SUBVERSIVE TEXTS,

RANDOMNESS & FRIGHT,

AND THE NARRATIVE DECONSTRUCTURE OF

THOMAS PYNCHON'S <u>GRAVITY'S RAINBOW</u>

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On my honor, I have received no unacknowledged aid on this piece.

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I

INTRODUCTION:

THE SUBVERSIVE TEXT

Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow is every bit as exasperating as it is brilliant. The book simply does not seem to add up at times. Trying to get a good hold on it is frequently like trying to get a good hold on a freshly-caught fish: the harder we squeeze, the more it wants to slip right out of our grasp. But this is not Pynchon's fault, as it were, but rather his intention. It would be a mistake to expect Pynchon's work to behave the way novels are "supposed" to behave. His characters should begin in a state of crisis and confusion and reach at novel's end a state of clarification; his plots should reach a resolution with all enigmas **solved**; his narrative should organize itself into a coherent, cause-and-effect structure. None of this seems to be happening in Gravity's Rainbow. But it is central to Pynchon's grand design to understand that his narrative structure is a deliberate and systematic subversion of structure--what I will call in this paper a deconstructure--where a simple cause-and-effect interpretation might not be possible. In fact, Pynchon's work raises the question as to whether we are reading a novel at all.

Our problems begin when we try to describe what the work is about. With some 400 charcters and 760 dense pages, Gravity's

Rainbow is a defiantly complex and involved affair.[1] We can say at the outset that it opens in the last few months of World War II and proceeds into the months following the cease-fire. We can also say that it concerns the multitudinous events surrounding the creation and launching of a specific V-2 rocket known as the Aggregate 4, or the Schwarzgerät ("black instrument"). In addition, there is an American lieutenant named Tyrone Slothrop whose erections may or may not predict where German V-2 rockets hit, and there is an utterly decadent German named Blicero who builds the S-Gerat as a sacrificial "oven" for his boy-lover, Gottfried. But that is not all: not even remotely.

For instance, to pigeon-hole this book in such a manner is to drastically ignore its madly comic exuberance, its dignified pathos, its obscene horror. For comedy, there is a scene in which laboratory mice speak in New Yawk taxi-driver jive; in another, two lovers douse each other with seltzer bottles; and in yet another, our inept hero Tyrone escapes an attacker by hot air balloon, using coconut cream pies as ammunition. For dignified pathos, there is the tender love story of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, as well as the tale of rocket technician Franz Pokler, who is allowed annually to see a daughter who may be a different little girl each year. And as for obscene horror, we have the scatological, sadomasochistic set-pieces concerning Captain Blicero, Greta Erdmann and Ernest Pudding.

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[1]All notes refer to the 1987 Penguin softcover edition, reprinted from the original galleys of the 1973 Viking Press hardcover. Page numbers appear in parentheses in my text.

And that is still not all. We have yet to say anything about Pynchon's language, his multiple narrative voices, or his radical use of film as a narrative technique. Moreover, plots in this novel blend into other plots, characters take on multiple identities, and titillating concepts are introduced, developed, and left to unravel inconsequently into nothing important. And perhaps most maddeningly, the book cuts off before it is even finished and begins after it ends. There is no place to begin outlining this work, nor is there any place to stop.

Our inability to paraphrase and reconstruct this book's "story," however, is not simply a product of its length and complexity. Rather, the book is structured in such a way that it makes this kind of coherent recall utterly impossible. When we begin to understand how this book is designed and how Pynchon expects us to read it, we also begin to key in on Pynchon's primary thematic concerns. In effect, Pynchon "cons" us into understanding his view of the world: we expect his book, an American "novel" set in the second World War, to cohere in terms of cause and effect interpretation, and we also expect the same thing of our own lives; but Pynchon's work subverts this tendency, as does the mad, sprawling, comic, and horrifying world according to Thomas Pynchon.

How do we, then, approach this intimidating text? We will divide our inquiry into three primary areas of interest, all of which, when taken together, represent the compass coordinates of Pynchon's text. First, we will look at <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>'s five-

part plot structure; next, we will examine his view of language and his use of a Derridian "absent center;" and lastly, we will address Pynchon's subversion of cause and effect analysis and his resultant view of history and fiction. All of this is done with an understanding that this book is ultimately inexhaustable; with Gravity's Rainbow, one must simply find an area or direction of interest and be content for the time being with a mapping of that terrain. If these three maps lead to further exploration, so much the better.

II

THE FIVE SUB-PLOTS

In his at times lucid and penetrating yet on the whole "misguided" Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow, Douglas Fowler divides Pynchon's labyrinthine work into five succinct sub-plots.[2] This is no small task on Fowler's part, for most of these plots blend and overflow into one another in a seemingly unsystematic fashion. However, each sub-plot has a coherent identity of its own, and by setting them forth now, we can get an early though tenuous hold on what Gravity's Rainbow is "about."

The central sub-plot concerns the book's hapless, inept, and sympathetic hero, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop. Slothrop is an American stationed in London during the German V-2 blitz; he works at ACHTUNG (Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany), a branch of the Special Operations Executive, where his job is to photograph rocket-bomb disasters. He is a bungling yet likeable goof who also has one of the most intriguing libidoes in modern fiction. It seems that a map of London upon which he records his amorous victories corresponds exactly with a map of V-2 rocket strikes. Dr. Edward Pointsman, a Pavlovian psychologist employed by PISCES (Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender), determines that there is some conditioned connection between Slothrop's erections

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[2]Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Dexter, Michigan: Ardis, 1980), pp. 44-46.

and the pattern of V-2 rocket launchings. Pointsman attempts to observe Slothrop's sexual activity in order to discern the exact nature of the connection, but Slothrop eludes Pointsman's grasp, wanders comically all over the post-war Zone in search of his own identity, and winds up "disassembled" near the book's end. Slothrop's psychological or physical dismantling (it is arguable which is the case) arises out of a series of surreal identities that he assumes in the Zone, including "journalist" Ian Scuffling, comic book character Rocketman, and pagan pig-hero Plechazunga. Slothrop is also helplessly paranoid, as he believes that "everything is connected, everything in the Creation" (703), and his adventures in the Zone are an effort to see just who or what is controlling his slowly disintegrating life.

Pointsman is the "pointman" in the second sub-plot, which concerns the love story of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake. Mexico, an English statistician in Pointsman's employ, uses a Poisson equation to determine the frequency of V-2 rocket hits; Jessica has a "safe" boyfriend named Jeremy (aka "The Beaver") but she is also in love with Roger. She leaves Roger at the war's end, returning to boorish Jeremy, and their love story is contained almost entirely in the first section of the novel, "Beyond the Zero." We don't really encounter them again until the final section, in which Mexico, having lost both Jessica and any respect he might have had for Pointsman, spearheads the ultimately unsuccesful Counterforce.

Captain Blicero is the central presence in the darkest and

most allegorical sub-plot in the book. He is actually Major Weissmann, a homosexual German rocket genius who builds a specially designed V-2 (the Schwarzgerät or Aggregate 4) as a sacrificial oven for his boyfriend Gottfried. Weissmann assumes the <u>nom de guerre</u> of "Blicero," for it is "close enough to `Blicker,' the nickname the early Germans gave to Death. They saw [Death] white: bleaching and blankness" (322). In the sub-plot in which he is the primary figure, he is also the Witch in an elaborate, effective retelling of the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale.[3] Katje Borgesius takes on the character of Gretel, while Gottfried assumes the character of Hansel. Gottfried's name can be translated as "God's Peace," and he may be named after Gottfried von Strassburg, the premier medieval poet of the Tristan and Iseult myths.[4] In Pynchon's world, however, the name could also stand for "got fried," or, in a series of horrendous puns, "God's <u>Peace</u>" or "<u>Cod's</u> Piece." In any case, he and Katje are victims in the sadomasochistic rituals spearheaded by Blicero / the Witch, and the S-gerät that Blicero builds turns out to be the Oven into which Gottfried / Hansel must enter, though his "sister" is not around to save him this time.

Franz and Leni Pökler are the focus of the fourth sub-plot. The two are drastically ill-matched, as Leni is passionate,

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[3]Ibid., p. 45.

[4]Thomas Moore, in <u>The Style Of Connectedness</u> (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987) tells us that this myth should be interpreted "as an expression of that secret `passion' allied to death wish" (p. 107).

involved, and spiritual, while Franz is passive and ineffectual--"the cause-and-effect man" (159). For instance, when they go see Die Frau im Mond, a German Ufa (Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft) film, we learn that "Franz was amused, condescending. He picked at technical points," whereas "Leni saw a dream of flight. One of many possible" (159). Our first encounter with Leni is mid-way through the first section: she has left Franz, taking with her Ilse, their daughter, who she swears "is not going to be used" (156). But we later learn that Leni's underground political activities land her and Ilse in a concentration camp. Meanwhile, Franz is put to work on Weissmann's S-gerat at Peenemünde, where Franz finds himself increasingly "at the Rocket's mercy: not only danger from explosions or falling hardware, but also its numbness, its dead weight, its obstinate and palpable mystery..." (402). Weissmann, the grand manipulator, keeps Pökler at Peenemunde by arranging an annual meeting with Ilse at Zwölfkinder, an amusement park inhabited entirely by children. But there is no way for Pökler to know whether he is really seeing Ilse each year or some different little girl: "A daughter each year, each one about a year older, each time taking up nearly from scratch" (422). His inability to act--the flaw that first estranges him from Leni--proves to be his downfall; he realizes eventually "that he had known the truth with his senses, but allowed all the evidence to be misfiled where it wouldn't upset him. Known everything, but refrained from the only act that could have redeemed him" (428).

Franz's and Leni's story is beautifully dignified and extraordinarily moving, in itself worth the price of admission.

The fifth and final sub-plot revolves around the Scwarzkommando, an army made up of German Zone-Hereros. ("Schwarzkommando" translates into "Black army."). Gerhardt von Goll, a fictional Ufa film director and "contemporary" of Fritz Lang, makes a three-and-a- half minute propaganda film for a PISCES project called Operation Black Wing about a "fictional Schwarzkommando." Pointsman, Mexico and other PISCES employees portray the Schwarzkommando, performing "in plausible blackface, recruited for the day, the whole crew out on a lark" (113). But it turns out that the Schwarzkommando is <u>real</u>: led by an African mulatto named Enzian ("after Rilke's mountainside gentian of Nordic colors, brought down like pure word to the valleys" [101]), the mysterious army travels all over the Zone in search of pieces from Weissmann's S-gerät, the purpose being to build themselves a Rocket. In 1904-06, the Hereros rose up in defiance of German oppression and were squelched brutally under the command of a German general named Lothar von Trotha; the entire race was nearly exterminated. As a result, the Rocket is for them a religious icon, carrying with it profound spiritual significance. As Enzian tells Slothrop:

> One reason we grew so close to the Rocket, I think, was this sharp awareness of how contingent, like ourselves, the Aggregate 4 could be--how at the mercy of small things... dust that gets in a timer and breaks electrical contact... (362)

The Rocket represents for the Hereros Death personified, Death

controlled, Death created and worshipped. adding tension to the plot of a black quest is the counterplot of a white quest. Enzian's father, a white Russian flagship gunner, abandoned Enzian's Herero mother and returned to Russia, where he and his Russian wife produced a boy named Tchitcherine. "On a compulsive need he has given up trying to understand," Tchitcherine sets out on a quest through the Zone to find and "annihilate the Schwarzkommando and his mythical half-brother, Enzian" (338).

As indicated previously, each of these sub-plots has a coherent, distinctive identity of its own, and this is evidenced by Pynchon's employment of unique narrative voices appropriate to the tone and setting of each sub-plot. Although it would be misleading to say that each sub-plot has its own "narrator," we can point out at least three different "national" styles, each employed in accordance with the international setting of the sub-plot in which it is found.[5] Of course, this list is by no means all-inclusive, because Gravity's Rainbow, among countless other things, is an enyclopedia of dozens of twentieth-century discourses; in addition, all of these sub-plots interweave in one way or another, forming what Roland Barthes calls a sort of "narrative braid."[6] This "braid" is central to Pynchon's structural design.

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[5]Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow," ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 33.

[6]Roland Barthes, S / Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 160. This matter of a "braided" narrative will be discussed in broader detail later.

We encounter a slangy "American voice" in the picaresque passages featuring our hero, Tyrone Slothrop. This is Pynchon's most exuberant, delightful invention, a narrative voice that sounds like some surreal, modernist "stream of mutterings"[7] and is the most authentic prose rendering of comic book energy yet produced. The passages are on the whole wildly comic, and the energetic, colorful prose reflects this. But the comic book aspect, usually mimetically implied, is frequently made explicit, as this passage, on the momentous occasion of Slothrop's becoming that Rocketman, illustrates:

> Slothrop has been imagining a full-scale Rocketman Hype, in which the people bring him food, wine and maidens in a four-color dispensation in which there is a lot of skipping and singing `La, la, la, la'[...] (366).

Here, the prose actually conjures up an animated cartoon sequence, complete with "four-color dispensation," and also travels freely into surreal, fantastic territory. More importantly, however, this passage shows the way Pynchon expertly weaves the hectic, bungling observations of that Slothrop directly into the narrative voice. We are thus presented with a special instance of Gérard Genette's "free indirect speech" narrative mood, whereby the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or the character speaks through the narrator, and the two instances are merged.[8] Genette's term denotes the narrator's

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[7]Mendelson, p. 33.

[8]Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Suffolk: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 174. For Genette, the term "mood" is much more advantageous than "point of view;" for him,

distance from the main character, and he seems to suggest that the narrator is in the position to weave into his own voice the character's direct observations. This is to be distinguished from "immediate speech," where the narrator is obliterated entirely.[9] This typically "Slothropian" passage will illustrate this point more clearly:

> One day, just as [Slothrop's] entering a narrow street all ancient brick walls and lined with costermongers, he hears his name called--and hubba hubba what's this then, here she comes all right, blonde hair flying in telltales, white wedgies clattering on cobblestones, an adorable tomato in a nurse uniform, and her name's, uh, well, oh--Darlene. Golly, it's Darlene (114-5).

Notice the way the narrator, in mid-sentence, moves imperceptibly from recording narrative information ("One day, just as etc[...]") to recording Slothrop's observations exactly as Slothrop himself registers them ("[...] and her name's, uh, well, oh--Darlene. Golly, It's Darlene."). Through this technique and the adaptation of comic book energy, Pynchon achieves a singular, joyous narrative experience.

For the sections concerning our British characters (Pointsman, Mexico, Jessica, *et al.*), a dense, hyper-aware "European" voice is used.[10] By "hyper-aware" I mean to suggest that the narrator immerses himself in the scene, constructing lengthy strands of

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it means *more* or *less* telling what one tells according to one point of view or another, and his term addresses the regulation of narrative information (161-62).

[9]Ibid.

[10]Mendleson, p. 33.

minute detail that frequently taper off into ellipses, as if the list could conceiveably go on endlessly.[11] In many instances, Pynchon keeps action at a minimum, instead placing emphasis on a rhapsodic attempt at total atmospheric submersion. In this passage, located at the very beginning of the text, an unidentified character waits in a carriage in the destructive wake of a rocket hit:

> Inside the carriage, which is built on several levels, he sits in velveteen darkness, with nothing to smoke, feeling metal nearer and farther rub and connect, steam escaping in puffs, a vibration in the character's frame, a poising, an uneasiness, all the others pressed in around, feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time: drunks, old veterans still in shock from ordnance 20 years obsolete, hustlers in city clothes, derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone, stacked out among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation. Only the nearer faces are visible at all, and at that only as half-silvered images in a view finder, green stained VIP faces remembered behind bulletproof windows speeding through the city.... (3)

This is an extraordinarily detailed passage, and it is only one of countless others that could have been cited. This flagrant use of the "narrative pause"[12] is central to the narrator's stance within the text's "action." The only movement here is "steam escaping in puffs;" the rest of the passage consists of roving-

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[11]Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1883), p. 136.

[12]Genette, p. 99-105. Genette here is referring to those instances where the artificially established temporal progression of a narrative is frozen--or paused--in order to allow the narrator to impart descriptive information; he establishes that a true narrative pause only occurs when the narrative comes to a standstill that does not correspond to a contemplative pause by the character through whom the scene is being narrated.

eye documentation. Moreover, this description is not directed through the gaze of any character--not even the unnamed "he" around which the passage is framed. Rather, the emphatic attention to detail, and even the subjective judgments made about the described objects, all issue from the utterly omniscient narrator.

The voice alternates between these dense, detailed pauses and conversational addresses to the reader that frequently employ the voice of a given character, though the jump from narrator to character is seamless. More specifically, we have another "free indirect speech" narrative mood as noted noted above, but without the Slothropian focus. Instead, the narrator is omniscient, equally informed about every character in any given scene, and free to allow the observations and thoughts of any random character to weave into his all-knowing voice. Moreover, this narrator is likely at any time to leave the present-tense, first-degree narrative, in order to embark on parenthetical flights of rhetoric that acknowledge no temporal bounds:

> But then Pointsman laughs the well-known laugh that's done him yeoman service in a profession where too often it's hedge or hang. "I'm <u>always</u> being told to take animals." He means that years ago a colleague--gone now--told him he'd be more human, warmer, if he kept a dog of his own, outside the lab. Pointsman tried--God knows he did--it was a springer spaniel named Gloucester, pleasant enough animal, he supposed, but the try lasted less than a month. What finally irritated him out of all tolerance was that the dog didn't know how to reverse its behavior. It could open doors to the rain and the spring insects, but not close them... knock over garbage, vomit on the floor, but not clean it up--how could <u>anyone</u> live with such a creature? (52).

Notice the seamless shifts in narrative strategy here: we start off in the present tense; then the narrator addresses the reader ('He means[...]), filling in necessary information without regarding any temporal restrictions (when does this talk of Gloucester "happen"?); next, Pointsman's own voice invades the narrative ("Pointsman tried," the narrator tells us, then lets Pointsman himself, in the narrator's voice, add, "God knows [I] did"), as if Pointsman had been temporarily removed from the narrative in order to help the narrator along with this parenthetical passage. The passage ends with Pointsman's exasperated disclaimer ("[...] how could <u>anyone</u> live with such a creature?"), and then dives seamlessly back into the present-tense narrative.

Regarding the third "national" style, Rainer Maria Rilke, by my count, is explicitly referred to or quoted at least twelve times in <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>, and in all these cases, the name is dropped in passages concerning the German characters (Blicero, Gottfried, Pölkler, <u>et</u> <u>al</u>.). Indeed, the "German" narrator is essentially inspired by Rilke's seductive, direct-address poetic voice, found most explicitly in his <u>Duino Elegies</u>. In particular, "The Tenth Elegy" is the most prominent; we know, in fact, that it is Blicero's favorite:

> Of all Rilke's poetry, it is this Tenth Elegy [Blicreo] most loves, can feel the bitter lager of Yearning begin to prickle behind eyes and sinuses at remembering any passage of... the newly-dead youth, embracing his Lament, his last link, leaving now even her marginally human touch forever, climbing all alone, terminally alone, up and up into the mountains of primal Pain, with the wildly alien constellations overhead... (98).

Blicero's employs the imagery of rocketry, of course, and it adopts the same painful, mournful tone found in the "Elegy" from which it is drawn. In addition, the way the sentence's subject is suspended at the beginning while the passage continues on in layered, rolling parallelisms recalls Rilke's own technique, as evidenced from this passage from "The Tenth":

> She waits
> for girls and befriends them. Shows them, gently,
> what she is wearing. Pearls of grief and the fine-spun
> veils of patience.[13]

Indeed, Rilke's "Tenth Elegy" is, among other things, a rhapsodic meditation on the sorrow and triumph of suffering,[14] and so too are the plots featuring Blicero, Pökler, and Enzian. Blicero's mad obsession with pain and Death underscores his love of Rilke, while the dark, foreboding death-wish of the Hereroes, which Enzian desperately tries to thwart, recalls Rilke's own spiritual struggle as revealed in the Elegies. In general, moreover, the German sections of the novel are saturated in imagery found in "The Tenth Elegy." For instance, Zwolkinder, the amusement park where Pokler meets "Ilse" each year, recalls the adult carnival developed in Rilke's poem; Ilse herself suggests the young girl Lament, while Gottfried seems to be one of the

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[13]Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Tenth Elegy," The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1982) p. 207.

[14]See the commentary of J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender on "The Tenth Elegy" in Duino Elegies, trans. Leishman and Spender (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1939), p. 114.

male youths "who died young, in their first condition / of timeless equanimity..."[15]

But it is the nature of the Rilkean voice that is the concern here, and it is in strong evidence in Pökler's, Blicero's, and even Enzian's sections. In his introduction to Rilke's selected work, Stephen Mitchell writes about the Duino Elegies:

> What makes them so seductive is that they also speak to the reader so intimately. They seem whispered or crooned into our inmost ear... The effect can be hypnotic.[16]

This is perhaps the best way to describe Pynchon's Rilkean voice as well. Through dense, elegiac prose, Pynchon pulls the reader into the darkest, most scatalogical scenes in the book; sentences drift off into inexpressible territory, while the narrator whispers to the reader to join him in this horror. Though this technique reaches its most intense realization cumulatively, disengaged passages can serve to illustrate my point:

> But as you swung away, who was the woman alone in the earth, planted up to her shouders in the aardvark hole, a gazing head rooted to the desert plane, with an upsweep of mountains far behind her, darkly folded, far away into the evening? She can feel the incredible pressure, miles of horizontal sand and clay, against her belly. Down the trail wait the luminous ghosts of her four still unborn children, fat worms lying with no chances of comfort among the wild onions, one by one, crying for milk more sacred than is tasted and blessed in the village calabashes[...] She is a seed in the Earth. The holy aardvark has dug her bed (316).

This is a horrifying description, and certainly not the least horrifying in the book. The reader is brought down into the scene

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[15]Rilke, trans. Mitchell, p. 207.

[16]Stephen Mitchell, p. xiv.

("But as you swung away[...]") and this allows the narrator, in a painful yet perfectly controlled voice, to address the reader. And Pynchon seductively draws the reader deeper and deeper into the scene: we start with the image of the woman, then move to the pressure the earth is exerting on her submerged, pregnant belly, and are even proleptically drawn "down the trail" where her still unborn children wait like "fat worms lying with no chances of comfort among the wild onions." The voice, so quiet and seductive, echoes Rilke's own elegiac voice:

> Yes--the springtime needed you. Often a star
> was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you
> out of the distant past, or as you walked
> under an open window, a violin
> yielded itself to your hearing. All this was mission.
> But could you accomplish it? Weren't you always
> distracted by expectation, as if every event
> announced a beloved? (Where you can find a place
> to keep her, with all the huge strange thoughts inside you
> going and coming and often staying all night.)[17]

The reader is implicated as the voice crawls inside us and demands that we acknowledge our part in the passage: "Yes--the springtime needed you." And like Pynchon's chilling announcement, "The holy aardvark has dug her hole," Rilke's cold, matter-of-fact observation, "All this was mission," lands with resounding authority. Finally, both voices pose questions that keep the reader uncomfortably straddled between the rhetorical and the literal.

As indicated earlier, although this three-part categorization

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[17]Rilke, "The First Elegy," p. 151.

serves to illustrate Pynchon's use of multiple narrative voices, these three voices never quite stay where they belong. Rather, they crop up in sections where the locale does not correctly correspond. In this way, Pynchon manages to create an adaptation of what Barthes refers to as a narrative "braid." In S/Z, Barthes "rewrites" an obscure Balzac novella called Sarrasine by assigning to it five codes, under which he groups all textual signifiers. His definition of the "braided" text is as follows: each sequence of the novel waits isolated, like an inactive bobbin from an unfinished piece of Valenciennes lace, and is taken up when needed by "the lace maker"; the thread is then woven into the frame, and thus the pattern (the narrative discourse) is moved forward. Now, each braid can actually be seen as a grouping of codes, and each code is seen as a voice. When each voice is alone, it does no labor, like the isolated bobbin mentioned above: "it expresses; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation."[18] Barthes goes on to call attention to Freud's analysis of the braiding act: the labor of weaving is symbolic of a woman braiding her pubic hairs to form the absent penis. Thus, to reduce the text to a "unity of meaning" is to cut off this braid--to castrate the text.[19]

This is central to Pynchon's narrative design since it always thwarts a "unity of meaning" and subverts our traditional

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[18]Barthes, p. 160.

[19]Ibid.

approaches to reading. His multiple narrative voices (we are transposing Barthes' concept literally to make a point) weave into one another, forming an intricate voice "braid" that does not allow for a single paraphrasable signification. To insist upon such a univocal reading would, in Barthes' Freudian terms, castrate Pynchon's text.

We will first look at Pynchon's "weaving" of the Slothropian voice. Late in the text, after Slothrop disassembles, the cartoon voice infiltrates the text,[20] as if Tyrone were "scattered" all over the narrative voice as well. For example, this passage features Roger Mexico, who is escaping from security police after committing the Counterforce's first thumb-in-yer-nose act:

> MANIAC ASSAULTS OIL PARLEY After ----ing on Conferees and [Mexico's] out of the elevator by now and running down a back corridor to a central heating complex zoom! over the heads of a couple of black custodians who are passing back and forth a cigarette rolled from some West African herb, stuffs his hostage into a gigantic furnace which is banked for the spring (too bad), and flees out the back way down an aisle of plane trees into a small park, over a fence, zippety zop, fastfoot Roger and the London cops (637).

The humorous headline merges perfectly with the narrative passages, the italicized zoom! has the look and feel of an exclamation from a Batman cartoon, and the passage ends with, of all things, cartoon poetry.

This "scattering" of Slothrop's narrative voice is significant, for he is precisely the character who inspires

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[20]Hite, p. 120.

Mexico's Counterforce. For instance, foam rubber phalli, which Mexico and his Counterforce associate Seaman Bodine whack at each other in impromptu slapstick shows, are used to drum up support: "Yes, giant rubber cocks are here to stay as part of the arsenal..." (708). In addition, at Stefan Utgarthaloki's dinner party, where Mexico and Bodine gross out the guests present with their obscene, alliterative "menu" ("`No, but there might be a scum souffle!' cries Roger, `with a side of--menstrual marmalade!'" [715]), we learn that Slothrop is there "in spirit[...] but only because now--early Virgo--he has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell--stripped. Scattered all over the Zone" (712). Thus we see why Slothrop's voice crops up in the passages concerning the Counterforce: it is his spirit--his crude, paranoid need to disrupt those forces apparently controlling him--that inspires the Counterforce, and only his spirit, since we learn that they "`were never that concerned with Slothrop qua Slothrop'" (715). Neither, perhaps, are we, since now the narrative is beginning to braid: Slothrop's voice has unravelled and has been taken up by some other narrative agent.

The German, elegiac voice invades several "British" sections as well. Right in the middle of a passage set in England, the narrator all at once employs the Rilke-influenced voice to describe a disturbingly beautiful scene concerning Dr. Pointsman at St. Veronica's Bus Station; and since the passage is written in the second-person, direct address mode, the reader is irresistibly implicated:

> And where these children have run away from, and that, in this city, there is no one to meet them. You impress them with your kindness. You've never quite decided if they can see through your vacuum. They won't yet look in your eyes, their slender legs never still, knitted stocking's droop (all elastic gone to war), but charmingly: little heels kick restless against the canvas bags, the fraying valises under the wood bench. Speakers in the ceiling report departures and arrivals in English, then in other, exile languages. Tonight's child has had a long trip here, hasn't slept. Her eyes are red, her frock wrinkled. Her coat has been a pillow. You feel her exhaustion, feel the impossible vastness of all the sleeping countryside at her back, and for the moment you really are selfless, sexless... considering only how to shelter her, you are the Traveller's Aid. (51)

This is one of the most explicit examples of the Rilkean narrative voice found in Gravity's Rainbow. All one needs to do is glance at the passage from "The First Elegy" cited above to see the connections: the reader is the subject, but it is the narrator who voices our longings for us. In Gravity's Rainbow, this voice emerges, however, right in the midst of the "British" voice, so here the narrative voices are beginning to weave together almost imperceptibly.

Whereas the two previous examples show how a "stray" voice may crop up in the middle of another controlling voice, occasionally two voices will be operating simultaneously. For instance, early in the book, Roger and Jessica stop off at a church for a Christmas eve service. They listen to and are moved by a 15th-century macaronic, but right in the middle of the hymn, the "British" narrator, manically recording even the most insignificant detail, simultaneously "pauses" the narrative and addresses the reader in the "Germanic," Rilke mode:

> There's the smell of damp wool, of bitter on the breaths of these professionals, of candle smoke and melting wax, of smothered farting, of hair tonic, of the burning oil itself, folding up other odors in a maternal way, more closely belonging to Earth, to deep strata, other times, and listen... listen: this is the War's evensong, the War's canonical hour, and the night is real. (129-30).

We are almost not even aware that the narrative strategy has changed, so subtle is the shift. As the odd yet intriguing details submerge us into the scene, we are hypnotically seduced by the Rilke voice when the narrator beckons, "listen... listen." This "evensong" is some seven pages long, and it "occurs"--in the artificial temporal world of the novel--between the macaronic singer's uttering of the lines "Alpha es et O" and "O Jesu parvule."[21] None of the characters--Roger, Jessica, the choir--are allowed to "hear" this dazzling seven-page passage, for it is addressed to the reader.[22] But the "evensong" is not written strictly in the Rilke voice: rather, it combines the poetic, direct address strategy of the Elegies with the mad attention to detail and roving omniscience we find in the "British" narrator. For instance, a curiously moving 300-word sentence about the recycling of toothpaste tubes (the "British" voice) dissolves into a poetic exploration of how the War is implicated even here; then we travel to the "White Visitation," where there is a comic description of a poor soul "who believes

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[21]James P. Warren, "Ritual Reluctance: The Poetics of Discontinuity in Gravity's Rainbow" (to be published in Pynchon Notes), p. 7-8.

[22]Fowler, p. 24.

that <u>he</u> is World War II," and this passage seemlessly segues into an elegiac address to the reader about the actual War, "the true king" who "only dies a mock death." And this is just in the first two pages.

The implications of this weaving of the narrative voices are vastly significant to the narrative design of <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>. These multiple voices do not merge and coalesce into one unified voice that holds the key to the novel's ultimate narrative stance; rather, the weaving or combining is effected throughout, turning back upon itself to avoid any final authoritative narrator. As Pynchon writes on the book's first page, "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive <u>knotting into</u>" (3). That is, the voices do not lead to some end, but instead only refer back to each other.

Pynchon's layered, weaving strategy is employed in the arrangement of the five sub-plots as well. No single sub-plot is completely autonomous; instead, each is connected with some other sub-plot in a maddeningly intricate and complicated pattern. There is no way one can schematically diagram these sub-plots and their connections with one another (this writer has already unseccessfully tried), and this is just the way Pynchon wants it. Thus, no one sub-plot represents the book's ultimate <u>dénouement</u> since no one sub-plot escapes being tangled up with one, two, or three of the other sub-plots in some way or another. While reading the book, the reader frequently forgets or is not altogether aware of how the sub-plot he is reading is connected

with, say, the one narrated ten pages back. But being aware of these connections is crucial, for here we arrive at some sort of understanding of Pynchon's seemingly chaotic narrative design.

To get a glimpse of how complex and complicated this overall sub-plot structure is, we will examine the way in which they connect with one another. Pynchon links the sub-plots by the use of what I will term "bridge" characters--that is, minor characters that inhabit two seemingly autonomous sub-plots. These characters form the bridges that connect one sub-plot with another; however, this does not mean that we can simply lay the sub-plots out in a line with our bridge characters forming the links, because sometimes the same bridge character will be the connecting link between two sets of unrelated sub-plots. Here are several instances: Pointsman forms the bridge between Roger and Jessica's love story and Slothrop's journey through the Zone; Geli Tripping is a bridge character in that she is Tchitcherine's and Slothrop's lover; Katje is the Gretel in Blicero's grim fairy tale, Slothrop's short-lived lover, and Pointsman's tool to observe Slothrop; Pokler worked for Blicero on the S-gerat and conceived Ilse after watching movie star Greta Erdmann's torture scene in <u>Alpdrucken</u>; Greta herself is yet another one of Slothrop's lovers, and she was also present with Blicero at the S-gerat launching; Gerhardt von Goll filmed <u>Alpdrucken</u> and also filmed the bogus Schwarzkommando footage, which means that Greta is also linked with Enzian. And so on...

Thus the plots themselves weave into their own narrative

braid. Since to confine this braid to a "unity of meaning" would be to "castrate the text," we must instead address the weaving itself in order to arrive at some understanding of Pynchon's intentions. Again, we must turn to Barthes and S / Z to understand the implications of the braided text. In terms of Barthes' singular terminology, Gravity's Rainbow is a "writerly text."[23] By way of contrast, the "readerly text" is the "classic text," in which the reader is simply an idle consumer left with no other function than to reject or accept the singular, unified meaning presented in the text by its writer; on the other hand, the writerly text forces the reader to be a producer of meaning, a "rewriter" of the text. This means that the reader does not approach the writerly text in hopes of it narrowing down to some ultimate, paraphrasable whole, but rather acknowledges the plurality of meanings, openings, and voices, and produces his own pluarlity of meanings through the play of textual signifiers:

> This new operation is interpretation (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it... In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one....[24]

From our discussion of the interwoven, multiple plot design of Gravity's Rainbow, we can see that this text is indeed "writerly"

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[23]Barthes, p. 4.

[24]Ibid., p. 5.

in every sense of Barthes' terminology. If we recall that it is impossible to say what this book is _about_, then we can now see the reason _why_: _Gravity's Rainbow_, as a writerly text, is not _about_ any one thing, but is instead "a galaxy of signifiers" with plural meanings or "signifieds" that we as readers must _produce_. In order to examine this phenomenon further, we must turn to Pynchon's use of the Derridean "absent center."

III

THE ABSENT CENTER

When we speak of the absent center, we are actually talking about the core around which any linguistic structure--in this case, a late twentieth-century post-modernist text--is built. We have been maintaining throughout this paper that Pynchon's text thwarts and subverts our traditional, cause- and-effect approaches to reading, and now we are ready to examine the crux of this strategy: his use of the absent structural center. We must first familiarize ourselves with the work of French deconstructionist philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida. This discussion will involve an examination of Pynchon's view of language and will lead to an explication of Gravity's Rainbow's narrative structure, which we will learn is actually a narrative "deconstructure. Once we arrive at an understanding of this concept, we will be better equipped to discuss Gravity's Rainbow as a writerly text.

In his ground-breaking essay, "Structure, Sign and Playin the Human Sciences," Derrida reveals the essential paradox of all classical thought concerning narrative structure. According to Derrida, the traditional view holds that any structure must have a center, which we can think of as some point of departure. That is, a structure is organized around some fixed origin, some central signified, some point of presence--what we have termed in the readerly text as the "unity of meaning." In Paradise Lost,

for instance, the central signified or point of origin is the justification of God's ways to men. The classicists felt that the center was paradoxically the thing around which a structure was constituted, while at the same time it escaped structurality. The center, that is, was both inside the structure and outside it.[25] We can look at this another way. Although the point of origin of a narrative structure is its unified, paraphrasable meaning, this center, while being the thing around which the narrative structure--the _totality_--is organized, escapes any structural analysis because it is not part of the totality--that is, it exists outside the structure. It should not itself have the attributes of structure applied to it:

> The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality _has its center elsewhere_. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure...is contradictorily coherent.[26]

The classicists want to have their cake and eat it too: they want a structure with a center, but they want that center to be set apart, to be above, the false, man-made construct of a totality.

As it stands, this paradox seems irresolvable. If we do allow the center to be encased in structural confines, then any structural analysis will ultimately lead to just one more structure that would need to be explicated; this structure would, by extension, need a center as well, _ad infinitum_. There

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[25]Jacques Derrida, "Structure Sign and Play," _Critical Theory Since 1965_, ed. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1986), p.84.

[26]Ibid.

has to be a point of origin beyond which we can go no further, and this origin must escape structurality. This seemingly inescapable paradox renders ny theory of structure vastly problematical, because, as Derrida asserts, "The entire history of the concept of structure... must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center." [27] In other words, each time we think we have reached a point of origin, and find that it too is subject to structurality, then we must now substitute for this so-called "center" another point of presence. And herein lies the primary problem in this paradox: regardless of the fact that the classicists want to have the center exist somehow outside the structure, if the center is also part of the structure, then it simply cannot escape structurality. This is what Derrida is saying is "the history of the concept of structure:" every so-called center ultimately proves to be subject to structurality.

Now, Derrida posits a new concept of the center that seems to "disrupt" this untidy paradox by removing the center from the structure entirely. The central presence, he states, is never inside the structure, but rather "has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute."[28] That is, the whole point of the structure is not that it is organized around a point of origin, but that it represents and is substituted for the point of origin; what this means is that the center is absent from the

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

structure entirely--is absent, that is, as soon as its structural substitute comes into being.

Derrida's critique of structure leads, as the title of his essay suggests, to a radical critique of the linguistic sign. The entire movement of post-structuralist thought takes the classical relationship of signifier and signified and renders it problematical. In Paradise Lost, for example, we never reach the central signified, "the justification of God's ways to men," hidden somewhere in those twelve books; what we have is a structure--an intricate chain of signifiers--that represents and is substituted for that central signified. As soon as the central signified is represented by a signifier, it has immediately--"always already"--been replaced by that signifier. In terms of discourse, we can say that its center, or central presence, is always already absent throughout the chain of signifiers. Derrida, then, rejects the idea of logocentrism and proposes in its stead the decentered chain of signifiers.[29] The meaning of any text is not to be found in trying to totalize this chain of signifiers toward this center--a practice which, Derrida asserts, is useless and impossible, since the center is always absent--but meaning is rather produced in the play of the signifiers, which he terms as the "disruption of presence."[30] The chain of signifiers is actually a system of differences and play lies in

[29]By "logocentrism," I mean here to suggest a view of structure centered around some transcendental logos.

[30]Ibid., p. 91.

the movement of this chain. It is like Barthes and his braided text: we cannot reduce this intricate woven braid of narrative voices and textual signifiers to a "unity of meaning" (a center), but must instead recognize the plurality of signifiers and produce meanings found in the play of the weaving itself ("rewriting the text"). And these meanings are produced by determining how the signifiers disrupt or deconstruct this always already absent center.

The concept of a decentered structure is the central component to both Derrida's and, as we shall see, Pynchon's view of language. For Derrida, the sign, or signifier, does not have an origin or a center but is rather itself a substitute for that center. The center--or the meaning, the transcendental signified --is always already absent from the substitutive word. This means that there is no way a word can ever "reach" its absolute meaning; there is no "being" of the word in the Platonic sense, only becoming, only play. Derrida wants to affirm "the play of the world and the innocence of becoming," wherein signs are faultless, without truth, without origin to serve as interpretation.[31]

Pynchon too recognizes that words can never "reach" the thing they are signifying. For him, words are "only delta-t from the things they stand for" (501), but that "delta-t," however small, is irreconcilably crucial, for it affirms language's ultimate inadequacy.[32] The more man, the namer of things, continues in

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[31] Ibid. p. 93.

[32] Hite, p. 36.

this "mania of name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing," the more man is setting himself even "more hopelessly apart from named" (391). The name, in the Derridean sense, replaces the named and can never get back to this central presence. But it is the "getting back to" that is the whole point of language; that is, we use language in order to get to that transcendental signified. In a passage saturated in bitter irony, Pynchon describes the quest for that transcendental signified in terms of molecular structure:

> The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment, left on the outside of Earth, at the mercy of a Gravity we have only begun to learn how to detect and measure, must go on blundering inside our front brain faith in Kute Korrespondences, hoping that for each psi-synthetic taken from Earth's soul there is a molecule, secular, more or less ordinary and named, over here--kicking endlessly among plastic trivia, finding in each a Deeper Significance and trying to string them together like terms of a power series hoping to zero in on the tremendous and secret Function whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken... (590)

The struggle to uncover the origin, the center that escapes structurality, is nothing more than "kicking endlessly among plastic trivia, finding in each a Deeper Significance." This recalls the problem encountered by the classicists: every time they thought they had found a center of a structure, they found that "center" was just another structure. The "secret Function" is the center that exists outside a language that seeks to name it. Pynchon's "Kute Korrespondences" connect the secular molecule, "more or less ordinarily named," to the "power series" whose solution will give the "secret Fucntion." Here, the mathematical imagery corresponds--not cutely but despairingly--to

the "power series" of verbal molecules. In a final irony, which is neither cute nor despairing, the passage thus points to a rather striking series of similarities connecting Derrida, Barthes, and Pynchon.

This "endless kicking" for the center is at the heart of Pynchon's text. Although he recognizes that there is no center where there is language, he also recognizes that language is all we have. As Mendelson writes, "One cannot speak outside of language, and one cannot speak the truth within it." [33] So Pynchon's text, if it is going to be aware of the inadequacies of language, must also be aware that it has no center. And now we are finally prepared to discuss Gravity's Rainbow as a dramatic illustration of the decentered text.

The immediate "tangible" center of the text is the German V-2 rocket, which dropped repeatedly on London in the latter years of World War II. It could be said that the text, in the most elementary terms, is about the V-2. The most striking characteristic of the V-2 was the fact that it was faster than the speed of sound, and the implications of this are intrinsically important to Pynchon's thematic design. Because the V-2 arrived before its victim heard it, the rocket was, for its victim, "absolutely and forever without sound" (760). There was no way of knowing that the rocket was even approaching, and the only way anyone knew if the thing had arrived was to survive its blast: first the arrival and explosion, then the heralding sound.

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[33] Mendelson, p. 35.

Another way of stating this is that any knowledge of its <u>presence</u> for the survivor was always going to be impossible, because the survivor could be aware of nothing more than the always already exploded. The other side of the coin, concerning the rocket;s presence for the victim, is obvious.

If we use the image implied by the novel's title, we can say that anyone on the <u>descent</u> end of the rocket's rainbow trajectory would never be tangibly aware of the rocket itself, only its after-effects. That is, he would either die before he knew it was there or learn of its (already absent) presence after it had arrived. Now, one of the metonymic meanings Pynchon attaches to the V-2 is death: the rocket is death personified, in a way. Thus, those on the <u>ascent</u> end, watching the rocket take off, never experienced its <u>raison d'etre</u>, either; all they saw was the rocket as a <u>symbol</u>, a <u>substitute</u>, or <u>signifier</u> of death. It did not approach its central signified--death--until it soundlessly struck ground, and then, when its arrival was heralded shortly thereafter, it ceased to signify anything. It is itself a signifier that can never be perceived in possesion of its own transcendental signified.

The "soundless" approach of the rocket can be seen in terms of infinitesimals, denoted in the text by "delta-t." The delta-t in calculus represents a distance between successive points along a time line, the intervals each having a width on a graph of delta-t. As delta-t approaches zero, the width of the intervals decreases, and this width can be infinitely decreased without

ever approaching zero.[34] "Zero" for Pynchon signifies death, as we can see in his depiction of the plight of the suicidal Otukungurua Hereros, the Empty Ones: "The Empty Ones can guarantee a day when the last Zone-Herero will die, a final zero to a collective history fully lived. It has appeal" (318). Death, then, is "the last delta-t" (760). Death can also be seen as a center that can never be reached by language; we can get closer and closer to it, dividing the delta-t distance smaller and smaller, but once we finally cross the last delta-t, we have entered a realm where language cannot go.

That is why the novel ends the way it does. The narrator turns to the reader in the present tense and tells him that he is in a theater watching "a film we have not learned to see..." (760). The film is actually the text, and we find that it "has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out." In any case, the narrative has been cut off. And above the theater, above us, is "that pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound." The S-gerät is on its way to that "last delta-t" distance above our heads. The narrator invites us to sing or touch the person next to us, here in our last minutes. And just before the Rocket does reach "its last immeasurable gap above the roof of this old theater," the narrative ends, unfinished. It must end this way, because for the narrative to reach its final dénouement, it must finally arrive

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[34]Lance Ozier, "The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow," Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 195.

at zero, that "last delta-t," and there is no way one can write about something that exists outside of language. In Pynchon's mathematical terms, there is no way to totalize the zero. The book's meaning, then, is found in the decentering play of signifiers, in their disruption of this central presence, and the book's structure, since it ultimately leads to the last delta-t without ever possibly reaching it, is a decentered structure: a <u>deconstructure</u>.

Although V-2 rockets in general are prevalent throughout the work, one particular V-2 serves as the immediate, tangible center referred to above. It is the A4 Schwarzgerät, with the serial number 00000. Built by Blicero to house his sacrificial boyfriend Gottfried, the A4 is precisely the rocket that comes crashing down on the reader at the novel's end, taking us all to that "last delta-t." Indeed, it could be falling throughout the novel, its delta-t decreasing as the story progresses. But from the opening sentence, we find that the A4 is already absent: "A screaming comes across the sky" (3). Here, we find that the rocket has <u>already</u> hit, it has gone beyond the last delta-t. That is why the first section of the novel is called "Beyond the Zero." The novel is [de]constructed, then, in imitation of the benzene molecule, depicted in Friedrich August Kekule's dream as "the Great Serpent holding its tail in its mouth, the dreaming serpent which surrounds the World" (412). Does this circular structure mean that the text is designed to illustrate <u>wholeness</u>? This is a necessary confrontation of two structural

modes--a decentered text built as a closed system--and it illustrates the language paradox indicated earlier. On the one hand, there is no way one can speak or write a novel outside of language, so Pynchon has constructed his "intricate chain of signifiers" in a decidedly circular fashion so that it ends with its tale in its mouth: thus, there is an imitation of wholeness. This circular structure is undermined, however, by the fact that the text does not and cannot cross that last delta-t to its point of presence, and so the text is decentered and the circular construction is only another example of the endless play of signifiers that only serve as substitutes for that absent center. The two structural modes seem mutually exclusive, but the text necessarily employs both.

The text's five sub-plots all, in one way or another, revolve around the A4 like the five zeros of the serial number. First, we have Tyrone Slothrop's destiny, which is somehow tied in with the A4 and its mysterious plastic Impolex G, and Pointsman, who is obsessed with determining the source of Slothrop's erection conditioning. Next we have Roger Mexico, who uses a Poisson equation to determine the frequency of the rocket hits. Enzian leads the Schwarzkommando in a religious search for the remains of the A4, and Franz Pökler works on the mysterious rocket's construction. And of course, Major Weissmann is the A4's designer and launcher.

The A4, or S-gerät, is used metonymically by Pynchon to represent Gravity's Rainbow's central haunting presence, the

established powers that control the novel. Referred to only as a plural "They," this obscure creation is paradoxically all over the novel yet never truly approached. It is significant that the novel's central presence is linguistically nothing more than a plural pronoun without any discernible antecedent, because here we have a supreme instance of a signifier without a signified. It does not even have a reference point <u>within</u> the discourse for us to consult. "They" are simply forever at play throughout the entire the novel: a "secret Function" without a proper name.

"They" represent the work's primary thematic opposition: either everything is connected and governed by Them, or nothing is connected to anything, "a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). But reading Pynchon is not simply a game of determining which is the case. Rather, as Molly Hite maintains, Pynchon demands that we include the middle category, what is <u>between</u> absolute order and absolute chaos, <u>between</u> the zero and the one. She points out that novels are traditionally read as totalizing structures that derive their energy from their "promise to reveal the intrinsic connections uniting apparently contingent elements."[35] Slothrop, Pökler, Enzian, and Tchitcherine are all in search of something, and the final meanings of these quests are dependent on the determination of whether or not each person's destiny is being controlled by Them or left to spiral into chaos.

By setting up these two binary opposites, Pynchon shows how

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[35]Hite, pp. 17-18.

effectively they rule out any "middle:" if reality is either controlled by "an all-embracing `plot'" or not controlled at all, then there is no room for "the possibility of local meaning-systems that claim to be partial reflections of reality--novels, for instance."

> Pynchon's novels themselves are "middles," and they demonstrate how much significance can be included within a plurality of limited, contingent, overlapping systems that coexist and form relations with one another without achieving abstract intellectual closure.[36]

We have returned to the notion of the writerly text. In terms of our binary opposition, we see that the writerly belongs in the "middle," for the writerly does not put the reader in the position of accepting or rejecting one of the two possible outcomes (everything is connected / nothing is connected). Rather than affording the reader the comfort of "abstract intellectual closure," the text demands demands that the reader produce significance and meaning in the "plurality of limited, contingent, overlapping systems" that are the hallmark of this text. We will find no central presence in this novel--if it exists, it has already always been replaced by the ominous plural pronoun "They"--, so the crux of the text is the way in which its five, interwoven sub-plots disrupt any hint of closure.

The cornerstone to this disruptive approach is Pynchon's undermining of causal relationships--the crux of any totalizing gesture--and this will be the topic of our third and final area

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[36]Ibid., p. 21.

of inquiry. Once Pynchon's ideas on cause-and-effect have been established, we will be prepared to illustrate the novel's subversive and anti-causal deconstructure, which lies at the heart of this decentered text.

IV

RANDOMNESS AND FRIGHT

As readers of a novel, it is our tendency to interpret events in terms of all other events in the text, judging some events as "causes" and others as "effects." We interpret the end of the novel as the final "effect" of all the preceding "causes," and we take with us what we comfortably call our "reading" of the work. One of the central ways Pynchon's writerly text resists a "unity of meaning" is the way it does not seem to "add up" causally, and here we approach the last component of the subversive structure of Gravity's Rainbow.

Hayden White, in an essay entitled "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," argues that regardless of the notion that historical documents are ideally a collection of "facts," they are nonetheless texts written by men with biased views. White insists that the historical narrative is unavoidably structured after fictions--indeed, that the historical narrative is a verbal fiction--and that the "facts" are "as much invented as found."[37] His argument rests on the realization that in any historical document, the act of determining which events are considered "causes" and which "effects" rests on the order and manner in which the events are emplotted by the historian. This endeavor is obviously necessary, because, White argues, "facts" in their

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[37] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," Critical Theory Since 1965, eds. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee, Florida: University Press, 1986), p. 396.

unprocessed form make no sense at all; that is, "no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story elements."[38] Furthermore:

> The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like--in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play.[39]

Thus, historical documents, in order to present some causal, continous mapping of historical events, rely on the tools normally reserved for novelists and playwrights, and thus, the historical text actually becomes a literary artifact.

I do not bring up White's essay in order to argue that Gravity's Rainbow is a "historical novel." Rather, White's argument concerning the essentially fictional nature of any historical text carries with it a powerful explanation of the way historians present history: that is, history as a chronologically arranged series of compounded events, history as a story or systematic narrative complete with a dominant theme, history as cause and effect. By insisting that it is precisely the historical narrative's reliance on fictional structures that creates this stylized notion of history, White is indirectly pointing out that we intuitively demand this same linear narrative qualtity--this reliance on cause and effect--of

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[38]Ibid., p. 397.

[39]Ibid.

fiction, and it is this notion of fiction that Pynchon seems to be shattering with Gravity's Rainbow.

Every historical narrative, according to White, assumes as its model one of four fictional myth structures, as spelled out by Northrop Frye in his essay "New Directions from Old."[40] Once the reader apprehends which mythic icon is being appealed to, he "experiences the effect of having the events of the story explained to him. He has at this point not only followed the story; he has grasped the point of it, understood it, as well."[41] That is, if the reader realizes that the historical text he is reading is constructed according to, say, a "tragical mode," then he begins to understand how those historical "facts" are to be interpreted. And later in the essay, White looks to Levi-Strauss' "Overture to Le Cru et le cuit" for this enlightening conclusion:

> All this suggests to Levi-Strauss that, when it is a matter of working up a comprehensive account of the various domains of the historical record in the form of a story, the "alleged historical continuities" that the historian purports to find in the record are "secured only by a dint of fraudulent outlines" imposed by the historian on the record. These "fraudulent outlines" are, in his view, a product of "abstraction" and a means of escape from the "threat of an infinite regress" that always lurks at the interior of every complex set of historical "facts."[42]

The "threat of infinite regress" is at the interior of every set

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[40]Northrop Frye, "New Directions from Old," Fables of Identity (New York, 1957).

[41] White, p. 399.

[42] Ibid., p. 401.

of historical facts because the facts themselves have no intrinsic novelistic outline within them; that is, "no historical event is _intrinsically_ _tragic_; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element of enjoying a privileged place."[43] And this "structuring" of events that are intrinsically neutral is "fraudulent."

In a sense, the reader of _Gravity's Rainbow_ is tempted to play the part of one of White's historians, searching for "continuities" in the narrative's unfolding. As readers of a fiction, we _expect_ these continuities. But White insists that as viewers of history, we _impose_ continuities where none are necessarily provided. Likewise, Pynchon's novel frequently does not provide these continuities; when we impose them, are we properly inferring something Pynchon intentionally left out or are we misreading him? If these continuities are not present in a work of fiction, then where are we supposed to find them? In the "real world?" But White's textualizing of the world of facts shows that there are no intrinsic continuities there, either; whatever continuities exist have been adapted from fictional modes and imposed on essentially neutral, even meaningless, events. Thus, when a fictional discourse--the well-spring of false continuities--does not offer causal connections, then obviously we must look for other means toward signification.

At one point in _Gravity's Rainbow_, Walter Rathneu, the Jewish

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[43]Ibid., p. 397.

industrialist-administrator,[44] is summoned from the dead at a seánce, where he insists, "All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic"(167). Pynchon's ever-present, ever-evil "They" creates this insistence on cause and effect as a "diversionary tactic," for They make systems and connections where intrinsically there are none. By making the events of history seem connected, piled onto one another toward some teleological goal or logical end, They manage to divert our attention away from history's--or more specifically, Their--main enterprise, which is Death: "The persistence, then, of systems favoring death. Death converted into more death" (167).

Ned Pointsman, as a member of this acronymous power structure, is employed in the business of imposing cause and effect on history. He takes it upon himself to determine what connection there is between Tyrone Slothrop's erections and German V-2 rocket launchings. The source of the connection, however, confounds the doctor. For starters, there is a reversal concerning the stimulus and the response: first Tyrone has an erection, then the rocket hits. Perhaps there is no connection at all; the frequency and location of Slothrop's erections may merely coincide with the rocket hits by chance! But Pointsman will not have it, cannot accept the idea of an effect without a cause: "In the domain of zero and the one, not something to something, Poinstman can only possess the zero and the one. He

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[44]Fowler, p. 130.

cannot [...] survive anyplace in between" (55). Pointsman's Pavlovian obsession is understandably useful to Them--committed as They are to diverting our attention away from Their real enterprise and toward the false doctrine of cause and effect. For, if Pointsman succeeds, the lie will be complete: "When we find [the connection], we'll have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul. There will be precious little room for any hope at all. You can see how important a discovery like that would be" (86).

Posited against Pointsman is Roger Mexico, the statistician who employs a Poisson equation to try and determine some pattern of possibilities between the rocket strikes. He is described as "the Antipointsman," and he wants to reject the doctor's strict interptretation: "It's not my forte, of course," he tells Pointsman, "but there's a feeling about that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, a less... sterile set of assumptions. The next great breaktrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle" (89). Here, Mexico is anticipating a quantum theory of physics, but this passage is also a message to the reader: when reading this book, it is necessary to junk long-held assumptions about narrative continuity and "strike off at some other angle." This "other angle" is, of course, the privileging of plurality at the expense of a "unity of meaning."

Mexico's Poisson equation is based on probability: "The

Poisson equation will tell, for a number of total hits arbitrarily chosen, how many squares will get none, how many one, two, three, and so on" (55). There is no connection joining the rocket hits, according to Mexico. When Pointsman asks Mexico if the equation can tell "which places would be safest to go into, safest from attack," Mexico flatly replies, "No." He adds, "No matter how many have fallen inside a particular square, the odds remain the same as they always were. Each hit is independent of all the others. Bombs are not dogs. No link. No memory. No conditioning" (56). Mexico's resistance goes right to the heart of Pointsman's convictions. It is not necessarily a case of the doctor's being forced to accept, against his will, Mexico's view; rather, Pointsman fears that widespread acceptance of a Mexico interpretation of history will wreck all that he stands for:

> How can Mexico play, so at ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware--perhaps--that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history? (p.56)

Whereas Hayden White insists that history has had cause and effect forced upon it, Pointsman here presents the idea that history is itself cause and effect, without which history would cease to exist. Of course, Pointsman is confusing the real events and the records of them; on the other hand, we do not have access to the "real events," only to those records. Thus, "history" is, in a sense, nothing more than the texts we have at our disposal, and in order for these texts to make any sense whatsoever, the

"real events" must be arranged in some coherent, teleological order--that is, in some causal arrangement. White picks up this strain when he writes, "Histories, then, are not only about events but also the possible set of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting them."[45] As always, White differentiates between the real events and the record of them, but that record is all we have. Indeed, his term for these texts is "histories," which suggests that the discipline is nothing more or less than the records. And if we record history without interpreting, then all we have left is "randomness and fright." Perhaps the doctor has a point.

This brings us back to one of our primary assertions. If Pynchon's narrative strategy is decentering and deconstructive, resisting any systematic narrative control or cause and effect connection between the text's varied events, then we have to ask ourselves how we are supposed to read this text. As we recall, White maintains that, with regard to history, "no given set of casually recorded events can itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story <u>elements</u>." These elements must be ordered into some sort of existing plot structure in order to form a comprehensible story. If Pynchon challenges the idea of order, does he therefore create an incomprehensible story? Do we in fact even <u>have</u> a story, or are

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[45] Ibid., pp. 403-04.

we only left with "randomness and fright"?

Douglas Fowler points out that of the work's five primary sub-plots, only two come to any sort of resolution: the plots concerning Enzian's Schwarzkommando and Blicero's doomed Hansel, Gottfried.[46] Enzian chooses tribal life while Gottfried climbs into Blicero's Oven (the Rocket). These endings seem satisfactory to us because there is a finality about them--one represents life, the other death--but Fowler misses the point, I think, when he judges that the novel's other plots reach unsatisfactory resolutions. Tyrone Slothrop, for instance, merely "scatters," apparently disassembling somewhere in the Zone. Fowler suggests that this represents a flaw in Pynchon's narrative--as if Pynchon had spent six years writing this work and, just as he got to the end, found he had no idea "what to do" with Slothrop. But Slothrop's resolution--or <u>anti-resolution</u>--is one of the most significant aspects of the novel. To a degree, we might say that Fowler is guilty of playing the part of Ned Pointsman here, for Slothrop represents what is <u>between</u> life and death, <u>between</u> the zero and the one; Fowler needs to "look for a less narrow set of assumptions."

Pynchon alerts us to the need to address this "less narrow" approach to interpretation through his flagrant use of the anti-climax, perhaps his most consistent stylistic convention. In fact, Pynchon is <u>so</u> consistent in this--to the point of exasperation, some readers would say--that, instead of bemoaning

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[46] Fowler, p. 47.

his lack of attention to the structure of his own novel, as Fowler seems to do, one must conclude that Pynchon is being wholly deliberate. In one way or another, every one of the five sub-plots ends in anti-climax, and of course the entire novel concludes in an anti-climax of the first order. Surely this is not a flaw in Pynchon's writing.

To start our discussion, let us first examine an intriguing and microscopic example of this technique. Inexplicably, right in the midst of a scene featuring Katje Borgesius, we are given the story of one of her ancestors: Frans Van der Groov, dodo killer extraordinaire. In the seventeenth century, on the island of Mauritius, Frans began "systematically killing off the native dodoes for reasons he could not explain" (108). As is usual with Pynchon, Frans had no real "cause" for doing what he did: he simply acted <u>meaninglessly</u>, without regard to cause and effect. In fact, he did not even eat his victims, but instead left them to rot. (Recall Tchitcherine, who hunts down his half-brother "on a compulsive need he has given up trying to understand" [338].) One day, Frans sat all day staring at an unhatched dodo egg, sighting the object for hours down the length of his gun barrel. And what did Frans do, after this long, suspenseful wait? Absolutely <u>nothing</u>:

> The egg, without a quiver, still unhatched. He should have blasted it then where it lay: he understood that the bird would hatch before dawn. But a cycle was finished. He got to his feet, knee and hip joints in agony, head gonging with instructions from his sleeptalkers droning by, overlapping, urgent, and only limped away, piece at right shoulder arms. (109).

The reader is right to feel robbed here: why did we just read this lengthy scene if nothing happened? In an even broader sense, the reader might justifiably ask, "Why do we have this whole scene in the first place? How will it `affect' the rest of the discourse?" Indeed, nothing comes of Frans Van der Groov--this is the only time we hear of him and his ill-fated dodoes. In a readerly text built on totalizing systems of cause and effect, this scene should influence the "outcome" of the narrative, but here the scene simply exists autonomously, like an inactive bobbin in Barthes' loom. But in the writerly text, one should not look for a unity of meaning, but rather privilege plurality. The reader must produce his own meanings from this passage without concerning himself with how it will affect some dominant, unified whole; and once meanings have been produced, the scene can be woven into the texture of the text.

This scene, like every scene in Gravity's Rainbow, is just one installment in an elaborate accumulation of codes, and this code system serves as the text's only claim to coherency. Recall that Barthes' strategy with Sarrasine was to assign to the text five codes to describe narrative signifiers, thereby rewriting the text and producing his own meanings; he did this because he wanted to affirm the plurality of the discourse, and so must we approach Gravity's Rainbow. If every sub-plot--indeed, the entire text--ends in anti-climax, then the "answer" is not to be found at the end, but rather multiple "answers" are found "scattered" and coded throughout.

Given this orientation, we can look at our first sub-plot and ask, "Whatever happens to Roger and Jessica?" A large portion of the first section is devoted to their love affair, and we are given the intriguing notion that Roger's "mother is the war" (39). But after "Beyond the Zero" and the end of the war, Roger and Jessica have completely left the stage; we do not hear of them for some 420 pages, and when we do, we learn only that Jessica has gone back to Jeremy. What does this _mean_? But that is the same thing as asking, "How can we totalize this part of the text?" Roger's short-lived love affair with Jessica is a significant strand in the narrative's intricate braid, pregnant with meaning. And Roger and Jessica "intertwine" with Pointsman, who uses Katje to get to Slothrop, who in turn meets up with Geli Tripping and by extension Tchitcherine, and so on.

As for Enzian and Tchitcherine, their plots are equally anti-climactic. Enzian does manage to keep his Schwarzkommando from committing racial suicide, and they do finally build their Rocket, but everything is ambiguous. For starters, we are told that they have built "the 00001, the second in a series." Does this mean it is an entirely new rocket modeled after the 00000, or is it the rebuilt S-gerät, newly numbered? This problem leads to another: although Greta tells Slothrop that she was present at the S-gerat launching (487), we find at the end of the book that the rocket has not even landed yet. That aside, we should note that the new numbering is a significant code since zero has been associated with death; that is, by giving their Rocket a serial

number with a one in it, the Schwarzkommando could be signifying a resistance to the Rocket's destructive power. Indeed, their Rocket is never fired: rather, it seems to have become a religious icon for the suicidal Hereroes, as it is looked at in terms of "Rocket state-cosmology" (726). But can we totalize this--a group of people affirming life by worshipping a symbol of mass destruction? Here again Pynchon has forced us into a middle: he has placed us between the zero and the one, between the possibility of death and the possibility of life, between the possibility of totalized meaning and the possibility of multiple meanings.

Enzian's Schwarzkommando weaves into Tchitcherine's quest, but even this thread reaches an unabashed anti-climax, perhaps the most dramatic in the book. Tchitcherine and Enzian do in fact meet, but absolutely nothing happens, thanks to a spell Geli places on Tchitcherine to protect her Russian lover. All that occurs is Tchitcherine "manages to hustle half a pack of American cigarettes and three raw potatoes" (734) from the unfamiliar African, and the narrator calmly tells us:

> This is magic. Sure--but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it (735).

Surely Pynchon is not simply being perverse here. Instead, this is a clear subversion of the way we expect a "story" to wind up. We must ask ourselves other questions--not ones concerning how Pynchon could have made the ending of his story more exciting, but ones addressing his structural intentions. The narrator tells

us "this is magic... but not necessarily fantasy." We must ask, "Whose magic--Geli's or Pynchon's?" Isn't this whole text a form of linguistic magic, whereby words are used to create a fictional world? That is, in a fantasy, Enzian and Tchitcherine might have battled one another, but in this chain of signifiers, they simply pass each other by, a presumably ordinary experience (as the narrator presents it) that is perhaps more "magical" than fantasy. But how can a text be both ordinary and magical? Again, the strategy of anti-climax plunges us into a middle.

One of the most important codes in Gravity's Rainbow pertains to Slothrop, for as Molly Hite points out, Slothrop is the case in point for all totalizing efforts in the book.[47] When we are first introduced to him, he is being spied on for Pointsman by Teddy Bloat. Bloat's job is to photograph the map of London on which Slothrop records his sexual victories, but the heart of this scene is found in the full-page catalogue of the objects on Tyrone's desk. This exhaustive list is pregnant with codes of meaning for the attentive reader. First, we have hints of Slothrop's "scattering" in the wildly disorganized arrangement of his belongings on the desk. Secondly, we learn that "things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma" (18). Here is a significant code: Slotrop has superimposed his scattering (a positive term in Pynchon's decentered vocabulary) over bureaucracy's order (notice the grisly and negative term, "smegma"). The attentive reader should

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[47]Hite, p. 115.

also note that there are "lost pieces to different jigsaw puzzles" strewn on the desk--another term in the "scattering" code. Thus the reader can begin to produce meanings by engaging in the play of textual signifiers--here, in the form of an opposition between the code of scattering and the code of systematic order.

As we have seen, Pointsman's primary problem concerning Slothrop's alleged "gift" is the reversed order of the stimulus / reflex situation. The cause and the effect have been flip-flopped, and here is another code: Pointsman is trying to impose his view on a situation that resists it. But it is not so simple as that. We do find that around 1920, legendary scientist Laszlo Jamf conditioned "Infant Tyrone" to produce an erection in the presence of some mysterious stimulus; it is an allegedly famous scientific case study. And the conditioned response was so simple: "A hardon, that's either there, or it isn't. Binary, elegant" (84). For Pointsman, it is a glorious case of either-or. And although Jamf surely must have extinguished the hardon reflex, the reflex stimulus could still exist "beyond the zero" (85). That is, it can exist beyond existence and extinction, beyond either-or, in some uncharted middle. Thus, Pynchon presents Slothrop's case such that it has some validity; not only is Pointsman snared, but so is the reader. The only question that remains is determining the mystery stimulus. That is, what is it about the V-2 that causes Slothrop's penis to respond? As Hite points out, "The project of explaining Slothrop, which for the

reader is also the project of `understanding' Slothrop's character, centers on attempts to identify the original stimulus used to produce Slothrop's infant erections." [48]

While half-enjoying a military pass at the Casino Hermann Goering (a pass arranged by Pointsman), Slothrop learns of the S-gerat and a plastic used in it called "Imipolex G." Intrigued, he pursues this bit of information and learns at first that Imipolex G is a revolutionary plastic, stable at high temperatures (high enough to withstand the heat of a launched V-2), which was developed by Jamf, a name that is initially foreign to him. But Slothrop later learns about his infant conditioning at the hands of Jamf, and he recalls a familiar odor: "A smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom of his memory. He can't see it, can't make it out. Doesn't want to. It is allied with the Worst Thing" (286). The smell seems to be nothing less than the smell of Imipolex G, Slothrop's mystery stimulus. And indeed, Imipolex G, we are told, "is the first plastic that is actually <u>erectile</u>" (699).

Though intriguing, the inattentive reader might ask, "What is to come of this? What will Slotrop do, now that he <u>knows</u>?" But the Imipolex G question is full of irreconcilable holes. First, how does Slothrop become aware of the presence of Imipolex G when we have already shown that knowledge of the V-2's presence is impossible? Secondly, if the A4 is the only rocket out of 6000 that actually carries the Imipolex G plastic (292), why does

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[48] Hite, p. 116.

Slothrop get an erection for every V-2?[49] Even further, one passage tells us that Imipolex G was developed in 1939 (249), while another tells us that Slothrop's conditioning occurred "around 1920" (84).[50] None of this connects properly. Pynchon has given us a tantalizing possibility and deliberately undermined it; whatever connections drawn between Slothrop's hardons and the V-2 are imposed by <u>us</u> upon a set of events that resists these connections.

Even more significantly, it is inherent in Pointsman's nature to want to draw these connections. For a man who thinks the end of cause-and-effect means the end of history, it is safe to say that this mania for causal continuities should be viewed with reservations. And what about Slothrop? We have already seen that he is a helpless paranoid, believing that "<u>everything is connected</u>, everything in Creation" (703). Is Slothrop's insistence on the connection between Imipolex G and "The Penis He Thought Was His Own" (216) to be trusted either? On the other hand, Pynchon is not saying that there is <u>no</u> connection between these events, which would be a case of "anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). Of course, we must look toward the middle.

There are several opportunities to produce meanings here. First, we have shown that simple cause-and-effect interpretation cannot work, and if it does, it will be at the expense of unique,

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[49]Fowler, p. 273.

[50]Ibid.

individual significance. Second, and more importantly, if Slothrop's erections were actually conditioned to respond to the V-2, the novel proposes a frightening closure--an inescapable connection between Slothrop's sexual urges and the pointless death of thousands. Surely, we do not desire this "Kute Korrespondence," yet we still try to draw the causal continuities. Thus, the novel raises the question of the <u>reader's</u> motives: is this labyrinthine network of interrelated events what we really hope to achieve--both in <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> and in history? If so, then everything is ultimately connected to death, for death is the final effect of every human cause. In Pynchon's binary system, it is either that or chaos--unless, of course, we look toward middles. And now we shall see how Slothrop shows us a way.

If Slothrop's sub-plot is the focus for the totalizing tendency of most readers, it is also the means through which Pynchon dismantles those tendencies. When Slothrop begins to realize that he is being set up as pure instrument, he rebels and escapes Their grasp. When Pointsman loses track of Slothrop in Zurich, Slothrop's hectic adventures in the Zone begin and his "scattering" gets underway. First, he uncovers the information connecting his mysterious reflex to Laszlo Jamf and the A4. He is drawn toward the A4, where he thinks he might find the secret to his confusing identity, but this is the closest Slothrop ever gets to self-knowledge: "Slothrop, though he doesn't know it yet, is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these

days" (291). The terrible information, if it is true, would mean that Slothrop's entire life has been controlled by Them; if none of it is true, then it would mean that nothing in his life is connected to anything. Moreover, if his identity _is_ actually tied up in the S-gerät, then it is significant that the closer he gets to the source--the _center_ and point of origin--the more his identity becomes decentered. We have another example of Pynchon's use of the delta-t strategy: we can get close, but ultimately we can never arrive at the center. It is hardly ironic that at this very point Slothrop assumes his comic book identity, journalist Ian Scuffling.

Slothrop's quest for self-knowledge is reflected by the setting of this quest. From Geli Tripping, Tchitcherine's witch-lover, Slothrop / Ian learns that the Schwarzgerät is for sale somewhere in the Zone. He also learns that there are not any frontiers or subdivisions in the Zone; there is only the Zone. This is significant for our code system, since Slothrop's scattering occurs in a frontierless land not divided and harnessed by Them. With this information, Slothrop is off in search of the A4, which serves as a phallic code and symbol for his identity. But the A4 is not a whole rocket anymore; rather, it is scattered all over the Zone--bits of it here, bits of it there. And so, Slothrop's identity is associated with a disassembled rocket, while his scattering takes place in a divisionless Zone. His efforts to track down the scattered rocket that presumably holds the secret to his identity results

in his own scattering.

He leaves Geli and heads for the Mittelwerk, or Raketen-Stadt (Rocket City), an elaborate labyrinthine edifice that has been turned into a tourist trap. There, he runs into Duane Marvy and Marvy's Mothers, who are drunk and shouting dirty rocket limericks. A deliberately hilarious comic book chase is uncorked, and this sets a pattern for the next group of adventures.

As Slothrop moves deeper into the Zone, his tale becomes more and more surreal, more wildly comic, as if to divert attention from his real quest. He loses sight of his original motive--pursuing the pieces of the A4--and is now simply running from his probably-insane enemy, Duane Marvy.

As soon as Slothrop arrives in Berlin, he meets up with Saure Bummer and the Berlin dope scene. Even more importantly, with the help of a pointed helmet and a full cape of green velvet looted from the set of a Wagnerian opera, he is christened Der Raketemensch (Rocketman), the Zone's first hero!

> The girls are moving the coal of the reefer about, watching its reflection in the shiny helmet changing shapes, depths, grades of color... hmm. It occurs to Slothrop here without the horns on it, why this helmet would look just like the nose assembly of the Rocket[...] yeah, a-and on the back of the cape put a big, scarlet, capital R-- It is as pregnant a moment as when Tonto, after the legendary ambush, attempts to--
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> "Raketemensch!" screams Saure, grabbing helmet and unscrewing the horns off of it. Names by themselves may be empty, but the act of naming... (366)

The act of naming, we recall, is no less than "dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly away from named" (391). So here, when Slothrop is

named Rocketman, his new identity sets him even further away from his true self, his point of presence, his center. So scattered is Slothrop's personality at this point, in fact, that he can barely even muster the wherewithal to turn down his first Rocketman mission--to go fetch six kilos of Nepalese hashish hidden beside the Potsdam White House. How can Slothrop turn the offer down? He is hardly even _Slothrop_ any more.

Thus begin Slothrop's adventures as Rocketman, which are picaresque, exciting, and usually hilarious. It is the type of imaginative creation that might inspire overly-enthusiastic readers to scrawl Rocketman's trademark cry, "Fickt nicht mit der Raketemensch," on bathroom walls. These sequences are so much fun, in fact, that the reader might lose sight of the question concerning Slothrop's mysterious destiny. Not surprisingly, so does Slothrop: "Slothrop and the S-Gerät and the Jamf/Imipolex mystery have grown to be strangers. He hasn't really thought about them for awhile. Hmm, what _was_ that?" (434). And that is precisely Pynchon's _point_. Like the story of Frans Van der Groov, Slothrop's adventures lead to nothing, other than contributing to his unravelling. What Slothrop is doing as Rocketman is escaping cause and effect, escaping Them and their enterprise, Death: "Death has been their source of power" (539). That is to say that all control, all cause and effect, leads to the final denouement. But Rocketman is the Zone's hero--the Zone, where there are no borders imposed by Them on an Earth They do not even own. His drug-running is also emblematic of this rebellion; any activity

that goes against Their means of control is positive. That is, illegal drug-running is preferable to legally taking part in Their grand enterprise, as, say, Pointsman has chosen to do.

Of course the consequences of Slothrop's heroic efforts are dire. As his hectic and decadent adventures continue, he grows even more decentered. Slothrop's affiliation with the V-2 rocket, the way in which his destiny seems to be tied up in the connection between his penis and the book's personification of death, could lead us to construe Slothrop himself as a personified phallus.[51] And indeed, Slothrop's last grasp at any kind of coherent identity occurs aboard the bad-ship _Anubis_ and her depraved crew. During intercourse with Greta Erdmann's illegitimate daughter Bianca, Slothrop becomes momentarily his own penis:

> Now something, oh, kind of _funny_ happens here. Not that Slothrop is really aware of it now, while its going on--but later on, it will occur to him that he was--this may sound odd, but he was somehow, actually, well, _inside his own cock_. If you can imagine such a thing. Yes, inside the metropolitan organ entirely, all other colonial tissue forgotten and left to fend for itself, his arms and legs it seems _woven_ among vessels and ducts, his sperm roaring louder and louder, getting ready to erupt, somewhere below his feet... (470)

His penis is the center of his being--all other tissues are only "colonial." And the roaring semen "getting ready to erupt, somewhere below his feet" foreshadows Gottfried's last moment in the A4, the presumed source of Slothrop's penis-identity, as Gottfried begins his descent down onto the top of the theater

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[51] Hite, p. 117.

containing us: "The first star hangs between his feet" (760). Slothrop's ejaculation inside Bianca, in fact, is described as "the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself" (470). Significantly, this Slothropian epiphany--this moment of psychological coherence--also foreshadows the death of young Bianca, who is thrown shortly thereafter off the Anubis. When Slothrop becomes his penis, he becomes also the A4, an arbiter of death.

But that is it. Shortly afterwards, Slothrop is thrown off the Anubis and picked up by Frau Gnahb, with whom he heads to Peenemunde, the site of the A4's construction. There, the narrator first informs us of Slothrop's literal scattering: "Slothrop, as noted, at least as early as the Anubis era, has begun to thin, to scatter" (509). Slothrop's personality is described in terms of "temporal bandwidth," which is the width of his present state. Again, Pynchon uses "delta-t" to denote the dependent variable for temporal bandwidth. The more one dwells in the past and the future, the wider one's bandwidth and the more solid one's personality. Of course, the events of the past are always interpreted in terms of cause and effect, and so is any anticipation of the future. But Slothrop's scattering is a result of his narrowed bandwidth, his inability to line his past up into any coherent teleological arrangement. Thus, his personality is losing its density, its coherency. The events of Slothrop's life are now only so much randomness and fright.

We cannot simply totalize Slothrop's decentering as a psychic breakdown or a case of amnesia. Nor can we say he simply died,

because we later find that he is not held together "even as a concept" (740).[52] Synthesis and control are aligned with Them, and Their domain is secular history, cause-and-effect, and Death.[53] Thus, Slothrop does not reach an end in a causal sense but rather disintegrates somewhere in the middle. And so, once again, Pynchon thwarts any effort toward a unity of meaning: "There is the story of Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly--perhaps,heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time's assembly--and there ought to be a punchline to it, but there isn't. His plan went wrong" (738). All Slothrop's adventures, all the speculation about the nature of his bizarre gift, all the little details alluding to his paranoia --everything, in a sense, that keeps us interested in Slothrop, keeps us wondering what's going to happen--is undercut when he scatters and disintegrates some hundred or so pages before the text is even over.

We are, of course, by no means through with Slothrop yet. The final section of the book is called "The Counterforce," and we have already seen how Slothrop's "spirit" is scattered over various plots and the narrative voice. Slothrop's scattered presence saturates this final section of the text in a variety of other ways, too.[54] He appears as a kazooist in a pop outfit ("There's supposed to be a last photograph of him on the only

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[52]Ibid., p. 119.

[53]Ibid. p. 120.

[54]Ibid., p. 120.

record album ever put out by the Fool, an English rock group" [742]); he is Christ, Fay Wray and even perhaps Byron the Bulb; his spirit is present in the scenes featuring the Komical Kamikazees, and he and his family are also the hero of a whole series of surreal cartoon sequences (""MOM SLOTHROP'S LETTER TO AMBASSADOR KENNEDY" [682], "AN INCIDENT IN THE TRANSVESTITES' TOILET" [688], HEART-TO-HEART, MAN-TO-MAN" [698], and a strange incident where Slothrop crawls into an icebox [677]), as if Tyrone has become the heroic object of myth rather than a real person.

All of these instances crop up in the hectic, confusing final section, where Gravity's Rainbow reaches its zenith as a writerly text. Slothrop's scattering, as we've seen, opposes the causal tendency of Their enterprise, and so too must the Counterforce privilege disorder. Thus, the 120 pages that bear its name are maddeningly chaotic and jumbled; there is no coherency about the section at all. Slothrop's scattered presence does not congeal into any final form of significance but unstead creates a kaleidescope of multiple meanings. In terms of Hite's definition of a "middle," these episodes form a network of limited yet overlapping systems that form relations but do not yield to abstract closure. They all lead to neither a zero nor a one--there is no way they "add up" to some final, totalized meaning. Rather, like the intricate network of anti-climactic sub-plots, these passages form a narrative middle where multiple meanings pile up in an intricate narrative braid. This approach is the

most radical example of Barthes' writerly text: "the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest."[55] We have a galaxy of signifiers (episodes) that simply cannot be totalized.

All of this, however, must be seen in terms of a "last ditch effort" at undermining causal continuity, for while this erratic narrative is bursting forth, so too is Blicero preparing Gottfried for his sacrifice inside the A4. Blicero's last words to Gottfried, written in Pynchon's Rilkean voice, are strangely moving:

> "I want to break out--to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become..." (724)

Blicero's sacrificing of his lover is actually an attempt to strip death of its causal finality, its absolute opposition to love, everything life-giving and human. The A4, painstakingly constructed out of an act of love for Gottfried, is also a blatant phallus representing the thrust and finality of death; in this way, Blicero and Gottfried, death (the rocket) and love (the phallus), are "gathered" into one gesture. Gottfried's death, a sacrifice made as an act of love, is turned into the overtly sexual and procreative image of the Rocket penetrating Mother Earth in grand intercourse.

Regardless of the symbolic intentions of this act, Blicero's Rocket is heading for us: we are all wrapped up helplessly in the

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[55] Barthes, p. 5.

same cycle of "infection and death." Earlier, we noted the temporal innacuracy of this development, since the A4 was, according to the constructed "temporality" of the text, launched perhaps before the central action of the book even begins, yet it makes its final approach here in the reader's constant present. We cannot possibly hope to scatter like Slothrop (and do we really wish this fate upon ourselves?), as the imminent approach of the A4 reminds us. The resounding and bitter irony of the ending is that the entire text has not been merely a series of events that ultimately, teleologically lead to this mighty crash of the A4. Rather, the text has been a deliberate attempt to undermine any causal continuities. And yet, even at the height of non-causal disorder, the Rocket approaches anyway. That is, Death is not the end of a pattern of arranged events--as They would hope--but rather one more meaningless, isolated event that is arriving from nowhere--literally, from outside of even the text's own time frame. As Father Rapier, the priest who gives the "Critical Mass" in Pirate Prentice's Inferno fantasy, tells us:

> "We have to carry on under the possibility that we die only because They want us: because They need our terror for Their survival. We are Their harvests... (539)

In other words, it is perhaps more comforting to know that our Death is the instrument of Them and that They Themselves are immortal; thus, Death at least seems controlled by something beyond us. To believe that They will die also, that everything is at the mercy of Death, "is to ask for an order of courage" that Father Rapier feels is "beyond" his own humanity.

But even this is a totalizing gesture, because the Rocket never does hit. The text is broken off right at the imperceptible edge of the "last delta-t." Right at the point of the text's final, resounding denouement, Pynchon halts his narrative, leaving it in limbo between the possiblity of life and the possiblity of death. The novel ends in the middle of the zero and the one. And this means Gravity's Rainbow is ultimately what Barthes calls a "pensive text." Up until its final word, the text "seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express, but whose place it keeps free and signifying."[56] Therein lies the crux of Pynchon's decision to end the novel in the present--in a time frame that will be forever suspended for every reader of Gravity's Rainbow. We have already seen why the point beyond the "last delta-t," beyond the zero, is also beyond the realm of language, and this notion is discussed by Barthes when he writes, "The pensive (in faces, in texts) is the signifier of the inexpressible, not of the unexpressed."[57] Here, in this middle, between the possibility of totalized meaning and the possibility of multiple signification, the final totalizing gesture is paradoxically of that of suspension.

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[56]Ibid., p. 216.

[57]Ibid.

V

CLOSING REMARKS

As indicated at the outset of this essay, Gravity's Rainbow is an inexhaustible text. Indeed, the purpose of this paper has by no means not been to "account" for Pynchon's vastly complicated work--that is, to explicate it, draw narrow symbolic conections, and reach some sort of cohesive, unified meaning. As we've seen, it is the very structure and make-up of this text that makes any attempt at systematic and totalized accounting a profoundly misguided endeavor.

The question that is fairly raised here, then, is why should we read a book that confounds our expectations so? The answer is simple, almost to the point of being glib. It carries with it an examination of the reasons why we read literature in the first place. And I submit that this has a great deal to do with an inherent need in us to somehow shed light on how we can properly and humanely perceive experience. Pynchon's text, seen in these terms, must be viewed as a radical and ingenious effort to reconcile the movement of the post-war condition. This is an age where systems of all sorts govern our every move. As Tony Tanner asserts:

> There is... an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.[58]

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[58]Tony Tanner, City of Words (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 15.

That is, psychoanalisis has been systematized and history can now be seen as a cyclical class struggle; bureaucracies expand, threatening to smother us all, while language becomes demystified and is shown to be irreparably isolated from sensual experience. This is not just a sociological matter: this is a frightening observation about the plot of modern man. As Saul Bellow's Herzog angrily asserts:

> The life of every citizen is becoming a business. This, it seems to me, is the worst interpretation of the meaning of human life history has ever seen. Man's life is not a business.[59]

Pynchon would certainly agree with this view. His novels, moreover, are an attempt to subvert any conditioned response not only to contemporary experience and the perception of history, but also any systematic tendencies in their very own genre, the novel itself. Tanner maintains that this is a "common phenomenon in contemporary America[n]" fiction,[60] and Pynchon is perhaps this movement's most radical practictioner. In order to humanely write about existence in this modern age of plot and sub-plot, surveillance and counter-surveillance, secret agent and double secret agent, etc., Pynchon must write novels that undermine even their own "rubricizing" and conditioning tendencies. How he goes about this has been the aim of this essay, which is really intended only as a primer of sorts for Pynchon's radically innovative techniques. Where the reader of Gravity's Rainbow goes

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[59]Saul Bellow, Herzog (New York: Viking Press, 19664), p. 11.

[60]Tanner, p. 16.

from there is her own individual and autonomous choice.

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