Gravity's Rainbow as Orphic Text

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Gravity's Rainbow is not an easy book to read. Its language is daunting and torrential. Its hundreds of voices--dialogically compressed and often presented without identifiable speaker--yatter off the page in a kind of acoustical hallucination. Many of these voices mimic the pure, exclamatory speech that might be produced were the "watching agent" to turn in for the night. This is uncensored language, contradictory, disturbing, and rendered at times into not even good English.

The book has no hero in the traditional sense. There is no Jamesian center of value to act as moral referent. With their comic-book names and pop art flatness, Pynchon's characters often seem insufficient to the weight of their allegorical burden, for *Gravity's Rainbow*, in its great ambition, presumes to comprehend contemporary culture in its entirety, while allegorizing changes in consciousness and modes of production and reproduction from the Second World War to the present. The problem of characterization in the novel is compounded when Tyrone Slothrop, its central if not most heroic figure, disintegrates into the mud of postwar Germany, before turning himself into a living crossroads. The narrative itself suffers a similar fragmentation. In the final hundred pages, the text breaks into speed raps and ellipses while undergoing its own syntactic dismemberment.

Critics of *Gravity's Rainbow* have treated the hero's and novel's fragmentation in a number of ways. Some have tried to take the pieces and fit them back together again. They find value either in Slothrop's "transcendence" or embodied in other of the novel's more stable characters. Pynchon is then said, by inference, to recommend some appropriate stance toward contemporary life: be it transcendence or "creative paranoia" or allegiance to the Counterforce or anarchy or a return to tribal animism and its conception of cyclical time. Unfortunately, none of Pynchon's characters can bear the weight of such exemplification.

They too, like Slothrop, split under the contradictions of modernity, and one finally has to conclude that these readings of value in the novel attempt an optimism simply not found in the text.

A second approach avoids the pitfalls of the first by acknowledging the novel's fragmentation, before going on to analyze its social content. In this reading, it is our modes of production and political organization that disembody the individual, degrade relationship into fetish, and otherwise organize bureaucratic support for the technologies of death. This reading is justified by the text, and its representation in Gravity's Rainbow accounts for Pynchon's stature as the great social novelist of our day.

But what elude even this interpretation of the book, and the pessimism of its social analysis, are the tangible affirmations of life that exist in Gravity's Rainbow. Opposed to social control and fetishism are the redemptive moments in the novel, when it breaks into song and dance, speaks in tongues and imagines with Dionysian enthusiasm a world other than the Apollonian present. Beyond exemplary and social readings of the novel, there is a third, one might call it esoteric, approach that embraces the book's ambiguity. This reading looks for value among the novel's fragments and asserts that in fragmentation itself Pynchon finds value. Given the crisis of the moment, he yearns for a more radical separation from the present than most of his critics are capable of imagining. This is what often remains misunderstood in the casual description of Pynchon as an apocalyptic writer.

Apocalypse is for him a profound hope, a chance to awaken from the nightmare of history. This is an aspiration voiced explicitly by many of the characters in Gravity's Rainbow--the Herero tribesman Enzian, the "world choosing witch" Geli Tripping, and the various anarchists whom Pynchon holds favored among his preterite--but it is a hope that resides most ardently in Pynchon's language, in its yearning to break free from "the chain link fields of the Word" and out into silence or sensuous speech or the Pentecost of tongues that presages the new heaven and new earth. For all

the bad news he brings, Pynchon lovingly augurs out of the wastes of the world the hope of transformation, of an *apokaluptein* that will, as in the original meaning of the word, uncover and reveal to us what we already knew before our fall into history.

This reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* has had difficulty finding its own appropriate language of expression. *Ambiguity* and the *dialectic* have been employed to good effect. Most of the discussion, though, has used the terminology of *metanoia*, *salvation*, and *apocalypse*. Many critics have also acknowledged the importance to Pynchon of concepts of transcendence borrowed from the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, particularly the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Tyrone Slothrop has been recognized as a latter-day Orpheus, and Pynchon himself has been characterized as writing in an Orphic voice. But what does it mean to call Pynchon's voice Orphic? How well does Slothrop succeed as an avatar? And what insights are opened to us by thinking of the text itself as Orphic?

The story of Orpheus is simple in outline. He is the mythical poet who through music and song tames the wild beasts and moves even trees and rocks to dance. He sails with the Argonauts as *keleustes*, or chanter, pacing the oarsmen. Among his various feats on the voyage, he charms the Clashing Rocks and puts to sleep with his lyre the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece. He later descends into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice, but fails on casting the backward glance. Finally, after he is dismembered by a band of Thracian Maenads, his head and lyre are thrown into the river Hebrus, where they float singing out to sea before landing on the isle of Lesbos.

Tyrone Slothrop's course through *Gravity's Rainbow* retells this story with what remains to us of its details. It begins with his descent into the underworld, which is occasioned by Slothrop's pursuit of his lost mouth harp down the toilet bowl at the Roseland Ballroom, and from there into the sewers of Boston. "There's no calling it back. Either he lets the harp go, his silver chances of song, or he has to follow."[1]

Slothrop's attempts at love in the novel are said to be guided by a "Eurydice-obsession," and they suffer, like those of Orpheus, from the retrospective glance, at which the loved one disappears. This happens twice for Slothrop. The first time with Katje Borgesius, who is also known as Domina Nocturna and Mistress of the Night. After one of their last couplings, she appears to Slothrop like "the terrible Face That Is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable [. . .] a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being" (222).

His second failure in love is with the girl Bianca. Pynchon emphasizes the Orphic elements of his encounter with her in various ways. The ship on which he meets her is the _Anubis_, named after the jackal-headed god of the ancient Egyptians who was the son of Osiris, himself once slain and dismembered. Anubis is the god of the necropolis, the Egyptian cemeteries and cities of the dead, and (along with Thoth) conducts the souls of the dead down to the judgment halls of the underworld. These associations with Orpheus's descent into Hades are underscored: "Too much closer and it begins to hurt to bring her back. But there is this Eurydice-obsession, this _bringing back out of_ . . . though how much easier just _to leave her there_ [. . .] 'Why bring her back? Why try?'" (472).

Slothrop also suffers the fate of Orpheus, the dismemberment and scattering of limbs that make their way singing to the isle of Lesbos. He rediscovers his harp, "the same one he lost in 1938 or -9 down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom" and wanders with it naked in the Harz Mountains of Germany. "There are harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers, wherever water moves," and Slothrop joins them before his final "disassembly" and transformation into a "living intersection" (622-23). To describe Slothrop's end, Pynchon paraphrases the last of Rilke's _Sonnets to Orpheus_, Number Twenty-nine, the final stanza of which he has quoted earlier in the chapter.

> . . . and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and

> his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. . . . (626)

Paraphrase may be too strong a word for Pynchon's use of Sonnet Twenty-nine, for one sees how freely he plays with his myths and other sources. They exist as *points de départ*, chords on which he improvises the complexity of his own musical texture. Tyrone Slothrop is hardly substantial enough as a character to bear Orphic embodiment--much less dismemberment. One might also remark that he does not "really" descend to the underworld, that this takes place in a dream--actually a drug-induced state in which sodium amytal is used to aid him in recollecting his past.

But this may be the point of the story: the dream world has priority for Pynchon, as it did for the followers of Orpheus. They conceived of life as sleep disturbed by dreams. To be born was to die, while death, if properly navigated with the aid of the Orphic intercessor, was a return to life. Fausto Maijstral, the poet who himself lives underground for a time in Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, remarks that "in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? A poet feeds on dream."[2]

The entirety of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself can be said to take place "underground," in an above-ground underground where dreaming and waking exist as inverted images of each other. The boundary between the two is permeable. Throughout the novel the dead converse with the living, while the living are often surprised to find themselves dead: "some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are" (303). Of all the literary genres Pynchon employs, the most basic is that of the Quest. It is an inverted quest, though, for the journey is backwards to knowledge of the past, and downwards in a shamanistic descent into the realm of the dead.

Gravity's Rainbow opens at night, underground, in a dream. It is London, the winter of 1944, "total

blackout" during "The Evacuation" from the city of a "rush of souls" which are "among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation" (3, 4). "There is no way out. Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?" (4).

This is being dreamed by Pirate Prentice, who lives below the "rooftop earth" on which he cultivates a stand of bananas. As this "fantasist-surrogate" (12) emerges to pick fruit and scan the morning sky, we find him waking into his dream. A "red daybreak" and a "new star" (6) in the east, which seems to presage his vision of the cataclysmic end, actually may be visual traces of a V-2 rocket coming from across the channel, that Prentice believes is pointed straight at the top of his head. On the last page of the novel, nearly 760 pages later, the rocket will still be arriving, although aimed now for the top of the reader's head. "Pirate," in the meantime, "hunches his shoulders, bearing his bananas down the corkscrew ladder" (7).

The specific loci of Pynchon's tours underground are actually quite numerous. Like several sewer-dwelling or -roving predecessors in _V._, Slothrop, early in _Gravity's Rainbow_, drops down into the sewers of Boston, and his subsequent wanderings are conceived as an extended tour of the labyrinthine world below. The Herero rocket troops known as the Schwarzkommando and their leader, Oberst Enzian, live in "underground communities" (315) near the German rocket factory at Nordhausen. The charismatic missile they hope to launch for the world's salvation is being built there "one and a half levels below" (673).

We also find Pirate Prentice, along with several others of the novel's characters, down in Hades. Again he dreams, or wakes into, the image of the world at twilight, only this time, in a Dionysian whirl of souls, he, Katje and the residents of Hell "dissolve now, into the race and swarm of this dancing Preterition" (548). Pynchon also locates underground what seems to be, for him, the quintessential image of the modern world and its bureaucratized forms of death:

the Mittelwerke and its neighboring prison camp, the mile-long rocket city built under a mountain from which the Nazis hoped to launch the ballistic instruments of the National Socialist Millenium. Pynchon finally describes how the act of authorship itself is for him a descent underground. In a bracketed interjection, he characterizes "the years of grease and passage, 1966 and 1971" during which he presumably composed the book:

> I am betraying them all . . . the worst of it is that I know what your editors want, exactly what they want. I am a traitor. I carry it with me. Your virus. Spread by your tireless Typhoid Marys, cruising the markets and the stations. We did manage to ambush some of them. Once we caught some in the Underground. It was terrible. My first action, my initiation. We chased them down the tunnels. We could feel their fright. When the tunnels branched, we had only the treacherous acoustics of the Underground to go on. Chances were good for getting lost. There was almost no light. The rails gleamed, as they do aboveground on a rainy night. And the whispers then--the shadows who waited, hunched in angles at the maintenance stations, lying against the tunnel walls, watching the chase. "The end is too far," they whispered. "Go back. There are no stops on this branch. The trains run and the passengers ride miles of blank mustard walls, but there are no stops. It's a long afternoon run. . . ." Two of them got away. But we took the rest. Between two station-marks, yellow crayon through the years of grease and passage, 1966 and 1971, I tasted my first blood. Do you want to put this part in? (739)

Journeying underground is perilous, traumatic, open to failure, but it also holds the possibility of renewal, and it is to this chthonic source that Pynchon looks for a force strong enough to counter the death-in-life prevailing in the above-ground underground. "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (525). That one goes underground to

search for such a key was known to Orpheus, and, more recently, to psychoanalysis.

Gravity's Rainbow resists any description of what it's about. The novel subverts Aristotelian succession in a unidirectional time. The point is to get lost. Every symbol, character, thing in the novel is polymorphously perverse, open always to multiple interpretations and capable of transforming itself into its opposite.

The seventy-three unnumbered chapters of the book are divided into four sections of unequal length, with titles as multireferential as any of Pynchon's metaphors: "Beyond the Zero" (177 pages), "Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering" (100 pages), "In the Zone" (338 pages), and "The Counterforce" (144 pages). The longest of these by far is "In the Zone," and just as the novel can be said to take place underground, or in an above-ground underground, so too can it be said to take place entirely in the Zone of war-torn Europe immediately following the Second World War, when our present boundaries and spheres of influence had yet to be fixed in place.

Nominally, though, the action of the novel moves from wartime London in the winter of 1944 to liberated France and neutral Switzerland, before entering the actual Zone of occupied Germany in the spring and summer of 1945. The narrative then reverses direction, as it moves from around the German rocket launching sites back to London, and finally on to a Los Angeles contemporary with the book's composition.

The first section introduces most of the significant characters, through direct action or flashbacks, or through occult leaps across the wall of death as conducted by the "cliques of spiritualists, vaudeville entertainers, wireless technicians, Couéists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, [and] Dale Carnegie zealots" (77) resident at The White Visitation, a facility outside of London researching "Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender. Whose surrender is not made clear" (34). The novel's characters line themselves up on one side or the other of death. Some are literally dead, some are capable

of communicating with the dead, while others dream of, or prepare themselves for, or struggle against the imminence of death.

Just as waking and dreaming scumble confusedly into each other throughout the novel, so too does war shade imperceptibly into postwar, with its technologies of control still intact. The dead, the past, the underground--which in the novel is the physical topos for the psychic givens of the unconscious--continue to exert their power over the living. The temporal dimensions of Pynchon's story, its nominal setting in England, France, Switzerland, Russia, and Germany before and after the war, exist as a palimpsest, a kind of dreamscape overlaid on the unconscious and its primary urges. Pynchon's characters move through this dreamscape under the spell of what he calls "demonic possession," the political implications of which he describes as "death-by-government--a process by which living souls unwillingly become the demons known to the main sequence of Western magic as the Qlippoth, Shells of the Dead. . . . It is also what the present dispensation often does to decent men and women entirely on this side of the grave" (176).

At stake from the beginning of the novel are the shape of the post-war world and the use of its technologies for death or life. Ranged on either side of the struggle are twinned sets of characters: Dr. Edward Pointsman, director of a research unit at The White Visitation, vs. his employee, the statistician Roger Mexico; the German engineer Franz Pökler vs. his wife, Leni; Major Weissman, otherwise known by his SS code name as Captain Dominus Blicero, vs. his counter, Oberst Enzian, head of the Schwarzkommando. Other characters spin off more haphazardly to one side or the other: Katje Borgesius ends up in Hell, while Jessica Swanlake, Mexico's former lover, is finally enlisted into the ranks of the "domestic bureaucrats." Geli Tripping and Tyrone Slothrop, also lovers, assume their own forms of living "beyond the zero" of death. Some of these characters are possessed--by dreams of power, control, knowledge--while others are among the dispossessed, the great mass of the Preterite. Slothrop wanders in the midst of these contending forces, at the center of a great many characters' attention

because of an unusual physiological symptom that correlates his penile erections with A4 rocket strikes. His story is told as a comic-book version of the Oedipal complex, where "The Penis He Thought Was His Own" turns out to be an organ of social control.

With these as its psychic and social givens, Part Two of the novel begins the working out of their permutations. I intentionally use the language of probability theory because its concepts are central to Pynchon's literary method. We are moving into what is called the sample space of the experiment--the set of all possible outcomes, with a probability measure assigned to each of them between zero, the statistically impossible, and one, the statistically certain. We should also note that Pynchon is unorthodox enough a statistician to entertain the hope of radical change "beyond the zero" of impossibility.

Slothrop has taken "un perm'" to the casino Hermann Goering--the first of his many personal permutations (in French slang this also means a military change of posts)--and he is on the road now from London to liberated France and then to Switzerland, where he seeks the grave of Laszlo Jamf, the scientist who originally conditioned his "hard-on reflex" and who subsequently has a kind of priority over him that his putative father lacks. Part Two ends and Slothrop's journey into the Zone begins with a visit to the dead father, which reminds us again that the direction of Slothrop's progress through the novel is ever deeper into the psychic underworld that he originally entered through the toilet in the Roseland Ballroom. While Slothrop is camped on top of Jamf's crypt, "It, the Repressed, approaches. . . . *waitaminute* up out of sleep, face naked, turning to *the foreign* gravestones, *the what? what was it* . . . back again, almost to it, *up again* . . . *up, and* back, that way, most of the early night" (268).

Part Three launches us fully "In the Zone." This is Germany in the spring of 1945, a no-man's land of scavengers after military hardware, of refugees and avengers. It is an open space, temporarily cut off from the European civilization obliterated by war, and not yet closed into the trajectory of the postwar

future. A statistical sample space, its possible outcomes have yet to receive their measure of probability from zero to one. The initial hopefulness found in the Zone is linked to this anarchic lack of definition.

Characters float through the Zone like particles in Brownian motion. Many of them are nominally driven by a desire to secure the remains of the Nazi A4 rockets, but their actual motives have more to do with revenge, power, money, salvation, or, in Slothrop's case, the retrieval of his elusive and fast-fading sense of self. But the anarchic possibilities of the Zone quickly resolve themselves in postwar boundaries, economies, hierarchies, bureaucracies, cartels--into the technologies, polities, and attendant sexual arrangements that comprise our present civilization and its discontents.

Pynchon is a dialectician, though, who for every force posits a counterforce. Along with the probability of ruin, he also calculates our slim chances for success. "Dialectically, sooner or later, some counterforce would have had to arise . . ." (536). Part Four of the novel, called "The Counterforce," explores these dialectical possibilities. It and the novel climax in the twinned events of Chapter 70 (pages 717-24), in which Geli Tripping's Dionysian vision of "the green uprising" is paired with Blicero's speech to the lover whom he is encapsulating and launching in the Rocket 00000 which anticipates all its world-destroying progeny. There are in fact many rockets, real and dreamed-of, in the novel: "The Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it," above all Enzian's and Blicero's: "Manichaeans [. . .] 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). It is the second of these that has been arcing across the novel from its first sentence. As it rushes toward point of contact, on the last page of the novel, we find ourselves in the Orpheus Theater, in the dark, singing. What does this final invocation of Orpheus portend? Other than

Tyrone Slothrop's appearance as a rather unconvincing avatar, what in the text are the larger implications of Orpheus's presence?

There is more to the story of Orpheus than the few details of his legendary existence, and there is more to Pynchon's use of the myth than his inscription of it into the figure of Tyrone Slothrop. Orpheus's greater significance is as the founder of a religion--one based on a set of texts: the Orphic Rhapsodies or hymns that narrate the theogony from which the Orphic adepts derived their practices.

This is not the place to describe the precepts of Orphism or their centrality to Greek religion. But a sketch of Orphism's basic tenets might illuminate their importance to Pynchon's own narrative. For the sake of brevity, I will rely on the description of Orphism given by W. K. C. Guthrie in his classic account of _Orpheus and the Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement_ (1935, revised 1952).

There is first of all for the practitioners of Orphism the primacy of the text: the Orphic Rhapsodies that, as cosmogonical poem, encompass the entire evolution of the universe. "We have seen that Orpheus was known to everyone as the author of a religion based on the written word," says Guthrie. "Orpheus was famous for many things, but best of all perhaps,he was known as the _theologos_, one of the most famous, if not the most famous of all that tribe" (69).

The text is of obvious primacy to Pycnhon, as well. Appearing throughout his work are references to cosmos and world and psyche as text. He too is a _theologos_ attempting to sing our cosmogony from start to finish. The Creation itself is described by Pynchon as a text. "And at the end of the mighty day in which he gave us in fiery letters across the sky all the words we'd ever need, words we today enjoy, and fill our dictionaries with, the meek voice of little Tyrone Slothrop, celebrated ever after in tradition and song, ventured to filter upward [. . .]" (61).

As in the opening of Genesis, where the earth is without form until God divides the light from the darkness, Orphism begins with the belief that Everything

comes to be out of One and is resolved into One. Judaism and Christianity have "repeated with varying degrees of mythological colouring," says Guthrie, what in Orphism was "this central thought, that everything existed at first together in a confused mass, and that the process of creation was one of separation and division, with the corollary that the end of our era will be a return to the primitive confusion" (75).

Many critics have seen in Pynchon's "Rocket-state cosmology" an apocalypticism coming out of the Christian tradition, but this cosmology might be comprehended more fully if expanded from a narrowly Christian context to include the original Orphic precepts. From its opening epigraph to its apocalyptic conclusion, Gravity's Rainbow is concerned with the nature of "transformation" and "belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1). The following is only one of dozens of passages in the novel where one can fruitfully employ an Orphic reading of Pynchon's text:

> It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the peak that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world [. . .] a very large transfer of energy: breaking upward into this world, a controlled burning--breaking downward again, an uncontrolled explosion . . . this lack of symmetry leads to speculating that a presence, analogous to the Aether, flows through time, as the Aether flows through space. The assumption of a Vacuum in time tended to cut us off one from another. But an Aether sea to bear us world-to-world might bring us back a continuity, show us a kinder universe, more easygoing. . . . (726)

The idea of a temporal and spatial aether, which is mentioned several times by Pynchon, was crucial to the Orphic mysteries. It explained the paradox of how differentiated life could appear out of primal oneness and then, at the end our era, return to that oneness. Eros, the first of the gods, is born out of that "ineffable aither," and it is back into it that the Orphic adept journeys on transforming him or herself from this side of death to the other (Guthrie,81).

Orpheus was "the expounder of a sacramental religion and of the life hereafter," and Orphism, says Guthrie, was "a religion that laid great stress on the life after death" (29-30). Orpheus's descent into and knowledge of the realm of the dead gave him "peculiar powers as advisor and intercessor" in helping his followers make the passage from this world to the next (29). Necessary for that journey was the purging of earthly attachments and the sinful, or Titanic, aspects of our nature. "The doctrine of original sin was of Orphic origin," says Freud in Totem and Taboo. "It formed a part of the mysteries, and spread from there to the schools of philosophy of ancient Greece."3

The followers of Orpheus conceived of our nature as two-fold, part Titanic and part Dionysiac. Their ascetic practices were directed toward purging the former and exalting the latter. "We can be quite clear," says Guthrie, "on what I would say was the most important point to one who wants to know the facts about classical Greek religion. To the question 'who was the god of the Orphic religion?' there can be but one answer--Dionysos. Orpheus was a religious founder, and the religion he founded was a species of the Bacchic" (41).

The Orphic theogony recounts the story of Dionysos the thrice-born, who appears as Dionysos-Phanes, Dionysos-Zagreus, and Dionysos the resurrected. As Phanes he is the firstborn of the gods fashioned by Chronos out of the aether. Phanes is identical with Eros: "the creator of all, from whom the world has its first origin," and it is to Eros that the followers of Orpheus direct their allegiance"(80). The second creation is presided over by Zeus, whose preeminence comes from having swallowed Phanes and taken into himself all things that exist. To Zeus and Persephone is born Dionysos-Zagreus, who is slain and dismembered by the Titans, before his final resurrection. "Alive again, he remains for the Orphics the supreme object of worship" (82).

It is from the Titanic crime against Dionysos that the Orphics conceived the twofold nature of humanity, and it is in his resurrection that they saw their hope of a life free of the primal crime. As Guthrie

recounts:

> . . . in what follows we have the link between all these warrings in heaven, these seemingly domestic affairs of the Immortals, and our own religious life. The most heinous part of the Titans' crime is still to be told. When they had slain the infant Dionysos, they tasted his flesh. In wrath at the outrage Zeus launched a thunderbolt at them and burned them up, and from the smoking remnants of the Titans there arose a race which this age had not yet known, the race of mortal men. Our nature therefore is twofold. we are born from the Titans, the wicked sons of Earth, but there is in us something of a heavenly nature too, since there went into our making fragments of the body of Dionysos, son of the Olympian Zeus, on whom the Titans had made their impious feast. So now to Dionysos we make prayer and sacrifice "in all seasons of the year" as the sacred writings say, "yearning to be set free from our lawless ancestry." Dionysos can free us, wherever we call him "liberator," Dionysos the immortal, the resurrected, of whose nature there is yet a small part in each and every one of us. Knowing all this, what other aim can we have in life but to purge away as far as possible the Titanic element in us and exalt and cherish the Dionysiac? (82-83)

It is finally to be said of Orphism that central to its doctrines is the figure of Chronos (Time). The theogony of the Rhapsodies begins with time, while allied to Chronos in preeminence are Ananke, or dread Necessity, and Night, whose special task is to advise the rulers of the Universe. The creation of humankind divided within and against itself is in time, and the hope residing in Dionysos the Liberator is to free us from time.

As well as Dionysos--the goat-god who will purge our Titanic urges--the figure of Orpheus also exists for Pynchon as an image of liberation. He stands as the divinity to whom all of Pynchon's numerous anarchists pay allegiance. If the Preterite in his novels dance under the aegis of Dionysos, the music that

moves them with its intimations of freedom and wholeness comes from the lyre of Orpheus. His political function for Pynchon is like that described by Marcuse in Eros and Civilization, where Orpheus represents "the Great Refusal" to obey "the repressive order of procreative sexuality."

"The Orphic and Narcissistic Eros," writes Marcuse, "awakens and liberates potentialities that are real in things animate and inanimate, in organic and inorganic nature--real but in the un-erotic reality suppressed. These potentialities circumscribe the telos inherent in them as: 'just to be what they are,' 'being-there,' existing."[4] What images there are in Gravity's Rainbow of non-repressed sexuality occur not in the everyday lives of its characters, who function entirely in a bureaucratized world of legitimated repression, but in the dream sequences, the Orphic visions that erupt momentarily into the course of the narrative.

Held fused in a single chapter near the end of Part Four, but tensed against each other as the novel's central dialectic, are the Dionysiac intoxication of Geli Tripping, who envisions the green world before the birth of human consciousness, and the Apollonian dream of Captain Blicero, who is about to inaugurate the Nazi millenium through the launching of his sexual fetish in a world-destroying rocket. Consolidated into these final images of Dionysiac union and Apollonian will are the divergent psychic and political energies that have fueled the course of the novel for the preceding seven hundred pages.

The dialectic at work here is specifically Nietzschean. As in The Birth of Tragedy, the Apollonian dream is countered by the intoxication of "the Dionysiac reveler," who through dance and music attempts a "mystical process of unselving" and ultimate reunion with nature. The story Nietzsche tells is one of lost primacy, and the way back--the possibility of getting unstrung from the Apollonian dream--lies in art, particularly the art that can sing of the Dionysiac spirit with "a recognition that whatever exists is of a piece, and that individuation is the root of all evil; a conception of art as the sanguine hope that the spell of individuation may yet be broken, as an augury of eventual reintegration."[5]

Like the dialectic of his cultural analysis, Nietzsche is also present in every line of <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> that strives in its style, as Nietzsche said of his own voice, "to sing with a sort of maenadic soul" (39). As Nietzsche wrote in the introduction to <u>The Birth of Tragedy</u>: "People would hint suspiciously that there was a sort of maenadic soul in this book, stammering out laborious, arbitrary phrases in an alien tongue--as though the speaker were not quite sure himself whether he preferred speech or silence. And indeed, this 'new soul' should have <u>sung</u>, not spoken" (67).

Nietzsche distinguished "the separate art realms of <u>dream</u> and <u>intoxication</u>, two physiological phenomena standing toward one another in much the same relationship as the Apollonian and the Dionysiac" (19). It was, he said, from "the glorious transport which arises in man, even from the very depths of nature, at the shattering of the <u>principium individuationis</u>," the shattering, that is, of the Apollonian dream, that "we are in a position to apprehend the essence of Dionysiac rapture, whose closest analogy is furnished by physical intoxication" (22).

<u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> is filled with an array of intoxicants, and the voice, the vision that its language continually tries to force is this break through the veil of Apollonian illusion into the rapture of Dionysiac primacy. Slothrop's entire course through the novel is under the influence of the sodium amytal given him in the Abreaction Ward of St. Veronica's. "Micro" Graham leads us underground to tour the Raketen-Stadt of the Nazi Mittelwerke. Tchitcherine, "the Red Doper," shoots up with "oneirine theophosphate" in his search for God. Säure Bummer (bad trip) defends Rossini against Beethoven. It is Geli Tripping who opens herself up to Dionysiac rapture. Enzian's confrontation with Ombindi comes in the form of a "speed rap." There is even the verging over the limit defined by Nietzsche--where the "maenadic soul" is found "stammering out laborious, arbitrary phrases--as though the speaker were not quite sure himself whether he preferred speech to silence"--in the parting lines of Gerhardt von Göll (maker of the movie <u>New Dope</u>), which he delivers while shot up on sodium amytal and

sitting on "an unusually large infant's training toilet."

> "Through evil and eagles," blithers the Springer, "the climate blondes its way, for they are no strength under the coarse war. No not for roguery until the monitors are there in blashing sheets of earth to mate and say medoshnicka bleelar medoometnozz in bergamot and playful fantasy under the throne and nose of the least merciful king. . . ." (746)

The method for getting unstrung from the Apollonian dream, free of the "chain-link fields of the Word," Pynchon describes as that of "drug-epistemologies." The use in his prose of ellipses, parataxis, condensation, temporal distortion, and enjambment is an attempt to arrive at this kind of hallucinated reality or surreality. "Those like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity" (582).

The last chapter of Gravity's Rainbow is divided by fifteen sub-headings. The one referring to Blicero, called "STRUNG INTO THE APOLLONIAN DREAM . . .," is followed by another entitled "ORPHEUS PUTS DOWN HARP." This latter explores the political implications of the Orphic counterforce, using what is, by now, a rather dated take-off on Richard Nixon. He is called here "Richard M. Zhlubb, night manager of the Orpheus Theatre on Melrose" in Los Angeles, and his greatest worry is the "state of near anarchy" induced by the playing of mouth harps in the queues for his midnight showings.

The novel concludes in the Orpheus Theatre at one of these midnight gatherings. "The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we?) to tell which before the darkness swept in" (760). The rocket arriving throughout the novel is now about to fall. At night, in the dark, at time's end, the novel's end, Pynchon breaks

into song--an Orphic hymn followed by a Dionysiac invitation:

> There is a Hand to turn the time,
> Though thy Glass today be run.
> Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
> Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
> Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
> All through our crippl'd Zone,
> With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
> And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . .
>
> Now everybody-- (760)

What make Gravity's Rainbow an Orphic text, then, are the incorporation into the book of Rilke's Sonnets; the establishment of Slothrop as a latter-day Orpheus; the adoption of Orphic tropes and precepts--life as sleep disturbed by dreams; Eros as a first principle that is at once life, love, sleep, and death; a soniferous aether to solve the problem of how all things are separate yet one; history as a progression from undifferentiated mass through individuation and back again to unity; our current age as a fall into time presided over by Ananke and Night; the twofold nature of being as a struggle between the Titanic and Dionysiac; the belief in life after death as a negotiable transformation; the primacy of the text in explicating esoteric mysteries; music and dance as vehicles of worship and images of the liberated self; and, finally, belief in Dionysiac enthusiasm as a way back to the original erotic unity.

It is most fully, though, in Pynchon's voice that one hears the Orphic strains, as he breaks into song or offers up the fragments of "drug-epistemologies" that resonate with Dionysiac enthusiasm. For Pynchon's hope is ultimately that of an Orphic adept yearning to live enchanted in a responsive world known to us through Nietzschean art and music. Striving after a "maenadic soul," Gravity's Rainbow itself finally suffers Orphic dismemberment in the syntactic scattering of its final chapters, which are characterized by a multiplication of voices and narrative units: "Remember The Password In The Zone This Week Is FASTER--THAN, THE-SPEEDOFLIGHT Speeding Up Your Voice Exponentially--" (726).

There is much in Gravity's Rainbow that remains incomprehensible without an understanding of its embrace of Orphism. Unless one dismisses it as ironic, which it is not, the epigraph of Wernher von Braun's that prefaces the narrative already posits an Orphic precept. "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation," he says, before asserting a "belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1). Characters that shuttle back and forth from one side of death to the other, and the novel's various descents into Hades, all bespeak the possibility of such transformation.

Pynchon's critics have difficulty with what they regard as his deep pessimism. In the temporal realm of politics and history, he is indeed pessimistic. He regards as improbable the arrival of some leader or force capable of effecting our charismatic salvation. Far more likely to arrive is the missile screaming across the night-sky of the novel. But at least those of us seated in the Orpheus Theatre, awaiting the coming of light from one source or another, have with us the enabling elements of the Orphic text--the central unity of word, song, and dance--to guide us through what might be only the first of many deaths.

Several critics, trying to place Gravity's Rainbow in the context of American literature, have interpreted it in relation to Puritan and Calvinist doctrine, often making a rather grim affair of it. I have already suggested how what first appears in the novel as Christian symbology can be better understood in light of its Orphic origins. But Orphism itself has a centrality in American literature that makes Pynchon merely the last in a long line of adepts. Harold Bloom, in the essay "Death and the Native Strain in American Poetry," characterizes the native strain of American writing, from Emerson to the present, as "a curious variant or version of Orphism."

> Divination, in every sense of the term, is the enterprise of the native strain in American poetry. . . . The American Orphic not only worships the gods Bacchus, Eros, and Ananke or Necessity, as the ancient followers of Orpheus did, but he seeks to become those gods. Zeus,

> Apollo, Jehovah and Christ count for less in American poetry than Bacchus, Eros and Ananke do, for the American Orpheus begins in the Evening-land, and so starts out in the belief that he is already a quasi-god, who perhaps can evade true death through divination, by joining gods like Dionysios, Eros and Ananke, all of whom include death, and so surmount it.[6]

Emerson wrote with an Aeolian harp in his study window. Orpheus was for him the supreme poet capable of animating nature, of replacing the There and Then with the Here and Now. "The transmigration of souls is no fable," he said, and it was in "the cyclus of Orphic words" that Emerson found the ideal of "the universal man." He embraced the act of divination as his own poetic project. "The poets are thus liberating gods," he wrote. "I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary."[7]

This is the literary project that Pynchon himself has undertaken--an act of divination with Orpheus as adept and image, guide and embodiment of what we perceive only in fragments to be the possibility of death-in-life transformed. In its drug-epistemologies, dreams, and visions, and in the pure intoxication of its language, one hears in the voicing of Gravity's Rainbow a promise of revelation that exists almost tangibly on the back side of each page. In these Orphic strains of the novel, Pynchon has created his own rhapsodic text with which to remember the promise of Orpheus.

Paris

Notes

[1] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 222.

[2] Thomas Pynchon, V. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), 325.

[3] Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 153.

[4] Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, rpt. 1974), 171, 165-66.

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 8.

[6] Harold Bloom, "Death and the Native Strain in American Poetry," in Figures of Capable Imagination (New York: Seabury, 1976), 94.

[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903) and Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1910). See Emerson's essays on "History" and "the Poet" and his Journal entry for November 28, 1836.