

PYNCHON'S ANGELS AND SUPERNATURAL SYSTEMS
IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

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One of the ways Gravity's Rainbow refuses to cooperate in its own interpretation is by refusing to let the reader be confident about what he or she can "know" is "true" in the novel. That is, the reader is repeatedly confused about which events are supposed to be actually occurring in the world of the novel and which are not. The novel combines carefully researched facts about the rocket program, the V-2 blitz of London, and postwar Germany with Pynchon's own fictional creations. In addition, the narrator swings wildly from being grittily realistic and intensely serious to being outrageously fantastic and sarcastically parodic. Pynchon often makes it impossible for us to judge the significance of those parts of the novel that fall between these extremes. Yet the amount of seriousness we grant these parts can affect our interpretation of the work as a whole. Among the novel's ambiguities are the mysterious, giant, supernatural beings who appear from time to time to observe the action. These beings, especially the Angel of Lübeck, have usually been identified as Rilkean Angels. However, a study of the way these beings function in the novel and of other uses of "angel" imagery suggests instead that they are the ultimate manifestation of Them, the novel's ubiquitous controllers. This interpretation implies that the supernatural Other side is not a holistically unified realm free of the divisions and distinctions made and enforced by earthly controllers, as some of the characters claim, but rather the ordinary system of control that structures the entire life/death system.

These angels (for simplicity's sake I will refer to these beings collectively as "angels," even though only one is specifically termed an angel) appear infrequently in Gravity's Rainbow, but their appearance marks key moments. For example, an angel is seen by a bomber pilot during the British attack on the city of Lübeck, in retaliation for which Hitler began the V-2 strikes against London: "sending the RAF to make a terror raid against civilian Lübeck was the unmistakable long look that said hurry up and fuck me, that brought the rockets hard and screaming, the A4s, which were to've been fired anyway, a bit sooner instead."¹ The pilot sees a gigantic angel observing the destruction:

Basher St. Blaise's angel, miles beyond designating, rising over Lübeck that Palm Sunday with the poison-green domes underneath its feet, an obsessive crossflow of red tiles rushing up and down a thousand peaked roofs as the bombers banked and dived, the Baltic already lost in a pall of incendiary smoke

behind, here was the Angel: ice crystals swept hissing away from the back edges of wings perilously deep, opening as they were moved into new white abyss[. . . .]

[F]or the few moments the visitation lasted, even static vanished from the earphones. Some may have heard a high singing, like wind among masts, shrouds, bedspring or dish antennas of winter fleets down in the dockyards . . . but only Basher and his wingman saw it, droning across in front of the fiery leagues of face, the eyes, which went towering for miles, shifting to follow their flight, the irises red as embers fairing through yellow to white, as they jettisoned all their bombs in no particular pattern.
(151)

Another angel presides as the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima: "At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east, head, shoulders, breasts, 17° 36' down to her maidenhead at the horizon. A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity. She loomed in the eastern sky gazing down at the city about to be sacrificed. The sun was in Leo. The fireburst came roaring and sovereign" (694). These two events, the bombing of Lübeck and the bombing of Hiroshima, are seminal for the novel and for our age: the first provides an excuse some months later for initiating the rocket blitz; the second is the initial use of the atomic bomb.² The rocket and the atomic bomb will be united in the ICBM that threatens the reader and the entire world at the end of the novel.

Because of Gravity's Rainbow's frequent allusions and references to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, most critics have identified these angels with the Angels of the Duino Elegies. Rilke's Angels are perfect manifestations of human consciousness. As Rilke commented:

The Angel of the Elegies is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing already appears complete . . . The Angel of the Elegies is the being who vouches for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible.--Therefore "terrible" to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still depend on the visible.³

Leishman and Spender elaborate:

The Angel may be described as the hypostatization of the idea of a perfect consciousness--of a being in whom the limitations and contradictions of present human nature have been transcended, a being in whom thought and action, insight and achievement, will and capability, the actual and the ideal, are one. He is both an inspiration and a rebuke, a source of

consolation and also a source of terror; for, while he guarantees the validity of Man's highest aspirations and gives what Rilke would call a "direction" to his heart, he is at the same time a perpetual reminder of man's immeasurable remoteness from his goal.⁴

Critics have made a case for interpreting Pynchon's angels in this way. Joseph W. Slade writes, "From the many invocations of the Duino Elegies, it is apparent that Pynchon thinks of angels in much the same way as Rainer Maria Rilke."⁵ Similarly, David Cowart argues, "A looming presence in several scenes, 'The Angel' is meant to remind us of the secular Angels in Rilke that dispassionately monitor the doings of humans."⁶ Mark Richard Siegel⁷ and John O. Stark⁸ also identify Pynchon's beings with Rilke's Angels, and Thomas H. Schaub, although he does not specifically mention the mysterious beings, links the novel's angel imagery to Rilke's Angel consciousness, "a meta-vision capable of binding the opposites tearing [Pynchon's] characters apart."⁹

The Rilkean interpretation, however, is not the only possible explanation for the angels. They, like so much else in Gravity's Rainbow, are shrouded in ambiguity. Pynchon refuses either intra- or extratextually to endorse any univocal interpretation of most areas of his work. In attempting to develop a coherent interpretation of the various characters, scenes, and symbols in the novel, the reader must contend with the possibility that somehow the text undercuts such interpretations or that, by misperceiving some sequence's context or by misunderstanding the author's sense of humor or commitment to some idea, he or she has misread the novel. Almost everything in Gravity's Rainbow can be read in at least two ways; the text and the absent author refuse to supply the limiting information needed to remove the ambiguity and establish one reading. Ulm and Holt make just this point in regard to the angels in their discussion of Quinean indeterminacy in Gravity's Rainbow: "So, instead of certainty, we are left quite uncertain as to whether the references to watchers at the world's edge and such are best taken as a Pynchonian joke or whether they are as 'real' as Seaman Bodine. We can say only that either hypothesis would be reasonable, were it not for the existence of the other."¹⁰ Ulm and Holt suggest as one possibility that the angels are a "Them behind Them," and this possibility can be developed through a reading of the angels' appearances and the novel's angel imagery. If we set aside (though perhaps we cannot and need not wholly reject) the Rilkean interpretation, the angels, rather than perfect manifestations of human consciousness and reconciliations of human contradictions, become the novel's ultimate manifestation of Them, the controllers, manipulators, and rulers of the human and natural resources of the earth.¹¹

The angels seem to take their place with the novel's earthly controllers when they appear on an occasion somewhat

less momentous than the Lübeck and Hiroshima bombings. At the Casino Hermann Goering, when Slothrop manages to get Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck drunk, the two end up on the beach, where Dodson-Truck confesses his part in the conspiracy against Slothrop. However, they are not alone:

But out at the horizon, out near the burnished edge of the world, who are these visitors standing . . . these robed figures--perhaps, at this distance, hundreds of miles tall--their faces, serene, unattached, like the Buddha's, bending over the sea, impassive, indeed, as the Angel that stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid, come that day neither to destroy nor to protect, but to bear witness to a game of seduction. [. . .]

What have the watchmen of the world's edge come tonight to look for? deepening on now, monumental beings, stoical, on toward slag, toward ash the color the night will stabilize at, tonight . . . what is there grandiose enough to witness? (214-15)

As Dodson-Truck complains about the people who give him his orders and define his function, his description of Them seems to apply equally well to the observing beings: "'They're so cruel. I don't think they even know, really. . . . They aren't even sadists. . . . There's just no passion at all'" (216). Dodson-Truck equates Their lack of passion with cruelty. In fact They have misjudged Dodson-Truck in just this respect: They thought he shared Their ability to "observe without passion" (216), but he is humanly unable to observe Slothrop and Katje without becoming emotionally involved. "'I care!" he blubbers to Slothrop (216). For his part, Slothrop, even confronting this tangible member of the conspiracy against him, "can feel, in his own throat, sympathetic flashes of pain for the effort it is clearly costing the man" (215). In contrast, Their dispassion is uncaring, inhumane, cruel. And the angels display this same lack of passion. They are described as "serene, unattached . . . impassive . . . stoical," and as "visitors" and witnesses. These descriptions suggest that the beings have no emotional involvement with the earthly events they watch. And as Dodson-Truck says of the earthly Them, such emotional distancing can be the same as cruelty. To be sure, dispassion is sometimes a virtue; but dispassionately watching others suffer, or dispassionately watching the bombing of civilians, or dispassionately watching the detonation of an atomic bomb is cruel. Such dispassion places the angels with Them.¹² At the same time, the angels' presence, their bearing witness to the exchange between Slothrop and Dodson-Truck, suggests some kind of interest or involvement. Do they, like the earthly Them, have some stake in Slothrop and the Rocket? The angels here are analogous to the "dark-suited civilians" in the "coal-black Packard" (40) who sit, parked, observing the destruction that results from a V-2 explosion. These unnamed men are the first hint that there are conspirators on the Allied side who have a

stake in the Rocket. The angels too may have some controlling function in the novel's structure of power.

This identification of the angels with Them is further supported by much of the novel's angel imagery. For example, Jessica Swanlake complains about the "angel's-eye view" of the rocket blitz in Roger Mexico's Poisson equation: "'Why is your equation only for angels, Roger? Why can't we do something, down here? Couldn't there be an equation for us too, something to help us find a safer place?'" (54). Jessica associates the angels' perspective with Roger's emotional distancing by abstractions of numbers, variables, equations, and graphs from the actual events of the explosions and the actual lives lost. Much later in the novel, when Sāure Bummer's Der Platz becomes overrun with visitors, no one will make a decision about whom to let in and whom to keep out:

Decisions like that are for some angel stationed very high, watching us at our many perversities, crawling across black satin, gagging on whip-handles, licking the blood from a lover's vein-hit, all of it, every lost giggle or sigh, being carried on under a sentence of death whose deep beauty the angel has never been close to. (746)

This passage suggests not only the angels' position of detached observation but also their power of control. Making decisions about who should stay and who should leave is division and definition, two hallmarks of control throughout the novel. In addition, the passage points out the separation of the angels from basic human experience; they have achieved the earthly Them's goal of transcending the preterite's sentence of death. The novel's angel imagery also implies the supernatural beings' active control over human life and destiny. The narrator refers to Walter Rathenau's death as when "the Angel swooped in" (184), and Blobadjian's guide says that angels are among the machineries for repaying Tchitcherine's blasphemy (355). Finally, Sir Marcus Scammony, the most highly-placed representative of the earthly Elect the novel presents directly, "demands to be called Angelique" (615). Thus much of the novel's angel imagery seems to support the characterization of the angels as dispassionate and cruel observers and as powerful manipulators of earthly life, a supernatural extension of the terrestrial Them.

Such an interpretation of these giant beings has important implications for our reading of the supernatural in Gravity's Rainbow. Recently dead spirits who communicate back to the living from the Other side report that the division between life and death is factitious and false; what the living see as two separate states is instead one integrated life/death system. At first glance this seems to confirm the traditional Herero view of a holistically unified system which has been perverted by Western rationalization and analysis. Indeed, some of the

spirits' remarks (e.g., Roland Feldspath's [30]) endorse the view expressed in the Advent Evensong oration and elsewhere in the novel that the systems and controls of the earthly Elect are factitious and arbitrary, manufactured and limiting restraints on a pre-existing "real." However, the presence of the angels (which Peter Sachsa's spirit confirms [151]) complicates this theory. These beings seem to be part of a hierarchy in the life/death system, members of the upper region of a system-enveloping bureaucracy, the lower reaches of which are manifested in the governmental, military, and industrial power structures of our world. This hierarchy of control is basic to the entire life/death system.

The recently dead spirits, although they have not yet reached the stage where they can see and understand the entire system, can begin to perceive such a structure, extending from the system-wide hierarchy, to the controlling procedures of the earthly Elect, to the make-up and function of molecules. Walter Rathenau sees the structure evidenced in the process by which the molecules of once living things are rearranged under the pressure of gravity to form coal. Coal is used to make steel, and even the waste material from this process, the coal-tar, has industrial uses. Rathenau hints at a process and a structure by which humankind's manipulation of the natural for profit and power is an extension of a similar, superhuman manipulation. This process is a part of the controlling structure which Rathenau sees increasingly clearly--and describes here for members of the corporate Nazi elite: "These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the signs'" (167). Soon after his crossing over, Blobadjian also begins to recognize levels of controlling structures:

How alphabetic is the nature of molecules. One grows aware of it down here: one finds Committees on molecular structure which are very similar to those back at the NTA plenary session. [. . .]

Blobadjian comes to see that the New Turkic Alphabet is only one version of a process really much older--and less unaware of itself--than he has ever had cause to dream. (355)

This comparison of the supernatural controlling structure to the Soviet Union's imperialistic imposition of control over the Central Asian people by creating a written language for them shows that the impulse to manipulate and control is not unique to this world but pervades the life/death system. As if to confirm this, Roland Feldspath, a spirit who at first felt free in the holistic unity of the Other side, eventually becomes "one of the invisible Interdictors of the stratosphere [. . .], bureaucratized hopelessly on that side as ever on this" (238).

Although they explain it only vaguely and by analogy, the spirits report a hierarchical controlling structure that governs

on both sides of the illusory line dividing life from death. Most of the living are unaware of this comprehensive system because they are caught up in their own factitious and partial controlling structures. But these latter are only a limited expression of the total (if, perhaps, no less factitious) structure and its processes.

There are many levels of control in the life/death system. Gravity's Rainbow focuses primarily on relatively low-level controllers such as Pointsman, who attempts to control others by treating them as experimental subjects; von Gdill, who controls others both as a movie director and as a black marketeer; and Thanatz, who controls others in the power game of sexual dominance. Aware that there are other people and institutions more powerful than they, these lower-level controllers consciously or unconsciously emulate those others in order to attain their own degree of power. They may not be aware, however, at least until quite late, that they themselves are controlled and manipulated by the levels above them. Pointsman, for example, manipulates Slothrop, but he is subject in his turn to the demands of the Operation. The upper reaches of the governmental-military-industrial power complexes exercise control those at lower levels often do not suspect or cannot imagine. The War, divisions between countries, conflicts between political ideologies and conventional religions are contrivances, their meaning for the preterite created by a public-relations appeal to nationality, morality, religion, etc. that masks their meaning for the Elect--the manipulation of events for increased profits and power.¹³ Similarly, we can conclude by analogy that the upper reaches of the earthly Elect are unaware that Their self-serving operations and schemes are in fact part of a process that originates beyond Them. What They do for the sake of Their own power also serves the interests and power of the bureaucracy of the Other side. This bureaucracy, like the earthly ones that imitate it (or that it imitates), is made up of committees and power levels; the angels may be supervisors or foremen representing levels higher than themselves. The far-reaching purposes and aims, if any, of this bureaucracy are unclear, but we can infer that it, like earthly bureaucracies, exists to maintain and increase its own power.¹⁴

To sum up, once we set aside the Rilkean reading of Gravity's Rainbow's angels, we can interpret them as supernatural controllers, part of the hierarchy of the life/death system that the recently dead spirits report. This interpretation is not the only reading of the angels that the text will support, but it is a possible reading with important implications for the interpretation of the supernatural and the nature of control in the novel. Thus, the Other side is not a holistically unified alternative to or escape from the bureaucracies, divisions, rationalizations, and controls of this world, but instead a bureaucracy with its own divisions, rationalizations, and controls. In addition, the hierarchy of

the Other side seems to be the archetypal structure of control that is manifested in the controlling systems of this world.

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Notes

¹ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 215.

² Also, the bombing of Lübeck was the first of the Allies' experiments in "area bombing," in which large civilian targets were destroyed in hopes of lowering enemy morale. This strategy reached a climax in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See Richard Rhodes, The Making of the Atomic Bomb (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) 470-71.

³ Quoted in J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, trans., Duino Elegies, by Rainer Maria Rilke (New York: Norton, 1939) 87. This is the edition of the Elegies Pynchon acknowledges on his copyright page.

⁴ Leishman and Spender 87-88.

⁵ Thomas Pynchon (New York: Warner, 1974) 183.

⁶ Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980) 121.

⁷ Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978) 90-93.

⁸ Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information (Athens: Ohio UP, 1980) 150-51.

⁹ Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) 15.

¹⁰ Melvin Ulm and David Holt, "The Zone and the Real: Philosophical Themes in Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon Notes 11 (1983): 39.

¹¹ In the context of the Rilkean interpretation, Slade and Stark also suggest the possibility that the angels somehow control human life, because this concern is introduced and eventually worked out in the Duino Elegies. Charles Hohmann (Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow: A Study of Its Conceptual Structure and of Rilke's Influence [New York: Peter Lang, 1986] 317-24) discusses the influence of Rilke's Angels on Pynchon's in detail; he says that both are "inaccessible" and "impassive to the human lot," but

that "In Gravity's Rainbow, the Angel is always an angel of "Death" (322-23). Thomas Moore (The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon [Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987] 70-72) also comes to the angels through Rilke; he argues that they can be seen as controllers only in the paranoid projections of certain characters. Douglas Fowler (A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow [Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980] 125-26, 138-39), in his Manichean reading of the supernatural in Pynchon, sees the angels as a Them, but a Them against Us, an invasion force from the Other side rather than an extension of the controlling structures and forces already present in this world.

12 Note that Rilke says of his Angels, "It would be inconsistent with the passionateness of the Angels to be spectators; they surpass us in action precisely as much as God surpasses them" (quoted in Leishman and Spender 88). This is one specific point where Pynchon's beings are clearly distinct from Rilke's.

13 This is not to suggest that all the preterite are unaware of the power of the controllers or of their own positions as victims. In fact, many of the changes in characters like Slothrop and Roger Mexico come from their growing sense of themselves as victims and of their own participation in the Elect's systems of control.

14 An interesting question this reading of the life/death system in Gravity's Rainbow raises is whether the bureaucracy of the Other side, like the earthly bureaucracies, perverts and rationalizes some pre-existing, unified "real." In other words, is this supernatural hierarchy of control as illusory as are the terrestrial levels of control in the novel? This question goes beyond the scope of this essay; however, I think the examples of Lyle Bland and Slothrop indicate that the control of the life/death system is factitious and that there are possibilities for passing beyond or perhaps submerging into the life/death system entirely.