

## Outhouses of the European Soul: Imperialism in Thomas Pynchon

Douglas Ivison

Western imperialism was a process by which a few states, and only a few people within those states, took possession of much of the rest of the world and (re)named it. At its height, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, much of the production of the entire human race went to support and enrich those living in a few European countries. This experiment in organizing human activity was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful. Beginning with the First World War, the empires began to crumble until empire as a political unit essentially disappeared from the map. Out of the ashes of those empires have risen new empires organized on an economic and technological basis. Unlike previous empires, these new transnational empires are independent of geographical boundaries, spatially organized as they increasingly are more in the realm of the techno-corporate than in that of the strictly physical.

Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* provide a means of reading the rise and ultimate failure of the politically organized empires of the late nineteenth century. His earlier short story "Under the Rose" operates mostly within the imperial naming of the world. "Mondaugen's Story," chapter nine of *V.*, offers a psychologically based reading of the imperial project; already one can see within that project the seeds of its own destruction. Finally, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon writes through the collapse of the empire, with all its opening of possibilities for reorganization of human relations, but pessimistically observes the new empires on the horizon. The novel shows how the imperial project inherently led to its own collapse, and to its being superseded by a more threatening force. While the zone seems to represent a vacuum created through the collapse and therefore a space of possibility, such optimism is quickly diffused by the recognition of the impending, if not already existing, rise of a new order.

To trace the evolution of Pynchon's concept of European imperialism that results in his articulation of the zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*, let us first turn to "Under the Rose." Like *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Under the Rose" is a historical fiction. It is set in Alexandria and Cairo at the end of the nineteenth century. However, Pynchon does not attempt to describe a real historical space, but places his narrative

within the European imaginative geography (to use Edward Said's term) of Egypt.<sup>1</sup> As Pynchon acknowledges, his source for much of the background information was an 1899 Baedeker guide to Egypt. From this book, the purpose of which is to define Egypt for its European readers, Pynchon appropriated "all the details of a time and place [he] had never been to" (l 17). Much of the atmosphere of the story was influenced as well, he notes, by spy novels, particularly those of John Buchan (l 18).<sup>2</sup> The artificiality of Pynchon's Alexandria and Cairo is further underscored by the direct and indirect intertextual references throughout the story to texts that played in western imaginings of Egypt (Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example).<sup>3</sup> This story takes place, then, in an Egypt constructed and defined by Europe.

The empire served as much an imaginative as a material purpose. Martin Green describes the significance of adventure tales, stories about the empire, to the British. In these stories the empire served as a space in which boys and men could imaginatively perform their masculinity; the empire was a "place where adventures took place and men became heroes" (37).<sup>4</sup> Stories about empire serve a similar function in "Under the Rose." Kitchener is referred to as "England's newest colonial hero" (106), and Goodfellow "yarn[s] about nonexistent adventures in South Africa" to impress Victoria Wren (109). Victoria has also been an impressionable consumer of her "renegade" uncle's stories about Australia (112).

In the space of Pynchon's Egypt, the moral codes of Europe are not strictly applicable. Prefiguring the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Porpentine realizes that "all of them operated in no conceivable Europe but rather in a zone forsaken by God, between the tropics of diplomacy" (113). Even further down the Nile, into the heart of darkness, the law of the jungle prevails: "There are no property rights, only fighting; and the victor wins all. Glory, life, power and property, all" (117). Pynchon's delineation of this space in which might is right (or, more accurately, might is all) is a clear preview of the German Südwestafrika of "Mondaugen's Story." The irony remains that it is the French and English forces that are threatening to clash down the Nile. Their aggressions are displaced into imperial space.

The final confrontation between the spies takes place in front of the Sphinx and the pyramid of Kheops (136), among "tombs of dead cultures" (117). This showdown between representatives of differing imperial interests occurs among the remains of an ancient empire, which is now being catalogued by the new imperial order. The scene recalls the warnings of Shelly's "Ozymandias" at the beginning of the nineteenth century and of Churchill's *Story of the Malakand Field Force* at its end, and foreshadows the explosion, and implosion, of the

European empires which Pynchon's character Moldweorp "passionately" desires (107) and which Pynchon goes on to chronicle in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Sir Richard Burton identified what he called the "Sotadic Zone," incorporating most of the Mediterranean and the "Orient," in which male homosexuality, particularly man-boy relations, "is popular and endemic" (qtd. in Sedgwick 183). The incorporation of much of this zone into various European empires allowed for a "wider and more protected international canvas of opportunities for—and fantasies of—exploitive sexual acting-out" (Sedgwick 182). Much of the empire became a space in which "deviant" sexuality was not only possible but acceptable.<sup>5</sup> While Südwestafrika falls outside Burton's Sotadic Zone, Pynchon portrays it as a similar space. In that space young boys are a rare and desirable sexual commodity (V 270), and women are repeatedly gang raped. The German/native relation is enacted as a sexualized relation of dominance and submission (240). Within this space it becomes impossible to maintain a conventional sexual relation. When Firelily's rider attempts to keep Sarah as "the closest thing to a wife he'd ever had," the secret is inevitably discovered, and Sarah is gang raped by a platoon—which "took out an abnormal distribution of sexual preferences on her" (272)—after which she apparently drowns herself.

The Germans In Südwestafrika can act in ways which would not be allowed at home.<sup>6</sup> In the imperial context, what is not possible in Europe is possible in the colony. The male protagonists of Rudyard Kipling's "Man Who Would Be King" and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, for example, can transcend the restrictions of European society and act according to their "true" nature. Pynchon's von Trotha is a Kurtz figure who liberates his soldiers by allowing them to take out their primal (and normally repressed<sup>7</sup>) aggression on the natives. As Foppl tells Mondaugen:

"[Von Trotha] taught us not to fear. It's impossible to describe the sudden release; the comfort, the luxury; when you knew you could safely forget all the rote-lessons you'd had to learn about the value and dignity of human life. . . .

"Till we've done it, we're taught that it's evil. Having done it, then's the struggle: to admit to yourself that it's not really evil at all. That like forbidden sex it's enjoyable." (253)

However, the genocide becomes too anonymous. In the transition from a military order to a civilian one, imperial functionaries lose the "luxury of being able to see [the natives] as individuals" (268). "Something had

changed. The blacks mattered even less" (267). In the genocide of 1904, both the destroyer and the destroyed play a part; but the later concentration camps and the impersonal bombing of the Bondels by the South Africans in 1922 deny that relation, that "operational sympathy" (261).

While Pynchon operates in "Under the Rose" within the European imagining, a turn-of-the-century imagining, of colonial space, he goes beyond that imagining in "Mondaugen's Story" by portraying the brutal repression and extermination the imperial project entails. He implicates both the Germans and the British (through the bombing of the Bondels by the Union of South Africa) in actions that prefigure the coming Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> Pynchon represents the German imperial project, and to a lesser extent the British as well, as allowing, in fact requiring, the articulation and enactment of the repressed in Western civilization. The colony is a space in which what is normally repressed can be acted on, and it is not a pretty sight. And now that "'the assertion of the inanimate' through rape, mutilation, and random murder" (Weisenburger 150) has been unleashed in the colonial space,<sup>9</sup> what will be the consequences for the imperial center? That is one of the questions to which *Gravity's Rainbow* responds.

Midway through *Gravity's Rainbow*, the (a?) narrator comments:

Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit. Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels like, and guzzle her blood with open joy. Eh? Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair on his own forbidden genitals. [. . .] Christian Europe was always death [. . .] death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil those cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts. . . . No word ever gets back. The silences down here are vast enough to absorb all behavior, no matter how dirty, how animal it gets. (317)

The first part of this statement is consistent with the representation of Südwestafrika in "Mondaugen's Story." However, *Gravity's Rainbow* makes it clear that the colonial opportunity to enjoy the smell of one's own shit does have consequences for the metropolis. Pirate Prentice's ability as a "fantasist-surrogate" (12) first makes itself known while he is out in the empire, "during his Kipling Period" (13), yet he can and does use that ability in the heart of England.<sup>10</sup> Most significant in this regard is the presence of the Hereros in Nazi Germany. In "Mondaugen's Story" we left them being slaughtered, yet now they are

at the heart of the Empire which attempted to exterminate them. Or as Myron Grunton says:

“Germany once treated its Africans like a stern but loving stepfather, chastising them when necessary, often with death. Remember? But that was far away in Südwest, and since then a generation has gone by. Now the Herero lives in his stepfather’s house. [. . .] Now he stays up past the curfews, and watches his stepfather while he sleeps, invisible, protected by the night which is his own colour. What are they all thinking? Where are the Hereros tonight? What are they *doing*, this instant, your dark, secret children?” (74–75)

If the Hereros in “Mondaugen’s Story” represent the repressed, then in *Gravity’s Rainbow* they represent the return of the repressed, as does Pirate’s haunting by Frans van der Groov, Dutch dodo-killer (620–21). In fact, the Hereros outlive the Third Reich and make its remains their own, particularly the rocket.

In “Under the Rose” and “Mondaugen’s Story,” the colonial zone is distant from the metropolitan center. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Zone is in the center of Europe, in the remains of Germany. As Lawrence Kappel describes it:

Germany, which had been the seat of a vast empire three years earlier, was going out of business, dropping out of reality. What had been a country was now simply “the Zone”—a place without political identity, a chaotic rubble heap of suffering and humiliation and exhausted depravity. . . . Here we have a wild, lawless West, complete with gold in the hills, a tropical island with cannibals and buried pirate treasure, a black market full of loot, but not much solid food. (233)

The space in which social control breaks down has incorporated part of the metropolitan center. In the Zone, everything becomes possible, within and without the text. It is “an existential carnival where national identities and allegiances can be shed and assumed . . . because of the absence of national, civilized, ordinary, socially-defined reality” (Kappel 234). It is a realm of possibility. As Squalidozzi says: “‘In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless. [. . .] So is our danger’” (GR 265). In this openness Squalidozzi sees the opportunity to recover what Argentina—and one might also point to Canada and the U.S.—has lost: The days when the “‘pampas stretched as far as men could imagine, inexhaustible, fenceless,’” before the property neuroses began to take their toll. Slothrop responds, “‘that’s *progress*’” (264), and surely Freud

and Norman O. Brown would agree. But later, Slothrop comes to share Squalidozzi's sentiments:

It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back [. . .] maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. (556)

The Zone presents an opportunity to restructure human organization, to redefine the relation between individual and society. Slothrop is allowed a brief utopian vision of a society without repression and oppression, in which it is possible to redefine one's relation to oneself, to others, and to the state. This subversive quality of the Zone existed when it was maintained at a distance, in the colonial space. Through the Hereros, Pynchon demonstrates how repressed behaviors and ideas released in the colonial space inevitably return home and subvert the metropolitan social order.<sup>11</sup>

Kappel notes that "*Gravity's Rainbow* is organized by a journey from civilized reality into wild possibility, a journey as horrific and revelatory as Conrad's up the Congo River" (225–26). During this journey Slothrop—and the reader—is transformed. As narrative conventions break down, so does personal identity. "Slothrop can be scrutinized and manipulated with absolute certainty in London because there is a power structure there capable of putting him in a fishbowl, and because he has a very specific history in time and space" (Kappel 227); but as that history gets more confused, so does the reader, and maybe Slothrop? In the Zone, "there are no taxonomies and no narratives" (Tanner 80). This absence of narratives is untenable for the empire: "We must impose a phantom topography on the country, project a Baedeker grid onto it" (Petillon 7). Pynchon observes that German "missionaries came in and set up dichotomies . . . created categories" in Südwestafrika (qtd. in Seed 241). This is precisely what Tchitcherine has been assigned to do in Kirghizstan (GR 338–59), and the absence of a narrative is what Frans van der Groov responds to on Mauritius (110). The absence of a narrative threatens the imperial order. The essence, then, of the European imperial project for Pynchon is "the imposition of a culture valuing analysis and differentiation on a culture that valued unity and integration" (qtd. in Seed 241). He writes in a letter to Thomas F. Hirsch that this project not only had been pursued by the Europeans in Africa and elsewhere but was currently (1968) being pursued by the Americans in Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup>

So Pynchon's vision is not really an optimistic one. Out of the ashes of Germany rises a new empire. The Zone "is only a hiatus, the brief interlude between a defunct Herrschaft and another one already looming ahead of us" (Petillon 31). This is indicated in *Gravity's Rainbow* only ten pages after Slothrop's optimistic vision:

Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul. [. . . Tchitcherine] will never get further than the edge of this meta-cartel which has made itself known tonight, this Rocket-state whose borders he cannot cross. (566)

This Rocket-state is the new empire, which we may not be able to resist. Out of the ashes of the Third Reich rises the new technocorporate empire that does not respect national boundaries. Particularly significant are the transnational corporations—not only the German-based IG Farben, but also the likes of Dutch Shell, ICI and General Electric—which had been complicit in the Nazi order and are now leaders in the increasingly global economic order.

The three texts examined here present Pynchon's critique of the European imperial project, which, as he makes clear in his letter to Hirsch, had appeared once again in the American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Smith and Tölölyan point out that for Pynchon, "Europe, powered by the dream of transcending earthly limits . . . has wreaked havoc on the rest of the world, and, incidentally, on its own citizens, since the seventeenth century" (175). Yes, Europe did wreak havoc on the rest of the world, but Pynchon shows us how the imperial project played a part in the destruction of European imperial society itself. The construction of imperial space as a space in which those attitudes and behaviors repressed by civilization could be expressed and acted out indeed did allow for the expression and acting out of those attitudes and behaviors. And the repressed inevitably returned to the imperial center to challenge the existing social order. Finally, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon portrays the rise of a new imperial order that will impose its narrative on the temporary autonomous zone (to use Hakim Bey's term) that is the Zone. It is this order in which we now live.<sup>14</sup>

—University of Montreal

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Egypt as part of "[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and

landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). Such is the setting for the action of Pynchon's story, not a realistically described setting.

<sup>2</sup>The relation of some of Buchan's fiction to "Under the Rose" is clear. *Greenmantle* particularly resonates throughout the story. Though much of Buchan's thriller is set in Constantinople during the First World War, the descriptions of streets (207, for example) and the movements of the spies throughout the city and its society are very similar to those in "Under the Rose." Where the two texts differ is in Pynchon's portrayal of the moral/patriotic ambiguity of the spies' behavior. In Buchan our heroes are good, and the evil Germans are bad.

<sup>3</sup>In his rewrite of "Under the Rose" as chapter three of *V.*, Pynchon makes this imaginative geography clearer: Alexandria is reduced to a spectacle in which Maxwell Rowley-Bugge "exists . . . entirely within the Baedeker world" (V 70).

<sup>4</sup>Or as Churchill phrases it, "If a strong man . . . boasts of his prowess, it is well he should have an opportunity of showing in the cold and grey of the morning that he is no idle braggart" (217).

<sup>5</sup>This is André Gide's understanding of the French empire. In *The Immoralist*, the empire—North Africa in particular—is portrayed as a space in which the narrator can escape social conventions and restrictions and act out his sexual desires toward young boys—in this case Arab boys. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of empire, see Ronald Hyam.

<sup>6</sup>They become physically different as well: they temporarily develop breasts (become feminized) because of their inoculations; and "the sun bleached their hair white and browned their skins" (nativizing them) (257).

<sup>7</sup>The concept of repression is central to an understanding of "Mondaugen's Story" and especially *Gravity's Rainbow*. Particularly significant is the work of Norman O. Brown, whose *Life Against Death* was a major influence on Pynchon (Seed 168). Brown's study begins with the observation that "in the new Freudian perspective, the essence of society is repression of the individual, and the essence of the individual is repression of himself" (3). This understanding of repression, and Brown's elaboration of the relation between repression and desire are central to *Gravity's Rainbow*.

<sup>8</sup>He compares von Trotha's genocide directly to Hitler's (V 245) and later writes, in a letter to Thomas F. Hirsch: "I was thinking of the 1904 campaign as a sort of dress rehearsal for what later happened to the Jews in the '30's and '40's" (qtd. in Seed 240).

<sup>9</sup>Note Sandy Arbutnot's characterization of Germany in Buchan's *Greenmantle*:

"Germany's simplicity is that of the neurotic, not the primitive. It is megalomania and egotism and the pride of the man in the Bible that waxed fat and kicked. But the results are the same. She wants to destroy and



simplify; but it isn't the simplicity of the ascetic, which is of the spirit, but the simplicity of the madman that grinds down all the contrivances of civilisation to a featureless monotony. . . . Germany wants to rule the inanimate corpse of the world." (251–52)

<sup>10</sup>It is also Clive Mossmoon's 1936 trip to Bahrein, where Pirate himself had been stationed, that allows Pirate to have an affair with Scorpio Mossmoon. This admittedly minor point does reveal the consequences of activity in the empire to an extent that Pynchon's earlier work did not.

<sup>11</sup>Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin note that this is an inherent result of the imperial project:

[I]mperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power. In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the "centre" pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the "margin" turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. (12)

<sup>12</sup>The passages involving Malcolm X early in *Gravity's Rainbow* also parallel the experiences of the Hereros in Germany.

<sup>13</sup>"I think what went on back in Südwest is archtypical of every clash between the west and non-west, clashes that are still going on right now in South East Asia" (qtd. in Seed 242).

<sup>14</sup>I would like to thank Professor Joseph Sigman for his helpful and constructive criticism and comments.

#### Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Bey, Hakim. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. 1985. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991.
- Brown, Norman O. *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1959.
- Buchan, John. *Greenmantle*. 1916. London: Nelson, 1917.
- Churchill, Winston S. *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*. 1898. London: Mandarin, 1990.
- Green, Martin. *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*. New York: Basic, 1979.
- Hyam, Ronald. *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990.
- Kappel, Lawrence. "Psychic Geography in *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Contemporary Literature* 21.2 (1980): 225–51.

- Pearce, Richard, ed. *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981.
- Petillon, Pierre-Yves. "Thomas Pynchon and Aleatory Space." Trans. Margaret S. Langford with Clifford Mead. *Pynchon Notes* 15 (1984): 3-46.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. 1973. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- . Introduction. *Slow Learner*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1984. 1-23.
- . Letter to Thomas F. Hirsch, 8 Jan. 1968. Seed 240-43.
- . "Under the Rose." 1961. *Slow Learner*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1984. 99-137.
- . V. 1963. New York: Perennial, 1986.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Seed, David. *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon*. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Smith, Marcus and Khachig Tölölyan. "The New Jeremiad: *Gravity's Rainbow*." Pearce 169-86.
- Tanner, Tony. *Thomas Pynchon*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Weisenburger, Steven. "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past." 1979. Pearce 140-56.