

Anachronism Intended: *Gravity's Rainbow* in the Sociopolitical Sixties

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In *Living the Revolution: The Yippies in Chicago* (1969), David Lewis Stein describes a meeting on a Chicago street with notorious youth activist Jerry Rubin during a lull in the convention-week street-fighting. Stein found Rubin "unusually relaxed and friendly":

"I hear you've become a Yippie," Rubin said.

"Well, I guess so," I said. "Whatever that means." He asked about my plans. I told him I might do a book about Yippie and then go someplace where I could live cheaply and write a novel.

"A novel?" Rubin said. He turned cold again. I guess I had given the wrong answer. Writing a novel isn't much of a revolutionary action. (76)

By the late 1960s, a vocal segment of the massive human rights and antiwar movement that had arisen in the United States had taken to calling itself a "revolution." As one function of this self-construction, activists began aggressively to evaluate their own behavior and creations, as well as those of their compatriots, according to a strict standard of revolutionary efficacy. For many of them—especially among the predominately white, male, and affluent sphere that struggled to bridge the late New Left and the counterculture—strictly intellectual activity was *per se* suspect. Even in the manifold essays, memoirs, and manifestos of such public radicals as Rubin, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, and Raymond Mungo, this movement eschewed intellection, stressing direct action in politics, and emotion—bright colors, electric music—in culture. Paradoxically, these writers took up the pen in part to denounce radical oratory and even writing itself as sedentary and ineffectual social strategies.

Consequently, many activists refused to think of themselves as writers, and the youth movement as a whole expended very little ink in praise of poetry or fiction. Though such sixties literary figures as Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Kurt Vonnegut identified to a degree with the movement, literature itself remained always apart. Mailer was "the best writer in *their* Nation," wrote Hoffman dismissively, insisting, "In Woodstock Nation there are no writers—only poet-warriors" (101). The prominent fiction of the period tended

toward either a middle-aged, spectatorial realism (Mailer, Updike, Bellows) or an otherworldly self-reflexivity (Vonnegut, Barth, Barthelme). Neither strain is generally held to have been relevant to the concrete historical “revolution” then gripping the country.

Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however—the central novel in what has become a fairly fixed and influential canon of postwar American fiction¹—was in fact quite specifically engaged with the contemporaneous politico-cultural crisis. While a vague sixties *feel* has always been apparent beneath the novel’s Second World War subject matter, I offer tangible support for the conviction recently articulated by Eric Meyer that “Pynchon’s text is a novel of ‘The ’60s’—not only because it is *about* that now mythic period, but because it is demonstrably *of* it as well” (81).² This essay will trace the evidence of Pynchon’s own political identification with the American youth movement and examine in some detail the means by which his novel encodes current events within its meticulous European forties setting. From the vantage of its 1973 publication date, by which time the national tempest was beginning to ebb, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers an allegorical history of the moment in general and the movement in particular—a reading of rise and fall Pynchon has recently validated with *Vineland*. Central to this history is Pynchon’s sympathetic deconstruction of the youth movement’s claim to direct and emotive action. As both a written text and a genuine oppositional gesture, *Gravity’s Rainbow* works to identify the function of texts (written and otherwise) in, and the textualizing work of, a historical endeavor that obsessively denied its own grounding in rhetoricity.

I

Pynchon’s fiction is usually noted for its broad political sympathies with the disempowered and with “mindless pleasures,” its attacks on military-industrial hegemony and on the conviction “that we are meant for work and government, for austerity” (GR 177).³ Far too little has been made, however, of those few traces of Pynchon’s *nonfiction* voice emanating from the period that saw our nation “more profoundly divided than at any time since the Civil War” (Chafe 225)—a period roughly coterminous with Pynchon’s writing of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (his previous novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, appeared in 1966). Despite the notorious obscurity of his biography and the difficulty of his novels, these scattered utterances place Pynchon quite plainly in the camp of the sixties youth movement, lending the weight of historical specificity to what are usually read as general political concerns. Yet, whereas activists of the period claimed that their real work took place in the

streets, Pynchon offers only his text, which in turn presents its own folk politics of textual production.

Pynchon's new-leftist credentials are firmly established in his 1966 essay, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts." In this *New York Times Magazine* piece about the previous summer's Los Angeles riots (which, with its warning tone, now seems as prescient as it is retrospective), Pynchon sides unequivocally with angry inner city residents. The article ascribes "L.A.'s racial sickness" to "the coexistence of two very different cultures": a vital black community marked by emotional authenticity and brotherly grace, trapped within an antiseptic, "creepy" white world "concerned with various forms of systematized folly" (35) and "full of pre-cardiac Mustang drivers who scream insults at one another only when the windows are up" (84). In this context, rioting becomes the most legitimate response. Pynchon decries both conservative calls for stricter policing and liberal war-on-poverty panaceas like the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency, the former creating greater ghetto resentment while the latter work primarily to usurp cultural identity by "coax[ing] the Negro poor into taking on certain white values" (84).

For Pynchon, Watts represents not a threat to order but, to borrow Hayden's assessment of racial unrest in Newark, "people making history" (148-49). Yet, while Hayden intends this phrase in the Marxist sense of an oppressed people forging its own future, Pynchon seems more concerned with this people's brand of historiography: the textualizing work undertaken by those Watts survivors who habitually reinscribe their own recent past. Calling the ghetto's response "mythmaking," Pynchon claims that, "As this summer warms up, last August's riot is being remembered less as chaos and more as art" (84). He explains how participants have fitted the paradigms of ballet and jazz over the insurgency, and celebrates a sculpture exhibit featuring works fashioned out of the "textures of charred wood, twisted metal, fused glass" that lay in the riot's wake (84).

This same element of the Watts phenomenon captured the imagination of Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver. In his best-selling essay collection, *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver describes the riot's reception among inmates at Folsom, where he was incarcerated at the time. The news inspires a "creative moment" in the prison yard; several prisoners encircle a fellow inmate from Watts, who, with a "gangster movie" flourish borrowed from "James Cagney and George Raft," proceeds to versify the L.A. outbreak: "They walking in fours and kicking in doors . . . drinking wine and committing crime . . . setting fires and slashing tires . . . putting an end to that 'go slow' crap and putting sweet Watts on the map" (27).

Pynchon demonstrates in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” that this sort of spontaneous but highly patterned performance evolved eventually into a communal enterprise of “restructuring . . . the riot.” He manifests his attitude towards this response by designating many of the works in the Watts sculpture exhibit “fine, honest rebirths” (84) —a phrase that at once reveals his radical sympathies and assigns to the ghetto artists the status of revolutionaries. In describing one such sculpture, *The Late, Late, Late Show*—a human skull woven into the scorched circuitry of a broken and hollowed-out TV set—Pynchon ends his piece on an apocalyptic note characteristic not only of his fiction but also of the widespread threats by youth of impending revolution.

Another Pynchon text, a 1969 letter to a graduate student interested in the Südwest Africa chapter of *V.*, reveals the pressure radical concerns exerted in the creation of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In the letter, recently published in David Seed’s *Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (240–43), Pynchon explains that he is developing his earlier treatment of Herero history “to work into the novel I’m writing now” (240). He makes it clear that his fictional deployment of this material—which he calls “vitaly important to people’s understanding of what’s going on in the world these days” (243)—will be calculated in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to comment on current events: “I feel personally that the number done on the Herero head by the Germans is the same number . . . now being done on the Buddhist head in Vietnam by the Christianity [sic] minority in Saigon and their advisors: the imposition of a culture valuing analysis and differentiation on a culture that valued unity and integration” (241). He sides with the colonial victims here in distinctly countercultural terms, celebrating their anti-rational sense of being “integrated into everything, like mystics in deep trances or people up on acid” (242). In forging this psychic link between the Vietnamese and acid-heads, Pynchon implies a political link, thus borrowing a frequent rhetorical tactic from sixties radicals, who insisted on their status as victims of an oppressive American establishment. Moreover, the site he chooses to illustrate this cultural imposition is the Herero village, based on the “yang/yin diagram . . . the whole thing oriented like a mandala on the points of the compass, each direction having a special meaning.” As he did in his account of Watts, Pynchon here attributes inherent political significance to a *textual* pattern—that is, to a structure wherein meaning is produced through the arrangement of elements. Western imperial power then plays the role of insensitive critic, “set[ting] up dichotomies, bust[ing] up that unity, creat[ing] categories” (241). Of course, by encoding this destructive drama within the experimentally evasive *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon

not only acknowledges the political value of intuitive texts; he himself employs textual means to resist the tyranny of the rational.

Pynchon's most explicit identification with New Left thought during this period comes in a blurb he wrote for the 1974 paperback edition of Kirkpatrick Sale's scholarly and sympathetic *SDS* (1973), calling it "the first great history of the American Prerevolution . . . a source of clarity, energy and sanity for anyone trying to survive the Nixonian reaction" (rpt. Mead 44). Merely by offering this endorsement, Pynchon was asserting the centrality of texts to the Nixon-era radical endeavor. Covertly, he was also acknowledging the centrality of that endeavor and its specific politics in *his* text of the moment. Appearing at roughly the same time as *Gravity's Rainbow*, this blurb points to the prevalence of contemporary political concerns in Pynchon's mind as he was completing his magnum opus. Considered in conjunction with his other pronouncements from the period, it compels the conclusion that *Gravity's Rainbow* is in large part *about* the challenge issued by sixties youth to American power.

II

To claim such a particular and overriding referential function for *Gravity's Rainbow* is, I realize, to risk immediate dismissal. While Pynchon's settings typically have the concreteness of a Baedeker, his fiction notoriously abandons all semblance of conventional realism in plot and character, and *Gravity's Rainbow* takes this tendency to the limit. Its comic implausibility of plot(s) and patent one-dimensionality of character have led the novel's critics away from its potential for concrete social relevance and into an almost exclusive concern with Pynchon's postmodern imagination and his staggering erudition. Nearly all studies of the text ultimately center on a cosmological question: do events in the novel, and by extension in the universe as Pynchon understands it, finally cohere in any meaningful way? Even history in Pynchon's work is usually reduced to a metaphor for the human craving for cause and effect—wherein the narrator's deciphering of historical meaning approximates the reader's effort to make sense of events in the text.⁴

Though there are scattered comments in the scholarly literature to the effect that *Gravity's Rainbow* is appropriate to "the period of Viet Nam protest, the black movement . . . and the resurgence of feminism" (Schaub 140), almost no one has as yet considered the novel's specific intervention in its particular political world.⁵ Pynchon is said to have set his story at the end of the Second World War to provide us with a

“revisionist analysis of a turning point in contemporary history: the resolution of the European power struggle and the transition to the on-again-off-again cold war that we still live with” (Wolfley 100). In writing ostensibly about that war’s end, however, Pynchon was implicitly engaging the particular history of the American late sixties, a history in which he himself was taking a vital part. Thus those moments when elements from the sixties violate *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* solid forties frame warrant more attention.

While Pynchon’s first two novels (*V.* [1963] and *The Crying of Lot 49*) are set close to their dates of publication, not until *Gravity’s Rainbow* did the combination of history and the evolution of Pynchon’s own politics enable him fully to explore sixties youth opposition. Of course, as remarked above, Pynchon’s placement of the novel’s action in the European forties is fastidious, extending to product names, to slang from the period, and even—as Steven Weisenburger (Companion) has shown—to descriptions of the weather taken from newspaper accounts for the appropriate dates and locales. Such meticulous representation led Scott Simmon, in an early “description” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to exclaim that, except for the jump to Nixon-era Los Angeles in its last few pages, “amazingly, the novel is narrated without even a *metaphoric* reference to anything after 1945” (64).

Careful scrutiny, however, turns up several allusions to and echoes of the sixties, beginning with the very epigraphs that frame the action: the opening section is headed by a statement Wernher von Braun made before the 1969 Apollo moon launch (1), and the closing section is introduced by a fanciful quotation from that nemesis of the sixties left, Richard Nixon (617). (Pynchon had originally planned to use a fragment from a 1968 Joni Mitchell song for this latter epigraph [Weisenburger, Companion 264].) *Gravity’s Rainbow* also refers explicitly to Ishmael Reed (588) and “the early Stones” (742); plays on sixties slang with the town name Bad Karma (457) and the character name Nickolai Ripov (700); and subtly echoes prominent phrases from the decade—“point of *maximum danger*” (231; Pynchon’s emphasis), for instance, recalling our “hour of maximum danger” from Kennedy’s inaugural address, and “spring of peace” perhaps prefiguring 1967’s celebrated “Summer of Love” and coming just after a reference to the “revolutionaries of May” (281) which conjures the Paris of 1968. And while no one questions the contemporary referentiality of theater manager Richard M. Zhubb in the book’s final section, an even more direct violation of the novel’s time frame comes earlier in the section when a Counterforce spokesman describes for an interviewer his avid pursuit of enemies through the “Underground”: “Between two station-marks . . . 1966 and 1971, I tasted my first blood” (739).

If, as some critics contend, the sudden shift from wartime Europe to the Nixon era and L.A.'s "Orpheus Theater" proves that *Gravity's Rainbow's* entire action has been framed as a film of the recent past, it is a film like Osbie Feel's *Doper's Greed*, an allegorical "message, in code" (535), addressing the historical present. Such coding explains the abundance of material in the novel that, while not chronologically inconceivable in a forties setting, resonates more deeply for Pynchon's readers than it can for his characters. For instance, Slothrop can only intuit the significance of the young Malcolm X and John F. Kennedy as they appear in his 1944 sodium amytal dream (63–65), but the narrator later reminds readers: "Eventually Jack and Malcolm both got murdered" (688). The narrator's reference to German "[s]earch-and-destroy missions, every day" in Südwest (362) and his off-hand description of war prisoners "back from Indo-China"—including Tonkin—looking "light as . . . men on the moon" (132) draw readers' attention to the Vietnam era.⁶

The latter allusion, moreover, employs a simile recent televised moonwalks had made much more concrete. Indeed, the Apollo program—with, from a leftist standpoint, its outrageous cost and symbiotic connection to military-industrial aims—is indirectly invoked throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*: in Leni Pökler's mockery of her husband's desire to "fly to the dead moon" (163); in a stage Gretel's musical reference to the German quest for moon flight, wherein "children who are learning to die" will eventually relocate to a "polythene home in the sky" (175); and in Blicero's speculation that, since America has been colonized and its brand of Western thanatos has returned to infect Europe, "our new Deathkingdom [may] be the Moon" (723).

The novel's firmest connection to its own milieu, however, consists in its investment of certain character groups with the traits, and with the specific political and emotional tensions, that defined various elements within the sixties youth movement. Thus far, this resemblance has been noted only in connection with the Counterforce, which, in its urinary raid on a board meeting (636–37) and its grotesque linguistic disruption of a Firm dinner party (715–17), is said to "recapitulat[e] the saintly assumptions of [Jerry] Rubinesque subversion"—that true reform can come only "from a kind of aggressively seductive subversion of the *seriousness* with which networks of power conduct their business" (Bersani 103–04). Yet the Counterforce is only one of several surrogates for sixties radical contingents inhabiting the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*. A crucial but almost unexplicated group, for instance, is Leni Pökler's Weimar Berlin "Revolution-in-exile-in-residence" (155). This small clique of committed

radicals caught in a clearly non-revolutionary situation offers several parallels to the increasingly Marxist factions of SDS that began to arise late in the sixties. Specifically, Pynchon names their journal *Die Faust Hoch* (*The Raised Fist*), playing off of a conspicuous sixties symbol of militancy; he depicts the female members of the group as mildly alienated by the “*male supremacy*” of their cohorts, alluding to the origins of Women’s Liberation among disgruntled participants in the youth movement; and he draws Leni and her comrades as conflicted between romantic attractions among themselves and the need for a radical suppression of bourgeois love instincts. This group’s slogan, “an army of lovers can be beaten,” like the stern injunction to “Smash Monogamy” issued by the historical Weatherman division of SDS (Gitlin, *Sixties* 395), replicates that group’s ostentatious contempt for the hippie resolve to “make love not war.”

Leni’s descriptions of street action, moreover, are prefigured by those in Pynchon’s *New York Times Magazine* piece. Watts, Pynchon wrote, partook of the quality of dance—“a coordinated and graceful drawing of cops away from the center of the action”—or of jazz—“a remarkable empathy . . . everybody knowing what to do and when to do it without needing a word or a signal” (Journey 84). In the same vein, Leni attempts to explain to Franz about

the level you reach, with both feet in, when you lose your fear, you lose it all, you’ve penetrated the moment, slipping perfectly into its grooves, metal-gray but soft as latex, and now the figures are dancing, each pre-choreographed exactly where it is . . . the man in the black suitcoat and brown sleeveless sweater grabbed by policemen one on either arm. . . . There is the moment, and its possibilities. (158–59)

With Leni as with the Watts survivors, spontaneous radical violence becomes a work of art.

Such street violence as engaged Pynchon in the sixties recurs in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, notably in a brief digression on the Los Angeles Zoot Suit riots of 1943. While historians have attributed these riots to the mutual antagonisms between black and Chicano zoot-suiters on the one hand and white soldiers and sailors on the other (see Cosgrove, for instance), Pynchon puts an unambiguously leftist spin on the fate of his fictional Ricky Gutiérrez, who “was set upon by a carload of Anglo vigilantes from Whittier, beaten up while the L.A. police watched and called out advice, then arrested for disturbing the peace” (249). Like so much else in the novel, this incident, despite its historical legitimacy, necessarily comments as well on the present in the form of the riots sparked in East Los Angeles by the police shooting of Chicano

muckraker Ruben Salazar in August 1970 (cf. Thompson). This level of contemporary reference is reinforced by Pynchon's having his "Anglo vigilantes" come from Nixon's hometown.

The novel's allusions to specifically black unrest in the sixties are by no means limited to echoes of Pynchon's piece on Watts. The Schwarzkommando embody many of the dynamics faced by the black movement that inspired, nurtured, and then split apart from the white student movement in the sixties. As an African population forcibly imported to be exploited by a white nation, then hysterically oppressed when its usefulness runs out and it gains a measure of autonomy, the Schwarzkommando obviously pertain more to the United States than to the Germany Pynchon fictionalizes. The novel drops several hints of this correspondence, like Enzian's decidedly non-Herero and non-Germanic expression "we gonna have a bad-ass time" (732), and this Panther-like description of Enzian's confrontation of Horst Achtfaden: "The others back him, rifles slung, half a dozen African faces, mobbing the mirrors with their darkness, their vein-heavy red-white-and-blue eyes" (455).

The Schwarzkommando's evolution follows that of the American Civil Rights movement, from an integrationism in Enzian's original effort to merge, "Ndjambi Karunga," with Weissmann (100), to a "black power" separatism in the European Hereros' ultimate formation into a rocket troop. Enzian's quest to construct the 00001 rocket, though presented in spiritual terms, gains obvious resonance from the late-sixties exhortations of many blacks to "pick up the gun." This stance was dramatized in the sixties by the seventh step of the Black Panther Party's "Platform and Program"—"We . . . believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense"—and by the Panthers' high-profile armed march on the California statehouse to protest proposed gun control legislation. Racial suicide, the Schwarzkommando alternative espoused in *Gravity's Rainbow* by Josef Ombindi, also finds its counterpart in the sixties Movement, in book titles like H. Rap Brown's *Die, Nigger, Die!* (1969) and Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973), and in such declarations as SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael's, just after Martin Luther King's assassination, that "if that's our only act of manhood, then Goddammit we're going to die" (quoted in Carson 288).

Pynchon's coverage of the youth movement includes numerous allusions to its cultural wing as well. The text magnifies the sixties popularity of arcane and Eastern mystic systems, depicting their use to an unrealistic extent by both youth surrogates and the Firm. A more significant correspondence involves drugs. While the drug culture described in *Gravity's Rainbow* is anachronistic in its pervasiveness,

the critical consensus does not attribute this oddity to Pynchon's sixties concerns, but dismisses it as an instance of the novel's ratification of "mindless pleasures" (270, 681), a phrase, it is customary to note, that served as Pynchon's working title for the book. Yet drug use in *Gravity's Rainbow* is quite complex. It takes on a distinctly sixties cast, for instance, in the mild obsession with hallucinogens. Though the use of LSD in *Gravity's Rainbow* would be anachronistic, the fictional drug oneirine serves as a surrogate. The text also puns on "'L.S.D. . . . pounds, shillings, and pence'" (260), and makes a colloquial allusion to LSD through the minor character "Micro" Graham, a rogue tour guide who, significantly, conducts the adventurous through secret rock passages beneath the Mittelwerke (295-96).

The hippie strands of *Gravity's Rainbow* come together in Der Platz, the realm of Säure Bummer—whose name, of course, translates into "acid bumper," alternative sixties slang for a bad trip. Säure's apartment brings the Haight to Berlin: the drugs and sex are plentiful, the attitude toward money cavalier (438); the communards amuse themselves with bizarre costumes (365-66); "[t]here is an unspoken agreement about not stomping on bugs" (621); and Säure issues his running plea for Rossini's "'light and kindness'" against Beethoven's technical virtuosity (622). At times, indeed, the perfect hippie fantasy assumes flesh at Der Platz. In a liaison with Trudi, Slothrop achieves true Norman-O.-Brownian polymorphous perversity: "no favored senses or organs, all are equally at play" (439). The hippie ethic infuses such minor characters as Felix, the tuba player from the circus, whom Slothrop discovers "eating a banana, and living for the moment" (508). This description immediately precedes the first hint of Slothrop's scattering, his decreasing "temporal bandwidth," a phenomenon that, in truncating one's experience of the past and future, is said to elevate "your present, your *now*" (509), and thus to hold some attractions in the sixties context.

III

The consensus reading of Pynchon's work to date finds it peopled by "questing protagonists [who] struggle to create meaning by the rhetorical and pathological agencies of metaphor and paranoia. These paranoid questers 'read' central symbols or 'texts'—V., the Tristero, the V-2 rocket—in order to develop provisionally coherent but radical historical visions" (Kharpertian 18). In fact, Pynchon exposes all historical narrative as provisional, be it developed by his "questing protagonists" or constructed by those in power as a diversion for the

preterite masses. Further, his characters not only read texts but also produce them. We have seen how *Gravity's Rainbow* weaves its own covert history of sixties radicalism into its narrative fabric. By depicting characters, in particular youth surrogates, who choose to follow officially discredited textual models and doggedly assert alternative models of their own, Pynchon's text discloses the importance of fictional narrative to the sixties radical enterprise. At the same time, of course, the book represents Pynchon's own narrative contribution to that movement.

A good example of the youth struggle between competing fictions again involves Leni Pökler's Weimar cadre. This group is nominally committed to the Marxist text of Historical progression as "events in a dialectical process" (158). In their dedication, these radicals struggle to steel themselves against what Vanya calls "'the forms of capitalist expression . . . pornographies of love, erotic love, Christian love, boy-and-his-dog, pornographies of sunsets, pornographies of killing, and pornographies of deduction . . . all these novels, these films and songs they lull us with'" (155). Yet Leni's *fantasies* follow precisely these forms, first in a racist erotic narrative of imagined coupling with her comrade Rebecca, a "Jewess" appealing in her "animal darkness" (156), and then in an extended romantic vision of meeting and falling in love with her secret childhood crush, Richard Hirsch (156-58).

This latter dream, problematically, develops over several pages into a conventional sixties counterculture narrative, with many friends visiting Leni and her new lover, "bringing exotic food and wine, new drugs, much ease and honesty in sexual matters." This situation soon achieves a revolutionary edge, as Leni's bliss filters into the culture at large, leading the nation's President abruptly to drop his request for an arms appropriation and to cancel the war—"fickt es"—to become "as human, as mortal now, as any of the people." This bloodless coup, we are told, brings "incredible joy," an "explosion of the heart" unavailable in the traditional Marxist storyline. It is defeated by the squalid reality into which Leni wakes from her daydream: "Somewhere water is dripping. The street reaches in, makes itself felt everywhere. Leni knows it, hates it" (158). In context, her fantasy is counterrevolutionary, exactly what she needs to guard against. But Pynchon is illustrating more than the insidious and stultifying power of the dominant culture's narratives; he is showing how those who would subvert that culture often appropriate its narratives for oppositional purposes.⁷

Textual imperatives structure the radical quests of at least two other youth surrogates in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The Schwarzkommando have made the Rocket their "holy Text," and believe it their mandate

that this "Text" be "picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop" (520). In the midst of this effort, Enzian perceives that perhaps the Rocket, indeed the War itself, has been a purposeful diversion from the "Real Text," wherein the elite among both Axis and Allies cooperate in the service of some greater Technology.

While acting as readers of this techno-political plot, the Schwarzkommando summon a mythological one to give shape to their enterprise in the German Zone. The group has its headquarters in a literally underground community known as the Erdschweinhöhle, after the Ovatjimba Herero custom of burying a woman up to her neck in the totemic aardvark hole. But what in Südwest was an invocation of tribal fecundity, Ombindi's Empty Ones have ironized, inverted, taken for a symbol of the "sterility and death" behind their tribal suicide program. This faction has also appropriated the old tribal custom of untying the leather cord knotted at a person's birth when, during the Teutonic invasions, that soul converted to Christianity: "The Empty Ones each carry one knotless strip of leather: it is a bit of the old symbolism they have found useful" (316).

Still more suggestive is the Schwarzkommando's transformation of their current quest into new myth. When Katje first visits them, she finds herself represented in tribal dance as the "true Golden Bitch" of Blicero lore (658). The Schwarzkommando themselves become the subject of lore for those who would follow them, much as did the balletic, history-making Watts rioters. The epigraph to a subsection of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a mock parable from *Tales of the Schwarzkommando*, a compilation that reflects the ultimate reification of these black rocket troops into textual form. In the quoted passage, Enzian, as "Nguarorerue," responds Christlike to the "white engineers" who doubt the data on their feeder system: "'Proud man. . . . What are these data, if not direct revelation? Where have they come from, if not from the Rocket which is to be?'" (314-15). In the Zone of the future, Pynchon's narrator tells us, various heretical sects will diverge from Rocket orthodoxy, including "Manicheans who see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle" (727). Enzian has become a text, and one that can always be invoked or imitated by those resisting Power.

Slothrop's fate is the same. Like Enzian's, Slothrop's quest is text-centered, as he "huddles inside his paper misfortune," devouring documents on Laszlo Jamf and the V-2 (284), searching for the S-Gerät and the secret of his sexual conditioning. And like Enzian,

Slothrop is eventually metastasized into a folklore hero, inspiring icon of the Counterforce, a text himself with an orthodox following and such heretical offshoots as the “Microcosmists” (738). As in *Tales of the Schwarzkommando*, Slothrop is commemorated in textual form in the “Book of Memorabilia” (739), from which *Gravity’s Rainbow* reproduces certain “Items,” sacred retrieved objects that contribute to the composite legend of Tyrone Slothrop. Dialectically, this legend is shaped in part by the mythic patterns into which peoples cast heroes and in part by the facts of Slothrop’s life, much of which itself follows such textual matrices as Rocketman and Plechazunga, the Pig Hero.

The fantasies of resistance Slothrop’s discoveries about the Plot conjure tend to conform to the pop-cultural pattern Pynchon has elsewhere labeled the “Badass—the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero—who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us” (Luddite 40). A classic instance of such dream heroics is the “brilliant Commando raid” Slothrop stages mentally on Shell Mex House in London, drawn straight from the frames of gangster cinema. Slothrop—who has earlier told Katje, menacingly (in what turns out to be a prelude to rape), “got no problems at all hitting women, I’m the Cagney of the French Riviera” (222)—now imagines himself “[m]owing down platoons of heavy security with his little Sten, kicking aside nubile and screaming WRAC secretaries (how else is there to react, even in play?), savagely looting files, throwing Molotov cocktails” (251).

With the parenthetical query in this passage, Pynchon’s narrator acknowledges the limitations placed on human imagination by our saturation in cultural texts, much as he does with Leni’s erotic and romantic fantasies. Even in Slothrop’s daydream, ostensibly as subversive as Leni’s vision of a nation in love, the narrative conventions of the dominant culture dictate the inclusion of reactionary elements of gratuitous violence and misogyny. Moreover, the pattern in this particular fantasy is broken, the heroism undercut, as Slothrop bursts onto a scene, not of fiery defiance or cowering capitulation, but of dully humming machines, tended by oblivious workers in, one imagines, gray-flannel suits. The entire episode points up the complexity of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* attitude toward the standard “forms of capitalist expression.” Here the bureaucracy is faulted for frustrating even our interior fictions, narrative forms which, though derived from the dominant culture, were routinely redirected in the sixties to subversive ends. Yet, in their particulars, such fictions often seem to reinforce the reigning ideology even when wielded against it.

Indeed, Pynchon’s text itself variously indulges in and critiques American popular iconography. The Counterforce appropriates John

Dillinger, for example, a figure "They" dismiss as "'a "common criminal."'" *Gravity's Rainbow* would seem to endorse Pig Bodine's exultant rereading of Dillinger as *politically* subversive: "He went out socked Them right in the toilet privacy of Their banks'" (741). Pynchon here participates in the cult of the heroic outlaw that permeated sixties youth writing, exemplified, for instance, in the youth movement's enthusiastic reception of such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Elsewhere, however, the narrator amends Slothrop's designation of frontier lawman Wyatt Earp as one of the "'good guys,'" evincing an awareness of the violent colonizing impulse embedded in our national myths seemingly unavailable to the Counterforce. The narrator explains Slothrop's failure to recognize "that Wyatt wasn't all that good" by reminding us that "this is still back in the Stuart Lake [a sympathetic Earp biographer] era here, before the revisionists moved in" (210).

With *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon himself would act as revisionist, not only rewriting earlier American and world history, but also working to reconfigure the power relations that constituted the contemporary "Nixonian reaction." Yet even while siding with the youth movement in this effort, Pynchon looks squarely at that movement and at his own sympathies with it. His preoccupation with this subject was corroborated by the appearance in 1990 of *Vineland*, where the fate of the sixties rebels is quite explicitly the central concern. Predictably, Pynchon's ambivalence toward the form sixties rebellion took is etched much more sharply in the more recent novel.

For instance, *Gravity's Rainbow* wavers in its stance toward the Counterculture's complicitous identification with pop culture models marked by "violence aestheticized . . . violence that did not even need to plead its reasons" (Gitlin, *Whole* 197). *Vineland* is much clearer about the dual impulse within the movement, setting the young Frenesi Gates's hope that "'we're really going to change the world this time'" against her friend DL Chastain's admission that "'Is the asskicking part's usually what I'm looking for'" (118). With its affectionate portrait of the extended-family reunion that closes the novel and its palpable contempt for the ideals of G-man Brock Vond, *Vineland* maintains Pynchon's movement allegiances to the messy forces of life. But, as Frenesi switches sides, the novel may also sanction Vond's recognition that "the activities of the sixties left [represented] not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it" (269). Whereas *Gravity's Rainbow* is complicated by its historical proximity to the events it covertly fictionalizes, *Vineland* stands historically (if not emotionally) removed from the moment when "revolution went blending into commerce" (308).

Of course, the most significant feature of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a fiction is its notorious resistance to closure, its stubborn refusal to bring its myriad sub-fictions together in harmonious resolution. Despite the novel's thematic opposition to entrenched Power, this calculated narrative incoherence is generally cited as the text's most subversive element. In fact, however, *Gravity's Rainbow* goes far beyond a merely structural attack on ideas of order. By incorporating narratives that refer obliquely to the specific challenge to American power being levelled in the American late sixties, and by depicting that challenge as one that itself relied on narratives, Pynchon at once participates in and deconstructs his participation in the contemporary youth movement. With this deconstruction, Pynchon partakes of the postmodern self-consciousness that, along with its radical critique, makes *Gravity's Rainbow* so exemplary a product of its period. Perhaps above all, Pynchon's novel contradicts Jerry Rubin's hint that "writing a novel isn't much of a revolutionary action."

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Notes

¹See Ohmann for a discussion of how the academy and the literary establishment have effectively combined to enshrine a particular set of "significant" postwar American novels.

²Meyer has taken the connection between *Gravity's Rainbow* and its "particular historical situation" further than any other critic to date, analyzing the ways the text lays bare the dominant culture's ideologically motivated manipulation of certain sixties "signs" (blackness, Vietnam, paranoia, the Rocket). While Meyer occasionally locates the overlap between Pynchon's critique of the power structure and, say, Cleaver's or McLuhan's, I am more interested in Pynchon's complex reading of the often contradictory strategies deployed by the youth movement itself.

³See, for instance, Tanner 72. Fowler provides perhaps the most insistent account of this opposition in *Gravity's Rainbow*, treating the novel as one massive Manichean poem within which all elements buttress the forces of either life or death.

⁴Such studies of "history" in the novel as Tölölyan's and Weisenburger's "End of History?" are more epistemological than sociopolitical in their concern with Pynchon's exposition of history as a human construct. Meyer shares this concern, but he credits Pynchon with making concrete and *particular* political use of his exposition.

⁵Besides Meyer, the primary exception to this claim is Mazurek, who finds only the novel's Counterforce applicable to the sixties, and chides Pynchon for that entity's failure to survive as a cogent oppositional force. This reading is

inadequate, not only in the limited scope of its comparison, but also in a polemicism that would require the novelist to illustrate political possibilities instead of interpreting and re-presenting actual forces and events.

⁶Meyer too notes the “subtly-coded double-focus” (90) on the Second World War and Vietnam in this latter passage.

⁷This is a central theme of Rubin’s 1970 manifesto, *Do It*, which rejects clinical leftist organizing in favor of creating and promulgating the compelling myth of “the stoned politico,” many particulars of which are, cheerfully, borrowed from mainstream American popular culture.

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