

Tristes Traumatiques: Trauma in the Zone:s

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1: Dermagraphics

One should think that Kafka, in "In the Penal Colony" (with a low pun on "penile" which Pynchon would probably approve of), had imagined the cruelest of writing machines. With this infernal apparatus, the law writes the commandment the accused has allegedly broken directly onto the body, with the criminal sentence and the linguistic sentence becoming identical in a slow, painstaking and agonizing process of reading and writing. Of course this happens without a *Trial* and without the victim's knowledge of the accusation. The accused is strapped to a bed while from above a large number of descending needles, the equivalent of the pen, puncture the skin, the equivalent of the empty page, in a hieroglyphics of blood. As the officer tells the explorer: "'You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds'" (141). In Kafka's parable, the realization of the accusation—the victim's "enlightenment"—coincides with the moment of death. Strapped into Kafka's nightmare, the victim can decipher the message only at the terminal moment of physical and psychic dissolution. Ironically, the deadly epiphany does not open up vistas of the abject chaotics of material death (as the other and the outside of culture). Rather, at the subject's "point at infinity," the victim feels, burning through his whole being, the core of culture: the blazing letters of the law.

It seems difficult to think of a more terrible fate. Imagine, however, that the victim is miraculously rescued before the sentence is written out completely and that all that is legible in the script written in pain is "Thou shalt not . . ." In this version, the traumatic scripting marks the beginning of life rather than its end. In a temporality of deferral that evokes long waits in front of *Castles*, it designates the entry of the subject into the most general form, what Kant would call the "empty agency," of the law (because it is not important *what* the law, which is here quite literally the law of the letter and of the signifier, forbids; it is only important *that* it forbids). The unfinished sentence illustrates that the ultimate, brute fact of the law is a categorical, senseless prohibition for prohibition's sake and a punishment for punishment's sake. As Citizen Wayvone in *Vineland* illustrates, because the law is

ultimately nothing but the inevitable other to transgression (and one might speculate, as Lévi-Strauss has done, which came first), the Mafia, as its involvement in *prohibition* implies, is only another form of the law and in deep complicity with it.

If in Kafka's version, the writing of the law is representational ("you have done this or that") and meaning is produced (albeit in death), in our second version, the writing is itself a purely formal, meaningless f:act ("you have done . . ."). In this case, in which the writing, as the form the law takes in general, comes to figure literally what Slavoj Žižek likes to call its stupid, senseless kernel, the punishment is survival: the guilt does not lie so much in a lawless act ("I am guilty because I have done this or that, and I deserve to die") as it lies in being human itself ("I am, therefore I am guilty, but I will live"), and the punishment consists only of an introduction to death by way of a painful, castrating wounding that figures a psychic interpellation. All the victim retains from the intrusion of the law is its most general effect: an enigmatic feeling of guilt that functions as the center around which life rotates. Remember *Vineland's* "'Vibrating Palm, or Ninja Death Touch'" (131), which works "'like trauma, only—much slower!'" (157).

If *V.* revolves predominantly around a universal historical trauma (note the many settings), *Gravity's Rainbow* traces such a traumatic inscription in a technological register, while *Lot 49* revolves around a personal trauma, *Vineland* around a political trauma, and *Mason & Dixon* (as do all the others to some degree) around the Great American Trauma. The traumatic inscription in *Gravity's Rainbow* is also performed by a writing machine, used here by a violent technoculture to copy itself, like a cultural virus, onto the bodies of innocent, implicitly reborn and thus de:scribed "new children" (described also as "artlessly erotic"):

painless, egoless for one Pulse of the Between . . . tablet erased, new writing about to begin, hand and chalk poised in winter gloom over these poor human palimpsests shivering under their government blankets. [. . .] How Pointsman lusts after them, pretty children [. . .] to use their innocence, to write on them new words of himself. (GR 50)

2: Traumagraphics

The poetics of *Gravity's Rainbow* illustrate that at the core of every trauma lies a terrible and painful event—already here one might ask, "terrible and painful for whom?"—which cannot be incorporated into the subject's mnemonic narrativizations (Gilles Deleuze deals with this

in detail in *Difference and Repetition*) and which therefore remains an undecipherable and unmediated agony. Like Slothrop, victims of trauma cannot read this event, an inability expressed in the case of Slothrop's painful conditioning by the sentence "[o]nce something was done to him, in a room, while he lay helpless. . . ." (285). In the logic of trauma, the primary event is such a fundamentally enigmatic, illegible "something" that cannot be transferred into representation.

It is tragically ironic that the results of a traumatic experience are not only evasive actions but a sentence to return to the undecipherable and painful event (acting out), an enigmatic compulsion to revisit and to repeat what I will call the traumacore—the primary event, which is, strictly speaking, not itself traumatic, because it will become traumatic only after the effect, that is, after a period of latency. This traumacore comes to function as an attractor, a vacuum that causes *mémoires involontaires*. In an immobilization taken up in Kafka's story by the literal fixation of the victim to the bed, the traumacore fixates the victim of trauma to a specific temporal slot in its development (the traumetime and the traumasite), to which it returns, against its conscious will, freezing again and again into a traumatized *tableau vivant*. In this economy of pain, the traumacore encapsulates a silence that cannot be translated into words. Crypted (as in Abraham and Torok's book *The Wolf-Man's Magic Word* and in Derrida's foreword to that book) into its dark center are a lost time, a lost space and a lost word.

The traumatic logic is governed by the temporality of belatedness. The traumacore (the primary repressed) calls to the present (its effect) from the future (through renewed and always missed confrontations with the traumacore by way of confrontations with traumatic triggers which are traces of the traumacore and which *re-present* it). As the primary cause is inaccessibly erased and the effect causes only returns to secondary causes (the triggers that represent the traumacore and that lead to renewed, secondary repressions), the future comes logically before the past, and the effects before the cause, as in a rearview mirror, in which the past (the space behind the subject) is projected into and is visible only from the future (the space in front of the subject). This logic also governs the trajectory of the rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, not only because impact comes before sound and death before its announcement; more to the point, a corerocket (the primary repressed rocket as the empty center around which the novel revolves) calls to the present (its [narrative] effect:s) from the future (through renewed and always missed confrontations with the corerocket by way of confrontations with triggerrockets, which are traces of the corerocket and which *re-present* it). As the primary rocket is inaccessibly erased and the effect causes only returns to secondary

causes (the triggerrockets that represent the corerocket and that lead to secondary rocketrepressions), the future comes logically before the past and the effects before the cause. To use a quotation from *Mason & Dixon*, the rockets are literally "'Wraiths . . . from the Future'" (560).

For some of its victims, the rocket spells out instant death—not the inevitability of a slow approach of death that proceeds according to the logic of a nightmare—with the sentence, or rather the screaming, coming only after the effect. In this reversal, death becomes an utterly unaccountable, enigmatic fall from grace. The rocket "travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you're still around, you hear the sound of it coming in" (GR 7). The reversal of sound and vision implies a reversal of chronology:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out . . . a few feet of film run backwards . . . the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning . . . a ghost in the sky. . . . (48)

The rocket is a word that travels too fast to produce meaning and that coincides with death: "a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever." It is "the Word, the one Word that rips apart the day" (25). In this *chronologic*, linear chronology implodes.

The lives of the more indirect victims of the rocket follow the temporal logic of belatedness that also governs the logic of trauma. Although these victims will be forever one step—or better, one date—ahead of the missed encounter with the rocket, their lives will inevitably zoom in on the corerocket, the erased traumatic intrusion of the law, which figures in Pynchon's text as well as in our second version of Kafka's story. Caught in the traumamachine, those "passed over" will not stop searching for the accusation, or, in Slothrop's case, for the scene of scripting. In fact, Slothrop's search is ultimately for the origin of the law and for the enigmatic relation of his life to this law. Why do the rockets fall according to his desire? And, in a second step, why do they fall according to his desire rather than to his pain (if they indeed do)? Maybe because of the ultimate irony that, as *Gravity's Rainbow* reminds us—and this is part of why it didn't get the Pulitzer Prize—in our society the psychosexual pathologies resulting from trauma have been eroticized, so that we have learned—or have we been conditioned?—to be in love with our own death. In the novel's countless S and M scenarios, pain has become a source of sexual arousal; in this acting out, the stroke of the letter literally becomes the stroke of the whip. Pain has come to function as an erotic currency,

with Kryptosam and Impiplex the synthetic chemical catalysts under whose auspices this unholy bonding takes place.

With Kafka as well as with Slothrop, the traumatic event is related to the intrusion of the law, to writing and thus to an image of order rather than to an image of the breakup of order. With Slothrop, it is related to Jamf and to Pointsman's Pavlovian inscriptions, to the traumatic agencies that have conditioned him into a state of death and desire by Rocket. After all, Infant Tyrone is one of Pointsman's darlings, a child sold to paper by the "Slothrop Paper Company" (285)—a child itself paper, its body a sheet onto which conditioned (not "conditional," a word immensely important in *Mason & Dixon*) scripts and cultural inscriptions are stenciled: a child always already signified.

To detraumatize—the utopian aim of most traumatologists—would mean to fill in the traumatic blanks: to return to the traumasite and to the traumatime, and from there, to come to terms with the disruptions that have been caused by the representational blank; to dissolve the traumatic event into the play of symbols, into narration and into a cultural context. In *Representing the Holocaust*, Dominick LaCapra calls such attempts at a Hegelian sublation "fetishistic narratives" (220). The aim would be to make the illegible "Real Text" (the traumacore, which is not a text at all and which is only subsequently turned into a traumatext) readable by what is called working through. What, however—and now we approach the core of Pynchon's poetics—if the very agencies of filling in (memory, representation, the writing apparatus) and culture themselves are understood as traumatic agents? To come to terms with this variation on trauma, which I will call a poetological traumatics, one has to differentiate among several versions of trauma.

Generally, the traumacore is an event that wounds and disrupts the psychic shell. It is an incision into the skin-ego, a cut—like those in Lucio Fontana's *Tagli* (Fig. 1)—through the surface of the phantasm(atic screen) that opens up vistas of unspeakable horror, pain, fragmentation and dissolution. The real spills out through the traumatic wound, and psychic suture, which according to Lacan leans toward the imaginary, is undone. Accordingly, the two modes of detraumatization would be directed either once more toward the imaginary (the creation of a new phantasm, which entails a renewed repression) or toward the symbolic. In the latter case, the aim would be to accept the traumatic logic, the repetition compulsion, and, ultimately, to accept (castration as) death.

A poetological traumatics complicates the mode of this acceptance, because there is no trauma without narrative, and no narrative without trauma. The symbolic is never innocent, because the initial, violent incision of the letter (and with it, as Kafka's story and Slothrop's fate show, the law) into the surface of the phantasm (or its inscription onto

the erased tablet of innocent children) is in itself traumatic. In fact, this inscription is the primary traumatic incision—in a structural parallel to Freud's *Geburtstrauma* (trauma of birth), it traces the violence of the second birth into culture and, with it, the violence of subjection—because it instigates the symbolic, which is the carrier of trauma in the first place. This initial traumacore *à la lettre* recapitulates the incompatibility of event and word within the representational system. Like the traumacore, the event of the first stroke of the letter (which is administered after the imaginary phase to a phantasmatically unified ego) is fundamentally meaningless and thus illegible, because meaning and legibility are conferred only belatedly on the first signifier by the second one—Lacan's shorthand for this retrogression is $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$. S_1 , the literary traumacore, slashes the wound of (the commandment of) castration onto the surface of the imaginary phantasm. From this point of view, it is no longer the loss of the letter (as the agency that enables both narrativization and the creation of a coherent subject) that is traumatic (the speechlessness before the traumatic event); it is the letter itself, as the agency that embodies the trajectory law→castration→death.

Without the intervention of the poetological traumatism and the convolutions it causes, narration could be seen as the perfect aid in dissolving the trauma into the play of symbols. What, however, about the originary wound caused by the whip of representation itself, by the stroke of the letter administered, in both Kafka and Pynchon, by a traumatic, violent, deadly culture? Can there be a writing through if writing itself is experienced as traumatic?

To come to terms with this traumatic irony, one has to consider the poetological traumatics next to the personal and the cultural ones (the more common traumatics). In this way, one creates a prismatic architecture of traumalayers (traumaplateaus) and temporal vectors in which the trauma moves. If the point of perspective of the common traumatics is the (what Deleuze and Guattari would call molar) subject (as against the wounded ego), the chronology of the poetological traumatics reverses the Oedipalizing trajectory, because the point of perspective is now the pre-Oedipal (molecular) negation of the subject and of the ego: the *jouissance* of pure, unmediated life. This *jouissance* (and its entanglements in what Lacan calls "imaginary *jouissance*") is the perspective point (the point at infinity) of *Gravity's Rainbow's* poetics.

From this position:ing, the trauma does not concern the breakup of the subject but its very constitution by what is felt as a traumaculture. If in the first case, the traumatic fall is experienced as a fall into the real, in the second case, the traumatic fall (and Kafka's story is an

illustration of this traumatics) is into subjectivity, language, the law, culture and thus into mediated and represented reality. From the timeless "paradise" of the real, man is expelled into temporal reality. In this logic, the (chaotic noise of the) real is no longer only what is (from the position of the ego even more than from that of the subject) feared and loathed; it is also what is desired (for whatever reason, and within whatever phantasmatic agenda). If the trauma is understood as an onrush of stimulation or irritation, the ambiguity of the German word Freud uses in this context, *Reiz* (which also means "lure," "attraction," "charm" and "temptation"), implies that one side of the trauma is related to this, however painful and violent, *jouissance*, a *jouissance* marked in Pynchon's text as "mindless pleasures."

If in the first case, the ego goes for cover under a blanket of words that screen off the real bogeyman, in the second, the words are themselves traumatic because below every level of language is never (the object of) *jouissance* but only other words, according to the recursive logic of an endless signifying chain. Words will be forever missing the point and will be forever "an eye-twitch away from the things they stand for" (100), "with pencil words on your page only Δ t from the things they stand for" (510).¹

Language, then, participates in the traumatic logic not only because it makes trauma possible in the first place but also because language recapitulates the traumatic logic, so that the utopia of detraumatization is always balanced by the traumatics inherent in the structure of language. The inability to escape language—the missed encounters with the real—pervades all traumatic poetics, which follow a repetition compulsion similar to the one that defines a general traumatics: ceaselessly, the text writes out, within the poetological traumatics based on the primary stroke of the letter, moments of secondary traumatizations.

The stroke of the letter causes the subsequent shame of being a subject and the desire to escape subjecthood, because with survival comes the guilt of having survived. For the subject, each narrative is a belated one, because from out of subjecthood and language there is no return, with repression proper always already the repression of a signifier. In this mapping of the traumatic logic onto the structure of representational systems, the aporia lies in writing—and thus in language—itself. For the subject, always already, the natural parable has been broken up into infinitesimal calculus, and the flight has become pornography. The human being is caught in the "prison house of language." Although pure, unwritten life is always already lost, it goes on calling, like the Sirens, through language, in which it functions as a blind spot. In fact, the same way the traumacore's belated effects

twist the psyche into pathological mannerisms—I will do all kinds of weird things to evade the event, but, even in these evasions, I will approach it—the poetological trauma (the lack of the real operative in language) twists language into poetry. According to the logic of “[a]pproach and avoid” (cf. Pynchon, V 55), the inaccessibility of the traumacore calls to language (the rocketpen) as the very structure that in the same stroke erases and recapitulates its inaccessibility. Such a transfer is the subject of Mark Tansey’s painting *Still Life* (Fig. 2), an inadvertent essay on Lacan’s experiment with the inverted flowers and on Poe’s story “The Oval Portrait,” in which the real, unmediated flowers are sacrificed—wasted, in fact—for their represented, mediated versions. (I have included several paintings by Tansey in the following text, which should function as stills from a movie on Pynchon’s poetics.) In *Still Life*, the detail that evokes Pynchon’s traumatic poetics is a curious lack within the representation. The flowers are depicted on an easel that cannot hold because it is unfinished. This representational vacuum might be seen to figure the inherent lack in the structure of the representational system itself.

Pynchon’s texts—and this is something *Mason & Dixon* makes one aware of once more—have always related trauma to the loss of com- and multiplexity, because in the shift from pure life to its belated representation (from living to writing), life marks the multiplex field the traumatic stroke of the letter reduces to order(ed lines). Life, in its sheer and chaotic multiplexity, as Bergson argues in his various meditations on “the pornography of philosophy,” is too complex to be computed and too complex for words. It is outside language, which functions, as Lacan says, as a perfectly well-regulated grammatical “network of signifiers” (52) spread out over the multiplex real. This real, however, which language always attempts to meet, insists within language as its other. Lacan relates this economy to the interplay of Aristotle’s notions of chance (which he subdivides into *tyche*—personal chance—and *automaton*—the general laws of probability) and necessity. Lacan relates language to the *automaton* and thus to order—even if this order no longer refers, as it does in Aristotle, to an iron necessity. In opposition, he relates unwritten and thus untraumatized life to pure chance and to chaos. In this context, the real comes to function as the chaotic *tyche* operative within the *automaton* of language.² The trauma, as a forever missed encounter—referring to the primal repressed here, not secondary repressions—is, as Lacan says, linked to the blind chance designated by the tyctic: “The function of the *tuché*, of the real as an encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed—first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma” (55).

As emotion recollected in terror and *jouissance*, the traumacore is the secret chamber of torture crypted into the subject's memory palace. Its poetic potential and power lie in the fact that it functions as a perspective point that causes the very failure of recollection and thus as the blind spot of language. It designates the moment when language chokes up and vomits itself out. It points to the silence:s within language, the moment:s when the apparatus of representation fails not to represent but to present.

According to the traumatic logic, the poet is the one who is forever too late, the survivor to whom death or *jouissance* did not (and will not) happen, the chronicler (heh, heh) of terror and delight. He is Ishmael, somebody who is primordially guilty because he has survived to tell the tale, and who, by being unable to do it, and in this very failure, becomes a writer. In this position, the writer always feels language as a possibility and as an impossibility, because according to the traumatics of language, the inability to fully tell the tale is only the secondary effect of a primary cause: the fact that there is language in the first place. As Freud says, "it would be better not to have been born at all." Not only, but especially for the poet, the trauma oscillates constantly between the position of the subject and that of someone not born (especially not into a traumaculture) and thus not having to write at all.

As Tansey's *Illumination* (Fig. 3) implies, traumatic art revolves inevitably around an always missed encounter with the invisible (the dark immediacy, in both senses of the word, of unwritten life), with paper layered between the real face—in a Pynchonian reference, one might wonder whether this is Katje—and its illumination by the system of representation which functions (not only here) as both screen and shield.

Structurally, then, in Pynchon's poetics, the ultimate traumacore is the fall into language, subjectivity and culture, a fall that entails the realization of death, not face to face but rather in the face of the letter. After the fall, the signifier, which could be visualized as a cultural tattoo, a branding or a scarification, acts as an enigmatic hieroglyph stenciled onto the subject's skin. The traumatic effect of this fall into writing is not lethal, but it leaves wounds that need to be deciphered. Tansey's *Doubting Thomas* (Fig. 4), which I have, of course, chosen solely for its title, might serve as an illustration here, because Pynchon's work often puts the finger into the wound to read the traces of trauma(culture), to verify death and the possibilities of resurrection.

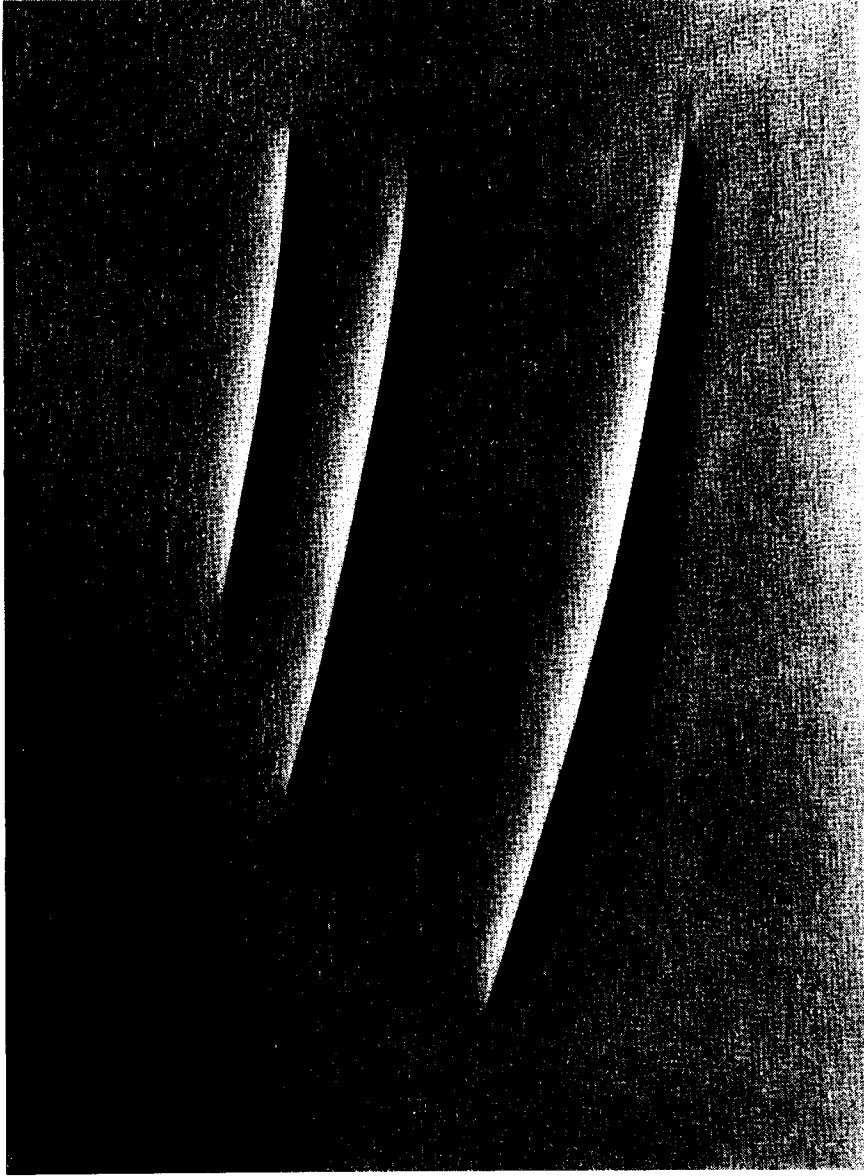


Fig. 1: Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Conception, Expectations [Concetto Spaziale Attese]* (1961). Water-based paint on canvas, 80.8 x 60 cm. Collection Kunstmuseum Bern.



Fig. 2: Mark Tansey, *Still Life* (1982). Oil on canvas, 62 x 46". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc. gift. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

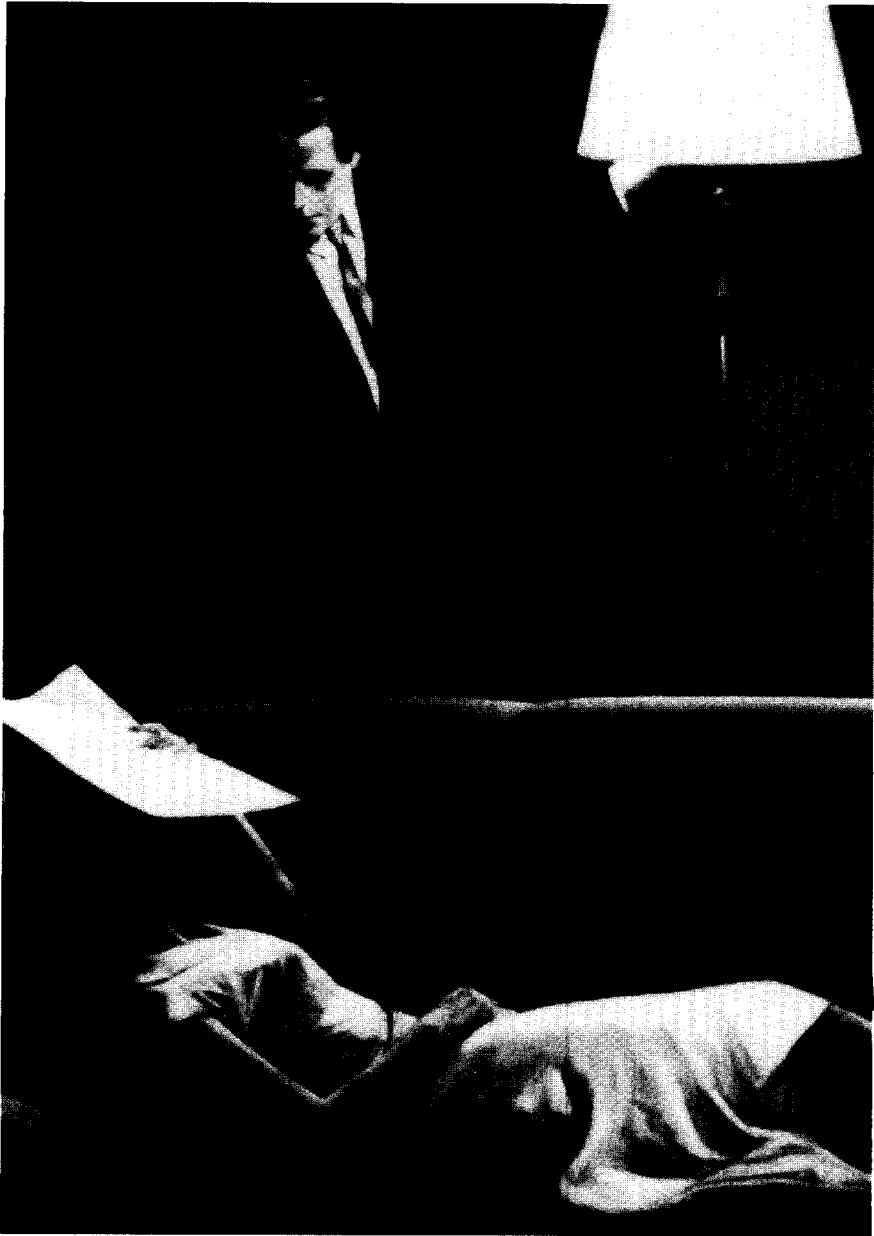


Fig. 3: Mark Tansey, *Illumination* (1982). Oil on canvas, 58 x 40". Collection Laura Skoler. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



Fig. 4: Mark Tansey, *Doubling Thomas* (1986). Oil on canvas, 65 x 54". Collection Steve Tisch.
Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



Fig. 5: Mark Tansey, *Valley of Doubt* (1990). Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 144". Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



Fig. 6: Mark Tansey, *Action Painting* (1981). Oil on canvas, 36 x 78". Private collection. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

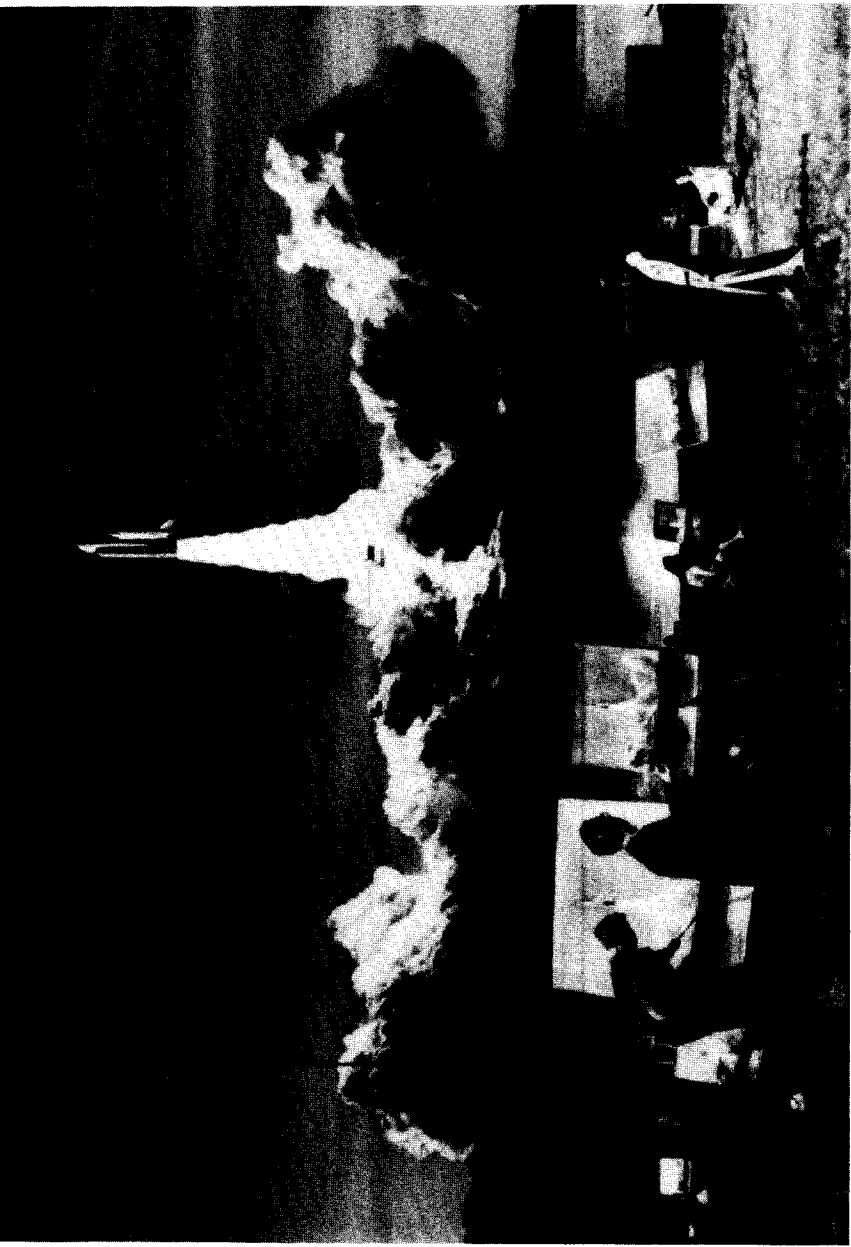


Fig. 7: Mark Tansey, *Action Painting II* (1984). Oil on canvas, 76 x 110". The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mr. Nahum Gelber. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



Fig. 8. Mark Tansey, *Coastline Measure* (1987). Oil on canvas, 87 x 122". Private collection. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

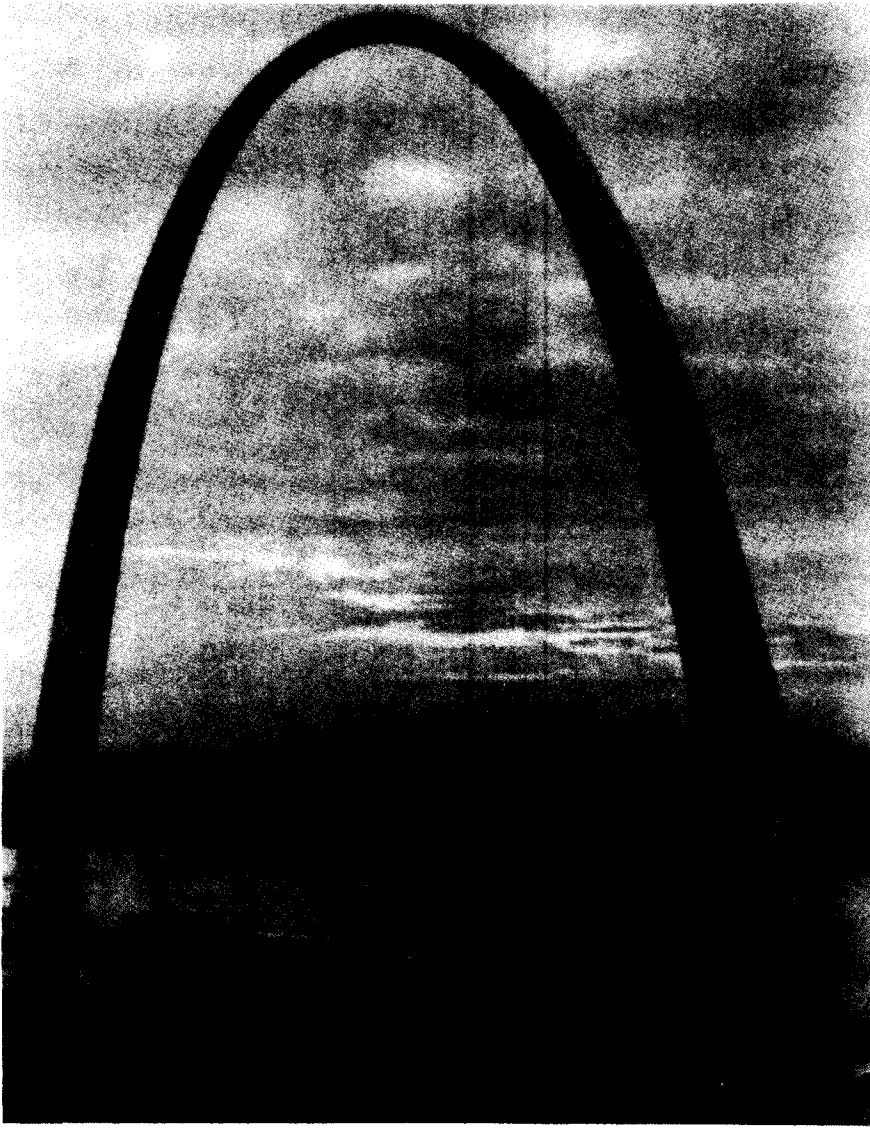


Fig. 9: Eero Saarinen, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial—Gateway Arch, St. Louis (1959–1964).

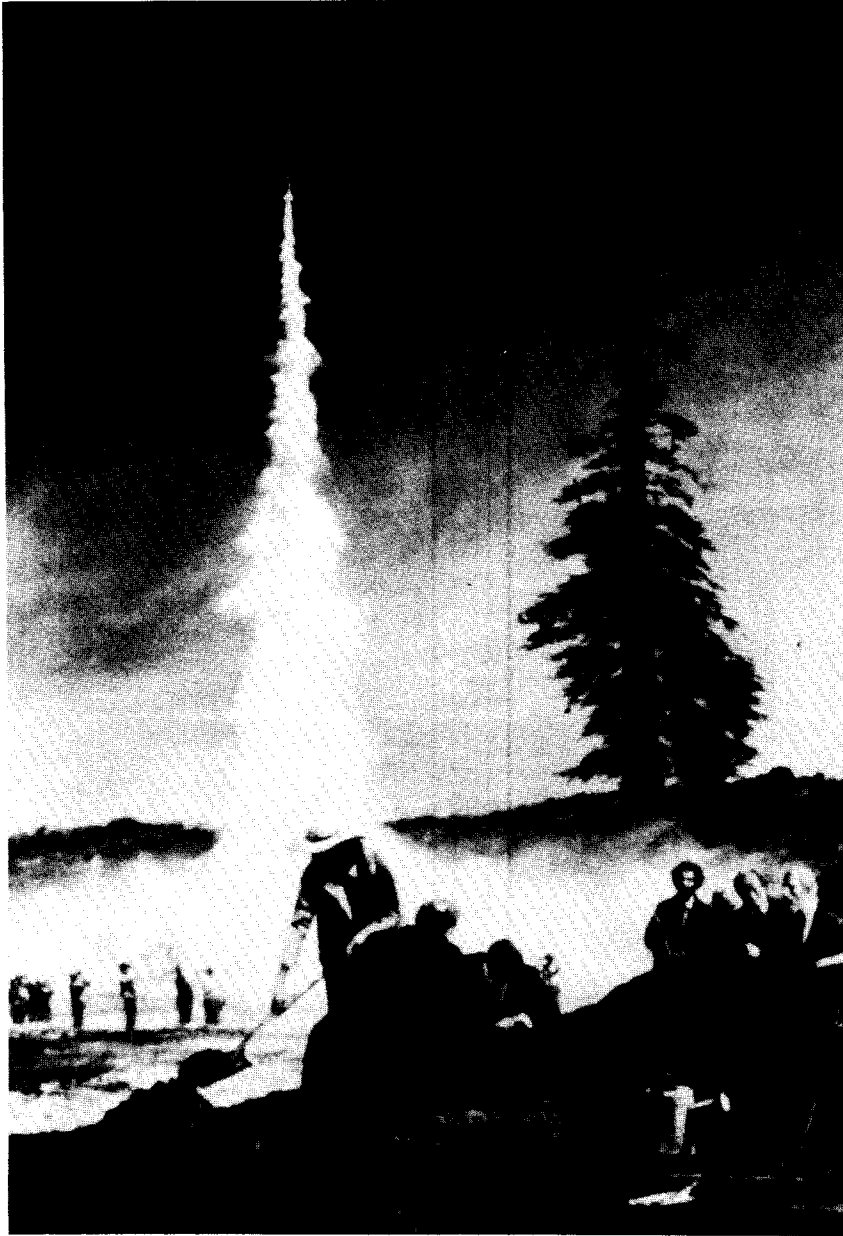


Fig. 10: Mark Tansey, *Achilles and the Tortoise* (1986). Oil on canvas, 111 x 76". Collection Robert Lehrman. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

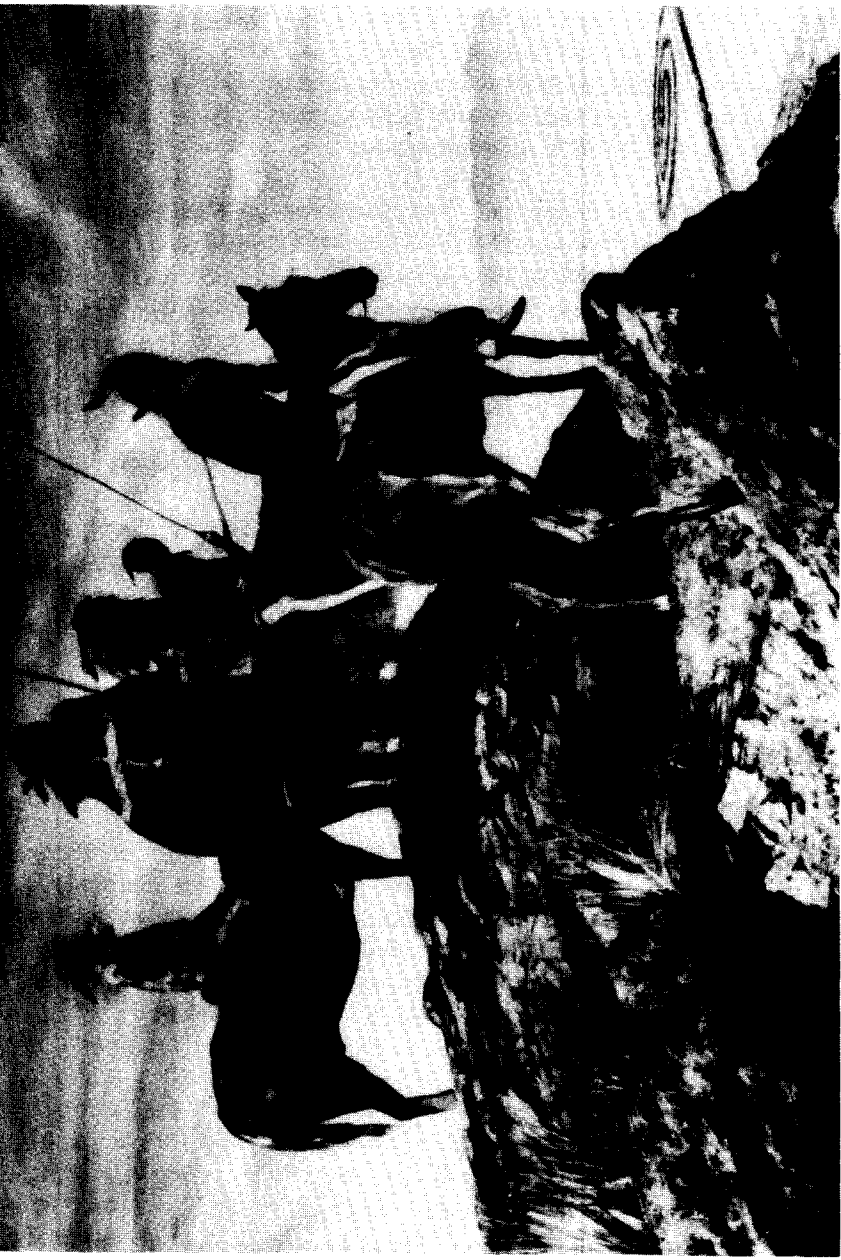


Fig. 11: Mark Tansey, *Purity Test* (1982). Oil on canvas, 72 x 96". Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A. Photo courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

In the painting, the trauma is a telluric wound (a blowing apart of the creation, an irregular revenge that destroys the straight line of the highway). Pynchon's works often describe the time before such a natural revenge. In fact, in their poetics, the ultimate, cosmic trauma is that of the panic, the natural world falling into humanity. As one of the narrative voices in *Gravity's Rainbow* says:

This is the World just before men. Too violently pitched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly. [. . .] Alive, it was a threat: it was Titans, was an overpeaking of life so clangorous and mad, such a green corona about Earth's body that some spoiler *had* to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart. So we, the crippled keepers, were sent out to multiply, to have dominion. God's spoilers. Us. Counter-revolutionaries. *It is our mission to promote death.* (720)³

We silence the noise of multiplicity. We are the penal colonists.

3: The Zone: Living *n* - 1

root and rhizome

— *Gravity's Rainbow* (345)

"There are no zones. [. . .] No zones but the Zone."

— *Gravity's Rainbow* (333)

It is impossible to return to the de:scribed event from out of the labyrinth of cultural inscriptions, because the inscriptions themselves are traumatic. With the law and the letter one and the same thing, the search for clues is by necessity always already subject:ed to a logic of deferral. This is why the Zone holds (on the one hand) such an immense promise. Anarchic Squalidozzi, for instance, feels that "[i]n the openness of the [deterritorialized] German Zone, our hope is limitless'" (265). With every inscription in ruins and every cultural sentence unwritten and in fragments, one might hope to break through once more to the raw life rather than stumble around forever in its various cooked, culturized versions. In this context, the Zone is a fitting image of our *Valley of Doubt* (Fig. 5), which, in Tansey's postmodern version, has become a landscape of destroyed texts and inscriptions (Pynchon's "Real Text" [520]) through which soldiers and civilians roam, looking for forgotten fragments and discarded objects: "the populations move, across the open meadow, limping, marching,

shuffling, carried, hauling along the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don't yet know is destroyed forever" (551).

The Zone, in this defraction, functions as the promise of what Deleuze and Guattari call a "body without organs" and as a "plane of immanence," which means, of course, a state without subjectivization, conditioning and Oedipalization, and thus a detraumatized site. Symptomatically, Slothrop feels he is "skidded out onto the Zone like a planchette on a Ouija board" (283). It is as if one had been beamed back to a once-more white spot on the map, an unexplored continent before Masons and Dixons and before linearization. As Geli tells Slothrop: "'Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions [which are, of course, also the main topic of *Mason & Dixon*]. There aren't any'" (294). The Zone, in its openness, has all

the principle characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One [Pynchon's "Them," the unknown center:s around which paranoia spins its web] nor the multiple. . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ($n - 1$). . . . The rhizome proceeds by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots . . . the rhizome pertains to a map that . . . is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits, and its lines of flight . . . the rhizome is an acentered nonhierarchical and nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states . . . all manner of "becomings." (Deleuze and Guattari 21)

A rhizome is a space defined by a tangle of histories rather than one grand historical narrative. To use concepts taken from chaos theory and from the theory of complexity, it is a field presenting—and I am careful not to say re-presenting—the pure multiplicity of matter, a fundamentally unordered and chaotic space defined by an interplay of secondary orders (islands of order) and disorders (islands of disorder). Like Michel Serres's description of turbulence, the rhizome is "a chaotic multiplicity of orderly or unitary multiplicities and chaotic multiplicities" (110). Pynchon's references and sensitivity to such multiplex fields (which become visible once more after *Mason & Dixon*) are only one

reason why, in Pynchon studies, chaotics (the scientific field of chaos theory) will—and this is a prediction—replace entropics.

It is not by coincidence that terms like “complexity” and “open system” come to mind when we confront Pynchon’s texts, because the Zone (and its micro-version “Der Platz” [GR 686]) is precisely such a turbulent field, a complex, forever shifting arrangement of machinic aggregates, molecular machines, nomadic groupuscules, “ad hoc adventure[s]” (706) and “ad hoc arrangements” (620).⁴ It is a field populated by small narratives, a field of freedom, $n - 1$, in which the parts are always more than their sum, a sum that is by definition reductive and molar. It is a—for a split second—seemingly timeless zone, empty, white, an unwritten page in the history of the world, a narrative erased by a cataclysmic, apocalyptic wind. A moment of absolute zero in which every movement is random and every subject tossed about in the chaotic play of postwar turbulences. As Slothrop muses, “maybe that anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized. [. . .] Is he drifting, or being led?” (556). Although, as with the artlessly erotic children, the historico-cultural tablet is erased for the briefest of moments, in the final sentence, doubt already rears its ugly head. Because “drifting” would imply giving oneself over passively to the forces, attempting to return, materially, to a time once more before traumatic inscriptions, before new lines of force and lines of desire are drawn over and across the stripped body of Europe.

(Around the terms “becoming” and “process” one might develop an axis Pynchon-Deleuze-Bergson-Nietzsche. This is indeed the Zone in which Enzian can dream of “becoming animal”—“Zoomin’ through the Zone, where the wild dogs roam” [522]—and in which Slothrop can dream of “becoming tree”—“When he comes in among trees he will spend time touching them, studying them, sitting very quietly near them and understanding that each tree is a creature [. . .] not just some hunk of wood to be cut down” [552–53]. Similarly, one might develop a somewhat ironic ecological axis around the term “tree” from the blurb on *Gravity’s Rainbow*—Geoffrey Wolff, from the *San Francisco Examiner*, praising the book with the words “Forests have gone to the blade to make paper for this novel. Don’t mourn the trees; read the book”—to the photograph on the cover of *Vineland* and to the Visto in *Mason & Dixon*. One might even consider a parallel text by “the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens”: “he was the king of trees, keeper of the leaves . . . we used to meet by him / far from the hustling town / I loved you. / Now they come to cut you down.” In the Zone one can hope to “become movement” and pure process:

[T]he Zone can sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon [Slothrop; . . .] this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom. He understands that he should not be so paranoid of either Bodine or Solange, but ride instead their kind underground awhile, see where it takes him. [603]

And maybe there is even the chance to zoom in on the zero point, the multiplex event from which to start again without differentiations, hierarchies and order[ing]s, without the drawing of lines: "somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates [with "(s)omewhere, among the wastes of the World (. . .) the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (525)] from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up" [556].⁵)

"Being led," on the other hand, would imply either conditioning or metaphysics. Jamf or God. The war and its destructions might have been merely pretense, with the image of chaos precisely planned by agencies of control: "each release of energy placed exactly in space and time, each shockwave plotted in advance to bring *precisely tonight's wreck* into being" (520). As Katje tells Slothrop, coyly but truthfully, "'Perhaps, after all, *we were meant to meet*'" (189; cf. 195). And in the end, "all in [Slothrop's] life of what has looked free or random, is discovered to've been under some Control, all the time" (209). There is, then, always the danger of an invisible, malignant control operating on a "plane of organization": *n*. In this case, the Zone would be, to adapt Serres's words, "an ordered unity of orderly or unitary simplicities and chaotic simplicities."

This is why, simultaneously with the Zone's promise, "[t]he Oedipal situation in the Zone these days is terrible. [. . .] So generation after generation of men in love with pain and passivity serve out their time in the Zone [. . .] terrified of dying, desperately addicted to the comforts others sell them [cf. *Vineland's* Thanatoids]" (747). The Zone, then, twists both possibilities, determinism and freedom, into a paradox: "personal identity and impersonal salvation" (406), or, in a different matrix, "paranoia" and "anti-paranoia" (434)—the trauma of constitution (a flashforward to *Mason & Dixon*) and order, and the trauma of dissolution and disorder.

4: The Zone: Writing *n* - 1

How to *re*-create the Zone in language, without disregarding these aspects? The utopia of a detraumatized writing (of a the real) would be a kind of action writing, as in Tansey's *Acti...*

Painting series, in which representation happens in real time (Figs. 6–7). Pynchon’s strategy, however, is to approach and avoid the pure multiplexity (the polymorphous perversity) of matter, not by attempting to fully escape the narrative grammar, but to create a multiplex narrative zone and to subvert the control mechanisms that bring about narrative coherence and a narrative line (another premonition of *Mason & Dixon*). The multiplexity of this literary Zone functions both on the physical and on the psychic level. As textual particle, the novel is structurally open, and as narrative wave, it has, like the Zone it describes, a literally “incalculable plot” (521) in which “the [narrative] arrows are pointing all different ways” (603). Such a field is, of course, especially dear to narratologists, who have always been particularly attentive to the subtle shifts of focus, of narrative voice:s, to the (hyper)embeddedness of narratives, the architectonics of a narrative field in which “*everything* [or nothing] *is connected*” (703). It is important that Pynchon’s work—which is full of fractal narrative self-similarities, chaotic and catastrophic shifts of point of view—cannot, on either of these levels, be fully calculated.

If this subversion vectors in on a detraumatized writing, the text avoids (and denies) such a completely free zone through the conscious entanglement of the story in the traumatics of the signifier and its law (writing out). It is always, consciously, a fraction (an eye-twitch) away from the infinite real. Even in its awareness of the impossibility of this mapping project—which is as impossible as *Coastline Measure* (Fig. 8), and not only in Trasero County, for that matter—it does not stop attempting to map the real in writing. The chaotics of Pynchon’s textual zone lie in its complex harmonics, in the refusal to choose one side over the other and in the constant reflection and folding of extremes into and onto each other.⁶ In writing the complex space between the 00000 and the 00001, it creates a space of transversals and middles. This approaches what Deleuze and Guattari call the ideal for a book, which would be “to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority . . . on a single page, the same sheet,” to rescue the “[f]lat multiplicities of *n* dimensions [which] are asignifying and asubjective” (9) by writing in a fractal dimension and on a smooth space:

[W]e shall call striated or metric any aggregate with a whole number of dimensions . . . nonmetric smooth space is constituted by the construction of a line with a fractional number of dimensions . . . what defines smooth space [as opposed to striated, furrowed—echoes of *Lot 49* here—and thus lined space] . . . is that it does not have a dimension higher than that which moves through it or is inscribed in it; in this sense it is a flat multiplicity. (488)

The challenge, then, is to create a fully chaotic narrative field (a monstrous fractal narrative attractor) that is in constant movement and becoming and that never congeals into a stable image, a multiplex field of discourses and narrative attractors providing an overall panorama rather than a vector, a multiverse, an infinite digression, ruled over by what Lucrece calls the *clinamen*, the “smallest possible deviation from the straight line.”⁷ Symptomatically, *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* narratology is based on the creation of narrative vortices that form chaotic attractors and whirlpools rather than on laminar (that is, linear) narration. And everybody always wonders how Pynchon can keep it all in his head in one giant map, and maybe the point is that he cannot, that the narrative forces he evokes are beyond his grasp, and willingly and consciously so. As Walt Whitman says, “I contain multitudes” (and, one might add, libraries), and maybe when Ginsberg saw Whitman lurking in the supermarket, there was another shopper around (maybe looking for quadrille notepaper) who followed the two out into the night. It is, after all, not far from *Leaves of Grass* to the prairie, and the complex choir of American voices in Whitman is not such a far cry from *Mason & Dixon* (in *Democratic Vistas*, America is constantly referred to as an aggregate: “Of all dangers to a nation . . . there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn” [949]) and from Pynchon’s advice to himself in *Slow Learner* “to shut up and listen to the American voices [and, yes, historical documents] around me” (22).

Gravity’s Rainbow shows that, as Bakhtin says, “the novel . . . is plasticity itself” (39). It is, in a proto-Deleuzian sense, a transversal field: “It is impossible to lay out the languages of the novel on a single plane, to stretch them out along a *single line*. It is a system of intersecting planes” (48; emphasis added). One of these plateaus, however, belongs inevitably to order, to the “Other attractor,” of which Brock Vond is one, truly attractive, representative. The harmonics must include ordering machines, molar aggregates and straight traumalines rather than just lines of flight, which brings me, of course, to *Mason & Dixon*.

5: The Zone: Reading *n* - 1

In a recent book on the history of aeronautics and space, Christoph Asendorf provides a technological and cultural history of the parable, from architecture to airplane and finally to the rocket. One of these parables, Eero Saarinen’s *architecture of the Gateway to the West* (Fig. 9), might be seen to connect *Gravity’s Rainbow* (the rocket’s parable) and *Mason & Dixon*, a book set to the tune of “Westering” and whose

perspective point (its point at infinity) is another instance of becoming animal. This perspective point is present in the novel only as a conditional "if" taken up by the narrative itself, which can imagine Mason and Dixon's going farther West only as subjunctive projects and dreams. *If* they had gone on "Westering" (711), Mason and Dixon might have reached the state of animalistic innocence: "'supposing Progress Westward were a Journey, returning unto Innocence,—approaching, as a Limit, the innocence of the Animals'" (427). Another image, once more Tansey, might illustrate the connection between the two books as well: *Achilles and the Tortoise* (Fig. 10) maps the pornography of rocketflight onto a becoming tree, here still uncut for the Visto. And we know that to talk today about *Gravity's Rainbow* means to talk about *Mason & Dixon*, in order to see what the second has done to the first—the way something later can come to change something earlier (see Bloom).⁸

If one can believe his letters—I'm being frightfully logocentric here, but then, sometimes curiosity kills deconstruction—it seems that Pynchon was already at work on *Mason & Dixon* in 1975 (Gussow E8). With this in mind, it is of course tempting to read the novels as (maybe even hypertextually) linked. In fact, nowadays (if one is a faithful lurker on pynchon-l, as I am, one knows this)—and I think it is a good thing—in the treatment of the novels, chronological linearity and with it the concept of development are being discarded for complex topological mappings, structural superimpositions of texts that create (because they are now written at the same time) a field of many—maybe up to a thousand—plateaus, intersecting at many times and places, creating *points de capiton* and transfers. Howard ("Slow") Lerner (GR 641), Weissmann, Seaman Bodine, the parable, the catenary and the snowballs. The transition from Ronald Cherrycoke in *Gravity's Rainbow*—"the noted psychometrist," who has access to "[t]urbulences in the aether, uncertainties out in the winds of karma" (146-47), who is already obsessed with history, real and other, who can feel "between his hands old history flowing in eddy-currents," and who thinks often about "the sheer volume of information pouring in through his fingers" (150)—to the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, un:reliable narrator in *Mason & Dixon*.

Other examples include Vaucanson's Duck in *Mason & Dixon* and "Marcel, a mechanical chessplayer," in *Gravity's Rainbow* (675), mobilities in *Vineland* and the Prairie in *Mason & Dixon*. It is difficult now not to see them as parts of a bigger overall project, architectonically, genetically and topologically connected. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, American forces operate in the Zone of postwar Europe, while in *Mason & Dixon*, European forces operate in the Zone of colonial

America, ironically preparing the ground for America to become postcolonial, to pass from colony to republic—a republic that subsequently “bicker[s] itself into Fragments” (M&D 6). In the complex topology of this setup (with *Vineland*, in the light of *Mason & Dixon*, becoming a spin-off—in the sense of a soap-opera spin-off—dealing with the modern American Zone of “The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll”), the temporal planes oscillate, each agency looking for the utopia of its lost innocence in the specific Zone presented by its other. One gets the image, certainly dear to a movie buff like Pynchon, of the shootout scene in Orson Welles’s *Lady From Shanghai*: a hall of mirrors reflecting one another endlessly, with the empty center in the hall the only real, material spectator.

I would argue that the most common denominator among these prismatic texts is that, on a formal, poetological and philosophical level, all are based on the fundamental enigmaticity and the terror of traumatic moments, with *Mason & Dixon* a long essay on the duo’s traumatic visto. Always oscillating between pure, chaotic materiality and pure, ordered transcendence, between Gaia and Gutenberg, Pynchon’s poetics open literature up to a profound disruption. This holds true for the reading process as well. In fact, when Mason tells Dixon, “‘Suture Self, as the Medical Students like to say’” (20), this is good narratological advice for the reader of Pynchon’s works, which always withhold a suture that would heal the traumatic wound, and thus refer the reader to his or her own traumatic landscape:s. As the narrator says in Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” (the story of another, probably traumatized, stranger): “It was well said of a certain German book that ‘*er lasst sich nicht lesen*’—it does not permit itself to be read. There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told” (97). I think it is ultimately because of the investment of Pynchon’s novels in this fundamental unreadability that they are and remain so very readable. In their attempt to write the real and to reach the traumacore, however, they come very near passing the ultimate *Purity Test*—my final image from Tansey (Fig. 11), which closes another temporal loop, this time to 1976, a mere three years after the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when Gilbert-Rolfe and Johnston published “*Gravity’s Rainbow* and the *Spiral Jetty*.” Both the image and the text evoke once more the importance of land art for Pynchon’s poetics: the Indians look at an artificial text that simulates a natural creation. Particularly in reference to *Mason & Dixon*, the importance might lie in the fact that the text is a vortex (the figure of chaos and complexity): a spiral jetty rather than a traumatic:ally ordered, straight line.

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Notes

¹Nietzsche describes this tragedy very nicely in one of his paradoxical parables:

Der Mensch fragt wohl einmal das Tier: warum redest du mir nicht von deinem Glücke [*jouissance*] und siehst mich nur an? Das Tier will auch antworten und sagen: das kommt daher, daß ich immer gleich vergesse, was ich sagen wollte—da vergaß es aber auch schon diese Antwort und schwieg. (101)

(A man asks the animal: why do you not talk to me about your happiness but just look at me? The animal wants to answer and say: that's because I forget immediately what I wanted to say—but immediately it forgot this answer and kept silent. [My translation])

For the human, the *jouissance* of the pure, multiplex moment is forever lost in a maze of memories and in the logic of belatedness:

[D]er Augenblick, im Husch da, im Husch vorüber, vorher ein Nichts, nachher ein Nichts, kommt doch als Gespenst wieder und stört die Ruhe eines späteren Augenblicks. Fortwährend löst sich ein Blatt aus der Rolle der Zeit, fällt heraus, flattert fort—und flattert plötzlich wieder zurück, dem Menschen in den Schoß. . . . Deshalb ergreift es ihn, als ob er eines verlorenen Paradieses gedächte, die weidende Herde oder, in vertrauter Nähe, das Kind zu sehen, das . . . zwischen den Zäunen der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft in überseliger Blindheit spielt. (102)

(The moment, coming fast, going fast, before it nothing, afterwards nothing, returns as a ghost and comes to disturb the quietness of a later moment. All the time a page separates from the roll of time, falls out, flutters away—and suddenly flutters back, into the lap of man. . . . This is why he is touched, as if he were remembering a lost paradise, to see the grazing cattle or, in intimate familiarity, the child, who . . . plays, in blissful blindness between the fences of the past and the future. [My translation])

²See also: “First, the *tuché*, which we have borrowed . . . from Aristotle, who uses it in his search for cause. We have translated it as *the encounter with the real*. The real is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs” (53–54).

³See also:

Titans stir far below. They are all the presences we are not supposed to be seeing—wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods—that we train ourselves away from to keep from looking further even though enough of us do, leave Their electric voices behind in the twilight at the edge of the town and move into the constantly parted cloak of our nightwalk till

Suddenly, Pan—leaping—its face too beautiful to bear, beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky—into the sure bones of fright— (720–21)

⁴See also: “thousands of arrangements, for warmth, love, food, simple movement along roads, tracks and canals” (290); and “the new Uncertainty. Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly” (303).

⁵See also: “At least one moment of passage, one it will hurt to lose, ought to be found for every street now indifferently gray with commerce, with war, with repression . . . finding it, learning to cherish what was lost, mightn’t we find some way back?” (693).

⁶See also: “If we model complexity in terms of a network, any given narrative will form a path, or trajectory, through the network. . . . As we travel various narrative paths through it, it [the network] changes” (Cilliers 130).

⁷See in this context: “Could he [the renegade William Slothrop] have been the fork [the *clinamen*] in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? [. . .] It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back” (556).

⁸In fact, all of what I have said up until now about *Gravity’s Rainbow* could have been said before *Mason & Dixon*. But today, more than 25 years after the release of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason and Dixon* has already been out for some time. This, of course, makes us, also according to the temporality of belatedness, read it differently. After *Mason & Dixon*, once more, and with a renewed vengeance, what Joe Tabbi has called the Pyndustry (that’s us) wonders, “Shall we project an author?” Not the real Thomas Pynchon, of course, but an unknown writer of the same name. Although in the many misreadings of Foucault the author seemed to have been safely buried, Roland Barthes (who read Foucault more carefully than many others) resurrected his ghost, reminding us that, although the author as a classical agency is dead and gone, we need the author image—the same way the author needs ours. This phantasmatic author is a ghostly projection—and we know, at least since *Vineland*, the importance of ghosts in Pynchon’s universe—a phantasmatic image created from the texts but also from and according to our desires and our readings. After *Mason & Dixon*, of course, we re:create Pynchon anew. And after *Mason & Dixon*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* will have been different. Ironically, it will have been less postmodern. Suddenly, and belatedly, it will have shifted into other lines of tradition. Even more, it will always have been in these lines.

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