KING LUDD SETS UP SHOP IN THE ZONE: NARRATOR AS TRICKSTER IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

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> "Everything straight lieth," murmured the dwarf, contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."
>
> "Thou spirit of gravity!" said I wrathfully, "do not take it too lightly! Or I shall let thee squat where thou squattest, Haltfoot,--and I carried thee high!"
>
> "Observe," continued I, "This Moment! From the gateway, This Moment, there runneth a long eternal lane backwards: behind us lieth an eternity."
>
> --Friedrich Nietzsche
> Thus Spake Zarathustra

> "You only want to know about your path, your Autobahn."
>
> --Thomas Pynchon
> Gravity's Rainbow

1: Introduction

We have in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow[1] a narrator who would embrace, who would delight in the double-entendre Nietzsche's translator constructs for the word lieth.[2] By gratuitously and a-contextually transporting the fundamental ambiguity of this pun to Pynchon's Zone, we make available certain insights into not only the anatomy, but also the affective presence of Pynchon's work, that is, its capacity to act upon itself, to influence the world it describes. At the very least, I propose here one possible itinerary, a segment of an Autobahn that "lieth" as a route through a work of highly complex and shifting meaning.

Brian McHale, in his attempt to invest the term "Postmodernism" with his version of coherence, suggests that Pynchon the Postmodernist carries epistemological issues so far that they become ontological issues, that Pynchon's enterprise in fact echoes Oedipa Maas' "projection" of a world.[3] Leaving aside the question of the most suitable lexical (or perhaps taxonometric) designation, I would like to make a few assertions about, not so much the nature of that projected world, as perhaps the spirit in which Pynchon projects it. As a useful model for Pynchon's narrator, I suggest the Trickster figure in Native American discourse, a sometimes likable, sometimes repellent rapscallion on the fringe of society who creates and recreates

the world at his whim.[4] But by unfolding his "encyclopedic" presentation of a world that turns out to be diffuse and unstable,[5] the narrator clearly demonstrates his lack of absolute control over his creation; and by, as Anne Mangel puts it, "flaunting the irrelevance, redundancy, disorganization, and waste involved in language,"[6] the narrator effectively defines the signification of fiction as a disjunctive, open-ended system. This seeming lack of concern for maintaining an authoritarian role in the projection of worlds suggests in the narrator an attitudinal flexibility and nonchalance that show him to be in fact very comfortable with the uncertainty of his Zone, and perhaps, as we shall see, ours.

Pynchon has elaborated in Gravity's Rainbow an intentional structure in which the narrator finally neglects to confirm a consistent, totalized, or enduring construct of narrative and thematic elements. Possible meanings expand along the novel's paradigmatic axis as a system of open alternatives available for reader consumption. At the very outer perimeter of the text is a narrating consciousness temperamentally inclined to move freely between interpretive possibilities in the act of generating discourse. The narrator's obsession for accumulating detail suggests a desire to achieve precision by alternativity rather than by exclusionary definition. To this extent, then, the narrator has created Tyrone Slothrop in his own image and shares the habit that Slothrop develops, as David Leverenz so aptly says, of just not paying attention.[7] The narrator exhibits this "lack of attention" in his[8] predilection for ontological dynamics, his capacity to make The Zone a radically varying place depending on the varying interpretive awarenesses of his characters. This narrative framing invites us to find the whimsy of the Native American Trickster as the essential organizational principle in the text.

Gravity's Rainbow engages the synthesis of interpretation as a structural and thematic issue by dramatizing "paranoid" formalization, "the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected" (703). The capriciousness of signification provided by the Narrator/Trickster suggests a fundamental antipathy to a paranoid insistence on conceptual closure. I will focus primarily on how the novel enacts the problematization of paranoid system building as it follows Slothrop's activities in and around the Zone. Because the novel persistently discusses Slothrop's paranoia in the idiom of the physical/spiritual quest of cyclic romance, as well as in terms of a displaced holistic or transcendental experience, I feel justified in using the convenient, and I believe useful, rubric mysticism to describe the cognitive and emotional system building that sometimes motivates Slothrop, sometimes only accompanies him. The novel allows dramatic play to the notion that mysticism operates by interpretive conjunction which frequently reifies itself in iconography. Gravity's Rainbow problematizes mysticism. The novel points out that mysticism has a tendency to evolve toward an object orientation; specifically that is, Zone mysticism fetishizes the Rocket (and its post-Hiroshima avatar,

the nuclear weapon) and installs it as an acceptable and perhaps necessary element of a contemporary world view. By letting a Trickster narrator tell the story, Pynchon allows for the possibility of worlds both inside and outside the text that could exist without this icon of apocalyptic destruction. He charts a course that lieth its way out.

First let me describe how the text displays mystical, interpretive system building, and then let me suggest ways in which the ontological whimsy of the narrator provides an antidote.

2: Mysticism and the Object

Edward Mendelson points out that Gravity's Rainbow operates as an exhaustive survey of the post-World War Two world, an attempt at the "public function"[9] of defining a world rendered unstable by physics and macroeconomics. The tour that Pynchon's narrator provides of this Zone organizes itself around American Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop's search through demilitarized Germany for a particular German V-2 rocket, number 00000, equipped with the S-Gerät, a search that Bruce F.Kawin associates with "a quest for wholeness,"[10] or what Thomas Schaub refers to as that "tyrannizing desire of the mind for unity and meaning."[11] In place of the mystic's desire for direct, intimate intuition of all-encompassing wholeness through union of the soul with God or some other spiritual organizing principle, Pynchon's narrator suggests to the reader the possibility of a connectedness by conspiracy. A Plot orchestrated by a They through the labyrinthine channels of a manipulative Firm lends coherence to human experience by its teleological orientation to German rocketry, and by extension, nuclear weapons. Many of Pynchon's characters have been drawn into the system of activity and meaning generated by this Plot, and their "paranoia," that is, their apprehension of a hierarchy of control and order beneath the discord of the Zone, drives them to seek further knowledge and understanding of their roles in a Plot that transcends their individual beings. As a result, as Richard Poirier notes, "the persistent paranoia of all the important characters invests any chance detail with the power of an omen."[12] So "acts of minor surrealism" which "the Empire commits by the thousands every day" (129) threateningly form intricate and often convincing corroborating testimony to the "pattern you're in, right now" (257). Herero radio operators swear they can identify individual sending-hands through the deadpan filtering disguise of Morse Code (733). And above it all, the reader hears the suspicion in the voice of Slothrop asking, "'Sa-a-a-ay. . . . Why are all you folks helping me like this? For free and all?'" (257).

This is, after all, a definitive characteristic of mystic experience--an individual seeking the intuitively defined "vision" that will put the pieces of the sensory accessible world together into an indivisible whole, a schema capable of providing

salutary unity, a sense of belonging usually brought about through a subordination of individual identity. In short, mysticism feeds on subjectively screened information; it offers a spiritual method that wants to convert all data to evidence for an a priori proposition. An event can become variously proof of an approaching millennium, the intervention of a benevolent creator, an inexpressible Tao. While mysticism pretends to scramble cause and effect with paradox and to contravene a positivist world view, in actuality it continues to operate smoothly, but deductively, from principle to manifestation in a direct causal relationship, so that the Tractatus, for example, operates finally, and relatively comfortably, as both a mystical and positivist document.

Similarly, for most of Pynchon's characters, sign wants persistently to become evidence: the priority of presence diminishes, the particular shifts toward the universal, and cause and effect moves on the wings of the "accidents and anomalies of individual sensations or fancies" that Coleridge associates with mystic perception.[13] Consequently, as Molly Hite points out, Gravity's Rainbow is "obsessed with documentation,"[14] attention to minute detail--the stuff that mysticism is usually not considered to be made of. But Pynchon's clues to the Big Plan remain grounded in ambiguity.[15] His narrator displays for us information that gives rise to conflicting interpretations of Zone cosmology. Utilizing one of the well-thumbed applications of a basically omniscient narrative point of view, Pynchon frequently capitalizes on the tension between what the reader knows and what the character knows to undermine the credibility of any absolute confidence in unity that either one might occasionally develop. When Slothrop feels a sense of personal volition, the reader sees the specter of Laszlo Jamf; but by the time Slothrop suspects that "'this is some kind of a plot, right?'" (603), the reader has been so disoriented by the "ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet" (264) that he cannot continue to process evidence of conspiracy. Signs become spurious, perhaps merely exercises in Rorschach inkblot projection (81). As the narrator tells it, mysticism, because it inevitably requires evidence and information, will naturally result in the missed messages of the Hereros, answers lost to the built-in "friction" of information theory while in transmission from the sacred to the profane. The Zone becomes a place of which Geli can say with no understanding of the paradox, "'It's so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements'" (290). Beginning with the novel's opening epigraph and the conjunction of Wernher von Braun with the Puritan impulse to apprehend an order of spiritual meaning beyond the corporeal world, Pynchon hints that in Gravity's Rainbow something will go seriously wrong with mysticism.

The problem is stage one of Comte's hierarchy of cultural/intellectual development, specifically, the introduction of a Baal or a Grail, the point at which mysticism becomes associated with the veneration of objects. Whether it begins in Edward Taylor's dream-based animism or in behavioral

conditioning, fetishism elaborates the human penchant for belief in a spirit reality beyond the mortal body,[16] more particularly, a spirit reality which can incorporate the essence of the self in a larger transcendental whole. Although locating spirit/magic/medicine in a physical fetish object might seem to work at cross purposes with a transcendental impulse, such is not the case. The systematizing program of mysticism is a desire to process and reconcile information, and the physicality of the fetish object acts as a sublimated but self-imposed obstacle to the attainment of the desired sense of spiritual union. Consequently, it preserves the event of desire and the need for the mystical experience of synthesis by maintaining an intentional dynamic in which the focus oscillates between the tangible and the intangible. The invested spiritual power of the ceremonial object necessitates a relentless movement between presences; the spiritual and physical aspects of the object are both substitute and that which is substituted. The object, therefore, is not so much invested with a spiritual power gained through transcendental insight as it is an embodiment of the ongoing process of that insight.

This impulse to systematize experience through fetishization follows the general course of Western intellectual history and becomes habitual and institutional to the extent that human mental processes, as Murray Bookchin puts it, "changed [experiences of mystery] epistemologically from gnosis into the warped form of a sacrament."[17] In the Western European/American tradition, mystical perception has periodically and cumulatively concentrated in a number of physical tokens, including the Ark, the Grail, and the vast proliferation of relics that decorated Medieval religious experience. More recently, the fetishization of abstractions has followed a number of very diverse patterns. John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" marked an important instance of an early American association of spirituality with the physical fact of the New World; Frederick Jackson Turner later extended that association when he conceived of the American frontier as the key to the nation's social and political evolution. When the Enlightenment began to operate from doubt rather than faith, it ushered in a new emphasis on the empirically verifiable in a process which established the intellect as a new mystical vehicle to penetrate beneath superficial flux. The "oscillation" between the tangible and the intangible could now be propelled with newly emerging data as both evidence and end. Later, Herman Melville initiated a search for unity and law that led to the mystery icon of the white whale but did not begin to exhaust the abstractive carrying capacity of objects. William James's "radical empiricism" in combination with a received and culturally sublimated residuum of the Puritan discrimination between Elect and Preterite began to produce our popular culture understanding of the "Puritan Ethic." This understanding requires object accumulation or economic success as evidence of grace in an expanding commercial environment which relies on Veblenesque leisure class media awareness. With Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon extends this montage to include its perhaps ultimate fetish object, the Rocket/nuclear weapon.

This spiritual interinanimation (to borrow Donne's term) of the abstract and the concrete devolves for Pynchon to "the terrible politics of the Grail" (701), the process by which Hitler's Vergeltungswaffe exacts vengeance on the entire culture for allowing it the power to do so. The Rocket enforces a complex of destructive, phallocentric, and object-oriented modes of hierarchical control too elaborate to outline here. Rather than acting simply as a leveling device making all "equal in the eyes of the rocket" (57), the weapon bifurcates humanity into the binary whole of a "chain of being" consisting of those with and those without access to the firing switch. As such, it represents a dangerous concentration of power, a spiritual as well as a political basket with too many eggs in it. In the Hippie-Puritan lexicon that Pynchon allows his narrator, the rocket suggests terminal private property, the most convincing exhibit possible of Election. But beyond this, the rocket (and by extension the nuclear weapon) acts, to use John Nichols' phrase, as "a spiritual hombre for all seasons,"[18] an image that can "answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it" (727), be they Gnostics, Kabbalists, Manichaeans, or Slothropian seekers.

3: Mysticism and the Atomic Object

In the social and psychological dynamics of religion, the human need for security from the social group finds expression in collective identification with a set of beliefs and physical objects associated with those beliefs. When the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow dramatizes as an object of veneration a weapon of virtually incomprehensible destruction, he enacts a powerful tension within the framework of mystical system building. The narrator asks his fiction to test the extent to which the horrible can be holy. He asks in what circumstances the horrible can be a comforting source of security. As a V-2 rocket, the Rocket of Gravity's Rainbow provides a sense of spiritual security in its capacity as a sort of spirit guide, a vehicle of transport to another world. As a typological prefiguration of the nuclear weapon, the Rocket looks prospectively to the period 1945 to 1949, the forty-seven months between Harry Truman's authorization of the atomic attack on Hiroshima and the American public's discovery that the Soviets also had gained the capability to wage atomic war. During this almost four-year period, "The Bomb" came as close as it ever has to representing genuine safety and security. In the public's perception, an American monopoly on the atomic bomb was all that forestalled the expansionist aims of an otherwise better armed Soviet Union.[19] The status of the Rocket as an institutionalized fetish object depends largely on its association with nuclear weapons and dates from the time when "The Bomb" seemed to Americans benign, simply because it was theirs.

What this translates to, in Gravity's Rainbow, is a narrator who insists on evaluating through his presentation the

status of the Rocket as central political/economic and religious/mythical artifact in post-World War Two Western culture. Just as the V-2 confutes the normal order of sensory perception because its approach is audible only after it has exploded (48), so the Rocket acts as a relic commemorating an event that hasn't happened yet--a nuclear holocaust. To bring this about, Pynchon's narrator describes the rocket (and in fact develops his discourse) by an ongoing process of meiosis, an unequal division of characteristics, in which dualities develop faster than the reader can assimilate them. The Rocket splits into two rockets, the 00000 and the 00001, adding to and embodying a complex of fleeting associations between life and death which form a "confusion of ideas of the opposite" (90) framed within a Heraclitian conception of the One--day and night, summer and winter, war and peace, satiety and hunger, and now, we might add, 0 and 1. In Rocket mysticism, the dialectic of human experience comes of the integration, or rather penetration, of death into life. The Quest for the Rocket enacts the culture's desire for its own annihilation (738). This unifying nature of the Rocket can perhaps offer a solution of sorts to the fragmentation of the modern world, but its apocalyptic method is horrific. The narrator does not allow the reader to fall for long under the spell of this mechanomorphic world view; he makes the reader share in the sense of world-affirming relief implicit in Slothrop's explanation, "'If you hear the explosion, you know you must be alive'" (222). He forces upon the reader the realization that out of the late 1940s came the 1950s, a period dominated by the desire for internal, international, and personal security but unable to come across with the goods.[20]

And so this is the Grail that the narrator parades past a confused Perceval, a Pavlovian artifact of deductive cause and effect, invested with power and authority. The novel repeatedly displays characters framing their attitudes about the V-2 rocket with the archetype of the Grail, that religio-mythical talisman of transubstantiation which so persistently surfaces in our literature and criticism. The narrator peoples the Zone with "Pilgrims along the roads of miracle" who regard "every bit and piece a sacred relic, every scrap of manual a verse of Scripture" (391).

Clearly Slothrop's burlesque quest for the Rocket functions as the principal superstructure of the novel.[21] Even though the narrator's presentation suggests a deeply ambivalent attitude about Slothrop as quest hero and the status of the S-Gerät as grail (cf. 275 and 364), the references accumulate to characterize Slothrop's "exposure" to the German rocket (82) as a Grail-specific quest for the information that will help him piece together a unified explanation of the behavior of his Pavlovian conditioned sexuality, "the penis he thought was his own" (216). The brief tenures of his alter egos--Ian Scuffling, Rocketman, Errol Flynn, and Plechazunga--link him with what Molly Hite calls the "American cult of the good-guy loner,"[22] but as he begins to admit that he doesn't even want to find the Rocket

(376), as he disavows interest in even buying the S-Gerät (499), a radical epistemological suspension comes to dominate the personality of the quest hero. He becomes a Perceval taking seriously the good advice not to ask questions, and the element of personal volition exits Rilke's poem (98). As the "buccaneering" associated with Rocketman (372) fades out of Slothrop's style, so comes the realization that "it's the S-Gerät after all that's following him" (490). Slothrop's search for the explanatory, unifying icon of the Rocket, his desire for wholeness, imposes the most radical obstacle to desire available. Slothrop's desire imposes a subject/object inversion that in a sense preserves the quest by confusing the identity of its object, or goal. The subject sees himself as the desired object and the desired object as the origin of the desire. As a result, the narrative disrupts mysticism's tendency toward fetishization. Slothrop begins his celebrated, "problematic" disintegration. In other words, he becomes the coefficient of a kind of "pure," that is, essential, unspecified principle of desire, which actually finding the Rocket only would have destroyed.[23]

What happens, of course, is that Slothrop happily metamorphoses from Perceval to Tannhäuser, as the narrator tells it:

> [. . .] he has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell--stripped. Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be "found" again, in the conventional sense of "positively identified and detained." (712)

Slothrop's disintegrating search for the S-Gerät provides in its conclusion, as it did throughout, a parodic revision of the quest for mystical understanding as represented by the Grail. He simply no longer "pays attention" to the paranoid structure of meanings that animates the quest, and the Rocketman who could prosecute the quest cannot "hold on," ceasing thereby to be "any sort of integral creature" (740-41).

Now wait a minute. Shouldn't we ask ourselves at this point how a narrator seemingly still chuckling over the Nietzsche lieth pun would regard this extravagant scattering? Clearly, Slothrop's sparagmos represents a distinctly Modernist conclusion to the mystic endeavor, but his is no Sufi Fana, no Buddhist nirvana, no snuffing out of the Romantic self. What we lose when we lose Slothrop is the caused self, the determinate self, the self as an element of the quest's subject/object dialectic, the self accessible to Pavlovians, psychologists, and Puritans. Pynchon's narrator requires that the essential unknowing of the individual survive, not by way of a Dadaist celebration of indiscipline, but rather through the discipline of uncertainty. For the mystic the ego may be a prison, but for Pynchon's narrator the ego is a "cover" for the Man (713), so that when Malory's Galahad replaces Perceval for a moment, he looks finally into the recovered Grail and sees what words cannot express: he holds an empty cup whose ineffable emptiness has become dangerous and condensed because the modern mind has believed since

Nietzsche that when he finally found the cup he would have nothing to say. Is the transcendental experience in trouble here?

4: A Cross-reference

At this point in the discussion, the time has come for an interregnum of sorts. I would like to refer you to another Zone altogether. The situation runs something like this:

"Ivan (shaking his shaggy ox-like head in an emphatic affirmative): 'Dot's right, Scotty. I don' li-ike blow up, no by devil!'"[24] The time is ten minutes before midnight; the year is 1915, and the ammunition ship steaming through the "War Zone" of the north Atlantic is a hothouse[25] of paranoia. Against the threat of German submarine attacks, the ship travels completely blacked out, but when awakening crew members discover in their quarters an uncovered porthole letting light out into the blackness, their fear prompts them to suspect A SINISTER SPY CONSPIRACY! Suddenly every sign becomes evidence. After all, that Smitty speaks with a British accent just TOO GOOD to be authentic. And what about that BLACK BOX he keeps under his mattress? Is it TICKING?

When the seamen in Eugene O'Neill's 1916 one act drama In the Zone give in to the paranoid insight that one of their fellow crewmen is in reality a German spy on a mission to blow up their ship, they begin to see everything in the new light of rapidly forming connections coalescing for them in one captivating,horrifying object, Smitty's mysterious black box. Certain that it conceals a bomb, they drop it in a bucket of water before forcing an outraged Smitty to open it. Even when they discover that it contains not explosives but love letters, Dear John letters, they continue to operate under the patterning spell of paranoia. Code, they conclude, a clever German code. And that smudged word at the top of a page--they are sure it reads "Berlin."

Then, just as they prepare to throw the spy overboard, a dry, pressed flower falls from one of the envelopes. Although this flower does not in any rational manner contradict the conspiracy, and although they could presumably interpret it as yet another omen implicating Smitty, the crew seems suddenly stunned. They release Smitty and lapse into "silence, in which each man is in agony with the hopelessness of finding a word he can say."[26] Even though Pynchon covers his biographical tracks assiduously, he purposefully, I think, leaves a conveniently clear trail leading to some of his sources and references.[27] The correspondences between Gravity's Rainbow and O'Neill's play proliferate, but for this discussion, I will summarize only one central parallel. In Gravity's Rainbow the dangerously concentrated power of the Rocket as a fetish object dissolves for Slothrop as his "inattention" to his quest for the Rocket results in his disintegration, which paradoxically maintains the quest by sidetracking and therefore preventing the fulfillment of his desire. In O'Neill's In The Zone the fearful

seamen (also questing after the systematization of information) witness the transformation of a supposed "bomb" into a packet of letters. The concentrated and threatening paranoid meaning of the bomb cum letters is undermined by the process of discovering and ordering information. In both cases, the condensed meaning of the artifact undergoes a diffusing/defusing through the quest, and as a result, the central element of the quest, desire, continues.

In a sense, the performance of O'Neill's sailors provides an illustration of a tendency Frank Kermode observes in the critic, the disposition, perhaps the compulsion, "to interpret texts in a humanly satisfying way despite our awareness that such meanings are tentative and provisional."[28] While pursuing their quest for corroborative evidence of a conspiracy they basically accept as a priori knowledge, and in their abrupt and almost arbitrary distancing of the object of that quest in favor of the continuance of the desire for system, the seamen idiosyncratically deny Wittgenstein's injunction, "say what you choose, so long as it doesn't prevent you from seeing the facts,"[29] advice that Pynchon's narrator precisely inverts by making the saying the fact.

5: An Antidote

When Slothrop scatters in the continuing dysfunction of his quest for the Rocket, the narrator creates a set of circumstances under which the weapon effectively ceases to exist, not so much physically as functionally. The typological connection that the narrator has so thoroughly fashioned between Hitler's vengeance campaign and the nuclear standoff of the early 1970s scatters with Slothrop, and consequently the rocket launched at the novel's beginning, whose parabolic flight lasts until the Nixon presidency, finds its target but never quite hits. By dividing for us the rocket's arc into delta-t's, the narrator evokes a mechanized Achilles who will never overtake the audience in the Orpheus Theatre. The rocket operates within a structure of infinite divisional bracketing à la Zeno

$$\left[\left[d/2\right]/2\right]/2 \ldots > 0$$

in which, defined functionally, teleologically, it vanishes. In a present that does not include thermonuclear holocaust, the nuclear weapon simply does not exist.

This bracketing of all but the present instant naturally enough brings us to Gertrude Stein. In 1946, the year she died of cancer, she wrote a short, curious, and delightfully Steinian piece called "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb," which so persuasively demands admixture with Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow that I have reproduced it here in its entirety. While you read it, I would like you to play Rossini in the back of your mind.

> They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it.
>
> I like to read detective and mystery stories, I never get enough of them but whenever one of them is or was about death rays and atomic bombs I never could read them. What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. If they are not as destructive as all that then they are just a little more or less destructive than other things and that means that in spite of all destruction there are always lots left on this earth to be interested or to be willing and the thing that destroys is just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people starting it off, but really nobody else can do anything about it so you have to just live along like always, so you see the atomic [bomb] is not at all interesting, not any more interesting than any other machine, and machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested. I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldn't any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. And really way down that is the way everybody feels about it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.
>
> Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story. [30]

Yes indeed. Characteristically, Stein simply refuses to play, or rather alters the rules to such a radical extent that the game itself becomes unrecognizable. She circumvents The Bomb psychologically by denying its capacity to render individuals insignificant because they can be so instantaneously and democratically destroyed. She plays Nietzsche by making of Slothrop's mendacious seduction line, "honey [. . .] right now's all there is . . . " (208), a personal solution to the Cold War. And even more significantly, with her indictment of nuclear weapons as just another "dull and meaningless" secret, she takes

out the entire history of Western mysticism, of which I hope we are all now convinced The Bomb is a part. Finally, by framing her discussion within the context of the process of reading a detective novel (without excessive concern over who done it), Stein drags the text along for Slothropian disintegration.

Granted, Stein's position might have been more persuasive in 1946,[31] and an argument could be raised (and was raised extensively by the SDS during the 1960s) against this sort of "drop out," exile approach to socio-political issues. There is the temptation to read Stein here as operating in an "escapist" mode.[32] But let us withhold judgment briefly as we examine more closely how Gravity's Rainbow functions as a prolix elaboration of Stein's "nice story."

For Pynchon's narrator, the Counterforce is merely a step in the right direction. While it appears to oppose the Plot, it does so only in a strictly Hegelian sense, as a complement necessary to flesh out yet another of the novel's numerous dualisms. The Counterforce never breaks away, nor is it intended to break away, from its binary co-orbit with the Firm. In fact, the alarmingly inverted solipsism (no I, only They) that readers discover when they can no longer believe in the John Dillinger heroics of the Counterforce produces one of the novel's most powerful effects. But from the narrator's perspective, at least one element of the Counterforce, its musical orientation, represents an important breakthrough. The "Rossini solution"--that "a person feels good listening to Rossini" (440)--which the narrator associates with the Counterforce, moves beyond the yin/yang commingling of Plot and Counterforce. It bypasses the direct demand for freedom that Gustav Schlabone connects with Beethoven (440) and suggests instead an Ophitistic[33] "pleasure principle" to militate against the "reality principle" of the entire Plot/Counterforce dialectic.

This then is a "nice story" that Gravity's Rainbow tells, a bedtime story about how society lives with The Bomb. The "sublime" Rossini can make us "comfortable" (376), as a cultural legacy of 1950s conspiracy thinking can never do. In this process of "removing" The Bomb, of stepping back from the goal-oriented system-building mysticism that makes it work, the narrator allows Slothrop's quest to simply run down; he upsets the dialectic of the "good" and "bad" Rockets, the Plot and Counterforce, and in short, all the structural dualisms that seemed to be giving the novel its structure; the novel jettisons its own clear organization. So when the narrator dissolves the Rocket, he makes of the Zone a place where even discourse itself has been disturbingly destabilized. The long historical perspective of Pound may be a good idea, but not to promulgate unity as much as to demonstrate a great unevenness in continuity and a history of rough transitions. As Molly Hite notes, we can forget in this text any "vision of the universe as 'blindingly One.'"[34] In other words, Plato's suspicions about discourse are confirmed by the destruction of the forms, and the passerby is free to misinterpret the signs and omens, so that

"Kraft, Standfestigkeit, Weisse"(250) can be taken for any number of types of graffiti.

6: The Narrator Administers an Antidote

But wait. Now the time has come to wonder who it is that tells us this story and why he directs the singing at the novel's close. In Native American tradition, the Trickster figure acts as a tension-relieving device, much like the institutionalized Feast of Fools did in Medieval Europe. He uses his semi-divinity to flout all social mores and rules, displays stunningly bad taste at every turn, blunders into vulgarly uncomfortable situations, and frequently even admits his own sense of self-revulsion. He will certainly never receive the Pulitzer Prize. John Greenway calls him a "traveling salesman of primitive culture," an outrageous character who is funny as long as he remains safely fictional.[35]

So Pynchon puts to work in Gravity's Rainbow the seminal magic described in Frazer's Golden Bough, a method of acting upon the world that precedes religion and science. He does this through the offices of the Trickster, whose blundering antics are also associated in Native American tradition with his capacity to create light,[36] to create and then recreate the world by giving it its structure and appearance. He uses a shaman's trickery, but it is trickery that works, that heals worlds by making them new in the context of a mindset that defines illness in terms of a loss of soul. Pynchon began his writing career with his original paranoid, the Ojibwa Indian Irving Loon in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," who yields to the possession of the Windigo, an evil ghost who breaks down the taboo against cannibalism by causing the afflicted person to perceive humans as animals. He manipulates Gravity's Rainbow with a narrator whose propensity for what seems to be accident and omission only disguises an ability to commandeer worlds and alter them at will. The narrator's lack of control over his creation is, paradoxically, the very essence of his control. As a result, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow breaks so many taboos of narrative coherence that culturally institutionalized paranoid visions such as Loon's cannot sustain themselves.

When we combine the characteristic playfulness of the Trickster with his multiple generative capacity, we have a useful metaphor to discuss the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow. He simply replaces the world of the Rocket/nuclear weapon with another. As Slothrop stops thinking about the S-Gerät, it disappears. When we combine the Trickster's defiant rejection of established norms with his capacity to work magic, we have a narrative with affective presence, the ability to get something done within itself and beyond its limits. We have indications of an author who recognizes the potential for creative political/social action in denying the reader's expectation that the goal of fiction is to tap into an ineffable One and subsequently fail in the expression of it. Bent on plundering the fetish of the Rocket/nuclear weapon, the narrator as Trickster carries out what

Bookchin in The Ecology of Freedom identifies as a "black redistribution," the attempt to "desymbolize power and property,"[37] to demystify its dominion over human life. The raid of Gravity's Rainbow on the central mechanomorphic icon of a misled Western spirituality casts the narrator in the role of the "Badass" that Pynchon refers to in a 1984 New York Times Book Review article.[38] In the tradition of the quasi-mythical Ned Ludd, who in 1779 broke into a Leicestershire cottage to become a symbol of the ongoing counter-Industrial Revolution,[39] the narrator attempts (with Bookchin, with Frankenstein, with King Kong, with Ludd), as Pynchon says with prominent italics in the Review article, to "deny the machine."[40]

This brings us again to Stein and Rossini purged now of any taint of apathy. What the Trickster narrator accomplishes with his new Rocket/nuclear weapon-free fictional world is to offer us a way out of the stultifying mandala of transcendental totality, out of the self-consuming system of Kekulé's dream where positivism folds strangely into mysticism and where the Renaissance confidence in the perfectibility of man has been almost entirely supplanted by a cynical trust in his controllability.

Pynchon's narrator offers an exciting textual Autobahn. Because the fiction "lieth" convincingly enough to fashion its world anew, it points a way that "lieth" out of the mandala in a linear movement of non-causally linked confusions. He suggests a route through an epistemological no man's land where entropic information loss and the discontinuity of culture benefit humanity by precluding the risky concentration of authoritarian and symbolic power. He describes in Gravity's Rainbow a long line of unrelated "I don't know's" which "penetrate the moment" (158) like a series of the cause and effect-free centers of Mrs. Quoad's candies (118).

The final clue in understanding this linear Autobahn taking us away from Rocket mysticism is to recognize it also as the line of light moving through the darkness of the movie theatre, from the "one bright, burning point" (104) behind the projector's lens.

The Trickster's world of Gravity's Rainbow is a voodoo world and operates as a von Göll film with the ability to become real, to have impact on the extra-fictional world. Telling Death to "fuck off" (10), not as an expletive of frustration, but rather as a spell, animates this novel and makes of the Trickster's bedtime story a well-thought-out Luddite strategy.

This implies that Gravity's Rainbow is essentially ritual discourse, effective because it reconnects the individual to his society and his culture through the offices of a playful, metashamanistic narrator. I posit in this novel a text with the capacity to act upon its audience, by blurring the outlines of fiction/reality dualism, yes, but more significantly, by allowing the capacity of fictions to supersede other categories of experience. If I wished to expand the discussion here, I would

say that Gravity's Rainbow offers critics a text where the discourse-orientation of post-structuralism and the goal-orientation of historical materialism can productively cohabit. Pynchon's more recent comments suggest a certain ambivalence about the capacity of fiction to generate praxis. In the Review article, he questions the existence of a mythical/fictional Badass "bad and big enough"[41] to overshadow nuclear weapons, and in his 1984 introduction to Slow Learner, he defines fiction as working somewhere on a political "spectrum of impotence."[42] But when these remarks merge with the textual fact of Gravity's Rainbow, we find, I think, a mandate; when the film goes off, Pynchon would rather we opt to touch the persons next to us, not to reach between "[our] own cold legs" (760). The "spell" of literature works in ritual fashion when the line out of the mandala becomes discourse becomes effect, all in a fluid dynamic based, not on a notion of abstract wholeness, but rather on genuine human contact and possibility, on "being someone new now, someone incredible" (177). Pynchon's narrator stalls the fall of the Rocket to give us a chance to solve the problem it represents, and to keep us together in that theatre long enough to disarm the potential for limiting self centeredness inherent in paranoia.[43] To William Slothrop's hymn, Pynchon's Trickster will play minnesinger.

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Notes

[1] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973) 165.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 174. In the German, the phonic basis for the pun is not quite as close as in Common's English because of a diphthongal shift. The first lieth in Common's translation corresponds to Nietzsche's lyügt, the second lieth to his liegt. "Thou spirit of gravity" corresponds to Nietzsche's "Du Geist der Schwere!"

[3] Brian McHale, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado/Boulder, Fall Semester 1985.

[4] The etymology of the noun whim traces an intriguing intermingling of the mental and the physical, the abstract and the concrete. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the usage "a capricious notion or fancy" grew up apace with "a fanciful or fantastic creation; a whimsical object" (see the Oxford English Dictionary). The "whims" used in 18th century mines to raise ore and water attest to the transference of meaning from the abstract to the concrete.

[5] Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 99. See also Edward Mendelson's introduction to his excellent collection Pynchon: A Collection of

Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978).

[6] Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: The Crying of Lot 49," Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, eds. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 99.

[7] David Leverenz, "On Trying to Read Gravity's Rainbow," Mindful Pleasures 229-49.

[8] I use the gender specific pronoun purposefully to refer to the narrator. The Raven and the Coyote Trickster figures usually appear in Native American discourse as males.

[9] Mendelson 5.

[10] Bruce F. Kawin, The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 201. For the most extensive argument for a holistic reading of Pynchon, see Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978). Although I do not deny the usefulness of Siegel's understanding of the Rocket as mandala, for the purposes of this essay, I would propose another analogy. Slothrop's graffiti-schematic of "the A4 rocket, seen from below" (624) suggests a resemblance to the Lamaist Mani Chos-'Khor, or prayer wheel. A prayer wheel is a revolving cylinder inscribed with mantras, or mystically efficacious utterances, used by Tibetan Buddhists to mechanically recite the inscribed mantras. The prayer wheel is typically turned by hand, wind, or running water, and each revolution of the cylinder corresponds to one oral recitation. Both the prayer wheel and the Rocket of the novel represent a simultaneously physical and spiritual presence and event.

[11] Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) ix.

[12] Richard Poirier, "Rocket Power," Saturday Review of the Arts March 1973: 59-64.

[13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge as quoted in The Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 under "mysticism."

[14] Hite 136.

[15] See Schaub's discussion, 57.

[16] See Auguste Comte, The Positive Philosophy [1830-42], trans. Harriet Martineau (1853; New York: AMS, 1974) 545. Comte writes: "The theological period of humanity could begin no otherwise than by a complete and usually very durable state of pure Fetishism, which allowed free exercise to that tendency of our nature by which Man conceives of all external bodies as animated

by a life analogous to his own, with differences of mere intensity." I am arguing that the mental habits associated with fetishism do not confine themselves to cognition and behavior that Comte would group under the heading "First Stage."

Sexual fetishism, of course, bears directly and interestingly on Pynchon's work as well. The eroticization of an object as a result of either conditioning or a splitting of the self into two parts can be effectively followed in Gravity's Rainbow.

[17] Murray Bookchin, The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982) 193.

[18] John Nichols, The Nirvana Blues (1981; New York: Ballantine, 1984) 12.

[19] Jerry Korn, ed., 1950-1960, This Fabulous Century (1970; New York: Time-Life, 1971), 62: 25.

[20] Milton Viorst, Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) 60.

[21] William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) 155.

[22] Hite 95.

[23] The close borrowings as well as the loose appropriations of idiom from Lacan and Barthes will be apparent to their readers.

[24] Eugene O'Neill, In The Zone, The Moon of the Caribbees and Six Other Plays of the Sea, ed. John Ervine (London: Cape, 1960).

[25] Pynchon uses the notion of the "hothouse" to somewhat different effect, for the growing of Counterforce bananas.

[26] O'Neill 33. In this edition the pagination starts over with each play.

[27] For example, while critics have been largely frustrated in their efforts to account for the name "Slothrop," I am fascinated by the fact that when one spells "Slothrop" backwards the result bears a remarkable resemblance to "portholes."

[28] Frank Kermode as cited in Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982) 131.

[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "The Philosopher in the Twentieth Century," Sceptical Essays (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935) 61.

[30] Gertrude Stein, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb," Reflection on the Atomic Bomb: The Previously

Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein, ed. Robert Bartlett Hass (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1973) 1: 161. Used with permission of Black Sparrow Press.

[31] Although the piece was not published until 1973--Oh God.

[32] Pynchon, however, seems all in favor of "escapist" literature. See Thomas Pynchon, "Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?" New York Times Book Review, 28 October 1984: 1, 40-41.

[33] A second century Gnostic sect, the Ophites advocated a radical, nihilistic interpretation of Old Testament morality. Their reading of Genesis made the Serpent a noble teacher and Cain a rebel model. The "hedonism" we associate today with the Ophites, they themselves regarded as a positive assertion of their spirituality.

[34] Hite 95.

[35] Unless otherwise noted, my American Indian anthropology here comes from John Greenway, Literature Among the Primitives (Hatboro, PA: Folkore Associates, 1964).

[36] Robert F. Spencer, Jesse D. Jennings, et al., The Native Americans, 2nd. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 54.

[37] Bookchin 193.

[38] Pynchon, "Luddite" 41.

[39] This is the revolution that brings us a new edition of Edward Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang with illustrations by R. Crumb.

[40] Pynchon, "Luddite" 40.

[41] Pynchon, "Luddite" 40.

[42] Thomas Pynchon, "Introduction," Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) 19.

[43] Peter L. Cooper, Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 203.