

## **Franz Pökler's Anti-Story: Narrative and Self in *Gravity's Rainbow***

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*Gravity's Rainbow* complicates traditional notions of narrative and self in two interconnecting ways. The text is both a narrative that problematizes the individuated self and a metafiction that problematizes the forms traditionally seen as making narrative a vehicle for communicating meaning. From Pirate Prentice's managing other people's fantasies to Slothrop's disappearance, the text challenges the idea of a coherent, self-responsible individual interacting uniquely with the world. As a metafiction, the text challenges the cause-and-effect assumptions behind narrative sequence and the hermeneutical assumptions behind evaluation and interpretation of narrative discourse. These two challenges are manifested in the narrative of Franz Pökler. The dominant consciousness in the longest chapter in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pökler tries to assess his situation by looking back at his years as a scientist in the V-2 rocket program, essentially trying to organize his life story.

Thinking of Pökler's story as autobiography helps us both to see the ways the novel connects the postmodern problematizations of individual identity and narrative and to understand the narrative techniques by which *Gravity's Rainbow* can be said to create meaning. These latter result from Pynchon's use of his sources for the novel. Much valuable work—notably by David Cowart, Thomas H. Schaub, and Steven Weisenburger—has been done identifying Pynchon's sources. But Pynchon does not use these sources only for information. Rather, *Gravity's Rainbow* incorporates the various discourses of its sources—their organizational methods, rhetorical strategies, and prose styles—and makes them part of what the novel is about. *Gravity's Rainbow* exemplifies Bakhtin's theory of the novel: the various discourses of the sources and the ideological systems they manifest are put into dialogic relations with one another and with the discourses of the characters and the narrator. Out of this intertextual mélange—not the totalized system of linear narrative—come the possibilities for meaning in the novel.

This dialogic technique can be seen clearly in the Pökler chapter. In writing this chapter, Pynchon apparently drew on several autobiographies of V-2 scientists for information and for the discourses in

which the life stories are narrated.<sup>1</sup> His technique here is similar to his technique in "Entropy" and *V.*, in which Callisto and Stencil try to make sense of their lives by narrating them in a style that is a pastiche of *The Education of Henry Adams*. Adams's ideas and discourses are equally important to these works' meanings, as William M. Plater has noted: "In the *Education* Pynchon finds more than a mechanism for translating physics into history. He also finds that the perspective necessary for seeing whole systems must lie outside the system itself" (5). Schaub concurs: "Like Adams, Pynchon seeks a form of expression that conforms to the lack of formal certainties in the world he is describing" (3). Similarly, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon has apparently used the V-2 scientists' autobiographies as sources for the details of Pökler's life story and his story environment, and has also incorporated the scientists' discourses and the worldviews they imply into a dialogic relation with his own narrator's discourses. By having Pökler use the discursive practices the rocket scientists use in their autobiographies, Pynchon underscores both the failure of Pökler's attempts at self-definition and, thereby, the narratological and ontological problems inherent in trying to make a story of one's life. Moreover, Pökler's failure reflects on the source autobiographies, unmasking the parts of those lives the life stories try to conceal.

Pynchon's source autobiographies, like all autobiographies, raise questions about the autobiographical-narratological enterprise. All autobiographical texts are qualified by the implications arising from the unbridgeable gap between the subject/narrator and the object/actor: the "I" remembering the life events and the remembered "I" acting out these events. One qualifying problem is the organizational question of where meaning resides in the narrative. Does the meaning depend on the events narrated? Or are the events to be narrated dictated by a predetermined meaning? In other words, does the meaning reside with the object/actor or the subject/narrator? Since past events are unrecoverable, memory is fallible, and narrators are not always truthful, the meaning of an autobiography seems to reside in the present with the narrator, and the narrative is constructed to serve that meaning. As Georges Gusdorf argues, the sequence of life events only appears to be the organizing principle of the narrative: "the illusion begins from the moment that the narrative *confers a meaning* on the event which, when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none. This postulating of meaning dictates the choice of facts to be retained and of the details to bring out or to dismiss according to the demands of the preconceived intelligibility" (42). So the meaning of a life exists only in retrospect, when the sequence of events and the interpretations they support can be seen.

A connected problem is the focusing question of standpoint, the time/situation of the narrator in writing the life story. A fixed standpoint from which to organize and interpret is necessary before any narrative can be made from life events.<sup>2</sup> But the narrative is then organized as a totalized sequence or interpretive system justifying how the narrator reached that present standpoint. This reveals once again that events are constructed to serve a meaning in the present and also that meaning is arbitrary since the standpoint is changeable. One might write a life story at 40 and again at 60. In either case the narrative as totalizing system is an illusion used to make an arbitrary collection of information seem a vehicle for truth. Both of these qualifying problems indicate that the interpretive focus of an autobiography is less on the ostensible content of the text (the sequence of life events) than on the organizing and evaluative narrator of the text.

This conclusion is particularly important for the autobiographies of the V-2 scientists because they are self-consciously written from the standpoint of re-created men. At various times between 1932 and 1945, these men were involved in researching, developing, and producing the V-2 rocket, essentially a terror weapon, for the Nazi state. Both at Peenemünde, the rocket-development works on the Baltic coast, and at the Mittelwerke, the V-2-production center under the Harz Mountains, the scientists employed slave labor: skilled workers impressed from countries occupied by Germany; Soviet prisoners of war; and Jewish, Polish, and political concentration-camp prisoners. Surviving documents show that at least 20,000 people were killed or worked to death at the Mittelwerke alone.<sup>3</sup> After surrendering to the U.S. Army, the scientists reportedly met frequently to create personae that would appeal to the Americans and to come to a consensus about the point of their work and their knowledge of the slave laborers.<sup>4</sup> Later, a Pentagon committee rewrote many of their dossiers to expunge any mention of Nazi-party or SS membership so the State Department would allow their entry into the United States (Simpson 34-37; Hunt 3). Thus recruited variously into the U.S. military, space program, and aerospace industry, the V-2 scientists were transformed from enemies into national heroes of a sort. Their problem in writing their autobiographies was how to write cynical conversion narratives: they needed to relate the events from the war years, their preconversion lives, in a way that would not clash with their postconversion standpoints, their present as celebrated citizens of the United States; to reveal the conversion would be to reveal the past that had to remain hidden.

The scientists solved their problem by each presenting the same basic sequence of events in an evaluative discourse that promotes

interpretations of those events in harmony with the scientists' present. Several of these interpretive strategies are common to Pynchon's source autobiographies. The first strategy is to argue that the scientists did not see themselves as creating a weapon; their real interest was in finding a means of space travel. Wartime necessity forced them into weapons research. Wernher von Braun, the technical director of Peenemünde, defends himself against charges of doing weapons work by comparing work on the V-2 to the invention of the airplane, which was also first used as a weapon (18). Walter Dornberger, the military commander of the V-2 project, qualifies every discussion of targeting accuracy and destructive potential with a reminder that "Our aim from the beginning was to reach infinite space" (140). Dieter Huzel, an engineer who worked in many different areas of rocket research, eventually becoming von Braun's assistant, writes of his 1943 assignment to Peenemünde: "Even as it is with most rocket engineers today, the fact that I would be primarily developing a weapon did not enter my mind. There were—and are—things bigger than this. To me, the notification of transfer was more than a simple order. It was the start of a career, and the opportunity to participate in the birth of one of the greatest ages of all time" (27).

The second shared evaluative strategy is for the scientists to distance themselves and the V-2 project from the war, the Nazi party and the SS. The authors dissociate themselves from negatively perceived wartime events. Huzel stresses that "the pace, fascination, and significance of our work made us less conscious of the actual fact of the war. . . . Noteworthy also was the nearly complete absence of Nazi party uniforms, party lapel buttons, and party activities in general" (79–80). Dornberger writes, "We hardly ever discussed politics in Peenemünde. We were out of the world" (192). While von Braun admits there were some "political aspects" to rocket work (von Braun and Ordway 107), he implicitly denies that the rocket program was subsumed by the SS (114).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the entire V-2 operation, from research through production to battlefield use, had been drawn into Himmler's power structure in late 1943. Many of the other denials of political attachments are equally disingenuous: Dornberger was, after all, a General in the Wehrmacht, and von Braun was a Nazi party member, an honorary officer in the SS, and a recipient of two War Service Crosses (Bower 111, 119, 240–41; Simpson 32; Hunt 44).

The third and most important of the scientists' shared interpretive strategies is to deny responsibility for the use of slave labor at Peenemünde and the Mittelwerke. While the rocket scientists were becoming American citizens, the SS officers who had worked under their orders at the Mittelwerke were being tried and punished for war

crimes. The scientists had apparently agreed early on to deny any specific knowledge of the abuse and death of prisoner-workers, and this strategy continues in their memoirs. Von Braun simply never mentions them, even to deny their ill treatment. Dornberger insists that "On security grounds the employment of foreigners at Peenemünde was forbidden" (92), but then later admits that the heaviest losses in the August 1943 British bombing of Peenemünde were "foreign construction workers" (168). Huzel concedes the presence of concentration-camp inmates at Peenemünde but distances himself from them. He recounts that during an air raid,

a group of thirty or forty concentration camp prisoners were sitting on the ground, watched by a couple of bored guards. I couldn't help noticing the difference between these poor souls and the only other group I had run across, during my days at Siemens in 1938. Concentration camp prisoners carried colored markers on their arms to indicate the type of offense. Six years earlier most of these I had seen were murderers, thieves, sex offenders, and the like, with only a small proportion of political prisoners. Now, I noticed a shocking predominance of black political arm marks. What had started out as a means of getting able-bodied prisoners to do useful work had apparently turned into a device for political persecution. (112-13)

The fourth interpretive strategy is for each author to assign himself a role in the scientific triumph of the V-2's creation. Dornberger, stressing his own role as administrator-hero, asserts that in a well-run team of scientists and engineers, no individual can take credit for any part of the achievement, implying that the person overseeing the team is the most important. He writes, "Neither the V-2 nor the V-1, nor any other great technological invention of recent decades, can be associated with the name of any one man. The days of the lonely creative genius are over. Such achievements can only be the fruit of an anonymous team of research specialists working selflessly, soberly, and in harmony" (273). Von Braun, on the other hand, presents himself as next in the succession of charismatic individual inventors—Robert Goddard, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, and Hermann Oberth (von Braun's teacher)—who had prepared the way for him and his work at Peenemünde. Huzel organizes his autobiography around the conventions of the individual success story: starting at the bottom of the ladder, through hard work, natural abilities, and a willingness to take chances, he attains a position of important responsibility, becomes a hero by hiding and thus saving the records of the Peenemünde experiments, marries the woman of his dreams, and finally achieves the

good life in the United States. Each author adopts the strategy that allows him to be the hero of his own story.<sup>6</sup>

Like these scientists, Pökler wants to be a hero and to understand the meaning of his life, and like them, he seeks to understand his life by making a story of it. But his effort is made problematic from the start by the ambiguity surrounding his autobiographical enterprise, especially the standpoint from which he views his life events. The past Pökler tries to make a story of his life events as he lives them—as he works on the rocket at Peenemünde, as he is visited by Ilse, and as he lives underground at the Mittelwerke. The past Pökler does not allow for retrospection because he wants to see the narrative structure of his life and the meaning this structure will provide as he lives it. The present Pökler sits at Zwölfkinder and reflects on the life events that have led to his being there; his standpoint is that of the traditional autobiographer. We cannot always clearly distinguish between the evaluative and interpretive autobiographical assertions of the past Pökler and those of the present Pökler. Thus the novel calls into question both Pökler's autobiographical efforts and autobiographical narrative in general by collapsing and confusing the separation between the object/actor and the subject/narrator. This confusion is augmented by Pökler's story being presented not directly by Pökler, but indirectly by the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Again, the narrator's evaluations and interpretations of events are not always unambiguously distinguishable from those of the past and present Pöklers. But more important, the narrator's presentation of Pökler's autobiographical efforts as part of a longer, more complex narrative enables the dialogic interaction among Pökler's story, the V-2 scientists' stories, and the other narrative elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* to take place. While it is probably impossible to assign each sentence of the chapter definitely to the past Pökler, the present Pökler, or the narrator, it is nevertheless possible to see the chapter as made up of these three layers and to understand the chapter as a dialogue among them.

In attempting to create a narrative for his life, the past Pökler tries both to define a fixed story environment in which his individual identity will be validated and to create a story of his life events as he lives them so as to extract a meaning for this identity. Thus he experiences his life at a remove, constantly evaluating his life events through the frames of story (a narrative's sequence of events, linked by cause and effect) and discourse (a narrative's rhetorical strategies for evaluating and interpreting the sequence of events).<sup>7</sup>

Pökler's first need in creating a story of his life events is to define a fixed relation with a stable story environment in which he can play the hero's role. However, the instability of the world he interacts with

and the implied inherent instability of the individual thwart this effort. His need for stability is evident in his suffocating dependence on his wife, Leni. Despite their ideological differences and their emotional estrangement, in losing her, he loses the fixed center around which his identity was formed: “When she left him, he fell apart. Pieces spilled into the Hinterhof, down the drains, away in the wind” (402). He tries to replace the stability he had grown dependent on in Leni by imposing a fixed understanding on another unfixable dynamic: the rocket. The narrator observes, “Temperatures, velocities, pressures, fin and body configurations, stabilities and turbulences began to slip in, to replace what Leni had run away from” (402). But as the years pass and the work on the rocket becomes more intense, Pökler’s devotion to the rocket threatens a different kind of identity loss:

he would become aware of a drifting-away . . . some assumption of Pökler into the calculations, drawings, graphs, and even what raw hardware there was . . . each time, soon as it happened, he would panic, and draw back into the redoubt of waking Pökler, heart pounding, hands and feet aching, his breath catching in a small voiced *hunh*— Something was out to get him, something here, among the paper. The fear of extinction named Pökler knew it was the Rocket, beckoning him in. If he also knew that in something like this extinction he could be free of his loneliness and his failure, still he wasn’t quite convinced. (405–06)<sup>8</sup>

Threatened by the dynamic rocket, Pökler, as Joseph Tabbi points out, creates a buffer in the artificial reality of his charts, graphs, and equations (77–78). In addition, he turns to his personal relations with his daughter, Ilse, and his superior, Weissmann, and solipsistically interprets them in such a way as to create a stable story environment and a clearly defined persona.

Ilse, like the rocket, offers Pökler a kind of salvation, rescue from his isolation through love, but she, too, threatens the loss of self. Having counted too heavily on Leni’s predictability and having nearly lost himself in losing her, Pökler protects himself by refusing to become dependent on Ilse. When she first comes to Peenemünde in 1938, he already suspects that he cannot bridge the gap between this girl and the baby he remembers: “He remembered her hair as lighter, shorter” (407). Each subsequent year he suspects that a different girl has been sent to him with his daughter’s name, and he claims his love makes these various daughters into a single daughter: “love something like the persistence of vision, for They have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child”

(422). But as the movie metaphor suggests, this is a self-indulgent pretend love; Pökler's belief that he is creating a pseudo-daughter protects him from any identity-threatening commitment of self. As he recognizes from the first, "The vacuum of his life threatened to be broken in one strong inrush of love. He tried to maintain it with seals of suspicion" (407). He extends this metaphor when he compares himself to Peenemünde's wind tunnel: "five minutes of growing void—then one terrific gasp: 20 seconds of supersonic flow . . . then the fall of the shutter, and the pumps starting up again . . . he has listened, and taken it to imply his own cycle of shuttered love, growing empty over the year for two weeks in August" (422). But the very comparison of himself to a machine suggests that Pökler has created a distant, abstract love that can temporarily affect but not significantly change him. By thus objectifying Ilse into a pseudo-daughter, Pökler brings some stability to his life and defines for himself the role of stoic, heroic victim.<sup>9</sup>

This role allows Pökler to imagine a fixed relation with Weissmann and, concomitantly, to create a cause-and-effect-based sequence of his life events with himself at the center of the plot. Even in the early rocket years, Pökler intuits that he has special significance for Weissmann. Later, he fixes his identity in his relation to Weissmann; his need for dependence leads him to accept willingly the role of victim to Weissmann's victimizer. His anger at his and Ilse's being used by Weissmann is one ingredient in his distancing of Ilse "to preserve him from love he couldn't really risk" (408). It allows him to see his relation to Weissmann as a game, the object of which is not clear but the stakes of which, for Pökler, are Ilse and perhaps Leni. This game becomes an interpretive paradigm for Pökler as he sees his and others' actions and words as moves and countermoves. His understanding of the world around him fixed by this paradigm, Pökler develops a more secure and stable persona: "Pökler grew into his new disguise—Prematurely Aged Adolescent Whiz—often finding that it could indeed take him over, keeping him longer at reference books and firing data, speaking lines for him he could never have planned in advance: gentle, scholarly, rocket-obsessed language that surprised him" (417). As the years go by and Pökler becomes more certain that "Weissmann was *saving* him for something: some unique destiny" (423), his sense of self becomes more solid. He begins anticipating the end of the game, the meaning-supplying eschaton for the story of himself that he has put in Weissmann's hands. He imagines that Weissmann "had responsibility for coming up with new game-variations, building toward a maximum cruelty in which Pökler would be unlaid to nerves vessels and tendons, every last convolution of brain flattened out in the radiance of the black



candles, nowhere to shelter, entirely his master's possession . . . the moment in which he is defined to himself at last" (424). But when this end comes, it is not with Pökler at the center of a target, armed rocket bearing down; instead, it is his doing a small job for the 00000 rocket: "this was to be his 'special destiny.' It made no sense to him" (431). Pökler's story has been so subjective, his story environment so solipsistic, that it fails to contain the meaning for his life he had hoped to discover.

Just as the past Pökler's attempts to define a stable story environment and a meaning-filled sequence of life events fail, so too does the evaluative discourse he employs to rationalize his rocket work and to reconcile the self he would like to be with the moral implications of his actions. His strategies are the same Dornberger, von Braun and Huzel use, and his failed use of these strategies implicitly critiques the source autobiographies. Like the others, he begins rationalizing his work on a terror weapon by arguing that the real goal is scientific, to reach the moon and stars. He tells Leni, "'We'll all use *it*, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend. [. . .] Someday [. . .] they won't have to kill. Borders won't mean anything. We'll have all outer space'" (400). Leni scorns him, but later the first Ilse accepts the same explanation and turns it into a fairy tale of living on the moon. Pökler's reluctance to destroy her fantasy with scientific reality reflects on the fantasy he has created for himself to obscure the murderousness of his work. He later admits this common self-deceit when he tells Weissmann that he is looking forward to working in the Mittelwerke: "'We've been so involved here with the research-and-development end. It's not a weapon for us so much as a 'flying laboratory'" (427). And at Nordhausen, where he works directly on production of the weapon, his earlier rationalization literally becomes a dream, "a dream of a gentle Zwölfkinder that was also Nordhausen, a city of elves producing toy moon-rockets" (431).

In a connected second strategy, Pökler attempts to distance himself and the rocket program from the events of the war and Nazi politics. In the early days, Pökler acquiesces in the Wehrmacht's subsidizing and eventually taking over of the Verein für Raumschiffahrt (Society for Space Navigation) because he imagines that the rocket club is "preserved against the time" (401). After Leni leaves him and he moves to the army rocket-testing field at Kummersdorf, he wonders "Was he giving up the world, entering a monastic order?" (402). Over the years, he is able to discount the bureaucratic power struggles for control of the rocket program because he sees the rocket itself as removed from it all, "growing toward a shape predestined and perhaps a little otherworldly" (416). Pökler realizes his own participation as a victim

and a victimizer in the Nazi system when he recognizes that Ilse has been kept not in a university-like “re-education” camp but in Dora, the concentration camp that supplies slave labor to the Mittelwerke: “Weissmann’s cruelty was no less resourceful than Pökler’s own engineering skill, the gift of Daedalus that allowed him to put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconveniences of caring” (428). When he at last accepts “some acceptable Ilse” (431), he attempts to bring down his labyrinth, trying unsuccessfully to get past the literal walls and fences of the Dora camp to her. But finally, with the U.S. Army approaching Nordhausen and a “graduation feeling” in the air, “[s]uddenly the cloistered life” and the interpretive strategy that supported it “was about to come to an end” (432). Pökler graduates by at last entering Dora.

This connects with Pökler’s third failed interpretive strategy, distancing himself from the use of slave labor. Pökler is aware that slave labor is used at Peenemünde and the Mittelwerke. Viewing the damage after the British bombing of Peenemünde, he admits that ““foreign workers”” is “a euphemism for civilian prisoners brought in from countries under German occupation” (423). And at Nordhausen, “he could see—the starved bodies, the eyes of the foreign prisoners being marched to work at four in the morning in the freezing cold and darkness, the shuffling thousands in their striped uniforms” (428). But this intellectual awareness makes no emotional impact on Pökler; the suffering exists in the background of his day-to-day activities, until he realizes that his acceptable Ilse is one of the prisoners. This recognition of his own complicity in the victimization of his daughter and thousands of others leads Pökler to abandon the intellectual distancing he had been practicing and to go into the Dora camp: “He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart” (432). In a symbolic marriage, he gives his wedding ring to “a random woman” (433) and so joins himself to the preterite, acknowledging, intellectually and emotionally, the slave laborers and his moral responsibility for them.<sup>10</sup>

In a fourth failed interpretive strategy, Pökler cannot even succeed in presenting himself as the hero of his own story. Although he imagines himself to be a lion, “asserting his reality” (578) against the world around him (like the characters his hero, Rudolf Klein-Rogge, played), Pökler actually reacts to others’ assertions of reality: Leni’s, Ilse’s and Weissmann’s. Symptomatic of his failure to take center stage in his own life story is that Pökler, unlike the other scientist-autobiographers, grows less important to the rocket program as the years go by. Despite being with the program almost from the start—with the VfR as an amateur, then with the Wehrmacht at Kummersdorf,

and later as a Peenemünde pioneer clearing the land for the initial test station on Greifswalder Oie—Pökler goes down the ladder of success. He moves from important propulsion work to materials procurement, and in the process moves further and further from the rocket, absorbed in bureaucracy. Pökler spends his rocket years not as the hero of his own story but as a supporting actor in others' stories.

Just as the past Pökler cannot make a meaning-supplying story out of the events of his life as he lives them, the Pökler of the novel's present, sitting in the ruins of Zwölfkinder, waiting for a last visit from Ilse, cannot make a coherent sequence of events in retrospect. One of the novel's cause-and-effect men (159), Pökler cannot believe in the illusion of causal sequence in his own life. He cannot overcome two problems basic to autobiography: fallible memory and second thoughts. Autobiographers usually cover the gaps in their memory with narrative bridges or rhetorical maskings, thus achieving another kind of persistence of vision, the illusion of a continuous story made out of the fragments of memory. Pökler, however, is so unsure of the shape and meaning of his own story that he can fill in the gaps only provisionally with his present knowledge: he "must have known" (401); "He must have picked her up" (407); "he could not [. . .] have been ignorant of the truth" (428). He realizes, concerning Ilse's lost years, "that no real chain of events could have been established for sure" (421), a realization that reflects on the impossibility of finding his own life story. Similarly, Pökler frequently wonders if he took the best course of action, if some other choice might not have worked out better; but, again, these second guesses are conditional. Even in retrospect, Pökler lacks a strong sense of the plot of his life, so he cannot be sure where he went wrong. During the 1938 Ilse's visit, he chooses not to confront Weissmann:

So, as usual, Pökler chose silence. Had he chosen something else, back while there was time, they all might have saved themselves. Even left the country. Now, too late, when at last he wanted to act, there was nothing to act on.

Well, to be honest, he didn't spend much time brooding about past neutralities. He wasn't that sure he'd outgrown them, anyway. (409)

Pökler's uncertainties and doubts break up possible connections between events and the interpretations that could be assigned to them; he cannot achieve the illusion of persistence of vision, even for himself.

Another failure in Pökler's autobiographical project results from his inability to assign familiar organizing plot elements to the events of his life. As Slothrop notices about Pökler, "here's some kind of fanatical

movie hound all right" (577). This fanaticism about movies influences Pökler's autobiographical impulse; the backward-looking Pökler frequently inserts into his memories of what had happened fantasies about alternatives that might have happened, fantasies based on expectations conditioned by movie plots.<sup>11</sup> Unable to be the hero of his story or to guide events to a happy ending in real life, he attempts to do so in his fantasies. Thinking back to when he learned Ilse and Leni had been separated, he imagines himself bringing down Weissmann:

Pökler laced up his shoes and calmly enough went out looking for the SS man, cornered him in his office, denounced him before a panel of kindly, dim governmental figures, the speech eloquently climaxing as he threw chessboard and pieces all into Weissmann's arrogantly blinking face. . . . Pökler's impetuous, yes, a rebel—but Generaldirektor it's his kind of fire and honesty we *need*— (417-18)

Similarly, remembering when the 1939 Ilse asked to sleep next to him, Pökler sees himself forcefully having sex with her, secretly leaving the country, and triumphantly beginning a new life with her: "the Captain called, 'Come on up, and take a look at your new home!' Gray and green, through the mist, it was Denmark. 'Yes, they're a free people here. Good luck to both of you!' The three of them, there on deck, stood hugging" (421). Pökler lapses into fantasies because the real events of his life will not resolve themselves into the narrative elements he is most familiar with; he can be a Rudolf Klein-Rogge in his imagination if not in his life.

The present Pökler is also confounded by a failing common to all autobiographies: by definition, such a life story cannot be finished. Unable to make sense of his own life story and disappointed in the 00000 as his "special destiny," Pökler is still waiting for the event that will be the eschaton for his life, that will turn the now seemingly random and chaotic events of his life into a coherent, totalized system. After he remembers his mistaken certainty that Weissmann had arranged for an armed rocket to land on him, Pökler thinks (or the narrator comments), "the Perfect Rocket is still up there, still descending. He still waits—even now, alone at Zwölfkinder waiting for 'Ilse,' for this summer's return, and with it an explosion that will take him by surprise" (426). Pökler's faith in outside authority has been exposed as false over and over, from his surprise that the police are the source of danger rather than protection from it at Leni's street demonstrations, to his realization that Ilse's "re-education" camp is Dora, to his disappointment that Weissmann's 00000 rocket is his destiny. Still, he waits for Ilse on the authority of a travel permit, and

waits for his eschaton on the faith that some outside authority has a plan for him. The failure of authority is analogous to Pökler's failure as an author of his own life, and comments obliquely on the autobiographical texts of the other V-2 scientists: that life events can be organized into a totalized and meaning-filled system must be recognized as a rhetorical illusion.<sup>12</sup>

Pökler's autobiographical efforts are further problematized by being presented within the larger narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Our reaction to Pökler's story is influenced by the narrator's placement of it and by the inclusion of information Pökler either has no access to or would rather not reveal. We see Pökler first through Leni's eyes, in a flashback to the day she left him; her characterization of him leaves us already critical of his complicity with death-dealing authority and his strategies for rationalizing it. In addition, the climax of Pökler's story, his seeming redemption through wedding himself to the preterite, is qualified by the later Pökler Slothrop meets, still lusting after his movie hero's power and dominance, still letting cinema fantasy substitute for the moral responsibility he had apparently accepted. Pökler cannot have complete control over his life story just as he cannot have complete control over his life.

Pynchon's narrator also lets us see what Pökler misses about his "unique destiny," his meaning-defining moment. Pökler dismisses Slothrop's inquiries about the 00000: "I was never that interested" (576). Yet the sacrifice of Gottfried in the 00000 becomes the overall narrative's climactic moment, manifesting the cycle of destruction and self-destruction in the name of transcendence that characterizes Western society's impulse to control. Pökler has missed the potential this rocket has to define for him the supporting role he has played in this cycle. And in a metafictional context, as the 00000 is transformed at the narrative's end into a nuclear-tipped ICBM zeroing in on the reader, ready to destroy the world, the text passes its ultimate judgment on the V-2 scientists and their autobiographies: their rationalizations, like Pökler's, are unmasked in the presence of the enterprise of control and death they have supported.

The Pökler chapter, then, epitomizes several ideas and methods evident throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. First, it challenges the romantic notion of the individuated self and the concomitant notion of the self's meaning being derived from its life story. Second, it problematizes traditional theories of how narratives function as meaning-conveying vehicles. Finally, and most important, it indicates another possibility for how narratives can mean. We see here how the narrator uses his sources, gleaned information from them but also adopting their discourses and with them their ideological and moral stances. By

placing these discourses in the new context of the many other discourses that make up *Gravity's Rainbow*, the narrator critiques their implied worldviews. Pökler's failed story helps us see that *Gravity's Rainbow* is filled with voices constantly in dialogue with one another and with the absorbed voices of its many sources.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Qazi cites Dornberger and Huzel as possible sources. Weisenburger's comprehensive study cites Dornberger, Huzel, von Braun and Ordway, and Klee and Merk (GRC 317-28). Weisenburger also analyzes Pynchon's use of Dornberger as a source (EH 56-63).

<sup>2</sup>See Pascal (1-20) on the subject's standpoint as "a condition of autobiography" (10). For Pascal, autobiographies are always the story of the creation of the narrating self: "they tell of the realisation of an urgent personal potentiality" (112).

<sup>3</sup>Hunt reports that Walter Dornberger, military commander of the V-2 project, "blithely mentioned" under interrogation that over 10,000 political prisoners and POWs were interned and used as laborers at Peenemünde (29). For documented evidence of the use of slave laborers at the Mittelwerke, see Garliński (103-09), Bower (109-14), Simpson (28-30) and Hunt (17-19, 64-77).

<sup>4</sup>Hunt points out that some interrogators believed the Germans had collaboratively prepared answers about the use of prisoners at the Mittelwerke: "Many of their answers were so alike that it was almost as though they had agreed on them beforehand. They claimed that the slave laborers' living, sanitary, and working conditions were the same as theirs. . . . All of them said they had seen only two hangings. And if prisoners were hurt, beaten for instance, the SS or prisoner capos were at fault. According to them, German engineers had nothing to do with punishing prisoners" (68).

<sup>5</sup>Von Braun's is not an autobiography in the usual sense. Written in collaboration with Frederick I. Ordway, III, a NASA public relations specialist, it is a history of rocketry from the thirteenth century to the 1960s. The V-2 project is covered in part of one chapter, and von Braun confuses the autobiographical nature of that material by referring to himself in the third person. Still, that approach serves the strategies of denial, distancing, and self-valorization in the presentation of von Braun's life events.

<sup>6</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the V-2 scientists' autobiographies, especially Dornberger's and von Braun's, see McLaughlin.

<sup>7</sup>See Chatman's discussions of these terms.

<sup>8</sup>Balitas (41) and Henkle both argue that characters, like Pökler, who lack a sense of self-definition and humanness are drawn to the rocket. As Henkle

says, "Technology becomes the Great Substitution for what is missing on the human level" (277).

<sup>9</sup>It is possible, of course, that Pökler is right, that he is presented with a different daughter each year. Nevertheless, Pökler's suspicions illustrate his valorization of the individuated self: the easiest way for him to disqualify Ilse from his love is to deny her individuality. Tabbi argues that much of Pökler's existential confusion arises from this privileging of the individual experience over the relatedness of human experience.

<sup>10</sup>Slade (196), Moore (96-97) and Hume (181) all note this symbolic marriage, but as we shall see and as Weisenburger points out (EH 60-61), the acceptance of responsibility here is qualified by the Pökler Slothrop meets later.

<sup>11</sup>Many critics have studied the complex nexus of film allusions and imagery in *Gravity's Rainbow* and have shown how characters' expectations derived from moviegoing experiences shape or even substitute for experience of the real. The blurred line between the cinematic and the real is evident in Pökler's memory of fathering Ilse after being aroused by the torture-rape scene in *Alpdrücken* (397). See Cowart (CA, and TP 31-62), Simmon, Márquez, Smith, Grace, Clerc and Marriott.

<sup>12</sup>Schaub points out that Leni leaves Pökler because of his faith in a personal destiny and his resultant "passive submission to what is given" (64). See also Hite's analysis of the novel's critique of totalizing systems (95-157).

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