

The Environmental Pynchon: *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Ecological Context

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This essay explores the influence of ecological discourse in the 1960s on Thomas Pynchon's fiction, especially on *Gravity's Rainbow*. To identify the environmental Pynchon requires only that we focus on what most readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* will have noticed about the informing values of the novel, including such specifics as the importance of preserving trees and such general recognitions as that bestowed on Lyle Bland: that "Earth is a living critter" (590). Similarly, late in Slothrop's progress, the narrator notes that Tyrone has become "intensely alert to trees, finally." With the moral judgment implicit in that reprimand ("finally"), the text begins to read like leaflets handed out by Earth First! or Greenpeace:

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, carrying on its individual life, aware of what's happening around it, not just some hunk of wood to be cut down. [. . .] "I'm sorry," he tells them. "I can't do anything about those people, they're all out of my reach. What can I do?" A medium-size pine nearby nods its top and suggests, "Next time you come across a logging operation out here, find one of their tractors that isn't being guarded, and take its oil filter with you. That's what you can do." (552-53)

Clearly, at least for the pine tree, it's O.K. to be a Luddite. The pigs of Slothrop's ancestor William had faith in him as "another variety of pig, at home with the Earth, sharing the same gift of life" (555). Near the end of the novel, Geli Tripping encounters the god Pan, "leaping—its face too beautiful to bear, beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky" (720-21).

If any further evidence were needed of the novel's environmental disposition, numerous passages also detail the waste and degradation of human technology: there are the smokestacks of the IG, which "'proliferate, fanning the wastes of original waste over greater and greater masses of city'" (167); and there is the waste Greta sees on leaving the Castle: "'One morning I was outside the factory, naked, in the rain. Nothing grew there. Something had been deposited in a great

fan that went on for miles. Some tarry kind of waste'" (488). The impact of technology on nature appears throughout the novel in less highlighted ways, too. Even in one of the novel's few utopian moments, when Geli finds Tchitcherine beside a stream under a bridge, their time together is introduced through a projected voice of the natural world, which looks forward to the central metaphor and device of *Mason & Dixon*: "Trees creak in sorrow for the engineered wound through their terrain, their terrenity or earthhood" (733).¹

Among the many quotations I could adduce, I have bunched together these familiar passages to underline the environmental dimension of *Gravity's Rainbow*. To be sure, many scholarly accounts of the novel make some mention, however passing, of the evil men do to nature, and to human life itself; but article-length studies on this subject are few, and none of them attempt to historicize *Gravity's Rainbow* to show the discursive context within which the novel emerged. Studies that have been published include Douglas Keeseey's "Nature and the Supernatural: Pynchon's Ecological Ghost Stories," Michael Adams's "Benzene Uroboros: Plastic and Catastrophe in *Gravity's Rainbow*," and Robert L. McLaughlin's "IG Farben and the War Against Nature in *Gravity's Rainbow*." McLaughlin's essay tells the story of how IG Farben's "ability to manipulate the chemical make-up of molecules and compounds" allowed Hitler to wage war despite enemy blockades of raw materials. "For Pynchon," McLaughlin argues, "this kind of control and manipulation of the natural is a perversion and a distortion of the almost spiritual energy of nature" (320, 321). Lawrence Wolfley argues the influence of Norman O. Brown on Pynchon's novel: "collective man, through repression both personal and social-historical, has pursued the death instinct nearly to the extreme of sacrificing all nature to the logic of his compulsion" (115). More recently, Jeffrey L. Meikle, in *American Plastic: A Cultural History*, devotes a brief section to Pynchon's use of synthetic chemistry as a "powerful metaphor of the twentieth century's organization of human beings into deadening economic and bureaucratic structures" (295).

This essay adds to that work a sketch of the discursive history that preceded and continued contemporaneously with Pynchon's novel, for the environmentalist frame is one of the most explicit openings through which we can see *Gravity's Rainbow* as a text from a specific historical period. In short, I would like to see *Gravity's Rainbow* in the intertextual field of environmental discourse of the 1960s and 1970s.

Appearing three years after the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), *Gravity's Rainbow* may be understood as the culmination or *summa* of three decades of intense environmental dissent. Especially in the novel's relentless attack on corporate global

power working hand in glove with governments, *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most penetrating representation of the way corporate socialism and transnational capital came under attack from a groundswell of environmental activism. As Jeffrey Ellis amply demonstrates in "When Green Was Pink: Environmental Dissent in Cold War America," writers like Fairfield Osborn in *The Plundered Planet* (1948) and William Vogt in *Road to Survival* (1948) had begun in the late forties to link environmental degradation to such American values as progress and productivity, and they laid the blame on free-enterprise capitalism, industry run amok.

As Ellis shows, the understanding we have now—and take for granted—of the back-scratching collusion of government, business and university-based science researchers working together to maximize profit at the expense of workers and the natural world had its most persuasive and influential identification in the attacks made on this system by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson was not the first to call attention to the practices and effects of pesticide use in fields and streams, in cities and backyards. Among others, Robert L. Rudd and Richard E. Genelly in *Pesticides: Their Use and Toxicity in Relation to Wildlife* (1956), Philip Wagner in *The Human Use of the Earth* (1960), and Murray Bookchin in *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962), as well as Osborn and Vogt, had tried to call the public's attention to this contamination. But none had the ability to arouse the public reader Carson had. Not only did she ask the question "Who has made the decision that sets in motion . . . this ever-widening wave of death" (127); unlike her more temperate contemporaries, she named names.

Carson was the Joe McCarthy of environmentalism—at least in her rhetoric—pointing a finger not at communists but at the cooperation among the pesticide industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the university entomologists, many of whom were in the pay of the pesticide industry and funded by the National Science Foundation, itself a creation of the Cold War. Borrowing the anti-communist rhetoric still prevalent from the McCarthy era—portions of *Silent Spring* were serialized in the *New Yorker* in the months prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis—Carson told her story as one about a vast conspiracy, a "grim spectre" (3) whose chemicals operate in "sinister" (39) ways. Intentionally evoking the fear of fallout from nuclear testing and warfare, she described the aerial spraying of pesticides as a "chemical death rain" promoted ruthlessly by "authoritarians temporarily entrusted with power" (127).

Arguably, in this way Carson taught an entire generation how to appropriate from government and business the rhetoric of paranoia for

the adversarial purposes of the new left. Her book attacked the hidden persuaders, the industry's blandishments, the government's lax control. And she understood that the basic assumption guiding the activities of profit and productivity was man's ability to control nature. Throughout *Silent Spring*, Carson makes the case for the complexity of nature, and for the humility with which we should approach any efforts to intervene in or alter natural processes. The book had once been titled "The Control of Nature," and it closes on that note: "The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" (197). This, it might be argued, is the central theme of *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the séance invoking Herr Rathenau, Carson could have told those assembled about "the real nature of control" (GR 167).

Following publication of *Silent Spring*, and as a direct result of it, Kennedy established the Kefauver committee to investigate, resulting eventually in the passage of the National Environmental Protection Act of 1970, which established the Environmental Protection Agency. The Clean Air Act was passed the same year. Also in the wake of Carson's alert came such books as Rudd's *Pesticides and the Living Landscape* (1964), Barry Commoner's *Science and Survival* (1967), Paul Shepard's *Man in the Landscape* (1967), *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968), Gary Snyder's *Earth House Hold* (1969), Shepard's *Subversive Science* (1969), *Ecotactics* (1970), the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970), Bookchin's *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought* (1970), *Eco-Catastrophe*, by the editors of *Ramparts* magazine (1970), the essays of E. F. Schumacher later published in *Small is Beautiful* (1973), Charles Reich's *Greening of America* (1970), and Commoner's *Closing Circle* (1971)—much of which appeared earlier in the *New Yorker*. Of course this is only a partial catalogue of the environmental discourse within which Pynchon was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*.

This discourse included representations of eco-terrorism, as in Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), a novel in which characters vandalize machinery to halt construction of the Glen Canyon Dam. But there were also highly publicized acts of eco-terrorism which captured national headlines, as when students burned the local branch of Bank of America in Santa Barbara, California. As the editors of *Eco-Catastrophe* point out, Bank of America

had long treated young people as a class apart. It had opposed the grape strikers centered in Delano. It had supported, with branches in Saigon and Bangkok and with its leadership of the investment build-up in the Pacific, the American occupation of Southeast Asia. Two of its directors sit on the

board of Union Oil, which had for so many months desecrated the once-beautiful beaches of Santa Barbara and destroyed their wildlife. Most important, as the branch manager explained to the press, it had been the major local symbol of capitalism and the business system. (xi)

Perhaps even more revealing of the cultural stature environmental dissent had achieved by 1970 are the comments with which the editors close their introduction to *Eco-Catastrophe*: If their action in Santa Barbara helps "wake up" the people of this country "to the real source of their misery," then "the students who burned the Bank of America . . . will have done more to save the environment than all the Survival Faires and 'Earth Day Teach-Ins' put together" (xii). When Ernest Callenbach invented *Ecotopia* (1975), he imagined his utopian community developing out of armed conflict.

As this partial listing suggests, Pynchon's representations of cartelized capital, chemistry and rocket technology in the prewar decades and wartime years are deeply influenced by the discourse of environmental dissent from which they emerge, even to the degree that such discourse informs many of the assumptions underlying Pynchon's imaginative conceptualizations. The most basic of these assumptions asserts that our efforts to establish the control of nature have produced a culture of death. Equally important to *Gravity's Rainbow* and subsequent novels by Pynchon is the growing recognition that ecology is a subversive science with revolutionary implications which, if carried through, would undermine that culture.

Even Pynchon's decision to locate our "time's assembly" in the period of the Second World War may have been determined by such discourse. For example, most of the books listed above identify the Second World War as beginning that environmental pollution about which we became so concerned only ten to fifteen years later. "All this," Carson writes, "has come about because of the sudden rise and prodigious growth of an industry for the production of man-made or synthetic chemicals with insecticidal properties. This industry is a child of the Second World War" (16). Casting a wider net than Carson with her focus on pesticides, Commoner puts it this way: "a rather striking picture does emerge from the data that are available: *most pollution problems made their first appearance, or became very much worse, in the years following World War II*" (CC 128). During my research on Carson and the Cold War, I found countless statements to this effect in such public forums as the *New York Times Book Review*, as well as in books by Carson and Commoner.²

The Kekulé Dream sequence may more specifically exemplify the intertextuality of environmental dissent and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Early in

Silent Spring, in a chapter aptly titled "Elixirs of Death," Carson describes the chemical manipulations by which modern synthetic insecticides are created. To acquaint as wide an audience as possible with the basics of synthetic chemistry, Carson provides a diagram of the methane molecule—a carbon atom at the center of an "X" and a hydrogen atom at each of the four points: its "structure . . . beautifully simple, consisting of one carbon atom to which four hydrogen atoms have become attached." Showing the example of how chemists learned to substitute atoms of chlorine for the hydrogen to form carbon tetrachloride, Carson comes to her moral: "instead of the simple methane molecule with its single carbon atom, [the chemist] may work with hydrocarbon molecules consisting of many carbon atoms, arranged in rings or chains, with side chains or branches. . . . Such ingenious manipulations," she concludes, "have produced a battery of poisons of truly extraordinary power" (20).

Pynchon's knowledge of this revolution in chemistry, which he dramatizes in the marvelous Kekulé dream sequence, might have come to him well before Carson published her book; he had any number of sources and opportunities to learn this not very arcane history. Yet his moral attitude toward this revolution—and *Gravity's Rainbow* has a lot of attitude—very likely came from the discursive environment of the late 1950s and 1960s, in which the extraordinary discoveries in aromatic chemistry came to be viewed as insidious violations of nature's beauty. Pynchon transmutes the discourse of public outrage into one of the central passages of his novel: "But the meanness, the cynicism with which [Kekulé's] dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, 'The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning,' is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle" (412). This dream itself is being run for Franz Pökler's benefit; he finds himself inside Laszlo Jamf's classroom, listening to a nightmare version of Carson's admonitions: "'we had been given certain molecules, certain combinations and not others [. . .] but the Serpent whispered, *'They can be changed,* and new molecules assembled from the debris of the given'" (413).

The negative moral valence attached to this ability to assemble "new molecules" first took hold because of Carson's book, but it became widely shared in the public sphere. Commoner, in *The Closing Circle*, also pinpoints these developments in chemistry as a watershed of modern history: "then it became possible to *design* new molecules for a particular purpose" (132-33). His words are not that different from either Carson's or those of *Gravity's Rainbow's* historian of Imipolex G, who recounts "Plasticity's central canon: that chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of Nature. They could decide now

what properties they wanted a molecule to have, and then go ahead and build it" (249).³

Carson, Commoner and other environmental writers helped create the cultural cachet of the "circle" and the "cycle." Captain Blicero, *Gravity's Rainbow's* allegorical figure of death, is exactly the one who consciously desires to violate the cycle, to "'break out,'" he tells Gottfried, "'to leave this cycle of infection and death'"; for Blicero is a type of the Western man who experiences the cycle only as a "one-way flow of European time" (724). During the 1960s the word "cycle" or "circle"—hooked to the old gospel "May the Circle Be Unbroken"—achieved its honorific status, versus the horrible epithet "linear." The last thing anyone wanted to be called in 1968 was linear. (To be linear was much more serious than to be square—the epithet of the 1950s—for the term "linear" connoted a repressive, rational and cold personality, not to mention its implications of being pro-Vietnam.⁴) But this was a moral distinction produced by the ecological activism of writers like Bookchin, Carson, Shepard and Commoner. In his prologue to *The Closing Circle*, Commoner seems to describe Blicero:

Here is the first great fault in the life of man in the ecosphere. We have broken out of the circle of life, converting its endless cycles into man-made *linear* events: oil is taken from the ground, distilled into fuel, burned in an engine, converted thereby to noxious fumes, which are then emitted into the air. (12; emphasis added)

Transmuted by the alchemy of Pynchon's imagination, statements like Commoner's become paranoid ruminations like this: "*It is our mission to promote death*" (GR 720).

In the 1960s the material symbol of man-made linear events was plastic. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, most of the attention Pynchon gives to plastic has to do with chemists' development of aromatic polymers and the quasi-fictional Imipolex G.⁵ First of all, what accounts for the centrality Pynchon gives to plastics? Though plastics do not figure so largely in the many histories of the Second World War, one answer may be that both Germany and the United States were forced by the war to develop synthetic rubbers and plastics.⁶ (Meikle shows that for a long time there was no distinction between these terms, "plastic" being the more encompassing category.) IG Farben already had the processes for such production, and only lacked a war to make synthetic rubber profitable. During the war Germans made synthetic rubbers out of styrene and butadiene and called them Buna-S and Buna-G. This is the historical explanation.

A number of set pieces in *Gravity's Rainbow* which represent this history are no doubt familiar to most readers, the most pertinent being Greta's account of being taken to a petrochemical plant she calls "The Castle." Once inside the plant, she tells Slothrop:

"Great curtains of styrene or vinyl, in all colors, opaque and transparent, hung row after row from overhead. They flared like the northern lights. I felt that somewhere beyond them was an audience, waiting for something to begin.⁷ [. . .] All around, I watched a clear crumbling of the air, or of the light. Someone said 'butadiene,' and I heard *beauty dying*. . . . Plastic rustled and snapped around us, closing us in, in ghost white. They [. . .] dressed me in an exotic costume of some black polymer, very tight at the waist. [. . .] It felt alive on me. 'Forget leather, forget satin,' shivered Drohne. 'This is Impipolex, the material of the future.'" (487-88)

This extraordinary passage asks to be read as a scene of nature's transformation into synthesized materials, materials moreover whose power to arouse exceeds and displaces the sexual enhancement of leather and satin. This constitutes nothing less than the transformation of desire, which arguably is the book's central motif. It is the chemist Jamf, after all, who also developed Kryptosam (to be used in conjunction with seminal fluid and a stimulus based on "thorough knowledge of the addressee's psychosexual profile" [GR 71]), who creates the very medium of this transformation. Weisenburger's note on "The Castle"—card sixteen of the Tarot Deck—helps underline the significance of the synthesized material made there: the Castle card, A. E. Waite says, is "a portent of destruction in material creation: 'the ruin of the house of life, when evil has prevailed therein'" (Weisenburger 220). Referring to the same quotation from *Gravity's Rainbow*, Adams writes, "Pynchon suggests that the whole post-modern world *is*, or *is being*, completely plasticized. Nature is at the mercy of the chemists" (157). Of course this is a salient instance of the way Pynchon rewrites modern history from a point of view in the decades after the Second World War.

To appreciate the pejorative valence of the word "plastic," which it acquired at that time and retains today, one has only to remember the lyrics of "Plastic Fantastic Lover," on the 1967 album *Surrealistic Pillow*, by Jefferson Airplane,⁸ or the scene in the 1968 movie *The Graduate* in which Dustin Hoffman is advised by a family friend, "There's a great future in plastics." In *The Greening of America*, Reich provides an explicit cultural meaning of the word: "Our life activities have become plastic, vicarious, and false to our genuine needs, activities fabricated by others and forced upon us" (7). Meikle's book

is a history of just this cultural meaning of plastic. In the scene from *The Graduate*, Meikle points out:

Nothing . . . was made of plastic. Furniture, lamps, draperies—all indicated a high standard of upper-middleclass taste and nothing revealed origins in a chemical refinery. . . . Because the famous scene contained no obvious plastics . . . it invited viewers to perceive their own parents, teachers, friends, even their very own selves, as somehow plastic.

The term “plastic person” became so common that it obviously satisfied a cultural need. (288)

Irving Howe, editor of *Dissent*, described Richard Nixon as a man “put together to appeal to everything inauthentic in American life,” a man indeed “made of plastic”; Garry Wills, too, recognized that Nixon stood “for all that the kids find contrived, what they call ‘plastic’” (qtd. in Meikle 290). No wonder Pynchon’s Richard M. Zerk, his parody of Nixon, fantasizes his own death from asphyxiation by a plastic dry-cleaning bag, “‘A plastic shroud, smothering me to my death’” (GR 756). The ubiquity of “plastic” as a term of opprobrium, especially in the war of generations, is thus another discursive explanation for the centrality of plastic in Pynchon’s account of our time’s assembly.

Of course plastic became a symbol of the unnatural and the fabricated because plastic is non-biodegradable. That quality makes plastic the perfect image of a technology that violates the cycle, creating waste out of waste: not redemption, as Rathenau’s voice intones, but “‘death-transfigured’” (GR 166). As a product of entropy, waste is an image in early Pynchon stories like “Low-Lands” and “Entropy,” and the central metaphor of *The Crying of Lot 49*; but in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, images of waste acquire environmental connotations. “All modern plastics, like synthetic fibers,” writes Commoner, are “man-made, unnatural polymers. They are, therefore, ecologically nondegradable. It is sobering to contemplate the fate of the billions of pounds of plastic already produced” (CC 163). In a world so constituted, we are left “blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences [. . .] kicking endlessly among the plastic trivia, finding in each Deeper Significance” (GR 590).⁹

The plastic motif allows Pynchon to build the ecological consciousness of the 1960s into the technology and culture of the Second World War as a kind of moral judgment on them. On the other hand, the emphasis on plastic helps fill out Pynchon’s characteristic interest in the origins of history, in the conditions and actions that created the history his readers inherit years thence. Finally, by creating the plastic with erectile properties, Impiplex G, Pynchon weds the

plastic culture of the Vietnam era with the nuclear culture of the elites, just as Carson inter-implicated pesticide use with nuclear fallout.¹⁰ In the novel's final missile launch, Pynchon unites plastic and the delivery system of the nuclear race to come by encasing Gottfried in a shroud made of Imipolex, whose erectile properties are manifest in the missile itself, and sending him off on Blicero's doomed mission to transcend the cycle of life. At the same time, this doomed mission may be a commentary on the space program and the nation's Cold War drive to the moon, which itself serves as an intertext for both the Hereros and the moon-driven dreams of von Braun and other German rocket scientists.

Perhaps the most striking evidence for a historicist reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a novel which emerges, at least in part, out of the discourse of environmental dissent in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s is yet another intertextual link with the nation's discussion of the environment. Toward the end of the novel, under the influence of Oneirine, Vaslav Tchitcherine is privileged with the illumination that became a major theme in Pynchon studies in the early years: "the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation" (703). These very words, italicized by Pynchon, express Commoner's First Law of Ecology: "Everything is Connected to Everything Else" (CC 33). As the narrator tells us, Tchitcherine's is only a "secondary illumination," an effect of the Oneirine rather than "the Cry that might abolish the night" (CL 118) for which Oedipa searches; but this secondary illumination is produced, as it were, by the environmental movement, whose "paranoia" insists not only on an ecological web of interconnections, but also on the interconnections of the economic and political System. What Reich called "green consciousness" might then be said to include a kind of "'operational paranoia'" (GR 25), complete with its own Proverbs for Paranoids.

In the refracted world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ecological activism of the Vietnam era isn't given much of a chance. By locating the origins of our decline some twenty-five years earlier, the novel suggests that we are already "too late" (752), and worse, that the power of life is just "too beautiful to bear, beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky." Even so, the environmental movement has had its own apocalypticism. As Sacvan Bercovitch points out, the rhetoric of doom has long been used in America to energize the faithful and recall them to life. Perhaps in this rhetoric Freud would see the work of Eros. In the conclusion to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he writes:

Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another

to the last man. . . . And now it is to be expected that the other of the two "Heavenly Powers," eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result? (92)

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Notes

¹The jacket photograph on Pynchon's next novel, *Vineland, Crescent Camp No. 1*, by Darius Kinsey, shows what appears to be a hillside clearcut, with the remaining trees engulfed in fire.

²Among many others, see Edwin Dale, who writes "There was no pollution, relatively speaking, just 15 years ago" (28). Similarly, Bookchin describes "man's despoliation" taking place "especially since the end of the Second World War" (ERT 7).

³One of Pynchon's more amusing riffs on the design possibilities of the new chemistry is the scene between Mossmoon and Scammony which closes book 3 of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In their club, sitting "among discarded back copies of *British Plastics*," the two men have met "to finalize plans for the Postwar Polyvinyl Chloride Raincoat, a source of great corporate fun these days ([. . .] 'how about mixing in something that will actually *dissolve* in the rain?')" (615).

⁴In *The Subversive Science*, Shepard provides a mild example: "Sometimes naturalists propose projects too, but the project approach is itself partly the fault, the need for projects a consequence of *linear*, compartmental thinking, of machine-like units to be controlled and manipulated" (9; emphasis added).

⁵When asked about the name "Imipolex," a colleague of mine in chemistry, Hyuk Yu, told me the following: "Among the trade names of commodity polymers that end with 'lex' are Marlex, Chemplex and Implex." He added, "there is also an antidepressant called 'Imiprex,' which was patented in France in 1964, and later in the United States, in 1971." Pynchon's invented plastic suggests his knowledge of typical polymer names, to which he added the "G" as a historical allusion to the synthetic rubber Germans made during the Second World War. It is even possible, as Yu's reference to the antidepressant suggests, that the name "Imipolex" came from Pynchon's knowledge of pharmacology, underlying the novel's subscription to the Doper's Creed. Meikle offers the compelling suggestion that the "o" in the name produces the internal pun "pole" in the name of this erectile material.

⁶See McLaughlin.

⁷Lines, by the way, that connect Slothrop's fear of the "radiant curtains just about to swing open" (29) with the audience on the last page, waiting for the show to start.

⁸For example:

The electrical dust
 Is starting to rust
 Her trapezoid thermometer taste
 All the red tape is mechanical rape
 Of the TV program waste
 Data control and IBM
 Science is mankind's brother
 But all I see is draining me
 On my plastic fantastic lover

—Marty Balin

⁹As Meikle and Frederick Karl have pointed out, "plastic" intersects with more than one discourse and finally comes to implicate "representation" itself. A narrator in the language chapter meditates, "How alphabetic is the nature of molecules" (GR 355). The author is a kind of chemist. The present essay restricts itself to the way *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to express a kind of positivist ecology, wherein "nature" is real, and under attack by mankind's mission to promote death. There is, to be sure, a more deconstructive realization within the book, in which "nature" is always already textualized, and representation itself is a force of death.

¹⁰See Stewart Udall 23: "Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner, President Kennedy's Science Advisor, vindicated [Carson] when he spoke for a panel of scientists and stated that the indiscriminate use of the worst poisonous chemicals was 'potentially a much greater hazard than radioactive fallout.'"

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