

Management and Chaos: Masculinity and the Corporate World From Naturalism to *Gravity's Rainbow*

Christophe Den Tandt

1

Corporate heroes are like heroes in a war.
—Deal and Kennedy

In an often-discussed scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, elite members of “the corporate Nazi crowd” (164) attending a séance circa 1930 ask the ghost of Walter Rathenau about the future of the corporate-dominated world economy. Rathenau replies that wisdom in this matter is gained by considering two key issues: “what is the real nature of synthesis?” and “what is the real nature of control?” (167). In these words, Rathenau describes the corporate world as a constellation of commercial and human aggregates with the same degree of complexity and unnaturalness as synthetic polymers. Indirectly, he also defines the psychological profiles of the human beings who inhabit the novel—the persona of Pynchon’s engineers, managers, military researchers and intelligence operatives. Indeed, since the inception of the corporate economy about a hundred years ago, social scientists and business ideologues have assumed that control—the art of “thriving on chaos,” as 1980s business guru Tom Peters puts it—must be the keystone of a manager’s personality. Corporate leaders, business analyst Michael Porter contends, have to learn “strategy formulation under uncertainty” (qtd. in Cannon 93).¹ In this essay, I wish to highlight how central this model of the corporate personality is in *Gravity's Rainbow*. To some extent, I deal with Pynchon’s mapping of the post-Second World War economy as if it were a manual of industrial psychology—a typology of the rituals and strategies adopted by characters whose lives are defined by corporate ideology, whether they align themselves on this economic pattern or develop oppositional practices against it.

Read along these lines, *Gravity's Rainbow* appears to construct a gendered economics: Pynchon’s novel maps the economy of the military-industrial complex by means of a gender discourse, and, in turn, models the gender identities of its characters on the logic of the

work-place and of economic institutions. Given the specific concerns Pynchon addresses in *GR*, my argument deals primarily with masculine identities. Indeed, unlike Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, *Gravity's Rainbow* focuses on a military-corporate universe whose main issues are articulated mostly through masculine voices—through the experience of men caught up in military or business hierarchies. Though the text casts a critical eye on this male homosocial power apparatus, it also uses its female protagonists mainly as reflectors, fantasies, objects—seldom as full-fledged agents.

The analysis of corporate identities in *Gravity's Rainbow* requires, I believe, a historical or genealogical perspective. Pynchon's text fits into a tradition of economic fiction that goes back as far as Melville's *Moby Dick*, runs through naturalism, and reaches the Second World War with, for instance, Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. Such novels attempt to provide a totalizing depiction of capitalism or at least point out why such a literary enterprise is unworkable. Within this tradition, I wish to focus on possibly unexpected continuities that link naturalism to postmodernism. This is partly a matter of personal inclination, since I have previously analysed the issues at stake here in the context of early-twentieth-century fiction. More pointedly, I believe a reader acquainted with the relatively little-read corpus of American naturalism can contribute a valuable perspective to Pynchon criticism. Naturalism and postmodernism are located at either end of the same axis in economic history: early-twentieth-century writers witnessed the beginnings of the corporate economy and often praised these new phenomena; Pynchon's encyclopedic assessment of post-Second World War conditions depicts this economy in its maturity, from a critical point of view.

At the level of literary discourse, a retrospective approach makes clear that *GR* inherited from early-twentieth-century writers a set of strategies meant to depict the landscape of power relations in the urban-industrial world. Specifically, this reading perspective allows us to reconstruct the genealogy of what Fredric Jameson and Joseph Tabbi have called the postmodern sublime—that is, the intimation that technology and its social basis are phenomena that outreach linguistic representation (see Jameson 32–38, 49; Tabbi 29). Like *GR*, the totalizing novels of turn-of-the-century writers such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser describe economic and political processes unfolding against the background of presumably unrepresentable phenomena: for naturalists, the unstable world of the city; for Pynchon, the Second World War. This form of fiction either promotes or debunks the belief that social chaos is the phenomenon against which gender identities, ideology and corporate power are defined. By the same token, totalizing

economic novels lead us to determine how far texts that frame their sociological discourse by means of an aesthetic of the unrepresentable can articulate a critical stance toward their object.

2

America's boardrooms need heroes more than Hollywood's box offices need them. . . . [Corporate] heroes do things everyone else wants to do but is afraid to try.

—Deal and Kennedy

[A]n amalgam of St. Paul, Poor Richard, and Adolf Hitler.

—IBM founder Thomas Watson, describing NCR founder John Patterson; qtd. in Deal and Kennedy

The links established in *GR* between gender, sexuality and technology are epitomized in the plight of Pynchon's main protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop—a plight which, for the sake of the present argument, must be analysed in terms of work-based gender identities. When the novel opens—in the last months of the war—V-2 rocket bombs have started hitting London at supersonic speed, thus without any warning signs. Therefore, Slothrop lives in an environment that is chaotic in the scientific sense of the term: it displays what chaos theorist Nina Hall calls a “predisposition for disorder, complexity and unpredictability,” which manifests itself through unforeseeable, non-linear disruptions (8). Still, Slothrop's libido—actually his penis—seems able to predict the rocket strikes. This libidinal link (real or imagined), we learn, was established through Pavlovian conditioning carried out under at least the retroactive aegis of the German corporation IG Farben. The conditioning seems (conventional chronology notwithstanding) to have involved the use of Impipolex G, an IG Farben synthetic material that seems to promote extraordinary erotic arousal even in a context of technologically-mandated destruction. Further, Slothrop's indenture to IG Farben can be expressed through a family narrative: the boy was sold by his very father, Broderick, to the German company. Thus, Slothrop's desire is shaped by a double process of alienation: the boy was deprived of the possibility to organize his desire through the power structure of his familiar world—a procedure that already carries a burden of alienation in its own right; instead, he was left to develop at the behest of a far less familiar, indeed all but unrepresentable corporate apparatus. In this sense Slothrop is, as Pynchon indicates in a burlesque song, only a boy with a “Penis He Thought Was his Own” (216).

It would be possible to read Slothrop's sense of dispossession along Lacanian lines, as the discomfort of a character whose desire has been inscribed in the alienating code of corporate culture—here, in a sign system whose most visible signifier is the apocalyptic phallic Rocket.² But for the present purpose, it is more convenient to describe Slothrop as the victim of a loss of instrumentality: Slothrop's inability to manage his sex organs allegorizes his own disenfranchisement as a human agent at large and as a historical actor. Having lost control of his desire, he loses the prerogative to relate to—or even to manipulate—others or his environment. However, loss of instrumentality does not mean a weakening of desire. During one of the burlesque orgies on the ship of fools *Anubis*, for instance, Slothrop feels projected inside his own penis. The sense of irresistibly rising arousal he experiences at that point is actually also one of helplessness. The climax of the sequence resonates with what Pynchon calls “the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself” (470). Here, as when Slothrop is “Dowsing Rockets” with his organic “wand” (490), the form of desire programmed by the military-industrial complex is a paradoxical experience mingling intensity, loss of control and submission to a higher order that escapes the protagonist's grasp.

That Slothrop's de-instrumentalized desire fits a corporate paradigm can be made visible by reading *GR* in the light of gender historians' studies of the changes in masculinity brought about by the passage from competitive to managed capitalism. Researchers in this field concur in describing a twentieth-century shift from personality models prescribing discipline, self-control, work or citizenship—in fact, the culture of the work ethic, of craftsmanship and instrumentality—to behavior patterns ranging from the passivity of modern bureaucrats to aggressive self-assertion and pleasure-seeking. According to these gender typologies, nineteenth-century work-ethic masculinity expressed itself as “artisan” manhood (Leverenz 74), “inner-direction” (Riesman 4), the culture of “character” (Susman 273), or “communal” and “self-made” manhood (Rotundo 2–3). The later evolution toward a more subdued, more bureaucratically regimented masculinity is described as the advent of “other-direction” (Riesman 5), the culture of “personality” (Susman 271), and the ideal of the “team-player” (Rotundo 286). The concomitant celebration of male aggressiveness is conceptualized by means of the categories of “entrepreneurial manhood” (Leverenz 85) and of the “existential hero,” the “spiritual warrior” and the “pleasure-seeker” (Rotundo 286–87).

Significantly, the typologies above do not provide a specific psychological profile for corporate selfhood. They do not envisage a corporate persona that would enjoy a status comparable to artisanal or

entrepreneurial masculinity. Indeed, by their standards, corporations are made up merely of team-players ordered about by larger-than-life patriarchal entrepreneurs—functioning like the city in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* as *GR*’s engineer Franz Pökler fondly remembers it:

[The metropolis was] a Corporate City-State where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly and benevolent and just, who wore magnificent-looking suits and whose name Pökler couldn’t remember. (578)

In such a work environment, Slothrop’s disempowerment would be merely the complaint of a feminized, regimented male subject deprived of its independence by corporate masters.

However, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like its naturalist antecedents, needs to reflect on corporate selfhood as such, and it does so in terms more paradoxical than what Pökler’s patriarchal vision of *Metropolis* implies. For Pynchon and his naturalist predecessors, corporate selfhood is indeed not a concrete possibility, not a ready-made psychological type, but rather a virtual concept whose putative existence fragilizes other work-gender personas. Walter Benn Michaels shows how Norris and Dreiser struggled with the paradoxical realization that corporations were both persons and non-persons (170–71, 198–213). Economic historian Martin Sklar explains this aporetic issue as follows: On the one hand, the trusts were regarded as human-like entities, recognized by law; simultaneously, however, these economic entities could not quite be represented according to a model of personhood (49). Indeed, corporations survive their human constituents and resist any limiting embodiment in time or space. Pynchon summarizes this paradox in the passage where American Major Duane Marvy, reflecting on the ubiquitous influence of IG Farben, confesses that he used to believe “‘I. G. Farben was somebody’s name, you know, a *fella*’” —married to “‘*Mizzus* Farben,’” presumably (565; Pynchon’s emphasis). Elsewhere in the novel, the impossibility of such a personalized embodiment of the corporation—the inability to give this social aggregate a human face—is emphasized in Oberst Enzian’s discovery that corporations will never be adequately named. They fit into networks of interconnections that are never subsumed under one single name, be it Jamf Ölfabriken Werke, the Krupp works in Essen, or Blohm and Voss in Hamburg (521).

In naturalism as in Pynchon, the crisis of corporate selfhood is one of the key contributors to making the twentieth-century economy an object of the sublime. Sublimity in naturalism means that characters feel dwarfed by an economic system whose main features—the city,

financial speculation, the crowd—are excessive in magnitude and power. The most opaque of these institutions are the corporate giants.³ In Pynchon, this lack of legibility in corporate structures is the source of the thematics of paranoia and anti-paranoia. Sublimity means in this case that characters may spend their lives disentangling the interlockings of the corporate networks. In psychological terms, this sublime apprehension of urban capitalism implies that economic actors—Norris's and Dreiser's superman speculators; Pynchon's engineers, capitalists, spies—feel compelled to identify with a corporate personality paradigm that is radically beyond their apprehension: if they feel that the work-gender profiles of the past are inappropriate to their situation, they must attempt to merge with—to embody—economic forces of inhuman magnitude or complexity.

In practice, both naturalist novels and *Gravity's Rainbow* produce what might be called corporate personalities by default, of which we may identify two types. The first variety I call the totalizers. They are figures who cherish the always frustrated fantasy of dominating, competing with or merging into their sublime environment. This characterization fits Curtis Jadwin, the protagonist of Norris's speculation novel *The Pit*. Jadwin tries to corner the whole of a year's wheat production; he eventually goes bankrupt when soaring agricultural yields flood the market and bring about a financial bust that resounds, in Norris's turgid rhetoric, "with a thunder as of the grind and crashes of chaotic worlds" (392). In Pynchon, totalizers are figures like Weissmann/Blicero, the German officer who develops a missile project to fulfill the fantasy of merging with the techno-structure of the military-industrial complex. Blicero's device—the 00000 rocket equipped with the S-Gerät—transforms a human being, Gottfried, into a sperm-like payload lodged within a doomsday missile. From the point of view of gendered economics, the rocket's ability to symbolize the totality of the military-based power system is manifested in its oxymoronic gender characterization: the 00000, like all other A4s, carries phallic connotations, but is also characterized as "the womb into which Gottfried returns" (750).

The second variety of corporate persona is the trickster—figures like Carrie Meeber, the heroine of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, or like Pynchon's Enzian and Slothrop. These characters are shape shifters who attempt to navigate an overpowering environment by means of cunning, disguise, subversion or the capacity for self-transformation. Dreiser's Carrie has an actress's talent that allows her to manipulate to her own advantage the forces at work in the urban scene of consumerism—deterministic currents that drag other people into poverty, criminality or suicide. By comparison, survival for Pynchon's tricksters is aimed not

at stunning material success but at residual subversion. This oppositional program is carried out, notably, by Enzian and his Schwarzkommando brethren—the South-West African tribesmen enrolled in an SS unit who strive to appropriate rocket technology for the sake of the underdogs of colonial history. As black dissidents within a military corps ideologically committed to white supremacy, the Schwarzkommando are endowed with an interstitial subject position antithetical to probabilistic common sense. They are indeed first presented in the novel as hypothetical beings—mere figments in a British propaganda plot. Once they materialize, they manifest the possibility for counter-entropic reversal within the complex structure of the military-corporate economy—a form of tricksterdom generated by quirks in physical and statistical laws, as it were. Slothrop, for his part, acts out the carnivalesque potential of the trickster type. He escapes the search parties that track him through postwar Germany by dressing up as Rocketman, a comic-book figure in an erstwhile Wagnerian outfit (365–66), and as Plechazunga, the particolored pig hero of a German folkloric festival (567–68).

3

Bring in outside shamans.

—From “The Ingredients of Successful Change,” in Deal and Kennedy

Tricksters are figures that move in and out of the everyday world and the realm of myth. Their presence in the economic narratives of naturalism and in *Gravity's Rainbow* is made necessary by the fact that corporations, in the novels at least, do not exist on one single plane of reality and therefore cannot be depicted by means of homogeneous realist narratives. In recent readings of the genre, realism has been described as the discourse that represents and demystifies limited worlds, knowable communities, familiar social spheres.⁴ Its scope is therefore too narrow to encompass corporations that are not circumscribed in time and place. Thus the belief, articulated in both naturalism and Pynchon, that corporations are sublime insofar as they outreach the perceptions of human subjects inevitably leads to the conclusion that they must be creatures of romance, of the supernatural, and of mystical insights. Norris's *Octopus*, for instance, raises the railroad trust to the status of a “vast cyclopean power” on a par with the unfathomable energies of agricultural reproduction—a force that “grows itself” in “Nirvanic calm” and that “no man . . . can stop . . . or control” (576, 651). One of Dreiser's autobiographical characters

phrases this economic supernaturalism as follows: though the “hierarchies of power in the universe and on earth were inexplicable . . . all out of order,” they might be “ordered to the best advantage” by the “greater, shrewder, and at times . . . possibly malicious intelligences” of corporate leaders (300). Consequently, as the visible embodiment of a higher order of things, the corporate world is accessible only to artists, mystics and visionary managers.

From this we may infer, on the one hand, that economic supernaturalism in Pynchon builds on a preexisting tradition of non-positivistic corporate discourse and, on the other hand, that the choice of this idiom is dictated by the constraints of literary representation. In this sense, the supernaturalist moments of *GR*, however grotesque or eccentric, always carry an underlying note of seriousness. The spiritualist invocation of Rathenau, for instance, makes clear that Pynchon cannot make totalizing pronouncements about “the whole shape” (165) of the “growing, organic Kartell” (167) through any other channel than a non-realistic one. Similarly, Slothrop’s libidinal ability to predict rocket strikes must indeed remain tied to a “Mystery Stimulus” (84), namely to an unexplained bond that apparently works against the laws of time and physics. In general terms, what is at stake in Slothrop’s case is making present a corporate male desire whose intensity is due precisely to the fact that it taps into energies of a social structure too complex to be objectified. More specifically, we could call Slothrop’s V-2 erections a totality effect: they are the visible mark of a cause-and-effect chain that reaches further than the characters’ powers of perception and thereby links up the disconnected data of what Jameson calls the “impossible totality” of the economic scene. An event of this type must, of course, be either a metaphor—a pseudo-phenomenon with a symbolic value—or, if presented within a realist narrative, a supernatural occurrence. Within the present reading, it is symptomatic that the causal epiphanies of Slothrop’s sex life should occasionally be represented by means of the quasi-supernaturalist imagery of naturalist gendered economics. At one point, Pavlovian psychologist Edward Pointsman conjectures that Slothrop’s erotic premonitions may be related to “fluctuations in the sexual market, in pornography or prostitutes, perhaps tying in to prices on the Stock Exchange itself, that we clean-living lot know nothing about” (86). Here Pointsman circumscribes the elements—female sexuality and financial speculation—that in naturalism epitomize the unmanageable irrationality of urban life.

4

The first myth of management is that it exists.

—Robert Heller’s “law,” qtd. in Cannon

Recognize a real threat from outside. . . . Position a hero in charge of the process.

—From “The Ingredients of Successful Change,” in Deal and Kennedy

What is at stake in the vision of male subjects magically bonded to a sublime economy is, I have suggested, the legitimation or deconstruction of management as a leadership function. Indeed, the struggle against overwhelming forces or philosophical uncertainty has long been a leitmotif of business ideology. Robert Wiebe, in *The Search for Order*, traces the origins of bureaucratic management to the upheavals of the Progressive Era. Management, he shows, was the technique of social and economic control adopted by middle- and upper-class experts who, despairing of understanding the deeper causes of social phenomena, came to the conclusion that “a society in flux always contained [an] irreducible element of contingency,” and that in that context, “predictability really meant probability.” These new administrators therefore resolved to implement policies of “constant watchfulness and mechanisms of continuous management” (145). Whereas Wiebe contends that turn-of-the-century reformers thereby properly responded to the conditions of newly-urbanized America, other historians are less sanguine about the narratives of legitimation of the managing classes. Burton Bledstein shows that middle-class managers were fond of evoking visions of social chaos to legitimate their recently acquired social prominence: they claimed they “lived in an irrational world,” and “cultivated this irrationality by uncovering abnormality and perversity everywhere” (102). The celebration of management required that social chaos be overemphasized or staged.

We might expect management ideology, with its strategic use of chaos and uncertainty, to have been savagely criticized by early-twentieth-century writers. However, recent neo-historicist readings of realism and naturalism reveal that managers could actually find some support in the structure of feelings elaborated in naturalist sublime economics.⁵ In this perspective, the naturalist practice of calling forth visions of extreme social pathologies was instrumental in empowering the social agendas of Progressive Era experts—reform programs that buttressed the hegemony of new professional classes. If we connect this disenchanting reading of naturalism to the issue of work-based

gender identities, we must conclude that the crisis of corporate masculinity—the loss of instrumental selfhood—staged in early-twentieth-century texts is primarily a rhetorical ploy: it is only a strategy meant to glamorize a discourse of masculine control more flexible and inclusive than its work-ethic antecedent. Naturalist economic novels indeed promote a paradigm of manhood that incorporates, for instance, the unhindered self-aggrandizement of the superman mystique, regressive fantasies drawing on Darwinian primitivism, or even the belief that, for protean corporate males, androgynous features are a source of empowerment.⁶

It is tempting, if a bit simplistic, to establish a sharp line of demarcation between the pro-corporate accents of turn-of-the-century writers and Pynchon's apparent countercultural radicalism. Still, we may venture that *GR* acts as an oppositional text in this matter, and that it does so by making corporate management a central issue in conflicts—the Second World War and the Cold War—that were officially depicted as clashes of political ideologies. Characters in *GR*, Russo-African German rebel rocket officer Enzian, for instance, realize that the "War was never political at all"—that "the politics was all theatre." Instead, the War is "a conspiracy between human beings and techniques" (521) whose hidden function is the deployment, against an apocalyptic background, of managerial technologies. Some of the control practices mentioned in the novel are Pavlovian conditioning, military intelligence, alphabetic reform in Soviet Central Asia, statistically-based psychology, and the military regimentation of work camps. In this emphasis on the management side of politics and warfare, *GR* anticipates Jean Baudrillard's argument that nuclear deterrence "rules out war"—that the rationale of the East-West confrontation was never mutual annihilation; rather, it was the opportunity to establish "the most powerful control system that ever existed"—a set of power apparatuses whose impact was felt in everyday life (57, 58; my translation).

5

Bet on the most probable scenario.

—Michael Porter, *Competitive Advantage*,
qtd. in Cannon

Baudrillard's vision of postmodernity shares with Pynchon's narratives of military corporations the key assumption that simulation is the cornerstone of contemporary power systems. In this assumption *GR*, a postmodern text, most sharply differs from previous economic

fiction. According to the oceanic imagery of the naturalist sublime, power is the object of pre-Oedipal engulfment anxieties: subjects feel perpetually in danger of being absorbed into the bodies of the urban economy—the crowd, the stock exchange, the corporation—that they otherwise find fascinating. In *GR*, on the contrary, power is an object of mimicry; it is ritualistically made visible in scientists' urge to emulate cosmic energies through rocket flights or chemical synthesis, in conspiracy theorists' attempts to conjure up pseudo-sociological models, and in sadomasochists' acting out of political domination. Simulation has been a highly useful term in postmodernist discourse because it helps conceptualize the workings of sign systems cut off from an accessible referential anchorage. Baudrillard's concept of simulation implies indeed that postmodern culture is made up of a set of simulacra deprived of any extra-semiotic origin. Here, I will use the concept of simulation in a way that links Pynchon's postmodernity to the Burkean variety of the sublime, which centers on power and terror. Simulation, in this perspective, is less an epistemological tool—an attempt to represent an illegible referent—than the structuring logic of a power apparatus.

In this light, rocket technology is the centerpiece of Pynchon's reflection on power because it is precisely the practice that enables men to simulate the management of overwhelming forces. Indeed, in a scene that links the natural to the technological sublime, Pynchon suggests that Pökler is fascinated by rocketry because he finds in it a means to recreate the sense of wonder he experienced as a child when gazing at the awesome cataracts of the Rhine Falls (160–61). Likewise, Achtfaden, another Peenemünde engineer, recalls early rocket tests as ritual approaches to the "pure, primitive terror" of "supersonic flow" (452). Thus rocket firings bring to virtual existence a gradient of power whose ultimate term is so excessive as to be beyond representation. Fahringer, a mystically inclined engineer, evokes this hierarchy when he explains that the Rocket creates "'its own great wind,'" which competes with the flows of the atmosphere itself (454). Rocketry amounts therefore to managing conflicts among ever greater levels of energy—contests of forces simulated in a closely monitored environment.

Similarly, rocket firings offer a technological paradigm for the sadomasochistic practices in which so many characters in *GR* are involved. What is at stake in Blicero's treatment of Katje and Gottfried is the reproduction, in the form of manageable pain and visible sexual configurations, of the unimaginable destructions of the war and the principle of evil that informs them. Thus, the bureaucratic extermination of the death camps is reduced to an Oven-game in a Hansel and Gretel

story. In another scenario, Gottfried's spine serves as simulacrum of the evil-minded military cartels of "the Rome-Berlin axis" (94). Likewise, Brigadier Ernest Pudding rehearses in controlled, ritualistic form the horror of the First World War's trenches in his coprophagic submission to Katje.

These varieties of simulation are management procedures because they contribute to what Foucault calls an "'economy' of power" relying on the exploitation of uncertainties and ambiguities or the fear of disorder (61). Pynchon's simulations accomplish a form of disciplining by weaving together order and chaos, human agency and cosmic contingency, instrumentality and loss of control, preordained script and indeterminacy. The psychological dimension of this strategy—its impact on work-based identities—resides in the fact that the paradoxical gesture of mediation performed by Pynchon's simulations is the very mechanism by which corporate personhood can be acted out. Whether they mimic cosmic forces in rocket technology or absolute domination in sadomasochistic scenarios, simulations are sites where both the impossible ambitions and the limits of corporate masculinity are made visible. Rocket firings fulfill this task by setting up a spectacle of control over phenomena that simultaneously elude containment. At first glance, the A4 traces out a smooth parabolic curve that serves as a metaphor of regularity throughout the novel and leads Fahringer to compare the A4 to an arrow shot from a Zen bow. Yet the rocket is also an unwieldy object in a perpetual state of explosion, rocked by turbulences and afflicted by an ever unreliable "*Folgsamkeitsfaktor*" (403). Viewed this way, rocketry is indeed homological to the construction of a corporate self—a gesture I define as the attempt to make personhood, an easily imageable concept, stand as simulacrum for an illegible economic scene. Likewise, the contradictions of corporate selfhood inform Pynchon's depictions of sadomasochism: the comic grimness of these passages results from an inadequacy of the signifying material they mobilize to the purported symbolic significance they express; they raise the question of how minimalist character configurations and vaguely ridiculous fetishistic paraphernalia can be used as simulacra of total mastery or, conversely, of the "true submission" Blicero defines ambitiously as "letting go the self and passing into the All" (662).

6

Perhaps no other [corporate] hero fires the imagination of employees more than the outlaw or maverick: Billy the Kid, Patton, bad boys with a heart of gold.

—Deal and Kennedy

From an ideological point of view, Pynchon's representation of simulation and management raises the difficult question whether an apparatus of power that uses chaos and uncertainty for ends of disciplining can be subverted at all. What "counterforce" is equal to the logic that reaps power from chaos? One radical way of demystifying the managerial power apparatus could be drawn from Thorstein Veblen's critique of American capitalist and industrial ideology—a critique whose influence is traceable in Dos Passos, for instance. In *The Instinct of Workmanship*, Veblen specifies that "free workmen"—typically "labourers, operatives, technologists" (188)—should avoid any "animistic [or] anthropomorphic" (327) relation to nature (334); they should devote themselves instead to studying "the logic of brute matter" (303). Through his depiction of "mechanistic," democratically-minded engineers, Veblen meant to oppose what he perceived as "a recrudescence of magic, occult science, telepathy, spiritualism [and] vitalism" (334) in his own day. Those tendencies, he thinks, are hostile to workmanship, but are parasitically cognate to "salesmanship" (349), the ethos of profit-oriented capitalism. In this sense, Veblen provides an early condemnation of corporate supernaturalism cognate to the Marxist demystification of commodity fetishism.

In *GR*, Veblenian principles are voiced by members of the Schwarzkommando who argue that the existence of rocket technology can be adequately explained by the simple fact that "some specific somebody with a name and a penis . . . *wanted* to chuck a ton of Amatol 300 miles and blow up a block full of civilians'" (521). This explanation interprets technological destruction by the categories of the familiar world—particularly a rational subject with instrumental goals. Therefore, it places itself beyond the paranoia and anti-paranoia that generally complicate characters' view of technology in *GR*. From this angle, the view of rocketry as a mimicry of apocalyptic forces qualifies as an ungrounded ritual that establishes a completely fantasized link between rocket engineers and a purported chaotic potential in the universe. Thus, the V-2 mystique offers a cynical parody of a performative process—a strategy that can be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy or as an infelicitous sublimity speech act: the spectacle of rocket operations is meant, through its own performative

power, to vouch for the existence of dark cosmic energies. Of course, this Veblenian interpretation denies that corporate selfhood and management could be simulated or produced in any form: it reduces rocket engineers to murderous entrepreneurs playing a god-game.

Veblenian demystification is, however, to a large extent the road not taken in *GR*. Pynchon's reflections on massive technological destruction are meant to suggest precisely that the Veblenian ideal of civic-minded engineers devoted to instrumental reason carries its own hidden technological death wish. Thus, Pynchon's critique of the technological mind-set cannot be articulated within a discourse of selfhood, the familiar world and instrumental volition. To expose the disingenuous naïveté of engineering ideology, or to follow corporate scientists in their metaphysical fantasies, the novel must indeed sketch a world in which visible actions are always likely to resonate on hidden planes. *GR* must therefore struggle with the unrepresentable, with the sublime, and, conversely, cannot itself presume to be immune to the romancing of chaos and uncertainty.

7

Outlaws are eccentric but highly competent.

—Deal and Kennedy

In these uncertain times, when the need to accelerate the pace of change is paramount, we must . . .
[u]nderstand the power of our smallest actions.

—Tom Peters

If *GR* must incessantly shuttle between demystification and postmodern sublimity, the most efficient oppositional practices available to its characters will be performed by the trickster figures mentioned above. These characters—Slothrop, the Schwarzkommando, also the Argentine band of self-styled gaucho-anarchists—are granted a paradoxical autonomy. On the one hand, they enjoy the prerogative of picaresque mobility, both spatial and discursive: they have access to many locales and, in Slothrop's case, spread over several forms of discourse, from real to surreal. On the other hand, all through their itineraries, their field of praxis and perception remains marginal or limited. They have to formulate their oppositional struggle without hoping to understand fully the power system they oppose, and without securing a vantage point exterior to it.

Thus the work-based masculinity of the members of Pynchon's Counterforce can be described as a gendered equivalent of what Claude

Lévi-Strauss calls *bricolage*—a term that, for the anthropologist, refers to both a work activity and a textual practice. Lévi-Strauss introduces the term to characterize the specificity of archaic societies in relation to European rationality. The distinction between the two cultures, he argues, is homological to the opposition between the scientifically-trained engineer and the *bricoleur*, the “Do-it-Yourself man” (31–32). In this logic, rationalistic engineers pursue what we might call totalizing instrumentality. Like Pynchon’s Pökler, Blicero and Wernher von Braun, they set no limits to their search for the most efficient, most innovative means to achieve their goals—dominion over nature, and, in *GR*, immortality. *Bricolage*, on the contrary, supports a non-hegemonic, non-totalizing instrumentality—an alternative practice inscribed in the margins of professional expertise, based on local, improvised, customized routines. The work procedures of *bricolage* resemble the piecing together of mythological narratives—or, we might say, of postmodern intertextualist writing—because they involve reworking a treasure of preexisting materials. These are recombined into new structures that nevertheless still carry connotations of the source components.

Thus, Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* profile fits the Counterforce of *GR* because it holds the promise of a workable autonomy within a social system that denies it: *bricolage* has a potential for cultural or political transgression, but, simultaneously, it remains focused on a local perimeter of activity, itself submitted to larger forces beyond the individual’s control. The Schwarzkommando’s rocket scavenging illustrates this practice, as do Slothrop’s successive disguises. Enzian and his group can emulate the authorized rocket builders by piecing together a missile from odds and ends. Slothrop, having no grip on the master narrative of Euro-American history, can nevertheless attempt to intervene in this script by creating his own Rocketman subplot based on signs—a Wagnerian helmet, a cape—borrowed from comic books and the theatre. At first glance, these practices may be mistaken for a poor person’s replica of the managerial simulations described above. By the very definition of *bricolage*, Pynchon’s tricksters cannot sever their bonds to the rocket culture. Slothrop remains, indeed, “rocket-obsessed,” and Enzian shares his name with a small German anti-aircraft rocket prototype developed at Peenemünde (see Ford 170–72). Yet, in the epistemological openness of *GR*, the oppositional potential of the tricksters’ practices resides precisely in the fact that we can never take their indenture to corporate technology for granted. In some still unforeseeable sense, they might be independent of the larger technological forces; they might be autonomous *bricoleurs*.

On a more general plane, the term *bricolage* may help us account for the fact that, in the fragmented structure of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a numerous cast of characters is seen frantically, sometimes enthusiastically, working at activities or rituals whose outcome remains unknown to the reader, or whose efficiency is dwarfed by the forces of devastation mobilized by the war. This configuration is illustrated in the very first pages of the novel, in the scene where Pirate Prentice catches sight of the first V-2 rising over the North Sea. In the face of an event that, in the context of the novel, has cosmic dimensions, Pirate feels he ought "to be doing something" (7). He first thinks of taking what seems the appropriate measure— notifying his headquarters— yet immediately decides instead on a more modest activity— picking bananas. The fact that the next scene—the sharing of the banana breakfast— depicts a male homosocial celebration of auto-eroticism matters for my reading, of course: it implies that Pynchon's characters oppose to the violent phallic logic of the Rocket their own, presumably more autonomous sexuality. Yet what I want to emphasize here are the literal elements of *bricolage* in the scene. The very presence of the banana trees on Pirate's roof is explained by a detailed exposition of Do-It-Yourself lore. The soil in which the trees are grown is made up of sedimented layers that go back to the pharmaceutical gardening experiments of the house's first owner—a Pre-Raphaelite eccentric. Pirate himself built a glasshouse on the roof and acquired the trees through a complex barter scheme with a fellow military man who could import them from Latin America. Such a moment, as I noted above, remains poised in indeterminacy, since Pynchon's phallic imagery suggests that the apparently innocent meal preparations mimic a rocket firing. Yet I think it does enact a utopian gesture whose fragility is proportionate to the general pessimism of *GR*: empowered male subjects in the novel are individual working persons—*bricoleurs*—who stake their autonomy—their instrumental control over self and world—on their ability to remain active in the margins of corporate power.

—Free University of Brussels

Notes

¹To be fair, we must acknowledge that the current ideology of management is not characterized exclusively by macho descriptions of the business jungle like those promoted by Peters's *Thriving on Chaos* or Deal and Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures*. Other textbooks, like Jeffrey Pfeffer's *Human Equation*, revolve around more democratic concepts, like "people-centered management" (1).

²The inscription of the subject in an alienating semiotic system—the “symbolic order,” of which the phallus is the paradigmatic signifier—is discussed in Lacan’s “Séminaire” (1.59–67) and “Subversion” (2.158–85).

³For a discussion of the sublime apprehension of the urban environment and its origin in corporate economics, see my *Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (3–11, 57–58).

⁴See Amy Kaplan for a discussion of the necessary affinity between realism and the local world—what Raymond Williams calls “knowable communities” (Kaplan 47). Kaplan’s argument, based on Georg Lukács’s and Raymond Williams’s studies of urban realism, suggests that the focus of realist narration extends only so far as the class- or ethnically-defined horizon that marks out the author’s, the narrator’s and the implied reader’s perimeter of commonsense everydayness. Any text that goes beyond this boundary of knowable social phenomena is necessarily heterogeneous, both epistemologically and in terms of literary discourse: typically, it mixes realism and romance.

⁵The 1980s studies that directly challenge the belief that American realism and naturalism were staunchly anti-business are Michaels’s *Gold Standard*, June Howard’s *Form and History*, and Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines*. All three compellingly argue that left-wing liberal historians of realism—Vernon Parrington and Alfred Kazin, for instance—systematically understated the aesthetic and ideological enthusiasm of Norris and Dreiser when describing the spectacle of consumption or the workings of corporate giants.

⁶The discourse of corporate androgyny is one of the most surprising aspects of naturalist economic novels, especially since this literary corpus is otherwise notorious for its belief in male supremacy (see my “Amazons and Androgynes”).

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