

“Before the Oven”: Aesthetics and Politics in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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We can distinguish two main strands in the critical discourse that circulates around the question of politics in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. On the one hand, critics focus on thematic concerns: the critique of colonialism, Western Civilization, totalitarianism, industrial Capitalism, and the politics of the interplay between the Firm and the Counterforce or the Elect and the Preterite. On the other, they attempt to infer a radical politics either from the heteroglossia of countercultural voices in the text or, from a more theoretical perspective, from the text’s lack of closure, the way its fragmentary structure resists totalization.¹ Little attention has been given to the important role the idea of the state plays in the text. This is surprising particularly since throughout the novel we are presented with elaborate theories and tantalizing models of an ideal state: the “giant factory-state” of the “Raketen-Stadt” (674); the “Rocket-state” that “spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome” (566); Tchitcherine’s transitory “mortal State” (338); Franz Pökler’s dream of a “Corporate City-state” based on Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (578); Wimpe’s vision of the cartel as the “model for the very structure of nations” (349); and the “dream world” (429) of Zwölfkinder. Even Slothrop is “as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone” (291).

In most cases these representations are at best mere fictions, escapist utopian visions various characters create in their attempt to come to terms with the chaotic politics of the Zone. As aesthetic models, or fanciful products of the imagination, they are relatively harmless; but, as Christopher Norris argues, there is an inherent risk in making the aesthetic a “privileged term in . . . ethical and political thinking” (17). In particular, Norris reads any effort to realize these aesthetic models, to actualize what are essentially fictions, as perilous because it amounts to

a dangerous (because immensely seductive) vision of how society might turn out if it could only achieve the state of ordered perfection envisaged by the poets and philosophers. Such an order would exist on the far side of all those hateful antinomies that plague the discourse of mere prosaic understanding. It would finally attain the kind of hypostatic union

supposedly vouchsafed to poetic imagination by the language of metaphor and symbol, a language that not only transcends the distinction between subject and object (or mind and nature), but which also marks the point of intersection between word and world, time and eternity, the creaturely realm of causal necessity and the realm of free-willing autonomous spirit. (17–18)

These aesthetic models of the state are not only grounded on naïve philosophical assumptions, falsely reconciling the relation between text and referent; they also have a powerful ideological force in that the totalizing movement that produces these romantic conceptions of an organic unity frequently masks the violence that makes this unity possible. We can perceive a similar movement at play in the models of the state in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Indeed, Pynchon's text may be read as a critique of such romantic attempts to aestheticize the political. However, before examining the way *Gravity's Rainbow* problematizes the relation between the aesthetic and the political, it is necessary to trace the historical and philosophical roots of the concept of the "aesthetic State."

Walter Benjamin connects the totalized structure of the aesthetic State with a totalitarian politics, maintaining that the aestheticization of politics is the guiding principle behind Fascist ideology. This principle is exemplified in the Fascist aesthetic—for instance, in the Futurists' celebration of the techniques of war and violence—and in Fascist politics, in that the Nazis employed cultural forms and reproductive technologies like film and photography to produce "ritual values" (234), or, as Pynchon puts it in *Gravity's Rainbow*, to engineer "a folk-consciousness" or an ideology of "ein Volk ein Führer" (131). The Nazis perceived the state as an object of beauty, a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), and so did not think of the aesthetic as a function of the state, that is, as an institutionalized autonomous realm: the state itself was an object of aesthetic judgment.

The idea of the state as an aesthetic object is not unique to National Socialism. Indeed, the discourse of the aesthetic State has been central to modern German philosophy and art criticism at least since the eighteenth century.² It originated in the exemplary status art critics like Winckelmann bestowed on the Greek *polis*, which represented the ideal of an integrated totality. In contrast to the fragmented and differentiated modernity they experienced, the *polis* expressed the harmonious relation between art and the social, and in a nostalgic attempt to return to this perceived unity, they advocated that artists should imitate Classical art. Almost without exception, this discourse

focused on problems of mimesis, exemplification, representation and totalization.

Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* remains the most sustained attempt to theorize the concept of the aesthetic State. His psychological approach to the problem outlines the necessary connection between aesthetic sensibility and freedom. Schiller argues that "if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom" (9). Borrowing his terminology and a large part of his theory from Kant's critical philosophy, Schiller uses the aesthetic to bridge the divide between the outer world of sense and the inner world of reason. Aesthetic perception, he maintains, unlike all other forms of perception—which divide us "because they are founded exclusively either upon the sensuous or upon the spiritual part of [our] being"—allows individuals to grasp themselves as wholes. It is only through beauty that we can conceive of ourselves as social beings and only through a state based on the beautiful that we make a society real because "it consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual" (215). Whereas in the ethical state the citizens' desires are curbed by a sense of duty and their freedom, and are always in conflict with the force of external laws, in the aesthetic State the "fundamental law" is to "bestow freedom by means of freedom." The aesthetic State must appear to be free from limits and normative constraints, and, because the conduct of those within this state is governed by beauty, the relation between subjects is perceived as a relation between forms which do not confront each other except as objects of "free play" (215). Only through beauty do we grasp the totality of our being, and only through play, in an activity that is "at once its own end and its own means" (209), are we truly free.

Although Schiller constructs an evolutionary movement from beauty to freedom, he refrains from conflating the aesthetic and the political and insists on their autonomy. He confirms this autonomy by distinguishing the different approaches the craftsman, the artist and the politician take to their raw materials. In their desire for form, the craftsman and artist, when working on a block of marble or a lump of clay, do not hesitate to do violence to their materials. The raw materials are mere objects, means to an end, so it is not necessary to feel respect since the "natural material" they are working on "merits no respect for itself." Their concern is "not with the whole for the sake of the parts, but with the parts for the sake of the whole" (19), though, as Schiller notes, the artist will attempt to disguise and repress his or

her violence and "feign" respect (21). The politician or "Statesman artist," on the other hand, must show a genuine respect when shaping his/her material, which, in this case, is the people. Politicians cannot claim to be objectively detached from or other to the material they work on, so their actions have a necessarily subjective dimension that should, at least in Schiller's ideal, deter the kind of violence inherent in the artist's work.

When Joseph Goebbels reshapes this material into his novel, *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*, he overlooks these fundamental differences. The relation between the Führer and the masses, he writes, is akin to a painter's relation to color. He concludes, "To shape a People out of the masses, and a State out of the People . . . has always been the deepest intention of politics in the true sense" (qtd. in Schiller cxlii; cf. Goebbels 14). In a later letter, he reiterates the point, further blurring Schiller's distinctions by suggesting that his role as a politician is to form "out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a *Volk*" (letter to Wilhelm Furtwängler, qtd. in Stollmann 47). As R. L. Rutsky observes, this was

the dream of a state with *an aura*. For the Nazis, the state itself was to become the cathedral of the future, in which the ancient spirit of the German people would be restored to an alienated modernity through the artist-leader's mediation, as an expression of his "will to form." (23)

We can see a similar idea at work in *Gravity's Rainbow*: the "necropolism" of Speer and Ölsch's "New German Architecture" (372) exemplifies a "corrupted idea of 'Civilization,' in which eagles cast in concrete stand ten meters high at the corners of the stadiums" populated by "a corrupted idea of 'the People'" (302).

By reworking Schiller's theory into his novel, Goebbels inscribes the aesthetic State into Nazi political ideology. However, curiously absent from Goebbels's vision is Schiller's qualification about the politician's need to show respect for his materials. Goebbels apparently has no reservations about inflicting violence on the people to achieve his ends or, for that matter, inflicting violence on Schiller's text. His attempt to literalize the aesthetic State, to manifest it in a physical space and sublimate the aesthetic into the political, is possible only by misreading Schiller. Schiller is aware that, in "the wrong hands," the "soul-seducing power" of the beautiful may be put at the service of "error and injustice" (65). What is missing from Goebbels's reading, as Schiller's translators point out, is "not only Schiller's grasp of the principles of analogical thinking" but also "his firm demarcation of the frontiers between the aesthetic State and the political State" (cxlii).

It is important to remember that Schiller gives no concrete examples of the aesthetic State: it remains at all times a utopian ideal.³ “[W]e are likely to find it, like the pure Church and the pure Republic,” he speculates, “only in some few chosen circles, where conduct is governed, not by some soulless imitation of the manners and morals of others, but by the aesthetic nature we have made our own” (219). In a letter to Körner, though, he suggests that there may be a similar freedom of play in the English figure dance. For Schiller, the spectacle of intertwining figures turning in rapid motion apparently without rhyme or reason “yet *never colliding*,” where each seems “to be following his own inclination,” is “the most perfectly appropriate symbol of the assertion of one’s own freedom and regard for the freedom of others” (qtd. in Schiller 300).⁴ The dance, however, only *appears* free; underlying it is a tightly controlled and highly formalized structure dependent on each figure’s knowing his/her place and understanding the overall movement and structure of the dance. Consequently, Goebbels’s literalization of the aesthetic State not only exemplifies the embodiment of an ideal but also, through its apparent symbolic resolution of ideal and real, marks the terminus of German philosophical thinking.

Surprisingly, in *V.*, Mondaugen reads the political in a way similar to Goebbels’s. Cornered by Weissmann in the billiard room of Foppl’s villa, he suggests that “[p]olitics is a kind of engineering, isn’t it. With people as your raw material.” Though Weissmann’s reply is a dismissive “I don’t know” (242), when we meet him again in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, he now knows enough to have “engineered all the symbolism” (750) in preparation for the launching of the 00000 rocket from Lüneburg Heath and, in the guise of Captain Blicero, to engineer the aesthetics of the “Oven-state” (102) by basing a sadomasochistic game on the tale of Hansel and Gretel. The Oven-state’s romanticized idea of a feudal past, its participants’ obsession with destiny and the structuring of its power relations in accordance with a charismatic Führer principle indicate that it shares many features with the National Socialist state. And because, like *Zwölfkinder*, it adapts and embodies “fairy-tales, legends from history, all the paraphernalia of make-believe [. . .] in a physical place” (419) and is concerned with spectacle and totality, play and form, the beautiful and the sublime, it also shares many characteristics with the aesthetic State.

Blicero, Katje and Gottfried create the Oven-state in response to their inability to impose form on the chaos of the war’s violence and “their own pitiable contingency [. . .] in its midst.” They fashion the autonomous and highly rationalized structure of the “Oven-game” (102) as their “preserving routine” (96) to compensate for this failure. The

movement is reminiscent of the compensatory gesture that underlies the aesthetic of the sublime in that their failure is primarily one of understanding, or as Deborah Madsen puts it, the result of a “cognitive barrier” (92) between them and the violence outside. On a textual level, the imposition of a third term (the Oven) recalls a similar movement in Weiskel’s analysis of the negative sublime, where he reads the destabilizing effect of the sublime as an “excess on the plane of signifiers” (27). The signifier is overdetermined, leading to a breakdown or impasse between signifier and signified that can be resolved only by inserting a “substituted term into the chain” (28), that is, by imposing a metaphor in an effort to stabilize the vertiginous proliferation of possible meanings. The Oven-game, then, is grounded in a hermeneutic crisis. The otherness of the war, seemingly without limit, and the constant threat of the potential enormity and apparent aimlessness of its violence are displaced by the Oven-game’s participants into the figure of the Oven.

However, the figure of the Oven provides only a temporary resolution since its meaning is equally unstable. Katje and Blicero offer different, often conflicting interpretations of what the Oven means. It is, of course, the oven in the Hansel and Gretel story. But for Katje, it also represents herself—“inside [. . .] she is corruption and ashes” (94)—and represents Blicero: he becomes the Oven she is forced to kneel before (94–95).⁵ Blicero, on the other hand, reads the Oven as a figure for his own death. He longs for the day when he is “pushe[d] from behind, into the Oven’s iron and final summer” (97), “the door behind him in a narrowing rectangle of kitchen-light gonging shut, forever” (99). Elsewhere, Blicero likens Gottfried in the rocket to Hansel fattened for the Oven (751). The image is evoked again when Katje, in the role of Domina Nocturna, prepares to defecate on Brigadier Pudding: her feces are “baked in the bitter intestinal Oven” (236).⁶

Though the figure of the Oven is overdetermined, its instability is not caused by a failure of comprehension. The potential breakdown of the signifier/signified relation is averted by the figure’s contextualization in the Oven-game, and so the hermeneutic crisis is avoided.⁷ Because Blicero “trusts [. . .] only [. . .] in the form” (97), in the structural components of the Oven-state, the conflict over the specific meaning(s) of the Oven is secondary. As in Schiller’s example of the English dance, relations in the Oven-state are tightly controlled by its form; but as in Goebbels’s reading of Schiller, the state achieves this control only through violent means. The terror of the war’s violence is formalized into the controlled violence of the Oven-game.

Initially, then, the sadomasochism of the game and the hierarchy of power relations it institutes are, for Blicero, more important than the

state's faithfulness to the content of the fairy story. The Hansel and Gretel narrative may be changed, transposed, and roles may be "reassigned," as long as the balance of power remains intact. When Katje leaves the game, Blicero imagines continuing the game with Gottfried by adopting "a new form" based on the legend of William Tell: "the archer and his son, and the shooting of the apple . . . yes and the War itself as tyrant king" (102). In both cases the function of the game is to narrativize control, and in this it reveals many characteristics of "Fascist aesthetics," which, according to Susan Sontag, "flow from and justify a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, ego-mania and servitude" (316). Moreover, the Oven-state has clear ideological goals: it both attempts to reproduce a tamed version of the war's violence and seeks, through its form, to naturalize the power relations among its participants. Though enslaved by the form of the game, Katje and Gottfried derive some pleasure from their subjection "in the leather and pain of gemütlich Captain Blicero's world" (277). For Katje, Gottfried is a "[b]rother in play" and "in slavery" (95).

The sadomasochistic game also formalizes the structure of identity in the Oven-state, in that it wholly determines the relations between the participants. Katje, Blicero and Gottfried identify with each other only in terms of their assigned roles in the game. This is partly a consequence of sadomasochism's highly aestheticized form. As Sontag argues, "to be involved in sadomasochism is to take part in sexual theater" (324)—a self-conscious pantomime largely dependent on role-play and elaborate scenarios. The emphasis is on appearance, spectacle and surface, with—because sadomasochists perceive themselves both as participants in the action and as observers—an element of impersonality. Like the cameraman who films Katje at the opening of this episode, the others in the game "can feel [Katje's] pleasure" (94), but they cannot penetrate her surface image. Blicero can only speculate about the others' "motives" (99) for being in the game, and Katje recognizes in Gottfried "her own studied mannequin's stare" (95). Of course "formal adventures tend, by their nature, to separation, to loneliness" (620), and the formality of the game alienates the participants from each other. As with the plaster Hansel and Gretel at Zwölfkinder, the relations among the characters in the Oven-state are "in perpetual arrest" (398), a distance Pynchon reinforces by structuring the episode around the three distinct interior narratives of Katje, Blicero and Gottfried.

One reason for this distance, as Deleuze suggests, is the radical asymmetry between the sadist and the masochist. He argues that "they

represent parallel worlds, each complete in itself, and it is both unnecessary and impossible for either to enter the other's world. We cannot at any rate say that they are exact opposites, except insofar as opposites avoid each other and must either do so or perish" (68). Though it appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* as if sadism and masochism are to some extent interchangeable, the text avoids positing sadism and masochism as a dialectical relation. For example, Katje seems to shift from masochist in the Oven-state to sadist in the game with Pudding. But in Deleuze's formulation, this latter game, because of its debt to Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, its relation to the fetish and its attempt to neutralize the real and contain the ideal "within the fantasy" (72), must be read as masochistic rather than sadistic. For Deleuze, "the sadist and the masochist might well be enacting several dramas, each complete in itself with a different set of characters and no possibility of communication between them, either from inside or from outside" (45). We can sense this incompatibility between sadism and the masochism in the text, and, as we shall see, this disjunction revolves around the characters' different relations to the real. In this context, the Oven-game must be read as governed primarily by sadism because it is dominated by Blicero's attempt to destroy the fictionality of the game, to go beyond the theatricals and have a direct impact on the real world.

However, although the rigid structure of the Oven-state appears to prohibit any deviation and its form enslaves its participants, the idea of freedom remains an essential element in the game. Blicero "gathers" that Katje and Gottfried yearn for "their freedom" (99). The possibility of emancipation is also built into the teleological structure of the game. As Hanjo Berressem suggests, "the promise of escape is inherent in Pynchon's text" (168). Gottfried, in particular, dreams this release "as a dark exterior Process that will happen, no matter what any of them may want" (GR 104). "He understands that Blicero will die or go away, and that he will leave the cage. But he connects this with the end of the War, not with the Oven" (103). But the text also implies that these hopes may be illusory. The moment of freedom may never arrive, or the emancipators, like Nayland Smith, the Lone Ranger or Plasticman, who usually appear at "the moment of maximum danger" (103), may arrive "my God, too late" (751).

The text also suggests that the founding of the Oven-state is based on a contract or a consensus among Katje, Gottfried and Captain Blicero: "though it is never discussed among them openly," they all agree to base the state on the "Northern and ancient form" (96) of Grimm's "old Märchen" (94) because it is "one they all know and are comfortable with" (96). Again the difference between the sadist and the masochist is crucial. Deleuze argues that "the masochist draws up

contracts while the sadist abominates and destroys them. The sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist of contractual relations" (20). While the masochist holds onto the illusion of the game, to its essential fictionality, the sadist, through the "powerful force of paranoid projection transforms the fantasy into the instrument of a fundamental and sudden change in the objective world" (72). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, this struggle circulates around the way participants grasp the reality of the game. To consolidate his power, Blicero needs to believe in the physical existence of the state, but for masochists like Katje (and Pökler, who plays a similar game with Blicero as Weissmann), the contract can be broken. There comes a point when a player may "say *fuck it* and quit the game, quit it cold" (107), though it remains questionable whether, by quitting the game, Katje (or Pökler) actually achieves her freedom. As Tony Tanner points out, "[t]he problem is that there seems to be nowhere to go if you 'quit the game'" (83). In contrast, Blicero cannot conceive of any alternative to the state. Though, as the sadist, he has the "responsibility for coming up with new game-variations" (424), Katje's "withdrawal from the game" is "[t]he one variation he didn't provide for." To him, it is an "act of wounding," akin to "knocking over the chessboard, shooting the referee" (102).

The distinction between institutions and contractual relations in the Oven-state complicates the already tangled politics of *Gravity's Rainbow*. It problematizes the traditional juxtaposition of They-systems and We-systems, of the Firm against the Counterforce. On the one hand, the Oven-state bases itself on the mechanical relations of *Gesellschaft*. Its institutionalization of control is similar to the "rational structure" of the Raketen-Stadt, though here the "Führer-principle"—the cult of personality which exemplifies "the male embodiment of a technogique that embraced power not for its social uses but for just those chances of surrender, personal and dark surrender, to the Void, to delicious and screaming collapse" (578)—is superseded by "abstractions of power" (81). However, Pynchon's text ultimately rejects this simplistic evolutionary model. As in Adorno and Horkheimer's diagnosis of modernity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the irrationality of fascism is read as the inevitable result of rational positivism, and the threat of its recurrence is always latent. Enlightenment in *Gravity's Rainbow*, represented as "Modern Analysis" (722), does not lead to the banishment of myth. Through the Oven-state, and through the use of other figures like the rocket, the text reveals the necessary interpenetrability of myth and enlightenment. As Mike Fallopien argues in *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is not a question of "'[g]ood guys and bad guys'": like Marxism and industrial capitalism,

both the Oven-state and the Rocket-state "'are part of the same creeping horror'" (CL 51). Power remains centralized; all that changes is its outward appearance.

On the other hand, and to further complicate our understanding of the politics in the text, the Oven-state may also be read as a community or *Gemeinschaft*. Because it is transitory and because it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, it is analogous to Tchitcherine's "mortal State that will persist no longer than the individuals in it" (338); and it shares the sentiments of the Gross Suckling Conference resolution that "The dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you and I" (706). Pynchon's text problematizes the altruism implied in these idealized communities; the mortal State, like the Oven-state, may as easily be founded on terror and violence, and structured on sadomasochism.

For some, like Thanatz in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this would not necessarily be a bad thing. For him, the state, or "'Structure,'" stigmatizes private sadomasochistic sex because "'[i]t needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game.'" He believes that if sadomasochism could be instituted "'universally'" on a micropolitical level, that is, in the family, then "'the State would wither away.'" Again, the Oven-state, with its surrogate family engaging in private sadomasochistic relations, undermines Thanatz's positive vision of "Sado-anarchism" (737). What it reveals is not the dissolution of state power, but the reproduction of its structure and its values. It reinscribes the law of the father.

One way to resolve the contradictory politics of the Oven-state is to focus on the way the text deals with the relation between the aesthetic and the political. Just as Goebbels misreads Schiller's theory of the aesthetic State, Blicero, by attempting to literalize the Hansel and Gretel story, misreads his source text. In doing so, he conflates the aesthetic and the political, so that, for him, these terms are interchangeable. Katje, on the other hand, views the Oven-state as merely a game. She "plays at playing" (97), and once reminded of the game's essential fictionality, she is "unable [. . .] to continue in the same spirit" (107). Blicero does not make this distinction between play and reality. He believes one should "not just [. . .] play a role, but [. . .] live it" (417), and he criticizes Katje both for her "politic transvestism" (97) and for her inability to "[let] go the self and [pass] into the All" (662). Blicero's attitude is not merely a product of what Judith Chambers calls his "diseased romanticism" (172). Like Goebbels, Blicero aspires, through the Oven-state, to reintegrate (in the sense of

a Hegelian *Aufhebung*) art into the life praxis, to transpose the idea of beauty from the realm of art into reality itself.

However, as McHoul and Wills make clear, *Gravity's Rainbow* remains suspicious of all attempts to unify or sublimate binary oppositions. And even though McHoul and Wills's version of *material typonomy* does not occur in Blicero's attempt to transcend the distinction between art and life, it appears that Blicero cannot circumvent the economy of *différance*.⁸ The Oven-game neither succeeds in literalizing the figure nor attains the transparent connection between sign and referent that would guarantee this sublation. Instead, it reveals the intertextual interplay between two narrative orders. Blicero's Oven-state functions as a commentary on the Hansel and Gretel text (and, potentially, the William Tell text). It must itself be read as a totalizing narrative that attempts, by reifying the relation between signifier and signified, to limit its source text to a single monolithic interpretation and prevent alternative readings. Not only does Blicero attempt to narrativize control; his reading of the text equally attempts to control the narrative.

This control does not exist on the level of the metanarrative in that Katje offers a radically differing reading of the game. Though she is scarred by the experience, she recognizes the fictional status of the Oven-state in her interpretation. It is grounded in "sexual fantasies instead of real events" (272). Blicero, on the other hand, reads the game as politics because he is unable to distinguish between the figural and the literal, climaxing in his "final madness" (485) when he loses all grasp of the distinction. Most of the accounts of Blicero sightings around the Zone agree on his having lost control, being no longer human but having "'reverted to some ancestral version of himself [. . .] wired his nerves back into the pre-Christian earth we fled across, into the Urstoff of the primitive German'" (465). He now dwells in "'The Kingdom of Lord Blicero,'" "seeing the world "'in mythical regions'" which have "'their maps, real mountains, rivers, and colors'" (486). Though for Enzian this is evidence of Blicero's transcendence, a sign that he has "'gone beyond his pain, his sin—driven deep into Their province, into control, synthesis and control'" (661), Blicero's regression into "'his own space'" (486) may also be read as a type of *Schwärmerei*, a term that appears three times in *Gravity's Rainbow* (238, 344, 700). Kant defines *Schwärmerei* as a type of mania or fanaticism: "a *delusion* that would will some vision beyond the bounds of sensibility" (128). It occurs in those visionary moments of positive presentation when one claims that one can see God, intuit the totality or transcend signifying relations, seeing "'the whole shape at once'" (GR 165) without the mediation of signs. It is opposed to negative

presentation, where the totality is present only by its absence. The appearance of the noumenal is inferred through signs that suggest the total: we "may never get to touch the Master, but [we] can tickle his creatures" (237).

Just as the Rocket ultimately fails to achieve its promised transcendence, Blicero fails to break out of the web of signifying relations. His withdrawal into a mythical region cannot be read as an escape from the figure, the world or history; it is his retextualization in the Zone. "He is the Zone's worst specter" (666). His name, itself derived from Teutonic myth, a figure of death, is reinscribed in the text and so remythologized as he changes from "'toad to prince, prince to fabulous monster'" (660). Like a tarot card, Blicero becomes a shifting signifier, a representation open to multiple interpretations. He is read as a "'local deity'" (485). Thanatz moves from not needing to "even *think* about Blicero, to always needing some formulation of him at hand to please any stray curious cop" (668). Blicero's eyes, "in which Greta Erdmann saw maps of his Kingdom, are for Thanatz reflecting the past" (670). Just before his death in the 00000, Gottfried reads his and Blicero's love as "illustrations for children, in last thin pages fluttering closed, a line gently, passively unfinished" (759).

This textualization is most evident in the "175-Stadt" (668), which aestheticizes the hierarchical structure of the Dora concentration camp by relocating it and creating "a hypothetical SS chain of command" (665) consisting of "some really *mean ass* imaginary Nazi playmates" and headed by "Schutzhäftlingsführer Blicero" (666). This structure is based, not on the command "the prisoners knew at Dora," but "on what they *inferred* to be the Rocket-structure next door at the Mittelwerke" (666; emphasis added). The 175-Stadt, in its aestheticized structure and in the way it institutionalizes the pattern of domination and submission, repeats the form of the Oven-state. Similarly, it attempts to narrativize this control, and so the way these two states mirror each other sets up a complex intertextual model of reading: The aesthetic State of the 175s is a simulacrum of the Rocket command-structure and of the Oven-state as well.

The implied connection among these episodes—the interpenetration of the different readings of the Oven-structure, the Rocket-structure and the 175-stadt—complicates the relation between the literal and the figural, the real and the fictive in the text. The world-making or "ontological instability" Brian McHale believes characterizes our experience of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* (71) appears to exist within the text itself. The 175-Stadt connects with or maps onto the Oven-state through the figure of Blicero. Blicero, whose "name has found its way this far east," substitutes for the figure of the Oven as a figure of

"absolute" power (666) that represents the prisoners' sense of terror and powerlessness. Ironically, the 175-Stadt is grounded not in the literal reading of a fairy story but in the prisoners' attempt to literalize an imaginary idea of Blicero. This fictionalized Blicero is, for the former prisoners of Dora, a presence that "crossed the wall, warping, shivering into the fetid bunkrooms, with the same reach toward another shape as words trying to make their way through dreams" (666). For the 175s, as for Thanatz, "[a] screen of words between [themselves] and the numinous" is "just a tactic." For them too, "Blicero, alive or dead, is real" (668). For us Blicero becomes a figure for the error in reading, representing the false conflation of the text and the real, the aesthetic and the political.

Similar conflations are evident in the critical reception of Pynchon's texts. Dale Carter, in *The Final Frontier*, argues that the Oven-state and the Rocket-state have direct political correlates. The movement from the former to the latter dramatizes how the partially obsolete imperialistic power structures of Nazi Germany, "dominated by Dominus Blicero" (6), were absorbed into the totalitarian structures of the Rocket-state, represented by postwar America's scramble to get the first man on the moon. Carter bases his analysis on Hannah Arendt's distinction between imperialism and totalitarianism, but emphasizes a more fluid relation between them. For Carter, totalitarianism did not immediately supersede imperialism. He reads totalitarianism as a gradual movement, and this reading allows him to alter Arendt's time-scale: Arendt reads Nazism and Stalinism as properly totalitarian, while, for Carter, Nazi Germany retained the structures of "an imperial power" (273). This shift accommodates the movement from Oven-state to Rocket-state that is central to Carter's thesis, and it also fits in with his broader methodological concerns. Just as totalitarianism somehow infiltrates and absorbs imperialism, Carter's historical reading proceeds by conflating the literary text and history, aesthetics and politics. Indeed, he suggests that the movement from the text to the "extra-literary" (7) is relatively unproblematic. For example, he describes Blicero's launch of the rocket as "a passover, as yet incomplete, which in a number of ways passes over—and reaches directly into—Disney's" original idea for the EPCOT center (4; emphasis added). In a way remarkably similar to Blicero's use of the Hansel and Gretel story to inaugurate his Oven-state, Carter sublates the aesthetic into the political to literalize his narrative. The relation between Rocket-state and American state is not analogical, and the Rocket-state is no longer an aesthetic model: the two are coextensive.

From a different angle, the neoconservative critic Daniel Bell argues that, along with other writers—like Norman Mailer and William

Burroughs—who embody a sixties sensibility, Pynchon set out “once and for all to erase the boundary between ‘art’ and ‘life,’” and fuse “art and politics” (121). For Bell, the nihilistic, anarchistic and decadent forms of art in the 1960s—and here he includes both modernism and postmodernism—intended to destroy the differentiation and autonomy of culture, economy and polity. He concludes, however, that this attempt at revolution was unsuccessful, and he notes that the introspective tone of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, its preoccupation “with madness and technology” (144), marks the failure of this project.

However tempting it may be to dismiss Bell’s analysis as simplistic or reactionary, his theoretical framework, the discourse of boundary-marking, differentiation and conflation, is similar to that in Carter’s analysis and in many other postmodern approaches to the text. For example, Linda Hutcheon believes that the merging of the aesthetic and the political in the counterculture of 1960s America preempted the concerns of postmodernist fiction (62). She argues that the postmodern questioning of metanarratives “means that the familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order *versus* chaos and disorder) no longer holds,” though she acknowledges that “[p]ostmodernist contradictory art still instills that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos” (7).

The problem with such postmodernist approaches is not the questioning of metanarratives or the resistance to the perceived terror of totalization, but the presentation of such questioning as a historically unique phenomenon or political act. It is a problem of how postmodern critics like Hutcheon read their readings. In Hutcheon’s text, the literalization of the narrative occurs on the level of her exegesis of historiographic metafiction where, in her attempt to categorize contemporary fiction, she goes against the grain of her own reading. Even when she asserts the paradoxical nature of these postmodern texts, their “curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical” (201), and sees her role as outlining the contradictions of postmodernist fiction, the erasure of the “boundaries between the literary and the traditionally extra-literary, between fiction and non-fiction, and ultimately, between art and life” (224–25), she attempts to totalize her argument by framing it as a “poetics.” This poetics, which she defines as an “open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures” (14), is not as open as she suggests. When it comes to the final border between the text and the real, she finds herself in a performative contradiction. We can see this clearly in her attempt to distance her reading from Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal:

The postmodern discourses I have been studying here do not “liquidate referentials” so much as force a rethinking of the entire notion of reference that makes problematic both the traditional realist transparency and this newer reduction of reference to simulacrum. It suggests that all we have ever had to work with is a system of signs, and that to call attention to this is not to deny the real, but to remember that we only *give meaning to* the real within those signifying systems. This is no radical new substitution of signs for the real, as Baudrillard argues. Postmodern art merely foregrounds the fact that we can know the real, especially the past real, only through signs, and that is not the same as wholesale substitution. (229–30)

In one sense, Hutcheon’s analysis is correct. *Gravity’s Rainbow* complicates any effort to reach the referent; the absence of the real is replaced by a veil of signs. The Oven-state episode undermines traditional realist transparency to the extent that it reveals both the seductiveness and the danger of making the sign commensurate with the real. It complicates any attempt to conflate the sign and its referent by positing the absent “real” as a signifier in the text. The real is a site of struggle in the text; but in striving to reach beyond the limits of the text, the characters and readers are faced with the task of working through the internal difficulties of intratextual and intertextual relations only to discover that the distinction between the “real” (in the text) and the referent can never be fully demarcated. By treating the postmodern text’s struggle to write the historical as a political act, Hutcheon reinscribes the transparency of the boundary between sign and referent on the metanarrative level. Her argument lacks the self-reflexivity and irony of the fiction she describes. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as we have seen, resists any corresponding appeal to the political; it is a work of aesthetic education, and, as such, it reveals the pure “mindless pleasure” of the text and teaches us to read more carefully the relation between aesthetics and politics.

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Notes

¹See, for example, Thomas Moore 137–48; David Seed 179–97; Frederick Ashe; and Charles Hollander. The most comprehensive treatment of the broader political contexts of *Gravity’s Rainbow* remains Dale Carter’s *Final Frontier*, which I discuss in more detail later in this essay.

²For a detailed history of this concept, see Joseph Chytry.

³Paul de Man suggests that Schiller’s aesthetic State is also a fiction, a product of his failure to read the aporia that De Man argues is at the center of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, an aporia that threatens to undermine his whole

architectonic. For De Man, Schiller attempts to join what Kant disarticulates (155), and this leads De Man to construct a sequence of misreadings: Goebbels misreads Schiller, who misreads Kant. In this essay I wish to include Blicero in this sequence.

⁴This passage recalls the "anarchist miracle" of the dance of the deaf-mutes in *The Crying of Lot 49* (132), where the dancers mysteriously avoid any collisions. However, Pynchon's text is more explicit than Schiller's in suggesting an underlying form, a choreography or "mysterious consensus" (131) behind the free movement of the dancers.

⁵According to Jacob Grimm, "German märchen and sagen have retained the feature of *kneeling before the oven* and *praying* to it; the unfortunate, the persecuted, resort to the oven, and *bewail their woe*, they reveal to it some secret which they dare not confide to the world" (2.629).

⁶For Gottfried, on the other hand, the formal structure of the Oven-game takes precedence over the interpretation of the specific meaning(s) of the figure of the Oven. Indeed, Gottfried "styles himself a passive observer." His participation in the Oven-state is, in many ways, a consequence of his fundamental naïveté: danger "is still fictional for him" (102). When the rockets fail, he does not think of the events as life-threatening but as exciting stories "to tell at mess, to write to Mutti." He perceives the sex and the chastisements that form the routine of the Oven-state as "necessary" because "they make *specific* his captivity," and so he differentiates these from the conditioning and colonization that underpin the processes of "Army repression." This is partly because he derives both pleasure and pain from the experience of the Oven-game: he is "ashamed that he enjoys [it] so much" and is "afraid that, if not actually judged and damned, he's gone insane" (103; emphasis added). However, the relation between pleasure and pain is more complex than the guilty pleasure he feels in the sadomasochism with Blicero and Katje. His participation in the Oven-state is sacrificial in that he suffers the pain of imprisonment in order to heighten and intensify the pleasure of freedom he believes will come with his release. And even though he connects this final release with the end of the war and not with the Oven, the Oven-state, in both its formal and figural aspects, makes the idea of his future freedom appear more real by giving meaning to a war he cannot properly understand or take seriously.

⁷However, the Oven-state foregrounds the complex interplay between the beautiful and the sublime. The texts of both Kant and Schiller are biased toward the beautiful over the sublime, because the former is more evolved, more permanent and less volatile than the latter. Where the sublime results from the feeling of being overwhelmed by the imagination, which leads to the sacrifice of imagination to reason in an attempt to regain control, the beautiful arises with the harmonious play of faculties which provides an image of the *sensus communis*, the idea of an intersubjective and universal approval expressed in

the notion of taste. It is the social aspect of the beautiful as well as its intrinsic formality and conservatism that influenced Schiller's notion of the aesthetic State. *Gravity's Rainbow* subverts this natural priority of the beautiful over the sublime and questions the stability and temporality of the movement between them. The bonds that unite the Oven-state, though structurally analogous to the formal interconnectedness of the beautiful, undermine the ideals of taste. The *sensus communis* of the Oven-state is founded not on an intersubjective idea of taste but on a corrupted idea of beauty, a spectacle of distaste. The structure of the Oven-state remains fragile, under constant threat of being ruptured or overwhelmed. Its fragility is evident in "the civil paradox" of the Oven-state, "whose base is the same Oven which must destroy it" (99).

⁸Like Derrida's notion of *différance*, the movement of *material typonomy*, where a "material equivalence between . . . signifiers replaces a rhetorical difference between them" (McHoul and Wills 53), parodies Hegel's totalizing movement. It is, as Berressem suggests, a "horizontal" model rather than a "hierarchical" one (31). However, McHoul and Wills, in their analysis of the increasingly complex way Pynchon's texts from *V.* to *Gravity's Rainbow* deal with binary oppositions, construct their own hierarchical movement. Like Pointsman with his dialectic of "the Book" and "the mounting sophistication [. . .] it seems to imply" (GR 139), McHoul and Wills argue that Pynchon's texts move from dialectic (*V.*) to an analysis of excluded middles (*Lot 49*) to *material typonomy* (*Gravity's Rainbow*) and finally to the speculative material text-object, "something like a hot air balloon" (63), where, as Slothrop attests, "binary decisions" lose their "meaning" (GR 335). Critics like Marc Redfield carefully avoid this dialectical movement by suggesting that Pynchon's texts provide merely "the illusion of progressive complexity" (153).

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