

The City, the Labyrinth and the Terror Beyond: Delineating a Site of the Possible in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Là où se poursuit l'activité la plus équivoque des vivants, l'inanimé prend parfois un reflet de leurs plus secrets mobiles: nos cités sont ainsi peuplées de sphinx méconnus qui n'arrêtent pas le passant rêveur, s'il ne tourne vers eux sa distraction méditative, qui ne lui posent pas de questions mortelles. Mais s'il sait les deviner, ce sage, alors, que lui les interroge, ce sont encore ses propres abîmes que grâce à ces monstres sans figure il va de nouveau sonder.

—Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*

London, Berlin, Buenos Aires: these are only some of the Cities Imperial in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel in which historical fact mingles with artifacts of myth, and the fictionalized landscape of the Second World War, the novel's Zone, accommodates both the green world of Slothrop's rainbow vision and the socially engineered, sinister enclaves of preserved innocence. If for most of Pynchon's third novel the city appears, in the quasi-Romantic fashion typical of much post-Second World War American writing,¹ as an essentially repressive, coercive, and above all imperialist construct which threatens to reduce human life to its own laws of determination, the novel offers a whole array of complementary, often highly contrasting perspectives which, taken together, constitute Pynchon's mature attempt to connect the various dialectics and myths of the urban.²

With its frequent narrative excursions into drug-induced fantasies, its numerous flashbacks and discursive analyses of the background of the action, and its eventual displacement of thematic concerns into the early 1970s, *Gravity's Rainbow* repeatedly skirts, without ever seriously deploying, the conventions of the classical realist historical novel. Whatever generic tag we choose to hang on it—whether we see it as an example of postmodern metafiction, or as a late surrealist textual monument, a Menippean satire, or a contemporary jeremiad—*Gravity's Rainbow*, whose 760 pages span the last year of the Second World

War and the first few months of postwar uncertainty, dispersal and drift, remains only nominally about that war itself.³ Throughout, Pynchon insists that war, as an outbreak of violence on a mass scale, and even history itself—the story we tell ourselves to make such conflagrations rationally (causally) explicable—are in a sense merely distractions from the deeper patterns which make them possible. Prominent among those deeper patterns is a cluster of cultural fictions, symbols, and patterns of ideation and action (projectively, plots) which to a large extent govern our understanding of both human destructiveness and human *socius*.

In its conspicuous concern, on the one hand, with tracing the lines of technological, economic and cultural forces which brought about the unprecedented destruction of human life between 1939 and 1945, and, on the other, with offering an imaginative analysis of the very personal motivations of the men and women who, whether as aggressors or victims, participated in a systematic programme of annihilation of military and civilian populations alike, *Gravity's Rainbow* displays only one of its many dualities. This double focus, integrated in the novel's interrelated subplots, works to identify and explore the dark side of the cultural legacy which underwrites the urban world of the twentieth century.

Examples of that sometimes occluded, often ethically equivocal or problematic cultural inheritance abound in the novel. Their common characteristic is the attempt to encompass and explain, or, more precisely, control the often chaotic and fluid experience of lived life.⁴ Each represents a type of ideational or physically realized design used to circumscribe and rationalize experience—in order to take charge of it. In passage after passage, Pynchon explicitly points to what he sees as the overwhelmingly negative feature of such constructs: their inherent tendency to exclude (by ignoring, repressing or silencing) the types of thought and experience they cannot subsume or tolerate as valid.⁵ Each of these ideological designs—both as conceptual systems and as social agendas, projects of action—is presented either as emanating from an urban centre of political and cultural control or as particularly suited to the patterns of life such a centre formalizes. Each can be seen as a buffer and a barrier we raise to protect ourselves from the destructive forces of nature, or from the subversive demands of others whose needs may run counter to our own—or, finally, from our fear of death.

The most enduring of such constructs, the one that inaugurates the establishment of civilization as we know it, is that of the city: not merely a communal space, a man-made environment, but, as Raymond Williams notes, "a form of shared consciousness . . . about which

everything from the magnificent to the apocalyptic can be believed at once" (295). The composite image of the city that emerges in *Gravity's Rainbow* draws on a number of cultural traditions and myths in which the symbolic dimension of the city, its power to focus our imagination, is encoded. The nightmare of urban destruction with which the novel opens sets up a web of imagistic and verbal allusions to most of the thematically significant traditions Pynchon works both with and against. "Pirate" Prentice's prophetic dream of the V-2 bombing of London contains, at a minimum, references to the Jerusalem of the Old Testament prophets, the modernist city of Eliot and Rilke, and the labyrinth-city of Daedalus. Later in the novel, Pynchon will also introduce the Biblical story of Cain, the first city-builder, and the Heavenly City of John of Patmos, that stands outside time and the chaotic randomness of the contingent and is reserved specifically for God's chosen.

Buried under the architectonic weight of his immensely complex narrative, Pynchon's peculiar cultural references create a significant inversion of Biblical accounts of origin and value, particularly as these pertain to the establishment of cities—urban civilization—as well as to our own relation to the *polis*, taken in its widest sense. The first mention of the city in the Bible occurs in the account of Cain's fratricide and his expulsion into the wastes of the world. Condemned to the fate of a perpetual fugitive and wanderer, of a man "cursed from the *earth*" (Gen. 4.11), and driven from the protection of God's presence, Cain travels east to the land of Nod, where he "builded a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch" (Gen. 4.17). The first Biblical city, then, is founded as a fratricide's attempt to provide security for himself away from a hostile earth and an alienated God. Built on ground staked out from a land in which he is a stranger, the city promises shelter not only from an unsympathetic nature but also from the aggression of other men. Named after his son, it also represents Cain's hope that within its protective confines he may achieve a form of immortality.⁶

The city as an enclave of peace favoured by God, in harmony with itself, self-contained, and excluding what is threatening and alien is elaborated in the Bible in the image of Jerusalem under King David. In the Psalms, Jerusalem becomes the magic centre of the world, its walls and encircling mountains marking out "from the midst of a 'chaotic' space, peopled with demons and phantoms . . . an enclosure, a place that [is] organized, made cosmic, provided with a centre" (Eliade 371). Far from the Temple standing at the heart of the city, and outside Jerusalem's walls live the "nations"—undifferentiated at first, rebellious, unclean—and the demonic powers of nature. Morally

unanimous, Jerusalem strives to maintain its perfect homogeneity: when dissension and rebellion threaten to erupt within its walls, it is the function of the King to suppress them, to banish all enemies of order (Psalm 101). The main features of Jerusalem as a cosmological city, conceptualized during the period of Jewish hegemony over the neighbouring Semitic tribes, are, first, the “sacred” exclusion of the unclean, the other, extended in many psalms into imagery of siege and war; second, the righteousness of those who dwell in the city; and third, the city’s inclusion of a shrine at its center where men may attain access to the divine (Dougherty 7).

The destruction of cities in Biblical literature is confined mainly to the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, composed at a time when Israel and Judah experienced a series of invasions culminating in the conquest of Jerusalem by Babylon. In the prophets’ treatment of the city, the duality between Jerusalem the good and an evil Babylon plays an important role in providing national consolation. Of particular interest to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, is the prophets’ imaginative vision of Jerusalem alone. By juxtaposing historical experience and visionary imagination, the prophets offer three views of Jerusalem. The actual, thriving city of the period just before the subjugation of Zion by the Babylonian empire is castigated for its delusive self-sufficiency. In its place, the prophets see Jerusalem destroyed, its walls broken, its buildings burnt, the streets full of the dead, the temple profaned, and the ruins finally become a lair of jackals, an object of contemptuous wonder to passers-by. This vision then gives way to that of Jerusalem restored to a “remnant” of the people, the faithful whose worthiness is established by their very survival. The image of winnowing and selection, recurrent in prophetic literature, looks forward to the later Puritan conception of the passed-over preterite and the saved elect, the predestined dwellers of the Heavenly City, whose spiritual status is demonstrated by their superior, sheltered position on earth.

Like Jerusalem fallen, the ruined imperial centre of a beleaguered Zion, London is introduced in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in a nightmarish prophecy of destruction, of “a judgment from which there is no appeal” (GR 4). The city which has lied to its people, denied and preempted their desires, is now a place of ruin and death, the site of ultimate betrayal. Its downtown core, the main railway station from which the evacuation proceeds, is in the secular city of an industrial society the parodic equivalent of the holy centre at the heart of the psalmist’s Jerusalem. The once calm center for both the psalmist and the prewar Londoner, city as the still point in the midst of cosmic, political and personal chaos, is now, as in the work of the Old Testament prophets,

replaced with a vision of the city destroyed. But while in Biblical prophetic literature, war and urban destruction are presented as acts of divine correction and selection, here there are no distinctions among the victims of the rocket. Prentice's apocalyptic vision is a spectacle "in total blackout, without one glint of light," of "great invisible crashing" (3) that comes, in a phrase from Eliot's *Four Quartets* (which Pynchon alludes to quite deliberately), "[a]s, in a theatre . . . with a movement of darkness on darkness" (Eliot, "East Coker" 3.13-15).

The evacuation that unfolds as the post-impact screaming of the rocket "holds across the sky" (GR 4) moves into "older and more desolate parts of the city," "ruinous secret cities of the poor" (3), places paved with the accumulated debris of all the hopes and desires the metropolis has always betrayed. Prentice, a fantasist-surrogate for the ruling elite of London, has never even heard their names. These are the areas where the protective walls have broken down and the roofs collapsed, places on the circumference of the city where the preterite dwell. In Prentice's nightmare vision, however, there are no divisions between the "feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time," and those closest to Prentice, whose "VIP faces" he remembers "behind bulletproof windows speeding through the city" (3). Undifferentiated as were the pagan tribes outside the walls of Jerusalem or as Eliot's multitudes of the urban lost, "[t]hey all go into the dark" ("East Coker" 3.1), into "thousands of these hushed rooms without light" (GR 4).

From the beginning of the novel, the urban environment is identified as the realm of the inanimate and inorganic. It is a world in which all sensory impressions are of old wood, "cold plaster," naphtha odors and "rotted concrete," "old tarry ropes and cast-iron pulleys," a world of inorganic matter seemingly come alive, of metal that "rub[s] and connect[s]," where only steam escapes, and the "smell of rolling-stock absence, of maturing rust" tells of a history developing under the marshalling hands of speechless masters trying "to bring events to Absolute Zero," to the total stillness of death (3-4). The inertness of inorganic or dead nature, of nature that has *never* been alive, is associated throughout the novel also with the passivity of those most inclined to give their allegiance to either technocratic or mystical systems of thought. The screaming of the rocket with which *Gravity's Rainbow* opens stands in counterpoint to the first line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, the question "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic / orders?" (E1 1-2). Pynchon's allusion to Rilke not only identifies London with Rilke's City of Pain; it also intimates that in the world of Pynchon's novel, the modernist Angel of the *Duino Elegies* belongs to a long line of city-destroyers, a line culminating in the V-2 rocket and its nuclear progeny. If London is the Leid-Stadt of Rilke's modernism,

the rocket is the technological avatar of a consciousness that “would tread beyond trace [the city’s] market of comfort” (E10 20). To seek communion with the angel, to surrender oneself to his rule, the novel implies, is analogous to acquiescing to the annihilating supremacy of the rocket.⁷

Pynchon emphasizes both this point and his own departure from the Eliotic or Rilkean search for value in systems of transcendence by yet another reference to Eliot. Like the speaking voice of the *Four Quartets* who, desensitized by the spiritual aridity of the industrial city, withdraws into a fugue and counsels the mystic’s stillness and waiting —“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope” (“East Coker” 3.27)—the participatory witness of the apocalyptic dream-scene at the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow* issues this parallel version of the quietist maxim: “Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet” (4). By introducing such a direct allusion to Eliot’s (historically decontextualized) search for personal salvation through passivity into its original context of war, Pynchon both draws on a literary tradition opposed to the dehumanizing effect of the modern city and throws a critical light on that tradition’s own retreat into compensatory systems of sublimation and consolation.

Just as in the walled maze of the classical labyrinth the unaided traveller loses all sense of direction, retracing her steps, recrossing paths already traversed, wandering down dead-end corridors in an anxiety of confusion, so the city-dweller in Prentice’s vision experiences his trek through the urban wastes of the twentieth century as, “not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knottling into*” (3). The novel similarly develops its themes through a complex intertwining of a profusion of plots, and an array of rhetorical and stylistic methods which reflect its thematic multicentricity at the level of language. Pynchon’s frequently bewildering syntactical structures of subordination and accumulation of long strings of coordinate clauses—and the corresponding sinuosity of his prose rhythms—re-enact on the level of both individual sentence and paragraph the difficult and often confusing voyage his novel takes through the arches and secret corridors of our urban history. One of its more sinister aspects, named but never quite re-presented in this novel, or never directly, is how “the natural forces are turned aside, stepped down, rectified or bled to ground and come out very like the malignant dead” (661).

Such are the spirits that stalk the streets of London and Berlin. Like Conrad’s Brussels in *Heart of Darkness*, London is “Death’s antechamber: where all the paperwork’s done, the contracts signed, the days numbered” (40). Once the old garden capital of Roger Mexico’s childhood, it has been transformed by the war into an imperial center of systematized death, whose function is “to subvert love in favor of

work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death" (41). As such, it offers a perfect urban laboratory for Dr. Pointsman, Mexico's colleague at "The White Visitation," whose obsession with structures of control motivates one of the novel's major subplots.

Mexico's "glimmering map [. . .] an ink ghost of London" (55) that dominates his tiny office at "The White Visitation," offers an "angel's-eye view" of the city (54), showing the Poisson distribution of V-2 hits on London. It is a record and a prediction of death expressed in terms of statistical probability, that shady area of indeterminacy between the zero of the impossible and the one of the certain. Like any other map, Mexico's simultaneously reveals, renders visible and legible, *and* conceals what it represents. What the map-maker's lofty vantage hides, what the Angel—Rilkean or otherwise—cannot perceive, and what is betrayed from such a point of view are the many layers of human memory and sentiment, those moments of social cohesion and disarray of ordinary urban life, the dynamic coordination of diverse living spaces occupied by diversely motivated men and women over many years that constitute the living reality of any city. Mexico's map thus inevitably reduces the complexity of wartime London. Unlike most maps, however—which were originally the tools as well as symbols of visual control complementing the political power of the men who build the empires and cities of the world—this map expresses no more than a newly realized *inability* to control events. It is this implication of the young statistician's work that disturbs the Pavlovian psychologist. Pointsman's predisposition to seek a means of imposing order onto the realm of Mexico's randomness easily turns into a governing obsession when the existence of another, unrelated map is discovered.

Day after day, as Slothrop walks the ruined streets of the metropolis investigating V-2 impact sites, the "secular city" he sees turns into a place of parables, teaching him "how indivisible is the act of death" (25). His rake's progress through London becomes for Slothrop a pilgrim's search for some human warmth, companionship, maybe even love. The coloured stars on his map, labeled with girls' names, are stations on a pilgrimage of consolation—real or imaginary—and an aid to memory of what can and should be cherished in a dying city, in this London-become-a-morgue, "a big desolate icebox, stale-smelling and no surprises inside ever again" (24). "At its best," Pynchon insists, Slothrop's map "does celebrate a flow, a passing from which [. . .] he can save a moment here or there" (23). All of this is lost on Pointsman, of course. Locked inside the confines of his obsession, and determined to identify the mechanism by which Slothrop's sexual adventures seem to predict the exact distribution of rocket hits on London, it is Pointsman whose own compulsion will eventually propel

Slothrop out of his reach and into the chaotic Zone of postwar Germany.⁸

If Pointsman represents—if he functions as the point man for—the coercive bureaucracy of a modern urban civilization, its conditioning of the psyche that reduces emotional life to a mechanical series of pre-established routines, Mexico is his diametrical opposite. In a long, lyrical passage framed by Roger and Jessica's visit to a church in Kent during Advent, Pynchon presents the other side of London: the resilience of its inhabitants, their hope against all reason, their loyalty to the city as Christmas approaches. Here, in one of its seamless transitions, the narrative voice assumes a new sense of intimacy, addressing the reader directly as "visitor to the city at all the dead ends" (131), inviting us to witness the great streaming of men and women, long separated by war, back into the city: prisoners from Indo-China, Italian Prisoners of War, Englishmen home on leave, children, the old, the infirm. Winter cold and with no protection to offer them against the rocket, London is still their focus of hope, and, for a moment at least, the old bright capital of their memory. If many of them have been blunted and dulled by their long exposure to institutionalized death, all the more do they belong to the city Pynchon elsewhere describes as a "victim," "vulnerable to the gloom of this winter," resigned (93).

What is striking about *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel often and perceptively cast as a contemporary jeremiad, a plaintive yet grim prophecy of the destruction of cities, is how consistently it deviates from the Old Testament model even as it evokes certain parallels with it. One of the characteristics of Biblical prophetic literature, mentioned earlier, is the frequent antithesis it constructs between a corrupt but redeemable Jerusalem and a thriving but doomed Babylon. Pynchon's treatment of London and Berlin, in contrast, rejects any basic dichotomy between the two. His only use of the traditional Biblical imagery of the city as a diseased woman occurs in two passages about London, and is later echoed in his depiction of Berlin destroyed. In other words, neither city is favored; for neither does Pynchon offer the prophets' consoling vision of a new Jerusalem restored in all its splendor to the just and faithful remnant of the survivors. Thus Mexico's growing suspicion that his city "carr[ies] the fatal infection inside herself" (125) is echoed in the description of Berlin as "the City Sacramental, the city as outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual illness or health" (372).

The brutalization of life by an urban technocratic civilization is a theme specific to those sections of the novel dealing with prewar Berlin, the setting of the subplot involving Leni and Franz Pökler. For Leni, politically active in the Freikorps-hounded KPD, the streets of

Berlin are places of real danger, consciously faced, of treachery and daily possible betrayal (158). For her husband, Franz, they are the indifferent corridors of his poverty and hunger, his desperate exhausted wandering through the city in search of work. Although he has trudged through the streets of Berlin day after day, Franz is oblivious to their violent reality as long as he has the protection of Leni's presence. His profession as a chemical engineer offers him an escape from the ambiguities and tensions of ordinary life—life in the flesh, life in the real city, life in time. With his fatalism and his sadomasochistic fantasies of power, Franz is the ideal because a willing subject for any form of social organization predicated on domination (and submission), on alienation and on a deceptive ideology of collective action that promises release from personal responsibility.

Leni's "street-theater," as Franz thinks of it before she leaves him, is a place of brutality and coercion he cannot allow himself to recognize. He has always viewed it as a stage for his wife's political theatricals, nothing to take seriously or be concerned about. Deviants—such as Leftists and Jews, "noisy, unpleasant to look at"—are "channeled" by the police, in Pökler's euphemistic evasion, and the city presents no danger he can identify (399). Only after Leni's departure with their daughter, Ilse, does he take to the streets she knows. Having steadfastly avoided the knowledge which might shame him into necessary commitment, Franz emerges into the reality of Berlin only to find a terrifying absence of all the benign forces he had dreamed of until then: a world where the "only safety [. . .] was ant-scaled, down and running the streets of Ant City, bootsoles crashing overhead like black thunder, you and your crawling neighbors in traffic all silent, jostling, heading down the gray darkening streets" (399). It is a realization to which Pökler can respond only by giving his allegiance to a power greater than that of the policeman's truncheon, to the sovereign power of the rocket itself.⁹

Moved to the early production site at Peenemünde, and later to the underground rocket-factory at Nordhausen, Pökler becomes further implicated in the organized program of destruction his work will make possible. Although he has been separated from Leni and Ilse since long before the beginning of the war, he is now coopted into Major Weissmann's service by the annual meetings Weissmann arranges for him and Ilse. Living under the shadow of Cain the Betrayer, the engineer defends himself from the unbearable truth of his daughter's life by burrowing into his paper bureaucracies, devising elaborate labyrinths inside the submontane Raketen-Stadt (elsewhere in the novel presented as a grim parody of the Heavenly City of the elect). Before his and Ilse's last holiday in Zwölfkinder, although he has lived literally

next door to the Dora concentration camp for months and knows his child is in a similar “re-education” facility, Franz still manages to avoid facing the obvious. In the city of fake innocence, to which Franz will retreat once again at the end of the war, Ilse tells him enough about her life at the camp for Franz to connect the pieces of information he has gathered into a coherent whole. Yet Pökler neutralizes this knowledge as well, spinning out a fantasy of “a gentle Zwölfkinder that was also Nordhausen, a city of elves producing toy moon-rockets” (431). Just as he had “[h]ad the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart” (432) the truth of Leni’s Berlin streets, just as he had turned them into a theatre stage where danger was only fictional and action neatly ordered by the directing hands of authority, so now again, putting his “engineering skill, the gift of Daedalus,” at the service of Weissmann’s secret project, Franz turns the reality of systematized annihilation of life into a dream of childhood innocence and play. In the end, inevitably, he comes to realize that all of his rationalizations, his professional ability to construct comprehensive structures of explication, were no more than an infernal labyrinth of evasion which had kept him, in Pynchon’s first allusion to Pound, from “the inconveniences of caring” (428).¹⁰

The symbol of the labyrinth is also related to one of the novel’s central thematic antitheses: that between the city as a model of a rigid system of control and nature as an unpatterned, aleatory space of freedom. Pynchon introduces this theme most explicitly in the subplot involving a group of displaced Argentine anarchists come to the postwar Zone in search of a place where they may live out their romantic gaucho traditions. For Squalidozzi and his friends, Buenos Aires represents the insidious spread of metropolitan hegemony over the provinces. As the administrative centre of a system built on relations of dominance and submission—of political, economic and cultural power over others—the metropolis routinely destroys human communities that appear to resist assimilation. Squalidozzi’s vision of Argentina polarizes “the city streets, the warrens of rooms and corridors, the fences and the networks of steel track” and “that first unscrambled serenity . . . that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky” (264). The very openness of the land, however—as Squalidozzi knows—contains not only limitless hope but limitless danger as well.

The threat the unstructured natural world can pose is dramatized in a historical flashback dealing with the alphabetization of a Turkic language in Central Asia (338–59). This subplot also offers another instance of the much repeated pattern of imperial dominance and the spread of centralized power issuing from the metropolis into surrounding districts or far-flung countries. Thus in Stalin’s Russia, the central bureaucratic political machine, in urban Moscow, sends out its

emissaries, its missionaries of the alphabet, into remote areas of Central Asia, where the language of the natives is to be analyzed, their speech broken down into its constituent phonemes, and finally caught (captured) in the static permanence of written form. The flashback becomes an account of the destruction of a pastoral community at the mercy of the corporate state.

The Kazakh community preserves its social coherence mainly by means of ludic, participatory art: the publicly improvised singing duel, which, always vulnerable to the contingent, the unexpected but possible outburst of antagonism and violence, manages nevertheless to reconcile potentially hostile forces by healing divisiveness with laughter. The story of the Kirghiz Light also reiterates the theme of the chaos beyond, as distinct from the order inside, a human community. The segment offers, in fact, the only depiction in the novel of a society that maintains a proper relation to nature. The Kirghiz Light sung of by the *aqyn*, the "wandering Kazakh singer," represents here the terrifying indifference of the vast open spaces of Asia. Visually, it symbolizes the immensely potent, non-human force of an untamed and untamable natural world. For the *aqyn*, the flash of the Kirghiz Light initiates a kind of rebirth, bringing with it a new awareness of one's position in the world. As Džaqyp Qulan explains to Tchitcherine, the Soviet emissary who has come to attend the village feast and record in shorthand the singer's tale, the *aqyn* must pass on his knowledge of the Light: not to do so would be to betray his calling and his people. The *aqyn*'s role, then, is to keep the men and women of the steppes constantly aware of human vulnerability to nature, and of the value of a harmonious communal life.

But if the Kazakh singer and his people can keep the two terms of the human position in the world in balance, for the city-dweller the openness of the Asian steppe can pose an overwhelming spiritual danger. Galina, another member of the Soviet cadre overseeing the alphabetization of Turkic, succumbs to the unsettling "silences of Seven Rivers" country (340). The terror of the open space and the silences that fill it seduce Galina with their vastness, with their intimations of absolute sovereignty, so that she identifies with the immensity and mercilessness of the land and takes on a "Central Asian giantess self" (341), a being commensurate with the force of an earthquake or the obliterating power of a sandstorm. Identifying with the destructive force of raw nature, Galina, a city girl now dreaming of herself inside a miniature model of a city, experiences both existential dread and a psychotic thrill at the threat of violence she has internalized.

Pynchon's allusions to Pound and overt references to Rilke in this scene are by no means gratuitous. "Seven Rivers country" needs to be

read, first, through the prism of Pound's "Seven Lakes" Canto, 49, where, as Christine Froula points out, Pound lures the reader into a seductively lyrical world, one in which imperial power "is simply the governance that preserves the 'stillness'" (182–83). In the "Inventing Confucius" chapter of *The Pound Era* as well as in "More on the Seven Lakes Canto," Hugh Kenner shows that in *all its* particulars, including the "seven lakes" themselves, the Hunan district Pound evokes in Canto 49 is the invention of Pound's own mental landscape. This transformation of the historical and literal into a utopia, a "no-place" realized only in the poem itself, thus allows the Pound of 1937 to enunciate his vision of a benign empire, one aligned with the peaceful rhythms of an idealized nature. Given the ruthlessness that overcomes the city-dweller in Pynchon's Central Asian episode, however, his "Seven Rivers country" also needs to be read side by side with Pound's postwar confession, first made in the psychologically and self-defensively distancing French of Canto 76, and then, finally, in the penultimate lines of Canto 116, in English too: "Charity I have had sometimes, / I cannot make it flow thru" (71–72). Juxtaposing, on a single page, Galina's discovery of a destructive self—one attuned to what Pynchon elsewhere in the novel calls "the Outer Radiance" (148)—with both Pound's poetics of the *imperium* and those Rilkean "tall [. . .] star-blotting Moslem angels" (GR 341), as well as with the line I have already quoted from the Tenth Elegy—"O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel den Trostmarkt"—Pynchon lets the interplay of language itself, the sharply outlined contiguity of these visions, develop a powerfully ironic commentary on the modernist imagination of the political and the transcendental. Seen in terms of Galina's experience, Rilke's terrible Angel sheds his otherness, is revealed as an externalization, a projection of the poet's and our own impulses modelled on the destructive forces of nature and now made available to us through our technological ingenuity.

Conceived as a place of shelter, now, under the grim unpredictability of the rocket, the city becomes a site of terror rather than protection. As a center of culture, furthermore, it is consistently shown in Pynchon's innumerable references to both popular and high aesthetic forms to exert a treacherous pressure on the imagination. Films, for example—not only the fictional *Alpdrücken* but also the actual German expressionist films and Hollywood musicals to which Pynchon refers—offer models of ideation and behavior which, as in the case of Franz Pökler, a devoted fan of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, lead their viewers, those "nation[s] of starers" (374, 429), to respond to reality around them in a manner which ultimately betrays their deepest hopes and desires. The extent of Pynchon's serious concern with the social

function of art, whether it be religious myth or modernist poetry or popular film, can also be gauged by his attempt to offer in *Gravity's Rainbow* an alternative vision of the culture's most ancient and to date most influential account of the origin of the city-dweller as well as the city.

Two distinct, independent traditions can be found in the Judeo-Christian genealogy of the races of men. According to one, all men are descended from Cain: the first fully human character in the Bible, born of a man and a woman; the first farmer, tamer of the earth; the first murderer; and the first city-builder in history. According to a later, divergent tradition, however, it is Noah, granted the rainbow-covenant with God, who stands as the progenitor of all the generations of humankind. This duality of origin, this polarity between the outcast and the chosen, the sinful and the righteous, cannot be reconciled by Biblical scholarship as it derives from two unrelated sources. It also provides an important symbolic nexus for Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Through the characters of Tyrone Slothrop and Vaslav Tchitcherine, Pynchon rewrites the story of the Biblical progenitors of men and offers a fictional reconciliation of opposites. Slothrop and Tchitcherine are, in fact, the only two characters in the novel with a clearly *mythopoeic* function. Let me clarify what I mean by this by reference to another subplot, the one that deals with the German rocket-master Weissmann/Blicero and his catamite Gottfried. Although the story of that relationship is an unmistakable reworking of the sacrifices of Isaac and Jesus, it develops in the novel according to a fairly straightforward logic of the characters' personalities. In other words, Weissmann's "sacrificial" annihilation of Gottfried requires no outside intervention and presents no rapture in the ordinary texture of their sadomasochistic relationship. This is not so in the case of either Slothrop or Tchitcherine, each of whom experiences a hiatus, a point of radical discontinuity, an influx of authorial grace, perhaps.

In a world of iron-clad laws of cause and effect, or reward and punishment, what happens to either of these characters would be inexplicable and unjustifiable. Tchitcherine has been instrumental in the destruction of the only harmonious, non-repressive community the novel presents. In the Zone, his job as an intelligence officer for the Soviet state, gathering information about the new rocket bomb, implicates him in the later development of the V-2's nuclear successor. Furthermore, Tchitcherine's fratricidal quest for his African half-brother, Enzian, clearly identifies him as modern-day Cain. Yet, at the end of the novel, having abandoned his military duty, Tchitcherine is granted what can only be termed magic salvation through love. Not only is he the one

character in *Gravity's Rainbow* not to be betrayed in love; he is also spared the fate of Cain. Meeting Enzian in the middle of a bridge inside the ravaged green world of the Zone, and blinded to all but Geli by the magic of the "World-choosing" witch's spell, he "manages to hustle half a pack of American cigarettes and three raw potatoes" from his brother (734). The black faces passing him by whisper "mba-kayere," the Herero word signifying "I am passed over," spared (362).

Occurring as it does outside the city, Pynchon's mythopoeic resolution of Tchitcherine's fate seems to indicate that the novel's evocation of the Cain legend repudiates the urban and requires a withdrawal into pastoralism. What counters such a reading is Slothrop's progress through and eventual disappearance from the novel. Having escaped Pointsman's control, Slothrop embarks on his own quest for Weissmann's secret rocket. In the course of his peregrinations in the Zone, he commits his one act of betrayal for which there is no pardon. On board the *Anubis* (named after the Egyptian god who conducted the urban dead), Slothrop abandons Bianca to her eventual death: "Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost" (470). This passage occurs nearly two hundred pages after a riotously comic scene in which Slothrop is briefly identified with Tchitcherine, the night he spends with the Russian's German lover Geli.¹¹ Later in the novel, after he has given up his quest for the mysterious Schwarzgerät, into which Gottfried was fitted for his sacrificial flight, Slothrop moves into the green world of the Zone. Here, he is granted the only authentic glimpse of nature's own rainbow: not exactly God's rainbow-covenant with his chosen; nor the rocket's parabola of "no surprise, no second chances, no return" (209); but the rainbow nature makes as it bends the rays of the sun through the refracting medium of raindrops. It is the sign of a new covenant in which Tchitcherine, unknowingly as always, and by virtue of his earlier identification with Slothrop, also shares—natural, unthreatening, bringing colour and fertility to the planet:

[A]nd now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. (626)

The sexual imagery of this scene is echoed in the imagery of the newspaper photograph of the bombing of Hiroshima Slothrop sees in an unidentified town in northern Germany—Anytown, in fact. Pynchon's elegiac ode to the city which precedes this moment in the novel, his

rejection of both modernist and Judeo-Christian repudiation of the City of Pain, ties together another set of urban themes in the novel. This authorial gesture of reprieve also displaces all the familiar simplicities of Romanticism and its rigid polarizations the novel has contemplated up to this point. Having only sixty pages earlier given credit to Rilke for "a mean poem about the Leid-Stadt" (644), Pynchon now pleads for all our cities of pain, all our streets "now indifferently gray with commerce, with war, with repression." Unlike Rilke or an Old Testament prophet, Pynchon calls on us to believe that nevertheless, and in spite of all the betrayals our streets have witnessed, in each of them "some vestige of humanity, of Earth, has to remain. No matter what has been done to it, no matter what it's been used for. [. . .] At least one moment of passage, one it will hurt to lose, ought to be found for every street [. . .] finding it, learning to cherish what was lost, mightn't we find some way back?" (693).

The moments of passage Pynchon evokes here, so near the end of the novel, recall Slothrop's own aide-mémoire for preserving them, his love map of London. Its stars mark bomb sites, are records of death, but they are also mementos of life which elicit (as such mementos do from Jessica [43]) empathy and compassion. Chambers of Brownian motion through which men, women and children go silently into the darkness of war, London's streets are also those places of encounter where even a Pointsman may be transformed, however fleetingly, into a "selfless [. . .] Traveler's Aid" (51). If London can be turned into a laboratory where Slothrop is used as a guinea pig in Pavlovian control experiments, Nice can momentarily offer "the best feeling dusk in a foreign city can bring: [. . .] some promise of events without cause, surprises, a direction at right angles to every direction [Slothrop's] life has been able to find up till now" (253). It is notable that Pynchon here singles out the city as the existential stage for those privileged creations of contingency (or chance, in the language of the Surrealists), unpredictable, spontaneous, too fleeting or complex for rational analysis, in which hope stands as the reminder of the possible: "the only form in which truth appears" (Adorno 98). The center of imperial exploitation, one of Conrad's "dark places of the earth," the city nevertheless contains all that

pedestrian mortality, restless crisscrossing of needs or desperations in one fateful piece of street . . . dialectics, matrices, archetypes all need to connect, once in a while, back to some of that proletarian blood, to body odors and senseless screaming across a table, to cheating and last hopes, or else all is dusty Dracularity, the West's ancient curse. (GR 262-63)

These, then, are the cities of Noah which the generations of Cain may inherit. While Slothrop, who leaves no progeny, acts out the traditional role of the Fool, the being bitten by the white lynx of remorse, one whose position is on the fringe of all orders and systems, Tchitcherine remains in the Zone to find, perhaps, with Geli “somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up” (556). Through his reworking of the West’s oldest cultural myths, Pynchon thus presents us in *Gravity’s Rainbow* with an alternative vision of possibilities that stands, as the last pre-apocalyptic scene of the novel suggests, today as it did a quarter of a century ago, poised at that crucial moment in which a civilization’s choice between destruction and creation, between denial and a conscious, non-repressive inclusion of its own and other forms of otherness, can still be made.

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Notes

¹See Tony Tanner.

²Both the city and the labyrinth are already there, very much present as themes, concerns and symbols, in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. In *V.*, however, the city and its synecdochal “street,” itself one of the novel’s main metaphors for the twentieth century, are epitomized by Valletta’s Straight Street, Malta’s Gut, its market of flesh and Pynchon’s equivalent of Rilke’s “market of comforts”—are, in short, an index of moral and spiritual decadence. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, too, the city is given a largely if not exclusively negative valorization. On the one hand we have San Narciso, described as not so much a place of habitation or human encounter as “a grouping of concepts,” where Pierce had “put down the plinth course of capital on which everything afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky” (24). Complementary to it is Oedipa’s vision of Los Angeles as a monstrously indifferent, inanimate yet avid junkie, whose high comes from consuming the human crystals of “urban horse” that happen to pass into its veins (26). These are arresting images, but what strikes me about them is the extent to which, although he echoes such judgments in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon has moved by 1973 to something much more complex than either the Romantic or the modernist vision of the city.

³For a brief overview of critical discussions dealing with the generic features of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, see Mark R. Siegel 8–12.

⁴The most exhaustive and influential treatment of Pynchon’s critique of such “totalizing designs” remains Molly Hite 93–157.

⁵Briefly, we find in this novel 1) Pavlovian determinism, which seeks to define all action in terms of stimulus and response and so provide a method for programmatic conditioning of human behaviour; 2) a brand of German mysticism whose commitment to forms of transcendence demanding personal surrender to death as the final arbiter of all value endorses an instrumental devaluation of life and thus makes its sacrificial annihilation attractive; 3) bureaucratic imperialism that seeks to impose on pre-literate colonies systems of writing designed to capture the living flow of human speech and thereby render communication and its social uses ever more amenable to manipulation by the centres of power; 4) the providential plan of Calvinist theology, which with its predetermined division of humankind into the elect and the preterite, turns easily into a sociological model that validates the rule of economic and cultural elites; and, finally, 5) the technologically-based secular system of control and unchecked greed which, legitimizing itself by recourse to Calvinist sociology, deifies the needs of the corporate technocratic state at the expense of those of its human members.

⁶For my account of the image of the city in the Bible, I have drawn on Franck S. Frick, James Dougherty and Jacques Ellul.

⁷Although Rilke's Angel holds back from realizing the threat he embodies, his motives give chillingly little reassurance:

For Beauty's nothing
but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear,
and why we adore it so is because it serenely
disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. (E1 4-7)

⁸Just how reliable Slothrop's map may be is the subject of Bernard Duyfhuizen's "Starry-Eyed Semiotics."

⁹Predictably enough, Pöckler comes to dream sometimes of the rocket as "a street he knew was in a certain district of the city, a street in a certain small area of the grid that held something he thought he needed" (400).

¹⁰Compare Pound's Canto 76: "J'ai eu pitié des autres / probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience" (244-45; emphasis added).

¹¹The connection between the two seems different from the "'mapping on to'" (GR 159) discernable in several other pairs of characters in the novel. For all the comic inflections of the scene, the world of nature itself, figured in Geli's owl, Wernher, senses in Slothrop an American Tchitcherine (289-94).

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