

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW AND THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD

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But this light must change us to children.
--"The Aqyn's Song"

In skillfully distorting the closing days of the Second World War to make them adumbrate our own closing days, Pynchon chose to include civilian victims in his representation, and thereby set himself a problem that bears a certain resemblance to one discussed in the summer of 1941 by SS-Sturmbannführer Eichmann, representative of Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, and SS-Sturmbannführer Höss, Kommandant von Auschwitz, when they met to set in motion history's greatest mass extermination: What to do about the children? They worried that killing them, like killing the women, would be a load (Belastung) too heavy for even the SS men to support, "rock hard" as they were in their determination to rise to the necessity of carrying through this cruelly severe mission of Massen-Vernichtung. Such psychological impressions (psychische Eindrücke) were, Höss felt, ineradicable (unauslöslliche).¹ The solution they hit upon was to minimize visibility and proximity, and thereby the psychological impression, by having the victims introduced into a closed room by other victims, and having an SS man drop poison gas in through an opening in the roof. The SS man was then in the elevated and impersonal position of a bombardier. For the moment anyway, his victims were as invisible as those in a city from 10,000 feet, and their destruction as abstractly part of the war effort.

The mantle of invisibility can be cast as well by the novelist-historian as he calls his readers to experience the work of SS man or bombardier. He can simply leave the more pitiable victims out, escaping in that way the danger of sentimentality or other literary Belastung. Höss left out many things in his Auschwitz narrative, but not the children. Given his literary inexperience and his presumable eagerness to impress the reader with his humanity, writing as he was from a condemned cell, this is understandable. But sure enough, the effect is maudlin as he describes, for instance, how things went wrong on one occasion and he had personally to deal with two children who refused to stop their play and enter the room with the others.² Worse still, he could not build and maintain enough ovens to keep up with the incoming torrent of victims. While he complained to the Reichsführer SS, Himmler was inspiredly taking over Peenemünde, the birthplace of the ICBM. Here would be, given time, the ultimate solution to the problem of mass extermination at a psychological distance. Even at 10,000 feet, bombardiers could be subject to psychological strain: Pynchon's Angel of Lübeck serves as a dramatic demonstration.³ Nevertheless, there was progress: as

executioners could be refined into bombardiers, bombardiers could be refined into rocketmen, and much more protective space added. The killing could be carried on a continent away. V-2's don't need pilots, and are not built to carry passengers--until Gravity's Rainbow (GR). If the children were to be "put in" the book/oven, there was little literary precedent to draw on: Pynchon was pioneering not only in creating something as unclassifiable as a "rocket novel."⁴

From the historical victims themselves there is testimony, some of it evocative. This is from a London mother about the Blitz:

"You'd hear the bomb drop so many hundred yards that way. . . . you'd think, 'My God, the next one's going to be a direct hit. But you'd continue to read: 'And the ugly sister said'--and you'd say, 'Don't fidget, dear.' And you'd think, 'My God, I can't stand it.'"⁵

Demonstrated here are two elements an American novelist, a child himself during the war, would assign thirty years later to such experience: the fairy tale used as a kind of charm that both protects and denies, and the peculiar horror of physical annihilation arriving as if gratuitously and from nowhere. Better than any bomb for that, of course, is the rocket--the 3000 mph V-2 arriving before its sound, carrying a ton of high explosives. It comes from outside the earth's atmosphere--it has been in outer space, and carries in its design the promise of space travel for mankind. A pretty combination: as Jean Michel put it in his moving book about the Dora camp, the range is "de l'enfer aux etoiles" (from hell to the stars).⁶

Pynchon's first step was to turn the lens of fantasy onto history. His American hero, Lt. Slothrop, is obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name on it, while the V-2 strikes follow him throughout London, falling where he has last lain with a woman. His counterpart on the German side, the teenage soldier Gottfried, is employed in an opposing fashion, equally fantastic-sexual: he is dressed as a rocket-bride and launched in a V-2 to realize his officer-lover's concept of Liebestod. Superficially trifling, a mockery of history, these events are linked through childhood to lie at the center of an encyclopedic narrative aspiring to encompass the world. This is childishness of a different kind, sometimes displayed by gods:

"That bad Krishna went and ate mud!"
 "Is that true, Krishna?"
 "It's a lie, Mother. Look at my mouth."
 "Open it."

And when the little boy opened his mouth his mother saw the whole world inside of it.⁷

The magic of immanence is put differently in GR, involving the child more with the dead than with gods. Its most common effect is thought transference:

there's that smell again, a smell from before his conscious memory begins, a soft and chemical smell [. . .]. Once something was done to him, in a room, while he lay helpless. [. . .] A smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom edge of his memory. He can't see it, can't make it out. Doesn't want to. It is allied with the Worst Thing.⁸

So gropes Slothrop's conscious mind toward the secret of his earliest childhood, the experiment performed on him, about which he has never been told. He will discover that smell is Imipolex:

The soft smell of Imipolex, wrapping him absolutely, is a smell he knows. It doesn't frighten him. It was in the room when he fell asleep so long ago, so deep in sweet paralyzed childhood . . . (754)

This is not Slothrop, but Gottfried--or Slothrop's mind impinging upon Gottfried's, as if in culmination of the hopeless search Slothrop has undertaken for the rocket in which Gottfried was sent to his death wrapped in Imipolex, the plastic film to whose molecular structure Slothrop's limbic system has been attuned. Twin victims of imaginings of sex and power, they are two Hånsels shoved into the oven of incandescent technology, each unaware of the fate of the other. "Do children meet again?" asks Roger Mexico's song. "They took us at the gates of green return, / Too lost by then to stop, and ask them why" (627). As Pointsman, master technician of the mind, seeks out child subjects for his experiments, characters lost in the Zone unconsciously ape his actions: Pöckler searches for his daughter, Ilse; Slothrop hunts for the secret of his childhood, which involves him with Gottfried, his somehow double, and with Bianca, his child bride. Victimization is corrosive of personal identity; Thanatz muses:

He lost Gottfried, he lost Bianca, and he is only beginning, this late into it, to see that they are the same loss, to the same winner. [. . .] Doesn't know which child he lost first [. . .] even if they aren't two names, different names, for the same child. (671)

As it dawns upon Slothrop that his search is a trap, part of a larger scheme in which he is a(n expendable) pawn, he attempts to disappear. Offers of assistance come from the child world. Katje, who plays Gretel, suggests she and Slothrop are united under the sign of the rocket's flight, "as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children" (209). In parallel fashion, the doomed Bianca tells him, "I'm a child, I know how to hide. I can hide you too!" (470). Slothrop's most successful disguise in

his flight is a pig suit, part of a children's festival. Sleeping in it, under trees made Christmassy by fallen aluminum chaff, he seems "a gaudy present waiting for morning and a child to claim him" (575).

Equally innocent is the following image:

For a moment, ten thousand stiffs humped under the snow in the Ardennes take on the sunny Disneyfied look of numbered babies under white wool blankets, waiting to be sent to blessed parents in places like Newton Upper Falls. It only lasts a moment. (70)

Such moments of kinship between the dead and the children are not only metaphorical: the dead appear in dreams, speak through mediums, and hover above the action, as if in conjunction with the dramatic signs in the sky, starting with the great Angel rising above Lübeck as the city is bombed into ashes.

Here Pynchon found the work of a poet that could serve him, a poet remarkable for taking a transcendent view of the child and concurrently of the dead: Rilke.⁹ Indeed, GR is uncannily like what would come of an effort to write a novel of the Duino Elegies, of saying, "I am going to take the concepts of the Angels, of the City of Pain, of the necessity of Death seen in unity with Life, and translate them from poetic metaphor into dramatic action." Such a novel would need to incorporate the statistically disfavored occurrence and to dramatically present powerful illuminations of the world as child's world. Slothrop's journey in his pig suit, for example, could stem from the following abstract representation:

Yet, when alone, we entertained ourselves / with
everlastingness: there we would stand, / within the
gap left between world and toy. . . .¹⁰

Such a gap or privileged space (Zwischenraum), from which one (here the child) can see out of normal space, out of this world into another (here the everlasting), is in GR an "interface," meeting point or border zone, that can suddenly, and dangerously, offer passage.

One of these is the Trip to the Moon, throughout history both an adult dream and a childish fantasy, made real in 1969. Thereby the moon has been both world, pale companion to Earth, and toy, brilliant bauble in the bedtime sky, a magic kingdom to fly off to--and neither: a world with no life, a toy no child could hold, thus Zwischenraum. Two of the doomed children of GR, Ilse and Gottfried, show the way. Ilse sees the V-2 at Peenemünde and asks her father, "'May I fly in it someday? I'd fit inside, wouldn't I?'" (410). Gottfried does fit inside. He whispers his "father," Blicero, to sleep at night "with stories of us one day living on the Moon" (723). Ilse does likewise for her father:

Ilse whispered to him bedtime stories about the moon she would live on, till he had transferred silently to a world that wasn't this one after all: a map without any national borders, insecure and exhilarating, in which flight was as natural as breathing. (410)

So Pötkler is brought through an interface, conquers (or sees the rainbow of) Gravity, feels himself "rising, [. . .] yes, firmly in flight" (410), and represents a glimpse of what Rilke put as "all things want to float":

All things want to float. And we go about like weights,
lay our self upon everything, delighted with gravity;
O what wearing teachers we are for things,
while they succeed at eternal childhood.¹¹

He won't disabuse the child of her view of the moon as a place to live, Pötkler decides; he will preserve her innocence. Pötkler himself dreams that Zwölfkinder, the children's play city on the Baltic, "was also Nordhausen, a city of elves producing toy moon-rockets" (431), while at the real Nordhausen Slothrop is rescued from pursuing murderous Americans by an "oversize elf" (309), one Professor Glimpf, who speeds him to safety down tunnels populated by midget creatures doing handstands, swinging on ropes, and staring with green and red glowing eyes.¹² The V-2, great engine of destruction, forerunner of the ICBM, ends by being infected with the same innocence, even being compared to Baby Jesus. Peenemünde shows on the map "like a Wilhelm Busch cartoon face, some old fool for mischievous boys to play tricks on [. . .] even sneaking in to set off a rocket in the middle of the night" (501). And indeed, a "Max" and a "Moritz" are among those manning the climactic launch of the novel's secret V-2.¹³ Pötkler's wife, Leni, who engages in the Communist struggle for power in pre-Nazi Germany and scorns her husband for his apolitical passivity, leaves him, reasoning "Franz has his toy rockets to the moon" (154).

The effect of much of the elfish fun is a disturbance of narrative consistency, a doubling of adult and child in a single point of view, whether Slothrop's or the author's, that we expect to be dependably adult. It is a disturbance that carries with it a demonstration of how we are double beings, blind to the child half, that which is "put away" for us by St. Paul (I Cor. 13.11). Most children's literature, written with one eye on the adult reader, has such a demonstration in mind, but does not use it to upset adult perspective: like the special voice used by adults when seeking to entertain children, it is meant to enable the adult to revisit, or indulge in nostalgia over, childhood. When the doubling is seen from a child's point of view, which must be single, the element of mystery or confusion is tinged with terror. How can you tell eating from being eaten? Many fairy tales evoke the terror (the wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother), and then dispell it (the hunter

cuts open the wolf's belly and rescues grandmother), thereby helping the child achieve control of the terms of existence.

When the terms of existence become uncontrollable for the adult, the adult finds himself in the place of the child. When Blicero, the tortured and torturing German officer at the center of the symbolic rocketry of GR, forces his two young captives, Gottfried and Katje, into a sadomasochistic pantomime of Hänsel and Gretel, all three tacitly agree that the fairy tale "shall be their preserving routine, their shelter, against what outside none of them can bear--the War, the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency" (96). Blicero, a disillusioned adult, plays the witch. Gottfried-Hänsel, young enough to think of the rockets as "pet animals," "knows, like everyone, that captive children are always freed in the moment of maximum danger" (103). Likewise innocent Slothrop, at the outset at least, "is almost sure that whatever They want, it won't mean risking his life, or even too much of his comfort" (207).

Childhood fantasy versus adult reality, the standard dichotomy of adult culture, is used in GR, but only in conjunction with variations on adult fantasy. This is illustrated by a counter-passage, the performance of Hänsel and Gretel as a Christmas pantomime in a London theater. Here Hänsel will be rescued, and, by the same necessity of the performance of a set text, the witch will go into the oven, as the audience watches. The physical terror of that is strong: to be put into the oven, to be small enough to fit in there, and to have the door shut behind you--who has not had that nightmare! It recurs in the outer text of the novel; the reader must know of the ovens at Auschwitz and Treblinka--and Dora. In the very moment Gretel is to give the shove that seals the witch's fate, a V-2 lands just down the street, introducing a new term into the drama. In the "gathering silence" (174) that follows the sound of the explosion, a few babies begin to cry, and Gretel steps to the footlights to sing a song. Its purpose is to banish the murderous adult reality of invisible sudden death from the sky with some innocent childish fantasy--which is how it starts out at least:

Oh, the greengrocer's wishing on a rainbow today,
And the dustman is tying his tie . . .
And it all goes along to the same jolly song,
With a peppermint face in the sky! (175)

This doesn't last. The words become less and less reassuring, almost as if some other message is breaking through the surface of the text:

We can fly to the moon, we'll be higher than noon,
In our polythene home in the sky. . . .

Pretty polythene home in the sky,
Pretty platinum pins in your hand--

Oh your mother's a big fat machine gun,
And your father's a dreary young man. . . . (175)

This is the Trip to the Moon, but with the suggestion of a plastic vehicle or capsule that rings oddly in the represented context. It leaps from the stage to the outer context of the novel, to the plastic that conditioned Slothrop and encloses Gottfried in his rocket, making for him both "womb" (750) and "shroud" (751). A mother--your mother!--turned murderous weapon sharpens the dislocation--how will that stop babies crying?--and the song ends with a further intensification of disquiet. Everyone is asked to join in the singing, and to sing reflexively:

And those voices you hear, Boy and Girl of the Year,
Are of children who are learning to die. . . . (175)

Gretel can't be singing this; it is an intrusive voice, hardly authorial, but mockingly omniscient. The dichotomy has become that of this life, on the one hand, and death, or a Rilkean other half of life reached through death, on the other hand, whence this voice speaks. Speaks or sings, it makes little difference, for the voice is also not there at all, since "those voices [we] hear" must be our own. As readers we normally avoid accepting second person reference from fiction, so we tend to treat this one the way we treat the "you" of "Let us go then, you and I" of "Prufrock" (an invisible inner auditor), or that of "And thence to France shall we convey you safe" of Henry V (the Globe audience). Who, me? Not on your life (if I so choose). When speaker and spoken to are not clearly identified, there is always the threat of a "you" or a "we" getting out of the textual representation and inescapably including me.¹⁴ Pynchon repeatedly presses this threat. When he tells us Blicero "is the father you will never quite manage to kill," for "we are condemned in our weakness to impersonate men of power our own infant children must hate" (747), the normal intertextual narrative plane is again broken through.¹⁵

Appeals to generalized humanity, of which this could be called an example, are common enough in literature: the classical apostrophe can be so used, and they form a staple of the nineteenth-century novel.¹⁶ Not so common is Pynchon's practice of offsetting the addressing voice from that of the author, placing it in a blank representational space and then employing that space thematically. In the cases I have noted, the space coincides with the nexus of childhood and death.¹⁷ Some further examples of this coincidence: when another "you" intrudes upon Pointsman's dream, it bears a revelation of "something wrong, drastically wrong," and shifts the dream location into childhood--"You walk out into the evening. It's the street before your childhood home" (137); when Penelope feels the presence of her dead father in the room, it is an indication of how

Mothers and fathers are conditioned into deliberately dying in certain preferred ways: giving themselves cancer and heart attacks, getting into motor accidents, going off to fight in the War--leaving their children alone in the forest. [. . .] Perhaps it's even better to have this presence [. . .] than a father who still hasn't died yet, a man you love and still have to watch it happening to. . . . (176)

Penelope being only a child, her mind can contain some, but not all, of these words: the Hänsel and Gretel reference, and "going off to fight in the War," but hardly the conditioning and "preferred ways." The "you" is personally deadly, casting its shadow out from the child mind or childhood reminiscence.

Strongest of the "presences" are those of children dead or about to die. When Klaus Närrisch, a rocket engineer, is trapped by the Russians at Peenemünde and feels himself close to death, his mind roves over familiar rocket guidance math--and then is interpenetrated by something quite out of his personal experience:

[. . .] somewhere a quantity B would be gathering, building, as the Rocket gathered speed. So, up till assigned Brennschluss velocity, "v*, " [. . .] radio signals from the ground would enter the Rocket body [. . .] the control surfaces twitch, to steer you back on course the instant you'd begin to wander off (how could you've kept from lapsing, up here, into that radiant inattention, so caught up in the wind, the sheer altitude . . . the unimaginable fires at your feet?). (517)

There is only one character in GR who finds himself at such an altitude: Gottfried. Has not Närrisch's mind been invaded, then replaced, by that of Gottfried, who does ride in a rocket, is caught up in the fires at his feet as he rises to the top of the parabola, then rushes down to destruction? So is Slothrop's mind used as a pathway by the spirit of the dead Bianca:

She's still with you, though harder to see these days, nearly invisible as a glass of gray lemonade in a twilight room . . . still she is there, cool and acid and sweet, waiting to be swallowed down to touch your deepest cells, to work among your saddest dreams. (577)

"They aren't my dreams," you may protest, but these dreams can't be dodged. For while the linguistic surface may be unruffled and the mind of Slothrop may be within the representation brooding over his lost child-bride, the "room" in which the Bianca-glass sits is not part of Slothrop's existence. It is a simile, language-artifact, shared by text and reader. Neither

Slothrop nor we can swallow the contents of a glass so located; both he and we have dreams that can be so worked.

Child-death-reader contact is maintained through to the final scenes of GR by images of motherhood. At the Krupp Fest, a gruesome fairy tale dinner of the power elite at which Roger Mexico and Seaman Bodine, two of Slothrop's allies, are to be roasted alive and eaten, the hostess, Frau Utgarthaloki, is "a blonde image of your mother dead" (712). No such "you" is at the dinner: this is your, and my, mother. When the end comes, "we" sit in a Los Angeles movie theater the instant before an incoming rocket strikes. The screen has gone blank. What image had it just shown? "It may have been a human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star" (760). A child, wishing on a star, for a childish boon? A blank screen appears in many people's dreams, and it has been suggested that it may be "a pictorial somatic memory" of the maternal breast, an emblem in turn of the Earthly Paradise, a "world where all is in harmony, and where the little child is king."¹⁸ Breast is synecdoche for mother; therefore, I propose, it is the face of the mother, one's own mother, that fills the screen next:

And in the darkening and awful expanse of screen something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see . . . it is now a closeup of the face, a face we all know-- (760)

And finally, for the last time, the child holds open the door to death to this "we," for the wish-object "was not a star, it was falling, a bright angel of death" (760), a rocket.

Before revisiting that conclusion, I want to turn back to the children's town where Slothrop met Pötkler, Zwölfkinder (Twelve Children). It is introduced thus:

In a corporate State, a place must be made for innocence, and its many uses. [. . .]he culture of childhood has proven invaluable. Games, fairy-tales, legends from history, all the paraphernalia of make-believe can be adapted and even embodied in a physical place, such as at Zwölfkinder. [. . .] If you were an adult, you couldn't get inside the city limits without a child escort. There was a child mayor, a child city council of twelve. Children picked up the papers, fruit peelings and bottles you left in the street, children gave you guided tours through the Tierpark [. . .] child police reprimanded you if you were caught alone, without your child accompanying. Whoever carried on the real business of the town--it could not have been children--they were well hidden. (419)

"They" are, in ascending order, the local, Gau, and national functionaries of Nazi Germany; the international business interests controlling world populations and resources, at which level "Nazi," "Allied," "Soviet," and so forth are no longer distinguishing terms; the unlocated voices of the text; Rilke's angels. Possible models for a children's town are many: Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, an amusement park with child soldiers, child courtiers, and a scaled down carriage drawn by ponies, in which a child king and queen make a daily progress through their realm; Madurodam at The Hague (as a historical V-2 firing site, The Hague figures in GR), a Lilliput town built to 1/25 scale to delight children; parks and fairs around the world giving some part of their space to the fantasy of a world scaled down to and inhabited only by elves or children. There are more ancient and less carefree models too: Krishna's Vrindaban, where the child is king; and the Warsaw Children's Republic, a Jewish orphanage founded in 1911 by Janusz Korczak. Korczak was a doctor, psychologist, and writer. His novel King Matt the First, about "a child-king who organized a children's crusade to reform the world,"¹⁹ was widely read. In the lives of Warsaw slum children he felt he heard "the weeping of the centuries,"²⁰ and he determined to do something to give them, and every child he could reach, a sense of individual worth as a human being. The Children's Republic, with its newspaper, parliament, and court all run by the children themselves, did just that. In 1940, when the Germans forced the Jews of Warsaw into the Ghetto, the Republic went too. There "it seemed an oasis of sanity in a world gone mad."²¹ It lasted two years. Toward the end Korczak had the children perform a Tagore play, which he said would help them to accept the Angel of Death. On the day of the deportation to Treblinka of some 4000 children, those in his care included, he led his little band out to the freight cars in marching order, the oldest boy carrying a large green flag like that carried by King Matt on his crusade. Korczak himself may have been offered a chance to escape; it is said that he replied, "You do not leave a sick child in the night and you do not leave children at a time like this. . . . Is it thinkable that I should leave the children alone to suffocate in a gas chamber? How could I live after that?"²²

Korczak also published, in the line of advice to parents, a piece called "How to Love a Child," which contains some remarkable sentiments:

You say: "My baby." It is not. The child is a common property, he belongs to the mother and father, the grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Some distant "I" that was dormant in an array of forefathers, the voice of a disintegrating, long forgotten coffin suddenly begins to speak through your child. . . . Sometimes a sensitive child fancies that he is a foundling in his parents' home. It may be so: his begetter died a century ago. . . . I call for a Magna

Carta of children's rights. I have found three basic ones, though there may be more:

1. The right of the child to die.²³

This was written during the First World War, years before anyone dreamt of a Treblinka--at about the same time Rilke was working on his Elegies. But isn't it better to separate the child, the promise of new life, as far from death and the dead as possible? What is convention for? That thought does not seem to have bothered those Jews who included Korczak among the Lamed-waw, "the 36 Just Men, whose pure souls . . . make possible the world's salvation."²⁴ "How to Love a Child" also makes Korczak more than just a victim of history, however courageous; it shows him to have been a seer, like Rilke, who perceived childhood as an interface between parallel worlds of the living and the dead.

Pynchon's Zwölfkinder embodies that same perception. Behind its child-government and innocent fantasy looms the shadow of the state with its war and its own miniature replicas, the death camps. Even the first year Pöckler takes Ilse there, she comes to him from a camp of the Dachau type, set up for the "re-education" of Communists and other enemies of the state like her mother. By the time of their last visit, in 1944, Ilse may be dead and the child who holds Pöckler's hand a stand-in foisted on him. She's growing; he sees her only once a year; he can't tell. He may be taking the shade of a dead child to an illusionary city of the soon-to-be-dead. As they walk along, they hear voices: "From behind the decaying mythical statues, sentenced children shouted to each other" (430). Of one of these an omniscient voice asks, as Ilse watches:

Who was that, going by just then--who was the slender boy who flickered across her path, so blond, so white he was nearly invisible in the hot haze that had come to settle over Zwölfkinder? Did she see him, and did she know him for her own second shadow? (429)

Her linked shadow partner is Gottfried, his name here absent, his identity uncertain. Like her, he is there and not there; dead and living interpenetrate under the gaze and in the body of a child. The Ilse-child comes this year from Dora, the infamous K-Z Lager that supplied the workforce for the Nordhausen V-2 complex. Pöckler now works at Nordhausen, and "[f]or months, while her father across the wire or walls did his dutiful hackwork, she had been prisoner only a few meters away from him, beaten, perhaps violated" (428). The interface has been at his elbow: his rocket, their ovens. He has kept innocence for himself, and seen it decompose into death.

Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus are dedicated to "the name and protection of a dead girl whose incompleteness and innocence holds open the door of the grave, so that she, gone from us, belongs to those powers who keep half of life fresh and open towards the other wound-open half."²⁵ In a 1923 letter, Rilke put much the

same idea as the child's role in "keeping life open toward death," reminding his correspondent that there is no full living without death; as John Mood aptly summarized: "Still more difficult is to see that life always goes toward death and that dying is an intimate and lively part of living."²⁶ There are two common ways of protecting oneself against such an idea, both distortive of it. First, and traditionally, there is the piety-enhancing view that whom the Gods love die young, or that God takes his little angels back. Second, we can emphasize the transcendence in the moving across the boundary, the making invisible, Rilke describes, as if it were sublimation.²⁷ Either course makes it seem at least in bad taste to bring together Korczak, Rilke, and Pynchon. Are we to imagine that Korczak told his children, who ranged in age from two to seventeen, that he was taking them to the Angel of Death? What he did tell them must remain a matter of speculation: could he, who knew so much beyond ordinary apprehension, whose revolutionary approach emphasized never lying to a child, have sunk to a lie? "Some believe he told them they were going at last to their summer camp in the country."²⁸ Is that any better than telling them they were going for a shower bath, as did the SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese, nicknamed "The Angel"?

Suddenly a five year old girl threw a big red ball. The others ran after it, threw it into the air, and played . . . in the warm September sun. . . . Irma Grese then clapped her hands like a kindergarten teacher:

"That's enough, put the ball down. We must hurry now, time to go take a bath."

The children obeyed and ran down the steps into the crematorium. . . . Twenty minutes later, the ventilators howled into action: the job was done. In front of the crematorium lay the little trousers and embroidered dresses--along with the red ball.²⁹

Rilke didn't live to hear of that ball, so it must have been one of his terrible angels who gave us these materials to put together. One of the Sonnets to Orpheus, written in memory of Egon von Rilke, who died in childhood, describes children at play, and ends with these lines:

What was real in the All?

Nothing. Only the balls. Their glorious curves.
Not even the children . . . But sometimes one would step,
alas, ephemeral, under the falling ball.³⁰

A toy is a metonymy, a part of the child's world and identity, which can also encapsulate what we mean by sentimentality (the little shoes, or Tiny Tim's crutch, in the corner) and all that of childhood we would put aside. Pynchon, our Rilke-novelist, allows no putting aside. Those curves are glorious (herrlich),

and they include the curves off into space of the toy rockets that will take us to the moon, or kill us all. Technological man is mad, a child, acting out a childish dream; so Leni, wife and mother, tells Pötkler:

"They're using you to kill people," Leni told him[. . .]. "That's their only job, and you're helping them."

"We'll all use it, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend."

She laughed. "Transcend," from Pötkler? (400)

Erik Erikson's Childhood and Society gives one answer to this argument: "If man permits his ethics to depend on the machineries he can set in motion, forgetting to integrate childhood and society, he may find himself helplessly harnessed to the designs of total destruction along with those of total production."³¹ But Pötkler has more of the child in him than Leni does. The child won't come into integration without bringing death along: my child is my death. Nor will he be used as a counter in a dialectic; he is too inextricably woven into the seamless web of correspondence that is life. The world is living and dead intermingled, with the child standing on the boundary, modelling and conditioning the doings of adults in his play.³² GR sets itself on that boundary and finds an adult-language representation for that play. No paraphrase, not a poetic equivalent, but a suitable epigraph exists in the last lines of the 9th Duino Elegy:

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
are growing less. . .³³ . Supernumerous existence
wells up in my heart.

A strange place to be, and it's where this extraordinary novel puts us. Its hero gone, it comes to no real end, except the fantasized end of a Los Angeles movie theater visited by the Angel of Death. That very event, with its chronologically and physically impossible link to what comes just before, the firing of the rocket bearing Gottfried, leaves the reader suspended in a Zwischenraum, a between-space bounded by time, where "neither childhood nor future are growing less." Such erasure of the adult-child boundary looks grotesque, but it leads to supernumerous existence (überzähliges Dasein). That is a very unusual child world, almost without parallel in fiction. It might be called an amusement park, where children rule, or seem to rule, and can be taken and killed; where heavy tasks of understanding are set, and can be laughed off; where the gates and doors open onto the vistas of the heaven and hell of the irrationalist philosophers. For his bringing the life of modern technology into the novel as never before, Pynchon has gotten his critical due; for his doing something more difficult, indefinable, and unsettling with child life in the novel, we have yet to praise him.

--Bridgewater, CT

Notes

¹ Rudolph Höss, Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen (Munchen: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1981) 132, 157-58.

² Höss 132. Of sadistic practices on the ramp regarding children, or of his own sexual opportunities with their mothers (cf. William Styron, Sophie's Choice [New York: Random House, 1979]), Höss has nothing to say.

³ In the Second World War, some bomber crews who never saw angels would apply their own defensive magic: they would start out, then pause for a minute. That meant many of the innocent they were going to kill would escape, having been given a minute to progress to another place, out from under the collapsing roof or wall, or into a shelter.

⁴ For a review of such use of children since 1945, see Strother Purdy, "Stalingrad and My Lai: A Literary-political Speculation," Critical Inquiry 5 (1979): 651-61. On children in GR, see Lawrence C. Wolfley, "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel," PMLA 92 (1977): 873-89; Bertram Lippman, "The Reader of Movies: Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," University of Denver Quarterly 12 (1977): 1-46; Scott Simmon, "Beyond the Theater of War: Gravity's Rainbow as Film," Literature/Film Quarterly 6 (1978): 347-53; Geoffrey Cocks, "War, Man, and Gravity: Thomas Pynchon and Science Fiction," Extrapolation 20 (1979): 368-77; Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980); and Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981).

⁵ Studs Terkel, "The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 44.

⁶ Jean Michel, De l'Enfer aux Etoiles. Dora. Le temps de la nuit (Paris: Plon, 1985).

⁷ Saduktikarnāmṛta, quoted in J. L. Masson, "The Childhood of Kṛṣṇa: Some Psychoanalytic Observations," J. American Oriental Society 94 (1974): 459.

⁸ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 285-86.

⁹ Rilke's influence is treated in Fowler and in Schaub above, and in Joseph W. Slade, Thomas Pynchon

(New York: Warner, 1974); Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978); David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980); and John O. Stark, Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information (Athens: Ohio UP, 1980).

10 "Und waren doch in unserem Alleingehn / mit Dauerndem vergnügt und standen da / im Zwischenraume zwischen Welt und Spielzeug. . . ." Duiner Elegien (1922) 4.71-73. The translation given in the text is that of J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: Norton, 1939).

11 "Alles will schweben. Da gehn wir umher wie Beschwerer, / legen auf alles uns selbst, vom Gewichte entzückt; / O was sind wir den Dingen für zehrende Lehrer, / weil ihnen ewige Kindheit glückt." Die Sonette an Orpheus (1922) 2.14.5-8. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1942).

12 On elves as child figures, see C. G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1959) 158.

13 Max und Moritz established Busch's fame and provided the models for our Katzenjammer Kids.

14 This is like the child's address, "Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home! Your house is on fire and your children are all gone!" It is formalized, equivalent to textual identity, and applies generically as well as dramatically: if you're a ladybug, you're it. Lack of identity in the voice constitutes a dérèglement of the type discussed by Todorov in his Les genres du discours (Paris: Seuil, 1978); see the chapter "La lecture comme construction" and the discussion of "you" in Dostoievsky's Notes d'un souterrain.

15 Most discourse in the novel is third person omniscient alternating with free indirect speech or erlebte Rede, perhaps better distinguished as "narrated monologue" mixed with "psycho-narration"; see Dorrit Cohn, Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978). In the terms employed by Gerald Prince's notable 1973 Poétique article, trans. as "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 7-25, Pynchon undermines the narratee "relay" between author and reader, so that

"the partial reading of the text" obtainable "by interpreting all the signals of the narration as a function of the narratee" (12) is put in jeopardy.

16 See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 99, on the commonness of "appeals to the reader."

17 Literary evidence for such a nexus is slight; in the traditional novel repression has been prevalent. Fairy tales are more forthcoming: Leslie Fiedler, "Child Abuse and the Literature of Childhood," Children's Literature 8 (1977): 151-53, has interesting comments; Jung 178-79 is illuminating on psychological background.

18 Masson 457. On the screen, Masson cites Lewin in Psychoanalytic Quarterly 15: 419-34.

19 Betty Jean Lifton, "Shepherd of the Ghetto Orphans," New York Times Magazine, 20 Apr. 1980: 94.

20 Lifton 97.

21 Lifton 101.

22 I combine here Lifton 94 with Igor Newerly, introduction, Janusz Korczak, Selected Works of Janusz Korczak, trans. Jerzy Bachrach, ed. Martin Wolins (Washington, DC: National Science Foundation, 1967) xliii. The offer also occurs in Erwin Sylvanus's moving play Korczak und die Kinder (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957).

23 Korczak 87, 128.

24 Lifton 94.

25 ". . . unter den Namen und Schutz eines verstorbenen Mädchens gestellt erscheint, deren Unvollendung und Unschuld die Grabtür offen halt, so dass sie, hingegangen, zu jenen Mächten gehört, die die Hälfte des Lebens frisch erhalten und offen nach der anderen wundoffenen Hälfte zu." Briefe aus Muzot (1940) 377. Trans. Herter Norton 136.

26 "das Leben gegen den Tod hin offen zu halten." Briefe 231. Trans. Herter Norton 130. John Mood, Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties (New York: Norton, 1975) 106. The whole passage in Mood is of great interest for his interpretation of Rilke's concept of "life-and-death as one."

27 Pynchon uses the neutral word "change" (GR 97) to translate Rilke's "Wandlung" in the critically important "enraptured with flame" 12th sonnet of Sonette an Orpheus, Zweiter Teil, as if to remove any such comfort.

28 Lifton 102.

29 "Da warf ein fünfjähriges Mädchen plötzlich einen grossen roten Ball. . . ." Inge Deutschkron, . . . denn ihrer war die Hölle: Kinder in Gettos und Lagern [If I Make My Bed in Hell: Children in Ghetto and Concentration Camp] (Köln: Wissenschaft u. Politik, 1965) 105-06. My translation.

30 "Was war wirklich im All? / Nichts. Nur die Bälle. Ihre herrlichen Bogen. / Auch nicht die Kinder . . . Aber manchmal trat eines, / ach ein vergehendes, unter den fallenden Ball." Die Sonette an Orpheus 2.8.11-14. Trans. Herter Norton.

31 Childhood and Society (New York: Norton: 1963) 325.

32 So Freud, with an acuteness akin to that shown by Rilke and Pynchon, was led by a child playing at throwing toys to see repetition compulsion (Wiederholungszwang) and, from there, beyond (jenseits), through the interface to the death-wish (Jenseits des Lustprinzips [Beyond the Pleasure Principle], 1921).

33 "Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft / werden weniger. . . . Überzähliges Dasein / entspringt mir im Herzen." Trans. Leishman-Spender.