

## Max Sachsa's Bad Karma in Enzian's Bathtub: A Bus Ride Through *Gravity's Rainbow's* Textscape

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Given the narrow employment prospects in present-day German academia, one is always on the lookout for professional alternatives. During the days of our trip "Into the Zone 2000," I wondered whether bus driver could be such an alternative for me, and thus add another illustrious species to Molly Hite's cabinet of ordinary people who burn for Pynchon ("For a long time, the most ardent Pynchon fans that I knew were a weight lifter, a short-order cook, and a pizza deliveryman" [Hite ix]). In the meantime, the dyed-in-the-wool Pynchonite and the Zoneproof driver in me have made up their mind, and would like to offer you a very special kind of excursion: a ride into the textual landscape, or textscape, of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself. "[T]he bus is idling, waiting—*passengers will now reclaim their seats*" (GR 413) . . . but wait!

Before we start moving, a couple of preliminary remarks on the itinerary or, for that matter, on my bus's special tachograph that will help register our way into a territory like *Gravity's Rainbow's*—a territory where whether its words truly represent what they stand for is more than doubtful. As Hanjo Berressem observes, "[a]lthough the landscape *seems* real, in the Schwarzkommando's search for the 'True Text' . . . it becomes a 'Real Text' . . . an ambivalent, even paradoxical territory in which . . . real and symbolic registers constantly oscillate" (131). What ultimately holds true, then, is not so much the realness of the text sign's referent, or signified; what holds true is rather the realness of the textual sign itself as it stakes a claim, a Zone saturated with signification flickering and semantic ambiguity.

If Hanjo was not altogether bussed when he wrote that (and I know him only as a nice and mostly sober fellow), one has to raise the question of how to map this Zone. How to chart my bus's route through Pynchon's textscape? How to map it, on the one hand, mapping implies that one "relies on traditional notions of representation as the mimetic charting of an ontologically homogeneous domain" (Liste Noya 512), but, on the other hand, there is no such ontological homogeneity in the case of the Zone? If the Zone is, quite to the contrary, a domain of mutually exclusive and incommensurate understandings that are (and keep the odd birds inhabiting it in) worlds

apart from each other? “British security are about,” conceives Enzian at one point,

but that’s another, encapsulated world. The British G-5 occupy their own space and Zone congruent but not identical to what these serious Schwarzkommando astride bikes unmuffled go blasting on through tonight.

Separations are proceeding. Each alternative Zone speeds away from all the others, in fated acceleration. [. . .] Each bird has his branch now, and each one is the Zone. (GR 519)

Let me put it this way: what the tachograph in my bus has to cope with is nothing less than a mapping “of the Zone, that eminently ‘unmappable’ site within Pynchon’s text,” as José Liste Noya puts it (515). In short, it must “attempt to represent the unrepresentable or to ‘map the unmappable’” (513)—indeed, again according to Liste Noya, a veritably fantastic undertaking: “the fantastic is the (representational) result of the encounter between representable fantasies and an unrepresentable reality” (517).

But the fantastic (a concept Liste Noya borrows from Tzvetan Todorov) will not be the only characteristic of our bus ride into the Zone. Another is its peculiar dynamics, that is, the theoretically infinite “process of incessant re-mapping that will never completely chart its referential terrain” but that “conform[s] figurally . . . [to] the onto-epistemological paradox of the fantastic’s ‘map of the unmappable’” (520), and that echoes the familiar Derridean notion of *différance* as well as the Lacanian notion of *glissement*. Berressem identifies it as the specific “dynamics of the ‘Zone’”: a dynamics consisting of a “twofold movement” that “unfold[s] between a concentric movement of ‘Holy-Center-Approaching’ . . . and an eccentric one” of the above-mentioned typically Zonal branching (Berressem 26; see also 244). So this is how the trip into Pynchon’s Zone will proceed and what it will ultimately look like: a fantastic, necessarily unique and eccentric movement or ride through a selected number of textspaces of *Gravity’s Rainbow* which in the end finds its way home, concentrically and of course very deliberately, to nowhere else but Peenemünde.

Our geographical starting point will be something bad, or, to be more precise (and to catch the German undertones woven into it), we will set out from Bad Something. Notably, *Gravity’s Rainbow* refrains from making explicit reference to our point of departure, and thus imbues it with the aura of an unmentioned yet latently present and indeed meaning-triggering signifier—“not words,” in other words, “but halos of meaning around words [. . .] that only stay behind—if they do—for

a moment, like dreams, can't be held or developed, and, presently, go away" (GR 145).<sup>1</sup> When Slothrop and Geli Tripping experience the *Brockengespenstphänomen*, the play of dawn light at the top of the Brocken where "the sunlight strikes their backs" and casts their "two gigantic shadows [. . .] miles overland," these shadows stretch "past Clausthal-Zelterfeld [sic], past Seesen and Goslar, across where the river Leine would be [. . .] toward Weser"; then Slothrop's shadow "reach[es] eastward for a grab at Göttingen" (330). But remarkably, it fails to touch a spa (in German, a *Bad*) adjacent to Göttingen: Bad Sachsa.

Although the place remains unmentioned here, it uncannily reverberates in the textscape in the name of Peter Sachsa, the control during séances, and, as a "bad pun" (Weisenburger 213), in the denomination of the fictional spa Bad Karma. In fact, the Hindu term karma and the name Sachsa occupy a common textspace situated well before the one in which Slothrop and Greta Erdmann pass through Bad Karma on their way from Berlin to Świnoujście (457), and, for that matter, well before the plot ventures into the Zone (and onto the Brocken) in part 3. As early as episode 18 of part 1, Carroll Eventyr, usually a reliable spirit medium—ever since that "one morning on the Embankment" when "all at once someone was speaking through" him "out of the other world" (145)—has difficulty communicating effectively with long-dead Peter Sachsa about Group Captain St. Blaise's mysterious "incident during the Lübeck raid" (146). This is the textspace:

Turbulences in the aether, uncertainties out in the winds of karma. Those souls across the interface, those we call the dead, are increasingly anxious and evasive. Even Carroll Eventyr's own control, the habitually cool and sarcastic Peter Sachsa, the one who found him that day long ago on the Embankment and thereafter—whenever there are messages to be passed across—even Sachsa's become nervous. (146–47)

The novel's peculiar landscape thus lacks, in the description of the *Brockengespenstphänomen*, a mentioning of the geographically determined site Bad Sachsa in which the earlier mentioning of Sachsa and karma, and the later of Bad Karma would be "demonstrated to coincide" (86). As a consequence, Bad Sachsa, unrepresented within the novel's textscape yet charted on every conventional map of the Harz region, resists representation unless one indeed figures it, as here, as an interpretational fantasy—unless one proceeds, in other words, in terms of and to the conditions of the fantastic.

Literally fantastic and blatantly contrived as the convergence of the signifiers bad, karma and (Peter) Sachsa in the place-name Bad Sachsa may appear, the specific configuration underlying it—two textspaces that factually sandwich a third, but whose worded claims make no reference whatsoever to that bracketing—reappears in yet another set of textspaces. This second set similarly triggers the quaint logics and oxymoronic underpinnings of mapping the unmappable or representing the unrepresentable, but it differs from the Bad Sachsa example in being based on much harder textual evidence. In its center stands the question of where to locate Seaman Bodine: does he continue lingering in a Berlin bathtub, or does he eventually leave that bathtub and cruise somewhere near the Azores on board the U.S. destroyer *John E. Badass*?

“On a wire-backed chair, blunt hair hands picking quietly at a guitar, sits an American sailor with an orangutan look to him.” In episode 6 of the specifically Zonal part 3, Seaman Bodine enters the scene, first enchanting the audience at Berlin’s Chicago Bar with his song about his “dream of the days back in Doperland” (369), then plumbing the depths of a German beauty in Säure Bummer’s black-market/countercultural tenement, Der Platz: “Trudi and Bodine lark in the bathtub” (371). Twenty-five chapters later, now “in benighted Cuxhaven” (591), he turns up in another textspace as “Seaman Bodine, whom we left, you recall, carrying on in the bathtub at Säure Bummer’s place back in Berlin” (594). It is no doubt astounding how readily this notoriously bewildering text refreshes one’s memory here, how friendly it lends assistance to the reader, how gently it addresses one in the courteous “you recall,” and how kindly it embraces one in the benevolent “we.” In other words, “we” smell a rat. And indeed, we actually did not leave Seaman Bodine in episode 6 of part 3, but in episode 8, where, on “a mild, fluorescent summer evening on the sea,” he prevents his ship from being hit by a “hostile torpedo on the way,” a torpedo whose “pale tunnel of wake is set to intersect the *Badass*’s desperate sea-squirm about midships”:

What intervenes is the drug Oneirine, as the hydrochloride. The machine from which it has emerged is the coffee urn in the mess hall of the *John E. Badass*. Playful Seaman Bodine—none other—has seeded tonight’s grounds with a massive dose of Laszlo Jamf’s celebrated intoxicant, scored on Bodine’s most recent trip to Berlin. (389)

Again, two textspaces within the textscape, one in episode 6 of part 3 and one in episode 31, bracket a third in episode 8, but withhold any clue to—in fact, deny—the existence of that third, and, consequently,

convey no hint whatsoever of the bracketing itself. Apparently, Bodine's whereabouts during these twenty-five chapters cannot be sufficiently determined, and in that sense remain unmappable.

But as a closer reading reveals, the implications triggered by the wicked remark of *Gravity's Rainbow's* own "untrustworthy Remembrancer" stretch far beyond the mere question of where to chart the seaman.<sup>2</sup> In fact, they are apt to spread over the whole of the novel's plot until the endeavor itself of charting the Zonal world disrupts the conventional conception of a true (and truly representable) "reality," and turns into a mapping effort of, ultimately, fantastic dimensions.

There are two ways to deal with the Bodine-bathtub-*Badass* cluster of textspaces. The easier (but all too sweeping) is to qualify the narrator's remark in episode 31 about having left Bodine in the Berlin bathtub as just another instance of "unreliable narration." Much as this label may seem adequate for the narrative in general, it hardly reveals the immense share the reader's own activities take in that label's very emergence. The other way is to dig a little deeper and take, if provisionally, the narrator's remark at face value. One might watch for ways to remap Bodine's in-between appearance on board the *Badass*, and try in spite of everything to fit the middle textspace into a coherent pattern. Offered here is the discrimination, triggered by the later textspace, between events that take place in some "objective," historically and geographically authenticated "real," and those situated in some character's highly "subjective" mental landscape. Subsequently one declares Bodine's bathtub foolishness to belong to the former and, more important, the *Badass* episode to exemplify the latter: "the reader, invited to reconstruct a 'real' scene or action in the novel's fictive world, is forced in retrospect—sometimes in long retrospect [here more than two hundred pages]—to 'cancel' the reconstruction he has made, and to relocate it within a character's dream, hallucination, or phantasy" (McHale 86). As a matter of fact, it seems plausible to relocate the *Badass* textspace (indeed the whole of episode 8) within a hallucination of Slothrop's, "shot up yet again with that Sodium Amytal" as he was by Tchitcherine and his buddies at the end of episode 7, and "com[ing] to in episodes that fade in and out of sleep" only at the outset of episode 10 (GR 392). Hence one would sort out the sandwiched textspace, the *Badass* one, as situated within Slothrop's drug-hallucination, while the sandwiching ones (that claim the bathtub as Bodine's long-term residence) belong to the sphere of "real" events. "If we concur in this, we will have succeeded in imposing a high degree of order on a violently disorderly section of the text," Brian McHale observes. However, he adds: "This may be a satisfying

outcome, but our satisfaction will have been purchased at the price of too much of the text's interest" (99).

As the example of Gerhardt von Göll's double identity as both filmmaker and black-marketeer indicates, the difficulty of sorting out the textscape of *Gravity's Rainbow* according to the ordering pattern of "real" events here, hallucinated ones there is not restricted to the *Badass*-bathtub set of textspaces alone, but turns out to characterize the whole narrative.<sup>3</sup> A few pages before the Russians put Slothrop under Sodium Amytal, Säure advises him to "'talk to der Springer'"; but Säure has no idea (or refuses to say) "'who is that der Springer, and where do I find him'" (GR 376). As a consequence, and even if Slothrop had heard before of von Göll in his identity as a filmmaker (who directed the film for Operation Black Wing<sup>4</sup>), he cannot possibly have any evidence that the two, der Springer and *der Filmregisseur*, are the same person. It is exactly this double identity (and naming) of von Göll, however, that episode 8—the assumed drug hallucination of Slothrop's—sows into the textual landscape of *Gravity's Rainbow*. There, together with gaucho anarchist Squalidozzi, we are "introduced to Gerhardt von Göll, also known by his *nom de pègre*, 'Der Springer'" (385); so, if we stick to the distinction above between real and hallucinated events, we have to conclude that the convergence of movie director and black-marketeer in the person of Herr von Göll is the product of one of Slothrop's drug dreams. More precisely, we must assume that in the sphere of the "real" outside the hallucinated, Gerhardt von Göll cannot possibly be, be mapped as, the notorious "'knight who leaps perpetually [. . .] across the chessboard of the Zone'" (376). Yet "out on the steel-littered promenade" in a geographically as well as ontologically well-mappable Świnoujście (and again more than one hundred pages later) "The Man" is "waiting for whoever will show up." Slothrop does, "flash[ing] the plastic knight. Der Springer smiles and bows. 'Gerhardt von Göll, at your service.' They shake hands" (494).

A dream has come true, really come true or truly come real: an outcome that undermines the initially assumed sorting pattern. What appeared safely rooted in the realm of the real turns out in the very act of a reader's closer inspection to be shot through with, if not altogether effected by, elements of the fantastic.

Von Göll's version of how the Schwarzkommando filter into visibility stunningly parallels his own appearance as der Springer on the Świnoujście promenade, hence mirrors once again the typically Zonal impossibility of sorting out and mapping textspaces that convey "real" events as opposed to those governed by the fantastic. Notably in the same episode 8 of part 3, von Göll, having learned "that

Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone, leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him or the phony Schwarzkommando footage he shot last winter in England for Operation Black Wing," concludes "that his film has somehow brought them into being. 'It is my mission,' he announces [. . .] 'to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation'" (388). It would no doubt be interesting to turn off here and continue with a detailed analysis of how novel-maker Pynchon—and not self-indulgent movie-maker von Göll in his "controlled ecstasy of megalomania" (388)—sows cinematic and paracinematic Schwarzkommando seeds in the Zonal textscape of *Gravity's Rainbow*, how it is "almost impossible to resist the distinction between the cinematic and the real," and yet how "this form of distinction is a virtually impossible one to make in the case of *Gravity's Rainbow*" (McHoul and Wills 45). My bus, however, will take a different bend from the Schwarzkommando junction, "riding through it, the Real Text, right now," onward to the name itself of one of the keenest "Kabbalists" (GR 520) of *Gravity's Rainbow's* "sinister cryptography of naming" (322): Schwarzkommando leader Enzian.

Like Sachsa and (bad) karma, Enzian is a word with halos of meaning around it. And much like Bad Sachsa, one such meaning is neither held nor developed explicitly in the textscape: "Enzian," that is, is another case of triple signification with two explicitly given and one withheld. The ones given are, first, the name of the Herero leader himself and, second, the literary source for this spectacular pet name: Blicero/Weissmann "gave his African boy the name 'Enzian,' after Rilke's mountainside gentian of Nordic colors, brought down like a pure word to the valleys" (101). The one withheld invokes the Rocket itself (which, one could say, might have saved a lot of trouble for the Schwarzkommando and their Enzian). On October 30, 1944, Reich Marshal Hermann Göring and Armaments Minister Albert Speer, in nowhere else but Peenemünde, agreed to place emphasis on two follow-up projects to the Aggregat 4, better known as the V-2: "on Schmetterling, which was most advanced, as well as on Enzian (Gentian), a newer project for a mostly wooden, unmanned, scaled-down version of the Me 163 rocket fighter" (Neufeld 254).<sup>5</sup>

Again, numerous bends might be taken from here: paths, for instance, that would lead us to an oddly distorted version of Slothrop's obsession, early in the book, "with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it" (GR 25). Or paths that might bring us, late in the narrative, to the symbolic marriage of projectile and preterite as induced by the act of signification, and made explicit in the description of Gottfried's situation inside the 00000: "The two, boy and Rocket,

concurrently designed. Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully . . . he fits well. They are mated to each other, Schwarzgerät and next higher assembly" (750–51). But once the aforementioned meeting of Göring and Speer has driven us in sight of the Holy Center, we should see to it that *Gravity's Rainbow's* incessant gliding does not lead us all too far off the track again. Enzian, in his concealed naming also after the Messerschmitt rocket fighter, has two brothers, or forerunners: "At the end of 1934 the A-2s were finally ready. Two were shipped to the North Sea island of Borkum for launching; they were called 'Max' and 'Moritz' after the twins in the German version of the popular cartoon strip *The Katzenjammer Kids*" (Neufeld 38). Whereas the steel Katzenjammer Kids, A2 rockets, remain unmentioned in the textscape, the two cartoon heroes do appear, incarnated as Blicero's launch assistants at the firing of the 00000:

"Steuerung klar?" [Blicero] asks the boy at the steering panel.

"Ist klar." In the lights from the panel, Max's face is hard, stubborn gold.

"Treibwerk [sic] klar?"

"Ist klar," from Moritz at the rocket motor panel. Into the phone dangling at his neck, he tells the Operations Room, "Luftlage klar." (GR 757)

In a way, the characterization of Franz Pökler also holds true for Enzian, Max and Moritz. Each of them figures as "an extension of the Rocket" —not, however, "long before it was ever built" (402) or as a hyperbolic description of a rocket engineer's utter obsession, but in terms of images that have been chosen for incarnation (as von Göll puts it). Their own figural shapes replace what is presumably represented here, the Me 163 and the two A2 missiles, respectively, and so necessarily help suspend the validity of the representational pattern itself.

As I promised, all this will culminate in, and drive us to, Peenemünde. If figural shapes indeed replace the presumably represented, and if by the same token they are symptomatic of a suspended validity of the representational paradigm at large, a map would reproduce these features accordingly. It would look like a somewhat fantastic figural shape in its own right, which, as such, as a contoured figure, opposes and undermines its representational function of truly and unequivocally charting a territory. In fact, this is exactly the way *Gravity's Rainbow* presents the map of the Peenemünde area, representing it for that matter as a figural shape in which the registers of the landscape and the representation of that landscape conflate, and which therefore assumes the dimensions of a



map that charts the unmappable. “Before you sight it, you can feel the place,” begins the textspace that brings us home to Peenemünde right before roguish Max and Moritz can tap the tank of my bus for fuel:

It’s a face. On the maps, it’s a skull or a corroded face in profile, facing southwest: a small marshy lake for the eye-socket, nose-and-mouth cavity cutting in at the entrance to the Peene, just below the power station . . . the draftsmanship is a little like a Wilhelm Busch cartoon face, some old fool for mischievous boys to play tricks on. Tapping his tanks for grain alcohol, scratching great naughty words across fields of his fresh cement, or even sneaking in to set off a rocket in the middle of the night. (501)

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For another such unmentioned yet latently present and indeed meaning-triggering signifier— $v^0$ —see Gossel and Vanderbeke. Their sign-finding in the Zone and mine, however, are informed by different and, as we would argue, incompatible interpretational strategies. In *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* expansive textspace, other buses take other routes.

<sup>2</sup>Halos of meaning? I confess my indebtedness to *Mason & Dixon* (8).

<sup>3</sup>The *Badass*-bathtub set as one that triggers the notorious indeterminacy of what is to be considered “real” and what hallucinated is, of course, a random pick. Other buses take other routes. McHale’s, for instance, goes via the similarly “unstable, flickering, indeterminable” cluster of textspaces that deal with Lady Candy Drill, Mrs. Quoad (95).

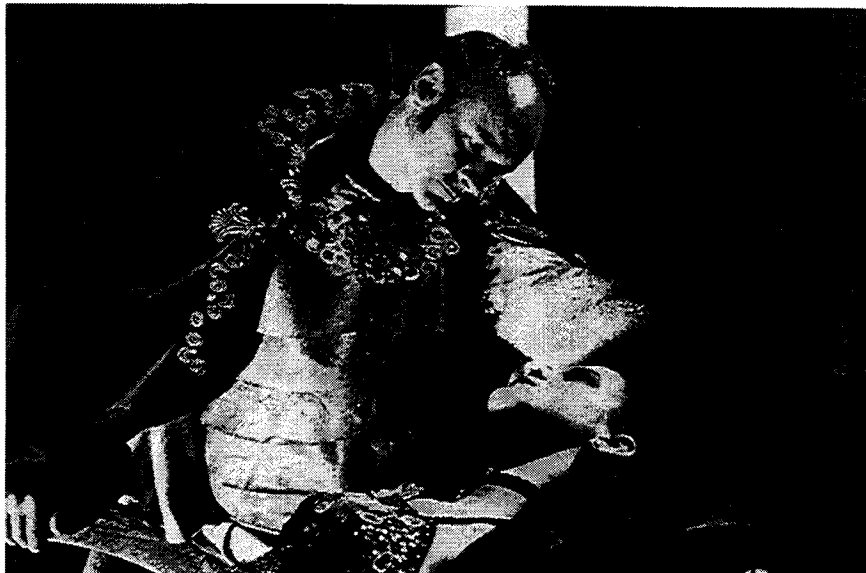
<sup>4</sup>Perhaps the two had in fact met: “Black Wing has even found an American, a Lieutenant Slothrop, willing to go under light narcosis to help illuminate racial problems in his own country” (75).

<sup>5</sup>The realization of the project later fell victim to the continual quarrels between Göring, Speer and Himmler. It was abandoned on January 23, 1945, by A4 tactical commander and program head Hans Kammler: “after receiving further backing from Himmler, Kammler canceled Enzian, Rheintochter, and a number of other projects” (Neufeld 257).

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Greta Erdmann (Inga Busch) and Slothrop (Michael Röhrenbach) in *Prüfstand 7*



Hanjo Berressem as Kevin Spectro in *Prüfstand 7*