226–47 and passim), etc.

At the level of values, there are no traditional authorities in the United States. There has never been an aristocracy as a historically and hereditarily legitimated source of political and social authority, and never been an established church (just sects); consequently, there is no literal *lese majesty*. In Europe, the aristocracy has historically served as the source of political and social legitimacy and the model of manners. Even when it was forced to give up these prerogatives, it had already passed on its self-justifying, exclusive legitimizing style (the style of the specialist, the specially qualified expert with outstanding skills which excluded anyone without proper credentials from the conversation) to the bourgeoisie, which took its place, and, through the bourgeoisie, to other European classes as well. Likewise, the Church in Europe has historically served as the source of legitimacy for epistemological and spiritual values, as well as a model and advocate (like the aristocracy) for the assumption that legitimization *should* take place and for the style in which legitimization would take place.

In the absence of such culturally hegemonic institutions, the lack of legitimacy and authority—of even the conventional wisdom that such legitimacy and authority should exist—is a central philosophical, governmental and social problem in the U.S. Conventional wisdom in American culture holds that every individual should always swim against the current, against preferred or implied authority—even though those like Gatsby who do “beat on, boats against the current” (Fitzgerald 182), usually come to a sorry end. As a result, every individual can rely only on himself or herself to validate ideas, beliefs and behaviors. In these circumstances, whom do you approach for confirmation lest your thoughts be self-deception, hallucination or dream?

The work of governments and other authorities is to keep us from understanding what freedom is and what it is worth. For better or worse, God has left us to ourselves, and we must learn to govern ourselves by doubting all authorities, must abandon the security of relying on authority and legitimacy in favor of personal autonomy, integrity—“the America of the Soul” (M&D 511) and “the lashed sea’s landlessness,” where “alone resides the highest truth”; “the open independence of [the] sea,” as opposed to the “treacherous, slavish shore” (Melville 148–49).

Pynchon’s project (like that of a number of other influential voices in American culture and cultural history, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Kurt Vonnegut and even Tom Robbins) is a revolt not so much against Puritan ideas as against Puritan cultural tendencies and mental habits. Specifically, to reiterate, he is concerned about the Puritan—and the secularized, sublimated Puritan—tendency to draw straight and ineffaceable lines: lines that divide, separate or bound (boundaries), and lines that connect, bind or determine (cause and effect). The will to draw such artificial right (straight) lines was characteristic of the Enlightenment, the so-called Age of Reason, which overrated human analytic powers and the orderliness of the world they would analyze. Advocates of Enlightenment modes of understanding and description as superior to Romanticism and its pre-Enlightenment ancestors attempt to take control of the conversation and preempt dissent, making their “enlightening” and rational modes of analysis totalitarian and imperial, valorizing them and investing them with authority, legitimacy and intellectual/cultural hegemony. In the face of these totalitarian tendencies, Pynchon declares an intellectual interregnum (cf. GR 294) and offers a postmodern anarchist/nihilist critique 1) of the simplistic division of the world into elite and preterite, governments and governed, master and servant races and classes, law-abiding and

criminal, enlightened and benighted, friend and enemy, saved and damned; 2) of the idea that “*everything is connected*” (GR 703) by predestination, necessity, causation, the idea that everything is determined by external, material causes that form us, as opposed to the possibility of autonomy, of transcendence, of breaking free by an act of independent, spontaneous creativity from the iron chains of causality; and 3) of simplistic divisions in the moral, epistemological, aesthetic and other realms of value into binary categories, the idea that clear, firm straight lines can be drawn between self and other, good and evil, true and false, beautiful and ugly (cf. Whitman sec. 3, 5–7, 33). In this sphere, nihilism is moral, epistemological and aesthetic anarchism—again, an intellectual interregnum.

In each case, Pynchon’s Emersonian conception is of a process of moment-to-moment self-creation—a godlike, ongoing, self-reliant, spontaneous, autonomous self-definition, not bound either by the way others classify us or by the causal or historical background others ascribe to us. In both the Emersonian and the Pynchonian view, defining the self exclusively in terms of where we are at a given moment is detrimental; rather, we should attend to our direction of motion, our motive and thrust, remain in motion and therefore free, rejecting fixed positions and fixed identities, constantly renewing both with each instant. Thus we define (make) our natures by our spontaneous acts as we move about, giving ourselves a kind of mobile identity and mobile invisibility, to be spuriously sighted and located only when mobility ceases. A kind of uncertainty principle applies to human beings in motion too: their position and their velocity cannot both be accurately measured, determined or predicted simultaneously.

Slothrop’s scattering in the Zone can be understood in this light. It is the price he pays for his mobile invisibility. Emerson once wrote that “[t]he only sin is limitation” (C 171); he also held society to be “in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (S 149). Pynchon’s response to authoritarian discourses and cultural practices is more profoundly Emersonian than most critics usually allow. The lawless, anarchic, volatile, antinomian Zone (more Burroughsian than Deleuzian) of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a manifestation of what Melville calls an “interregnum in Providence” (416). In her apt description of the Zone, Geli Tripping encourages Slothrop to “[f]orget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren’t any. [. . .] Vaslav calls it an “interregnum.” You only have to flow along with it” (GR 294).

Analogue of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Zone in other Pynchon novels include the People’s Republic of Rock and Roll in *Vineland* (204–67), St. Brendan’s Isle and the missing eleven days in *Mason & Dixon* (passim) and the “anarchist miracle[s]” in *The Crying of Lot 49* (119–

21, 124-25, 131-32). It appears, then, that Nazi Germany and the postwar Zone understood in this sense are convenient metaphors for illustrating some of the themes most important to Pynchon.

We must also note that U.S. involvement in the Second World War marked the end of isolationism in U.S. foreign policy and the beginning of a postcolonial/neocolonial period. The European colonial empires more or less collapsed, and came to be replaced by the U.S. and, temporarily and to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. This may be yet another reason the Zone as a point of initial conflict between the two civilizations is so important to Pynchon.

The novel swarms with references to colonialist practices and discourses. The major part here is played by Germany as indeed (what the CFP for the conference Site-Specific calls) the "dark specter of the Western soul." German colonialism epitomizes the European "'order of Analysis and Death.'" Echoing a Tocquevillean prophecy, Pynchon alias Blicero declares that "'American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis'" (GR 722). The fate of the Zone-Hereros (more ambiguous after all than the extermination of the Dodos, to which it is likened) exemplifies what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a "loophole" (233), through which some kind of escape from the Euro-American genocide and epistemicide may still be possible.

Finally, yet another reason for setting *Gravity's Rainbow* in Germany was the opportunity it afforded Pynchon to create a modern jeremiad, as Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan were the first to label the novel. In many ways Hitlerism and Stalinism represent for Pynchon the culmination of the Age of Reason, and as such they have to be mourned and lamented. The following passage on "crying," by Shiv Visvanathan, aptly parallels the Pynchonian stance:

As it is argued in *The Sacred Pipe*, by Black Elk, "perhaps the most important reason for 'lamenting' [*hamblecheyapi*, that is, crying for a vision] is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives." Crying is an act of kinship, a healing of the rift between the heart and the mind. In the history of metaphysics the eye has become associated "with detachment, separation, abstraction, rationality without heart." Crying opens the eyes to the primordial vision. When you cry, you cry with the whole body. You reach out. Crying thus reflects the need for openness, for wholeness. Crying reflects a breakdown, a recognition of vulnerability, a denial of the eye that panopticalizes, that seeks visual mastery. Crying restores us to reality. Instead of a will to power, it is a letting go. It is a dissolution of old experiential structures. An admission of a need for vision. When you cry, you care, and politically when caring and crying become part of the eye,

it loses its property of detachment. Crying is the major break from the Enlightenment world. Crying is that act of kinship, of togetherness, of participation that moves away from the objectivity of the Enlightenment worldview.

The passage echoes not only the paronomastic title of *The Crying of Lot 49* but also Pynchon's ironic comment on his early stories in the introduction to *Slow Learner*:

Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. . . . [I]n fact the fiction both published and unpublished that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live. (21)

In other words, Pynchon is not a scholarly tourist who just sits around and leisurely figures what country he should pick next as a setting for his new novel. Rather, his settings imply that, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, we all share something profound and that there are things about humanity that have to be lamented.

I do not mean to deny or undervalue the multifarious complexity of Germany and German contexts for Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*. I am only seeking to locate this interest in his overall endeavor. Some kind of mere area studies is arguably uninteresting for Pynchon (as it was for Emerson, to whom "[t]raveling [was] a fool's paradise" [S 164]). Instead, he has been elaborating a much more ambitious project: portraying the pitfalls of reason in Euro-American civilization (or "syphilization," as Joyce calls it [325]), the ultimate fallaciousness of the Enlightenment-inspired xenophobic witch-hunt against everything non-European and non-Judaeo-Christian in an epoch when even the Eurocentric concepts of democracy and human rights have long merged with the Judaeo-Christian tradition and become sacralized and imposed on others with a religious fervor.

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