Charismatic Figures in Gravity's Rainbow

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Gravity's Rainbow is a novel containing as many threads and knots as a finely made Isfahan carpet, but unlike those in such a carpet, many of the novel's threads appear to be untied, beginning and ending (as they seem to do) in themselves. However, the thread I hope to unravel in the following pages--the relationship between Max Weber's theory of charisma and Pynchon's most recent novel--is quite central to an understanding of one element of Gravity's Rainbow.

Because Weber's theories are rather specialized and complex, my approach to his influence on Pynchon will be divided into two sections. The first section will consider Weber's treatment of charisma, charismatic authority, charismatic figures, and the routinization of charisma.[1] In the second section, Pynchon's use of these theories will be inspected.[2] It should be remembered that my approach to Weberian elements in Gravity's Rainbow is restricted to Weber's work on charisma. This limitation, of course, excludes his valuable studies of religion and of capitalism. Also, just because aspects of Weber's brand of sociology can, more or less, be found in Pynchon's novel does not mean that Pynchon structured his novel around Weber's theories. Indeed, it is apparent that he doubts their validity.

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I

As a founder of modern sociology, Max Weber's position is secure. However, although his work on law, religion, and the rise of capitalism has become an intellectual touchstone, to many he is best known for his analysis of charisma. In many cases, moreover, his name is not even associated with that very "in" word of the 1960's. Weber's definition of charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (I, 241) certainly has been perverted by application to media-manufactured rock stars, movie stars, and athletes. On the other hand, its application to people such as John Kennedy and Malcolm X, both mentioned in Gravity's Rainbow, is warranted, since these two men were considered extraordinary by large groups of followers, and exercised authority as a result of their dedication.

In his introduction to Weber's Economy and Society, Guenther Roth states that the foundation of Weber's work is the "Sociology of Domination," and that "Domination exists insofar as there is obedience to a mixture of habit, expediency and belief in legitimacy" (I, lxxxiv). Commands, and obedience to those commands, presuppose some form of authority, and Weber defines "three pure types of legitimate domination" and sees the basis of the "validity of their claims as"

1. Rational grounds--resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority);
2. Traditional grounds--resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or, finally,
3. Charismatic grounds--resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).

(I, 215)

Pynchon's novel reveals his interest in Weber in its depiction of the specifically revolutionary nature of charismatic authority; it shows how this force is "routinized" and thereby absorbed into both rational and traditional authority.

Charisma is a "gift of Grace," and the person or object[3] endowed with the gift cannot refuse it--the relationship between charisma and the Puritan idea of grace, a doctrine important to Gravity's Rainbow, is significant. However, according to Weber, "if those to whom he [the charismatic figure] feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses; if they recognize it, he is their master as long as he 'proves' himself. However, he does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; it is their duty to recognize his charisma" (III, 1112-13). A charismatic person must be recognized as charismatic by others; his charisma does not depend wholly on this recognition, even though his authority does. Because he must "prove" himself, he has tasks to perform. As Weber observes, "The mere fact of recognizing the personal mission of a charismatic master establishes his power . . . his recognition derives from the surrender of the faithful to the extraordinary and unheard-of, to what is alien to all regulation and tradition and therefore is viewed as divine--surrender which arises from distress or enthusiasm."

Two new elements, "distress or enthusiasm," enter Weber's complex analysis of charisma. He suggests that charisma "may effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm" (1, 245). S. N. Eisenstadt, while admitting that this aspect of Weber's theory is still a source of academic debate, writes: "it may seem that it is mainly the disturbed, the disoriented, the alienated that tend to respond to such [charismatic] appeals--and they necessarily will become most prominent in extreme situations of social change and disturbances. It is in situations of stress or, to use Durkheim's term, of anomie, that more and more people tend to feel helpless, alienated, disoriented and feel that the society in which they live is meaningless and normless. . . ."[4] In Gravity's Rainbow, the war, an obviously stressful situation, creates a society or

mini-societies in which disorientation is the norm. Those fictional characters who exhibit charismatic qualities--Enzian, Blicero, and even the rocket--become the leaders of emerging groups of alienated followers. Enzian's group is revolutionary in that its mission is, if not to destroy, then at least to warn traditional and legitimate authority. Blicero's group, which at times includes Enzian, Katje and Gottfried, as well as the homosexuals who form a mock concentration camp under his banner, is also revolutionary insofar as its "ideology" is a form of decadent Romanticism and its mission to create a new power structure is based on physical and emotional bondage such as that which a charismatic leader can impose on his followers. The Rocket, as we shall see, becomes the leader of an ever-growing group, including Blicero and Enzian, committed to achieving non-being. However, it is not only the fictional characters, or rather those at the center of power structures, whose charisma is legitimized by the war. Several of the historical personages mentioned in the novel achieved power because they emerged and were recognized in a time of "anomie." For example, Hitler rose from the ashes of the Weimar Republic; Stalin after the Revolution; Roosevelt during the Depression; John Kennedy after the reactionary 1950's; and Malcolm X during the struggle for Civil Rights.

There remain only three interdependent aspects of charisma crucial to this study: its eventual routinization, its anti-economic tendency, and its concern with successorship. According to Weber, it is because charisma "is a typical anti-economic force,"[5] as well as a politically and socially unstable quality (in its pure form), that it tends toward routinization. It is peculiar to charisma that it contains within itself, or within the nature of its authority, the germ of its own transformation. This aspect alone makes it of special interest to Pynchon; in Gravity's Rainbow, as many commentators have shown, almost every occurrence contains its own opposite or opposites: meanings proliferate not only because paranoia creates them, but also because they, in turn, create paranoia. It is not so much that either/or situations exist in the novel, but rather that an and/and relationship both is, and is projected. The nature of charisma, like that

of paranoia in the novel, is that it begins and ends in its own beginnings. As Weber writes, "Charisma is a phenomenon typical of prophetic movements or of expansive political movements in their early stages. But as soon as domination is well established, and above all, as soon as control over large masses of people exists, it gives way to the forces of everyday routine" (I, 252). This process of routinization involves (1) the alteration or transformation of its originally anti-economic tendencies, and (2) an attempt to deal with the problem of succession to authority. These are not separate functions of routinization, but rather an on-going process of organic transformation.

The basis for Weber's conclusions that "pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations" is his belief that charisma "constitutes a 'call' . . . a 'mission' or a 'spiritual duty'" (I, 244). The charismatic leader has a task to perform, and that task must involve his followers. However, as Weber saw, once a leader has authority over a large group, certain routines, rules and regulations are necessary. For example, the original basis for recruitment of followers is the leader's own charisma, but "with routinization, the followers or disciples may set up norms for recruitment, in particular involving training or tests for eligibility" (I, 249). Whereas in its early stages, the group is small enough for self-maintenance and can ignore ordinary economic concerns, as it grows larger, it must find a means of financial support. What was once, again in its pure form, a non-materialistic and anti-economic force is reversed, and one of the keys to this change is the problem of succession.

Just as the need for rules and regulations involves a process of routinization, so too does the search for a successor to the original charismatic ruler. The method of selection"takes the form of the appropriation of powers and of economic advantages by the followers or disciples" (I, 249). Weber defines several methods of determining successorship, including strict criteria and succession by divine or other revelation, but for our purpose only two methods are important: "Designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor and his recognition on the

part of the followers" (I, 247), and the transfer of charisma by "ritual means" including the "laying on of hands" (I, 248-49). Both methods establish routinization insofar as there is an orderly, ritualistic process during which "the charismatically ruled organization" is "largely transformed into one of the everyday authorities . . . especially in its estate type or bureaucratic variant" (I,251).

Apparently, the transformation of charismatic authority into bureaucratic authority is part of its essential nature. Again, Weber: "Every charisma is on the road from a turbulently emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death by suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to this end" (III, 1120). Charisma is absorbed into the bureaucracy by a rationally controlled transformation. As Weber notes, "When the tide that lifted a charismatically led group out of everyday routines [wanes], at least the 'pure' form of charismatic domination will wane and turn into an 'institution'; it is then either mechanized, as it were, or imperceptibly displaced by other structures, or fused with them in the most diverse forms, so that it becomes a mere component of a concrete historical structure" (III, 1121). What was once a highly personal movement is depersonalized into that most rational form of authority, the bureaucratic, and ultimately becomes, like a bureaucracy, impersonal. Therefore, and Weber is quite clear on this point, "It is the fate of Charisma to recede before the powers of tradition or of rational association after it has entered the permanent structures of social action. This waning of charisma generally indicates the diminishing importance of individual action" (III, 1148-49).

I have briefly examined and summarized Weber's theory of charisma because it furnishes Pynchon with an influential sociological concept that defines a process which can be seen as a method of rational control over the individual. If even the charismatic figure must yield to the economic and technological forces that keep the bureaucratic machine oiled and operating, then what chance has the average individual? Essentially, the routinization of charisma is an

entropic social process. Moreover, the duality in Weber's system--support for a strong state bureaucracy on the one hand, and on the other, a pessimistic appraisal of the future of individual action in what Weber calls the "iron cage"[6]--becomes in Pynchon's novel a conspiracy by power structures ("They") to transform human beings into robots whose only function is to serve the bureaucratic machine. Weber's vision of the future as an "iron cage" is subtly evoked by Pynchon's rocket state and by Gottfried's "wedding" with/within the frame of the rocket. Moreover, there can be little doubt that Pynchon sees this movement to pure rationality as a major threat to individual action. He would probably agree with Julien Freund's position that "the rationality of the West has taken the form of a progressive intellectualization of life; it has tended to strip the world of charm and of poetry; intellectualization means disenchantment. In a word, the world becomes increasingly the artificial product of man, who governs it much as one controls a machine. Hence we need not be surprised at the formidable ascendency of technology with its corollary, specialization, as a result of the evergrowing division and subdivision of functions."[7]

II

In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon creates a society dehumanized by rational economic authority and by a technology that increasingly tries to make man its servant. This projection is only one aspect of this epic novel, but in seeing history and the war as a confrontation between economic forces (GR, 521), Pynchon presents his vision of a society dominated by markets, exchanges, and machines rather than by humanistic ideals. In such a world, methods of control are imperative, and if one of these controls, rationalization, comes from intellectuals themselves, all the better.

Early in the novel, the narrator, or one of the narrators, comments on a future society envisioned by some of the functionaries at "The White Visitation," a center for agents of various competing power groups:

> There must arise, and damned soon, able to draw them into a phalanx, a concentrated point

> of light, some leader or program powerful enough to last them across who knows how many years of Postwar. Dr. Rózsavölgyi tends to favor a powerful program over a powerful leader. Maybe because this is 1945. It was widely believed in those days that behind the War--all the death, savagery, and destruction--lay the Führer-principle. But if personalities could be replaced by abstractions of power, if techniques developed by the corporations could be brought to bear, might not nations live rationally? One of the dearest Postwar hopes: that there should be no room for a terrible disease like charisma . . . that its rationalization should proceed while we had the time and resources. . . . (GR, 80-81)

To rationalize charisma, then, is one goal of some of those at "The White Visitation," but a question central to this study lurks in the above statement: the immediacy of the need to rationalize charisma assumes the existence of charisma and/or a charismatic figure, but where and in whom does this "terrible disease" reside? This question seems to be answered at once: "Isn't that what's really at stake for Dr. Rózsavölgyi here in this latest scheme, centered on the figure of Lieutenant Slothrop?" (GR, 81). I am not suggesting that Slothrop is a charismatic figure, but only that Rózsavölgyi and his colleagues use him in an attempt to rationalize an existing charismatic figure and group.[8] Ostensibly, Slothrop's mission is to find the rocket, but his real objective, unknown to him, is to find Enzian and the Schwarzkommando. The rocket, also charismatic but not as yet fully recognized as such, will be a bonus, an additional weapon for "Their" power structure.

That Enzian is a charismatic figure is well established in the novel.[9] His life in Africa and his survival of the early German genocidal campaign against the Hereros (heroes, her eros, here o's, he rose) have been mythologized by his followers, even though the reader, seeing Enzian's story from several perspectives, knows there was nothing supernatural about either. Nevertheless, he does function in the novel as a type of charismatic leader, a master who

feels his power gradually diminishing:

> Enzian knows that he is being used for his name. The name has some magic. But he has been so unable to touch, so neutral for so long . . . everything has flowed away but the name, Enzian, a sound for chanting. He hopes it will be magic enough for one thing, one good thing when the time comes, however short of the Center. . . . What are these persistences among a people, these traditions and offices, but traps? (GR, 321)

What we see in Enzian, even in his use of Weber's tide metaphor (III, 1121), is the breakdown of charismatic authority, the last step before routinization. Even within Enzian's group, ominous signs announce the end of his authority: rival factions struggle for dominance, ideologies clash, and the recognition of Enzian as master weakens. One of the "Empty Ones," a sect of Hereros committed to tribal suicide, sees this process at work. Ombindi asks Enzian if "what's happened, since your first days in Europe, could be described, in Max Weber's phrase, almost as a 'routinization of charisma'" (GR, 325). Enzian denies the validity of the characterization, but Ombindi is quite correct. Enzian and his followers are slowly becoming a Zone. They are forming a society, a state, defined and limited by rational rules and regulations, by economic tendencies, and by the problem of successorship.

It is Enzian's search for the rocket and the process of assembling its iconography that hasten routinization. Enzian's growing number of followers is scattered throughout the Zone(s) and, therefore, communication codes are developed, followers are divided and subdivided according to specialized functions, new resources are needed to support new and complicated activities, and a clear chain of command is established. Enzian realizes the necessity of routines, and although he would prefer to gather his people together with a speech in Martin Luther King's style--"My people, I have had a vision" (GR, 525)--he knows the time for that has passed: "no no but there will need to be more staff, if it's to be that big a

search, quiet shifting of resources away from the Rocket, diversifying while making it look like an organic growth . . ." (GR, 525). The voice of the prophet is becoming that of the businessman.

The problem of succession is similar for both prophet and capitalist. Each must find someone capable of future leadership. Enzian wonders if one of his disciples, Christian, is qualified: "can he use the boy now, Christian's anger . . ." (GR, 525). Enzian does select Christian as his successor, but first the boy must be trained for his role. At one point, the ephebe openly challenges his leader:

> "Don't sweet-talk me," Christian explodes, "you don't care about me, you don't care about my sister, she's dying out there and you just keep plugging her into your equations--you--play this holy-father routine and inside that ego you don't even hate us, you don't care, you're not even connected any more--" (GR, 525)

When Christian strikes his leader, Enzian's reaction to this reverse laying on of hands confirms his selection of Christian: "'You just connected. Can we go after her, now?'" (GR, 525).

Christian's training is conducted mainly in conversations with his leader: "Enzian and the younger man somehow have drifted into these long walks. Nothing deliberate on either side. Is this how successions occur? Each man is suspicious. But there are no more of the old uncomfortable silences. No competing" (GR, 728). Christian is to preserve Enzian's rule and mission by accepting it as his own and by having his authority recognized and, therefore, legitimized by his followers. The young man even begins to interpret and clarify Enzian's parables and commands. For example, when Enzian tells Katje about a sonic-death mirror developed by the Germans, it is Christian who explains what Enzian specifically means. A narrator notes that Christian's act of interpretation "saves trouble later" by getting "the Texts straight soon as they're spoken" (GR, 729). Enzian's rule is almost over, but Christian, when he assumes leadership, will not be a charismatic figure. Routinization will be almost complete.

While it is relatively easy to sketch Enzian's charismatic qualities--extraordinary powers, recognition by mythmaking disciples, a mission, original anti-economic and anti-bureaucratic tendencies, and the initial stages of routinization--it is more difficult to define Blicero's charisma. In fact, it seems somehow perverse to even see him as a charismatic figure; yet he is depicted as an extraordinary, almost mythic character endowed with great power and insight. His rank as an officer in the dreaded SS, as well as his position as leader of a V-2 battery, legitimizes, at least within a certain sphere, his political and military authority. While not representing absolute evil, his authority is based, with three exceptions, on fear. The three exceptions, Enzian, Katje and Gottfried, recognize his authority out of both love and fear, i.e., because of a complex emotional commitment. They surrender to his power because he fulfills a quite basic need they share. This need, perhaps a metaphorical love of the whip, is in Pynchon's view an aspect of human nature. Therefore, although Blicero's charisma is not the pure type defined by Weber, it is a source of power and domination. It is, after all, his charisma that prevents Katje from destroying him and his rocket battery, that convinces Gottfried to "wed" the rocket, and that keeps Enzian long in awe of him. Enzian, in a conversation with Ombindi, describes Blicero's charisma:

> "Did you ever, in the street, see a man that you knew, in the instant, must be Jesus Christ--not hoped he was, or caught some resemblance--but knew. The Deliverer, returned and walking among the people, just the way the old stories promised . . . as you approached you grew more and more certain--you could see nothing at all to contradict that first amazement . . . you drew near and passed, terrified that he would speak to you . . . your eyes grappled . . . it was confirmed. And most terrible of all, he knew. He saw into your soul: all your make-believe ceased to matter. . . ." (GR, 325)

Blicero is indeed an unusual character. He possesses and dominates his kingdom. We do not have to accept his sado-masochistic bisexuality or his blackmail of Pökler to understand his disillusionment

with his world, or his desire to transcend a reality increasingly alien to his Romantic sensibilities. His elegy for Neo-Romantic humanism (GR, 722-24) allows us to sympathize with his sense of the loss of innocence and wholeness while recognizing that his megalomania has produced a brutal parody of the charismatic leader. Essentially, Blicero's appeal to us is emotional, and we are repulsed by his rationalism, best exemplified in his use of slave labor.

Enzian is a complicated other side of Blicero, not just an alter ego. Their missions are similar, in that both are symbolic gestures made in resistance to forms of traditional and bureaucratic authority, but for different reasons. Enzian wants not only to reveal to his disciples the weaknesses of their white suppressors, but also to find his own "Center," his own identity, in the rocket. Blicero is not so much bent on the destruction of an existing order as he is concerned to somehow define and legitimize his own decadent Romantic belief in his ability to transcend the unreality of his own perspective. Enzian and Blicero, then, both double and oppose each other's charismatic authority, and this duality is at work throughout the novel.

In yet another sense, the rocket is the primary charismatic metaphor and character of Gravity's Rainbow. Enzian understands the seemingly infinite symbolic possibilities of the rocket:

> But the Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it--in combat, in tunnel, on paper--it must survive heresies shining, unconfoundable . . . and heretics there will be: Gnostics who have been taken in a rush of wind and fire to chambers of the Rocket-throne . . . Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter--rivets, burner cup and brass rose, its text is theirs to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding . . . Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a

> good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle. (GR, 727)

The rocket, then, is the new pure charismatic authority; destined to be routinized, it is first recognized by its followers. In fact, the charisma has flowed from Enzian and Blicero to the various subjective interpretations of its mission. All the characters in the novel, including most of the historical figures mentioned, are in different ways connected to the rocket and subject to its growing authority. Many of them actually view the rocket as a living power, an attitude reflected in Miklos Thanatz's comments to Slothrop:

> "I think of the A4," sez he, "as a baby Jesus, with endless committees of Herods out to destroy it in infancy--Prussians, some of whom in their innermost hearts still felt artillery to be a dangerous innovation. If you'd been out there . . . inside the first minute, you saw, you grew docile under its . . . it really did possess a Max Weber charisma . . . some joyful --and deeply irrational--force the State bureaucracy could never routinize, against which it could not prevail . . . they did resist it, but they also allowed it to happen. We can't imagine anyone choosing a role like that. But every year, somehow, their numbers grow." (GR, 464)

The rocket does possess "a Max Weber charisma," and in the disorientation caused by the war, many answer its call, surrender to its commands (different for each disciple), and legitimize its authority.

In Gravity's Rainbow, then, we see Weber's theory of charisma carried to what might be an extreme. The new charismatic figure is an inanimate product of advancing technology, and it operates in the novel both as a symbol of man's increasing commitment to, indeed love affair with, death-giving objects, and as an apocalyptic power structure. The rocket-state is an ironic comment on a world in which people, driven by their own fascination with non-being and by unknown powers, are drawn to inanimateness. The anthropo-

morphized rocket is accepted as the legitimate leader of a new society whose mission is to transcend subjective experience and to achieve objecthood. The death of the self as perceiving subject is the ultimate goal of this new power structure. Moreover, this search for an ideal state of non-being is part of the cosmic push to entropy, and there seems no escape.

Pynchon does not call for a return to a pre-technological Eden or to a primitive irrationalism simply because he sees the impossibility of such a retreat. Whereas in Weber's sociology the charismatic figure is welcomed because he acts in opposition to impersonality, in Gravity's Rainbow man's drive to non-being is the motive for the ascribing of charisma. The characters who best understand this process, Enzian and Byron the Bulb, are powerless to resist. They know that charismatic leaders, as well as all "Counterforces," although initially capable of reorienting social action, eventually must submit to existing power structures or form new ones just as destructive. As Byron knows, "Prophets traditionally don't last long--they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it . . ." (GR, 655). However, in Pynchon's vision, this recognition might very well be all man can do to retard ever so slightly the process. If so, it is a moot point within the novel, since Gravity's Rainbow concludes with the tip of a rocket (no doubt a nuclear missile) poised above this movie theatre we call reality, and a Preterite song offered as a magical chant against Election. The Rocket, like Weber's "iron cage," pauses before bestowing its own special gift of grace.

Notes

[1] I have used the three-volume edition of Max Weber's Economy and Society, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: The Bedminster Press, 1968).

All citations from these volumes are included in parentheses in the text.

[2] All citations from Gravity's Rainbow will be from the 1973 Viking edition, and are included in the text in parentheses.

[3] Weber, in his examination of religion, extends his definition of charisma to include objects (Cf., II, 399). Obviously, the V-2 can be a charismatic object (as we shall see).

[4] Max Weber, On Charisma and Institution Building, ed., S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), xxiii.

[5] Ibid., 53.

[6] Arthur Mitzman, The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), v.

[7] The Sociology of Max Weber, trans. Mary Ilford (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 143-44.

[8] Slothrop might well be a comic version of the charismatic figure. He has a mission, is followed by assorted agents who consider him not only unique but also a threat, and is recognized, particularly in his Rocketman and pig-hero versions, as an extremely gifted person capable of almost magical feats. Moreover, his eventual fragmentation, his "getting off the wheel" (to borrow a notion from Byron the Bulb), might be the best example of routinization in the novel. Slothrop loses his personality and becomes, perhaps, one of Them: like Blicero, Slothrop's disappearing act could be his "crossing over" into impersonality--even, perhaps, the impersonality of myth.

[9] Obviously, Enzian, though he does found his "church" not on a rock, but on a rock-et, is not just a charismatic figure. Indeed, if we look closely at the nature of the Enzian-Christian conflict and its central problem of successorship, we can see a ritualistic reenactment of the death of the gods and myths, whose appeal was emotional until "explained" by commentators like Robert Graves. It is almost as if Pynchon is saying that the old explanations and

stories are more vital, even as fabrications, than the new ones. That Enzian falls increasingly under the spell of the Rocket, as it moves from being a symbol to becoming part of a defined power structure, is sharply ironic, even tragic.