

***Gravity's Rainbow:* "A Historical Novel of a Whole New Sort"**

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Much depends on the reader. When, shortly before his death, Tony Tanner described *Gravity's Rainbow* as "a historical novel of a whole new sort," on his mind may have been not only the subject matter but also the interactions between history and fiction which Pynchon's collaboration with his reader allows. The author does not just tell us what he knows about the Second World War—the temporal and spatial setting for the fictional universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*—the way a historical novelist of an earlier generation might. In fact, there is a lot about that setting he does not tell us, or, to be precise, does not overtly tell us he is telling us—if we were able to perceive it all, that is. Rather, both the extent to which history is recognized and what role it comes to play in the act of reading are left to the knowledge (or research) of the reader. Whether this history carries a lesson and what that lesson might be also depend on the inclination of the reader. This essay investigates the peculiar interactive and collaborative relation not only between history and fiction in *Gravity's Rainbow* but also between the authority of Pynchon himself and that of his reader in that juncture between ideas of what is "real" and what is "invented," which terms like history and fiction traditionally suggest. Pynchon assigns different types of characters to the central (rocket) design of the narrative. Some are completely fictional; others are known from history books. Concentrating on one of the latter, Wernher von Braun (1912–1977), this essay seeks to uncover the ability of such a character to move within and outside literary worlds (with the help of the reader) to become "real." It suggests not just how but why this novel achieves such dynamic life for its historical-fictional characters.

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Gravity's Rainbow's Reading History

Gravity's Rainbow reveals itself in many ways, little by little, to new readers. The initial revealing of the text may often feel more like a unveiling. Once first-time readers think they have detected the main character or the plot, either may disappear and give way to other figures and apparent plots. Some resurface many hundreds of pages later; others do not. A text which moves in and out of focus this way may fuel a reader's suspicion of and confusion (or even paranoia) about what is important. For many that uncertainty, embedded in the overwhelming scope and chaos of the book, is the real beauty of *Gravity's Rainbow* insofar as it defies traditional classification and analysis. However, the reader may persist in the attempt to find a structure and to get a temporal and spatial fix on the novel through its contents—to lend to it, that is, the sort of historical coherence an entirely postmodern or disjunctive narratology would deny.

Rereading the novel, or parts of it, looking instead for linearity or historical order, allows a second revelation. Suspicions of a hierarchy of importance among characters and events can now be affirmed, and latent themes sought out and traced through the text: literary coherence may seem to be (re)constructed. Readings and revealings are facilitated or given direction when informed by guides like Steven Weisenburger's *Companion* and Douglas Fowler's *Reader's Guide*, by web-concordances like Tim Ware's *HyperArts Pynchon Pages*, or by the innumerable essays on the novel and on Pynchon's ideas. But a second or informed reading can hardly impose a structure on the entirety of Pynchon's creative text: like Tyrone Slothrop (its ostensible main protagonist), the narrative changes appearance and moves out from under our watchful eye just when we think we have it pinned down and identified. Nonetheless, that more informed reading may lead us to entertain a sense of direction on the basis of such external evidence, along with impressions formed during the first reading.

One such readerly direction may involve concentrating on major characters like Slothrop, Blicero and Franz Pökler, and disregarding, almost as interference, other names which seem incidental and less important, mere parts of the novel's ornate tapestry of detail. Names one might overlook include Weichensteller, Flaum, Fibel (GR 453), Horst Achtfaden and Klaus Närrisch, and von Braun. While the first three are examples of invented characters without a fictional universe or life of their own, the next two have more memorable fictional lives within the novel. They are part of a plot and have sufficient background to make them plausible, if not fully three-dimensional, characters. The last, Wernher von Braun, has only a sporadic presence in the novel but

enjoyed a life outside it as rich in history as in fiction at precisely the time Pynchon was dropping his name as if it were merely a part of the past.

One could argue that von Braun is not just three-dimensional but has an additional temporal dimension. To readers in the mid-1970s, more than to first-time readers in the twenty-first century, the von Braun Pynchon resurrects as a historical character in the 1945 setting of *Gravity's Rainbow* also existed, freely, in the present tense, as Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Marshall Space Flight Center in charge of the Saturn rocket program which had recently propelled American astronauts toward the moon. A 1945 version of von Braun in *Gravity's Rainbow* is therefore more than a historical revision, biographical miniature, historical background-detail or fictional coincidence. Exactly because a 1973 version of von Braun was also alive, its interactions with the sporadic appearances of von Braun in Pynchon's novel can become more dynamic in the minds of readers, who may combine the two (or more) versions of von Braun they are confronted with somewhere in the realm between fictional and historical information. The historical novelty of *Gravity's Rainbow* to which Tony Tanner referred resides, for one thing, in the dynamic existence this real-life fictional character had in both the novel and American society between the time about which Pynchon wrote and the time at which he wrote. For while readers may decide whether to downplay von Braun with Weichensteller & Co. as part of a reading strategy intended to make maneuvering within Pynchon's fictional universe easier, von Braun's fictional character already performs in a historical space between the fiction of *Gravity's Rainbow* and postwar America. The mere fact that the reader can decide whether von Braun is significant, not because of his rare textual occurrences but because he is a recognizable historical character, grants von Braun a dynamic life of his own, inside and outside the novel, which (apparently purely fictional) characters like Närrisch, Pökler and Blicero do not immediately seem to have.

That von Braun's character is grounded in history while these others live solely within Pynchon's fictional universe turns out, on closer inspection, not to mark as unbridgeable a boundary between real life and invention as might at first appear. First, one may question whether *Gravity's Rainbow* is the boundless *fiction* it at first seems. Second, one may investigate and challenge the historical truth-value of von Braun himself and discover the extent to which the von Braun Americans recognized was a fictional product created by himself, the U.S. Army, NASA and his autobiographers in the decades following the Second World War. Finally, by theorizing the involvement each reader

has in understanding *Gravity's Rainbow* (and history), one may show how various characters (specifically, here, those involved with V-2 rocketry in the final stages of the war) all perform "historical" roles for the reader at Pynchon's behest: whether they are real characters, like von Braun; amalgams of fictional and real characters, like, arguably, Blicero; or invented ones, like Pöckler and (to a lesser degree) Närrisch and Achtfaden, all of whom typify the more anonymous real-life rocketeers or their general mind-set. The following sections investigate these three issues and question whether *Gravity's Rainbow* really is fictional and whether Wernher von Braun really is historical. In answering these questions we also look at how the reader and the rocketeers of Pynchon's novel navigate between external history and internal fiction.

Gravity's Rainbow Revealed as History

The reading history described above suggests a reader searching for some recognizable pattern and order in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this movement toward certainty through, for example, a second, directional reading, students of Pynchon often discover with some bafflement the extent to which what appears a chaotic fictional world in the novel actually corresponds to historical facts. Plots and characters which seem to meander aimlessly through the novel in fact move within a taut chronological structure provided by the Second World War. On the one hand, the history of the war furnishes tiny but verifiable background details, such as actual BBC radio broadcasts (the sort of authentic information Weisenburger uses to determine internal timing in the novel [CE 50–53]). On the other, it provides the complex timing of the invasion of Germany, and the redistribution of zones in Germany, and thereby the constantly moving boundaries across which Slothrop maneuvers in the spring and summer of 1945. When this underlying historical factuality is detected, *Gravity's Rainbow* appears to give a surprisingly accurate account of those times and events.

Detailed and pervasive though its observation of history may be, Pynchon's novel combines history and fiction in sophisticated ways: *Gravity's Rainbow* can be reduced neither to fiction controlled by a historical framework nor to history belabored fictionally. Though readers may look for temporary footholds or fixes as they work through the text, the disavowal of clear hierarchy at this level in favor of fluidity or interaction makes *Gravity's Rainbow* an excellent American Studies text, incorporating as comprehensively as it does both literary and historical references and strategies.

We may at this point consider some of the ways specific historical facts interact and inform whatever revelations in and of *Gravity's Rainbow* readers may experience. What readers derive from an informed text like this depends on what circumstantial knowledge and subjective perceptions they can contribute as much as it does on either what really happened or what the author may have intended to convey. An ideal reader might be familiar with some of the available facts and canonical narratives concerning historical events surrounding the end of the Second World War, and even with specialist texts dealing with the novel's time and place. That Pynchon has drawn on recognizable common history texts implies that his decisions, intentions and perhaps ethical stances toward history are imbedded in his fictional text. If the direction-seeking reader pursued the detective task (becoming ideal in the process) of locating Pynchon's source texts and identifying which parts of them he actually used in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the task would reveal not only the hidden contours of history beneath the novel but also what slant Pynchon's selections have put on historical events, insofar as Pynchon uses the past for a purpose as well as a setting.

We do know a little about which texts were available to Pynchon at the time of writing, and also what common constructions were placed on the particulars of the Second World War with which he deals. It may, however, be less interesting (as well as impossible) to seek to get inside Pynchon's head to reconstruct his historical knowledge than it is to recognize that endeavoring to understand his selections from that personal knowledge constitutes a subjective quest, something which says more about individual readers, the common history texts and the agreed-upon constructions of these texts at the time and place of reading Pynchon. This sounds complicated, but it helps explain why critiques of Pynchon's use of history have sometimes become criticisms of (and literary assumptions about) those parts of Second World War history Pynchon has (according to critics) unnecessarily overlooked in a fiction which in certain respects seems to be so faithful to historical detail. What such critics claim is missing are not, in fact, details of history but a certain moral stance expected of literature concerning the Second World War. These critics' readings are subjective, not because of what they read into the text, but because of what they cannot read out of it relative to their own background knowledge and morally-based construction of the war's historical events.

We know little directly from Pynchon about his intentions, but the choice of the Second World War as the setting for a novel may be assumed by the culturally conditioned reader necessarily to have moral implications. How could we not expect a tale taking place in the Second

World War to include certain established morals about the horrors of war and the desirability of peace and not vice versa? The reader may know the canonical history texts Pynchon writes from and against and expect some kind of condemnation of or siding against the atrocities of that delimited part of history. Critical readers suggest that Pynchon neglects his duty to depict the Holocaust and the horror of modern combat as undeniable historical truths of the Second World War, as if his fictional focus on rocketry has deselected the results and denied the core of Germany's totalitarian regime. This is far from the case. Yet Pynchon aims not just at the core of some universal human truth about modern history beyond immediate past events such as the latest World War, but also at that deeper history and the time-bound incidents which are its outward manifestation, in ways which challenge reader expectations of a hierarchy of importance ordering historical events according to their relative contemporary moral importance. By not appearing to place the Holocaust above the rocket program, or descriptions of the rocket's deadly impact above descriptions of the design of the rocket itself, Pynchon confounds those readers who have found his priorities inappropriate in light of their own hierarchical expectations (revealing that readers are not entirely free to construct even from *Gravity's Rainbow's* vastness, but read their own and common history texts into literature). Some have been offended that human casualties, on the battlefields or at the Third Reich's extermination camps, are barely (or only briefly) mentioned, and with a lack of gravity.

However, Pynchon expresses gravity with a lightness of touch, either through passages of both tragedy and levity, or by exposing the grotesqueness of war in ways which make the reader question facts and established historical information. Whether or not he intends to confound the reader in the process, Pynchon often employs historical events in microstrategies that foster a fictional alienation from what the reader may believe to be simple truth. Thus he turns the gruesome brutality of (Allied) incendiary bombing and (German) terror bombing inside out both to investigate something deeper in the motives for such actions and to interrogate unrecognized beliefs concerning who was good and bad in the war. For example, instead of apportioning moral judgment and simply questioning the justification for the bombing, Pynchon describes the RAF's "terror raid against civilian Lübeck" as the sexual spark that "brought the rockets hard and screaming" down on London (GR 215). In the process he thwarts readers' automatic, possibly legitimizing explanation of a historical event and redirects their attention toward understanding the event through less habitual channels: instead of enabling the pursuit of false ideas concerning an

objective historical perspective on Lübeck's fate, *Gravity's Rainbow* here makes sexuality a signature motivation of war, something beyond symbolism and closer to determinism, as it describes how "the Rocket's purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted" (223).

So, while *Gravity's Rainbow* is saturated with factual historical details, they are not always prioritized in ways readers might have chosen. At times Pynchon uses history and simultaneously obscures it. First, he does not always draw attention to the factuality of his narrative: indeed, surreal, burlesque or comical elements may disguise, discredit or distract from its historicity. For example, he literally monkeys around with the description of the Peenemünde test stands where von Braun and his crew launched their experimental V-2 rockets by having this "holy Center" (508), to which Slothrop makes a pilgrimage, invaded by "chimps, musicians, dancing girls" drifting over "the last dune and down to the packed cinder triangle of Test Stand X, and the sea" (514). The absurdity of the image may distract the reader from the accurate description of the number and location of this test stand. Pynchon must have studied these carefully in historical works such as *Crossbow and Overcast*, by James McGovern, and *The Mare's Nest*, by the now notorious David Irving, both originally published in 1964. They describe the physical and political contexts of the V-2 program, in the Third Reich and in the United States once rockets and rocketeers like von Braun had been transported out of the occupied zones by the U.S. Army. In 1945 the program was classified, but Pynchon could refer to the events with the benefit of hindsight and history as a privileged vantage point from which to write *ex post facto*.

A second way the surreal distorts expectations of historicity in *Gravity's Rainbow* comes from the absurdity of pure historical facts themselves. Pynchon's fictionalization of history may make it appear ridiculous and incredible. But sometimes the unadorned facts are so grotesque that readers might assume Pynchon had imagined them and that they could not be part of a realistic depiction of his setting. For instance, that, to observe a test firing, engineers would go "out to sit in the Polish meadows at the exact spot where the Rocket was supposed to come down" (424) almost beggars belief but is in fact true. At other times, where Pynchon's fictional treatment neither obscures the underlying history nor drowns factual in fictional details, it nevertheless remains obscure for many readers because it deals with a foreign war. Its obscurity therefore results not simply from how highly technical rocketry is, nor from how much less frequently V-2s were used than were so many other types of weaponry (they may have been few, but, as Irving, Johnson, Longmate and others show, they left a

scar on London and the English psyche); the obscurity is also a function of the rocket project's top-secrecy, not only within Nazi Germany, but also subsequently in the occupied zones, and, once the V-2s (and von Braun) were removed by the U.S. Army to White Sands, New Mexico, as part of Operation Overcast (afterward Paperclip). Though Overcast is not explained in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the reason for Major Marvy's presence in the Mittelwerke, where "American Army Ordnance people are busy crating and shipping out parts and tools for a hundred" rockets in mid-to-late May 1945 (295), before this "free-wheeling, overall operation was formalized" in July 1945 (McGovern 100).

U.S. Army intelligence did much to keep this part of history veiled, in the United States for domestic political reasons, and abroad because of Cold War sensitivity over technical matters. But in alluding to the classified Operation Overcast, which brought hundreds of V-2s and rocket designers (including von Braun) to the United States, Pynchon also tracks history out of the fictional universe of his novel—or rather, allows the informed reader to be reminded that history does not end within the confines of a selective narrative. Just as the (totalitarian) infection Blicero deposits in the rocket at the end of the novel may be heading to America or the moon or death (723), von Braun and his rocketeers, readers may know, were also heading to these destinations at exactly the same historical time. The reader familiar with von Braun's historical trajectory can therefore follow him out of the novel and into the present of 1973, where he has become a charismatic American and leading figure in the moon-landing project (and even up to our present day, where he has met and perhaps transcended death, as his statement prefacing part 1 of *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests he believed he would, and where his historical role is currently being reevaluated).

What really happened in 1945, when von Braun, the director of the program which produced terror weapons for the Nazis, was smuggled into the United States, might have seemed to an American audience of that time too unthinkable to be true. But to a cynical Watergate-era audience of 1973, the fact that the charismatic NASA personality von Braun might have a case to answer concerning his hushed-up past was less surprising. Official histories are no longer routinely considered as stable as they once were. If modernity saw us lose our innocence for good, postmodernity has added a loss of naïvete which cannot fail to inform knowledgeable readings of von Braun today.

Von Braun Revealed as Fiction

If *Gravity's Rainbow* is literature with a special relation to the use of history in creating fiction, then the public persona of von Braun,

whom Pynchon evokes eight or nine times in the novel, is in turn a piece of fiction per se, and not merely because he appears inside a fiction. Pynchon does not fictionalize von Braun so much as draw attention to the fact that by the end of the war, when von Braun was getting ready to sell himself to the United States, he had already become fictional. Von Braun must have been aware that his established reputation as a technological genius (impressed upon the Allies with every V-2 strike) would create interest around his person within the U.S. Army Ordnance Department, and he would also have realized that, to maintain that interest and create a new future for himself (and his colleagues) in the U.S., he would have to deal with his military and political past by recreating himself. One means to that end involved presenting a verifiable but selective version of personal history, choosing and assembling evidence in a way that minimized overt manipulation. While direct lying would be too crude and easy to detect, blame could be parried or guilt played down by making unnecessary the numerous reassurances, justifications of motives and ethics, or even reasonable excuses that the employment of former Axis weapons designers might otherwise have demanded.

The strategy was already evident in the shrewd guidelines imposed by von Braun and Major General Walter Dornberger (respectively, the erstwhile technical and military leaders at the Peenemünde East army rocket-development center) on other German scientists being interrogated by the U.S. Army, that strategy being not to say anything about their past, politics or morality which might compromise their future, and to say only just enough about the rockets to sustain American interest and feed the interrogators' own vivid imaginations (Bower 142-43). This minimalist strategy also applied to questions about the rocket team's involvement with the Dora camp and forced labor. The rocketeers' agreement not to mention the prisoners (not even to deny responsibility for their suffering) denied the prisoners' existence, even as signs to be read, with surprising efficiency—even in the face of the historical fact of their existence (McLaughlin 163). Prisoners from Dora have described how Germans screened them out at the time as if they were not detectable by human senses. Meanwhile, von Braun and his colleagues screened them out of their history by writing themselves up as distractible scientists who perceived only what was going on in outer space or in the future. Camp inmates such as Józef Garliński and Yves Béon have since succeeded in writing themselves back into what had been the selective history of rocket production during the war, and as a result have written von Braun—the father of the American space program—back into the fate of tens of thousands of slaves who suffered and died at Peenemünde

and in the underground V-2 factory as if *they* were living on another planet (Béon 178-79, 250). Only of late have PBS and BBC started producing documentaries about the V-2 and biographies of von Braun which make his connection to labor camps like Dora and the condition of workers central, so that a different set of facts is reaching a broader audience today than during von Braun's lifetime.

The essentially fictional trick von Braun played when captured continued to benefit him during his life in the United States: presenting an audience with selected facts likely to predispose it to arrive at a specific interpretation as if independently. Familiar with this trick, Pynchon redirects our view to its core or signature, here presented as film. Whether made up of twenty-four individual stills or frames per second or, for that matter, in theory, of one per century or millennium (GR 612), films invite us to fill in the gaps and create an illusion of continuity, linearity or history. Pynchon, like von Braun, can rely on our tendency to seek connections and directions when we read. Although Pynchon also subverts the strategy, he too presents factual snapshots in such a way that readers (or audiences) allow themselves to be manipulated by falling into interpretive patterns or channels which predispose them to assume causal relations between widely separated "frames" of a "film" they have not in fact seen. Pynchon's play on filmic images and conventions illuminates the conservative way his characters (particularly Pökler) think, and also implicates his novel's readers. We too may impose patterns on the fragments of information we gather as the book moves in and out of focus, the way Pökler does as he watches his beloved films while "nodding in and out of sleep." Pökler's wife calls him "the cause-and-effect man" because he pieces films and life together from fragments or signs he can map "on to different coordinate systems." Guided by common (historical and fictional) texts, references and constructions, and prompted to map "[s]igns and symptoms" (159) onto coordinates and structures which will make them play as real or on reels—as history or film—with a direction, readers are also likely to create a very personal and subjective, but also to some degree predictable, film.

The oracular message from Walter Rathenau's spirit is central to *Gravity's Rainbow*:

"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. All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic." (167)

Rathenau offers to make his audience aware of the illusion of history and of how the writing of history is not about conveying truth but about “‘synthesis’” and “‘control’” (167)—the manipulation of signs—just as, Pökler finally learns to suspect, the film of stills presented to him as his daughter may be. The German Disneyland set piece where Pökler meets Ilse once a year is edited together from the same sort of Oriental and Wagnerian stage props that formed his earlier narcoleptic film-viewing experiences (159, 419, 579). She and the place may be part of the same celluloid illusion or “Göllerei” (429). Rathenau’s immediate audience rejects the insight he offers. Pökler, however, grows aware of the possibility that his daughter’s history and therefore her identity may be a synthesis. Readers, who are also audience to Rathenau’s message, may answer his rhetorical question about whether they too have only wanted to follow their own “‘winding and difficult road’” through the book as if it were an Autobahn: “‘Is it any use for me to tell you that all you believe real is illusion?’” (165).

If the words given to Rathenau do bespeak a belief in the extreme fictionalization of our mental universe, and if *Gravity’s Rainbow* does denounce history as the tool of synthesis or as a dangerous illusion, how does Pynchon grapple with the history and fiction of von Braun?

Most of Pynchon’s direct references to von Braun are factually accurate shorthand descriptions of events relating to his being picked up by Operation Overcast, of his having at that time one arm in an elaborate cast after a car crash the week prior to his thirty-third birthday (a date granted significance with references to its proximity to the spring equinox), of his aristocratic status, and of the threat to his position posed by those above him in age and political clout (237, 273, 361, 402, 416, 456, 588). Some of these references are part of the scene-setting for the tale of Pökler, the Peenemünde rocket facility and the times in general. For instance, one explains Horst Achtfaden’s decision not to “‘go with von Braun . . . not to the Americans’” (456). Some characters attribute Masonic or other ritual mystique to von Braun’s birthday, but the man himself is described in a matter-of-fact way as if he were just part of the historical setting for this specific time, 1945. As such, he could be passed by as not much more noticeable than fictitious Bert Fibel, except for the fact of the first reference to him: his own pronouncement from the sixties on the subject of his belief in eternal life. He published a number of such credos in addition to the one on which Pynchon draws (Stuhlinger and Ordway 270–73). Because Pynchon opens his novel with such an apparently heart-felt personal statement, it seems a sort of bait and switch when he then does not give us much more direct insight into von Braun, providing only the occasional outside view of him. That

Pynchon lets von Braun have the first words of his novel leads readers to suspect that von Braun, and/or what he says, is important and may (mis)guide their reading.

In comparison, von Braun himself prefaces "Why I Believe in Immortality" (from which Pynchon took the epigraph to part 1) with the following quotation from Benjamin Franklin (the Masonic father of the U.S.A. whom Pynchon ridicules and suspects): "I believe . . . that the soul of Man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this" (119). The confident and guilt-free man who here identifies himself as "Inventor and Space Expert" (119), and lectures on the way ethics will decide the applications of atomic energy seems far removed from the contrite war prisoner we might have thought he was in 1945. Is Pynchon letting von Braun speak for him, borrowing authority the way von Braun seeks to have Franklin's status and repute in America reflect on him? We would answer yes if we believed Pynchon accepts von Braun's image as inventor and expert (the popular American tinkerer persona wed to highbrow scientific authority). This would guide us to search in our reading for further statements about nature, science and immortality—of which there are certainly many. On the other hand, we would more likely answer no if we believed the importance of the von Braun epigraph lies not (just) in the statement but in the person who made it. One reason for doubt is that the epigraphs to the other three parts of the novel are jokey or are statements by unreliable or fictional characters: a joke at the expense of King Kong's costar, the naïve statement of displacement by Dorothy on arriving in Oz, and the simple consternation of crooked president Richard M. Nixon. If the company he keeps undermines von Braun's persona, or if our own knowledge deprives him of simple inventor-and-space-expert status, it is still hard to decide what Pynchon expects us to think about von Braun and his fleeting appearances in the rest of the novel, if the focus is also on his person and not (just) the implications of his concept of immortality for the rest of the text.

After Nixon, cynical, suspicious or paranoid readers of the seventies were ready to confront the fact that history, including personal history like von Braun's, was as subjective or as manipulable as any fiction and was in no way the final truth about what happened in the past. Most of Pynchon's references to von Braun seem objective expressions of a stable past, but the most conspicuous one leads us straight into the fictional heart of the man himself: a person who used the circumstances of his transition to America to recast himself in a heroic role that would place him near Franklin in the pantheon of great American self-made men. The strategies of selective silence he and his men used in postwar interviews created a blank canvas on which he

(and others) could reinvent himself as a "Space Expert" rather than a rocket (that is, weapons) specialist and as an "Inventor," evoking the homely American archetype epitomized by Edison, and laying out the rails along which the American mind would likely run. But is this also the track Pynchon sets us up to follow? It might seem that he himself is caught in the maze von Braun's personal selections from the past create for our understanding of him.

For one thing, the facts Pynchon gives us about von Braun's past are neither objective nor free of our predispositions or of von Braun's own fictionalizing selection from his past. For instance, the palace revolts Pynchon mentions may be verifiable, but they also fit the image the U.S. Army and later sympathetic biographers wanted to paint of a man who was not the responsible person. Though von Braun was undeniably the technical director at Peenemünde, emphasis was placed on his being subject to greater forces and threats which prevented him from acting in more ethical ways than he did. In support of this pitch, selected incidents in von Braun's Peenemünde history were promoted to the exclusion of others. One such was his being temporarily jailed by the Gestapo, possibly as the result of the sort of opposition Pynchon mentions (Piszkiewicz 36-37). Whether jealousy or political infighting placed him in custody, the historically memorable event of his two-week incarceration by the traditional bad guys helped shift him, semantically, to the side of the angels as much as or more than any specific excuses he might have offered for his many years of creating terror weapons and using forced laborers could ever have done. Would Pynchon have been aware that he himself was using the sort of routine ideological assumptions he tries in other places to channel his readers away from? Could he avoid using them, especially if he wants to evoke the von Braun readers might think they know and would recognize? The ability of readers to see through von Braun is a more interesting possibility, perhaps, than what knowledge of the past Pynchon may have had or what ability to see through the layers of fictional subtlety around von Braun's character. The fact that Pynchon presents von Braun in the same sort of selective snapshots or frames as von Braun presented of himself might mean that Pynchon contributes to the directed filmic reality of von Braun as uninvolved in or above the grim reality of suffering within the rocket program's history, unless Pynchon manages in some way to help liberate his readers from their rails/reels, paths or channels of habit.

Much, then, depends on the reader, whether Pynchon always consciously frees or redirects our thinking. The way we see von Braun and his significance ultimately depends on our own knowledge and estimation of him. Whether or not our image of him is linked with the

human horrors of the Second World War in a way it was not or could not have been in the era when he was NASA's media trump card, we are made conscious not just of what Pynchon lets him say but of and by the fact that it is a hero or a villain who speaks. Whether or not we now know von Braun as callous rather than charismatic, and read his distant passings in the novel accordingly, Pökler may be the pedestrian means of opening our eyes to real suffering at the heart of *Gravity's Rainbow*, while von Braun himself and Blicero (his and Dornberger's composite fictional counterpart) refuse to acknowledge either the finality of death or the existence of the Dora camp, instead seeking higher spheres where mortality and history can be neglected or transcended. Dale Carter describes how Blicero tries entirely to escape the dialogue between "public history and private autobiography," which von Braun found ways of negotiating to his advantage, "by dreaming of an end to history." Blicero's mad delusion of escaping death by fixing himself in immortality has him inaugurating himself "as some ahistorical terminus, thus cancelling its unresolvable contradictions by dissolving the flux of history into the permanence of autobiography: projecting a personal world out of his own fantasized nature and thus denying his own historical displacement" (Carter 52).

Likewise, von Braun seems to forget himself in his own idea of immortality, transcending not just gravity but history when he fantasizes about blasting into eternal space—as Blicero dreams rocket 00000's special payload will allow him to do. In light of Rathenau's warning about the winding and difficult road his audience thought was an Autobahn, Pynchon may allude both to von Braun (who imitated Opel's death-defying stunts in Germany) and to us when he describes the "[a]mateur Fritz von Opels" on the Autobahn who think they are in control of their vehicles and their destinations: "but Slothrop knows better" (GR 380). Like Blicero, von Braun may have sought to use his fantasized nature to project and fix a politically ideal world in his autobiography, not just to further his career in the U.S., but with an eye on the image of the righteous man that would go down in history. If he could fix his image, he could create continuity between the justice in this life he claimed for himself autobiographically and the justice in another life to which Franklin attested. He would thus gain immortality through history if he could fix in people's minds the idea that his conduct, like Franklin's, deserved it, and keep them on that track. But readers may no longer buy von Braun's simple image, though *Gravity's Rainbow* will allow them to keep it if they insist.

Pynchon's Trajectory Between History and Fiction

While von Braun is a historical character (as well as a fictional one in the universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*), both the history—Third Reich and postwar—within which he is placed and his own autobiographical history are subject to suspicion and revision. Because of a change in general perception or attitude, readers are sent in a new direction, as are the characters Pynchon bases in history. This is the case with all such characters, not just the obvious candidates like von Braun, whose autobiographical stance is known and can be revised. It is also the case with a character like Pökler, who fits into the history being revised and who opens his own biography to revision—often by leaving conclusions open and ambiguous or offering us alternative versions. Characters from different ends of Pynchon's range of historical-fictional writing participate to different degrees along a trajectory between Pynchon's imbedded passive historical knowledge and the reader's applied active historical knowledge. It is a trajectory of creative reading along which characters gain an independent life much the way Pynchon says the rocket does in flight (GR 209).

Whereas the rocket achieves a temporary freedom beyond even the reader's reach (inside the book and outside, since it is pending at the end of the novel but crashes in the opening), we may not be aware of the nature of the freedom characters like von Braun and Pökler gain when Pynchon and we make history and literature comment on each other around them. Whereas we let our historical knowledge and directional reading in Pynchon's fiction determine such characters' importance and route through the book, because that is the way we tend to navigate, we steer a course with a rigidity akin to that with which von Braun and Blicero themselves thought they could manipulate and even fix history into a terminal, ahistorical immortality. Rathenau's Autobahn speech is a wake-up call about illusions of reality and the way history too is a fiction, a synthesis or manipulation of subjects (sometimes hegemonically performed by themselves). It warns us about finding our way in the morass instead of believing we can speed over or plow through it as if there were no pitfalls, dangerous curves or unpredictable stretches which temporarily deny us an overview. So too with reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is a journey where we lose focus for great stretches of narrative but where we have to let go of our familiar maps and wend our way through the thickets of fiction and history with the likes of Pökler and von Braun as our ambiguous guides.

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