

ANALYSIS

Gravity's Rainbow (1973)

Thomas Pynchon

(1937-)

“Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, toward the end of World War II, is stationed in London as part of the intelligence unit ACHTUNG (Allied Clearing House, Technical Units) to monitor V-2 rocket attacks. He is also under surveillance by the PISCES (Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender) section of the Firm, a mysterious shadow government within the military, since Teddy Bloat and Pirate Prentice of the Firm have discovered that the sites of Slothrop’s numerous romantic liaisons in London correspond exactly to the locations subsequently hit by rockets. Ned Pointsman of PISCES is convinced that the relationship is associated with the experiments with Imipolex G that were inflicted upon Slothrop as a child by a German scientist, Laszlo Jamf, once at Harvard, now a developer of the V-2.

Slothrop himself, always victimized by others, quests for the meaning of such matters, naively believing there is a way to understand events, past and present. Therefore he determines to learn about Jamf, and while engaged in an ever-shifting but phantasmagorically related search Slothrop is caught up in great power struggles that, among other affairs, involve a mysterious Captain Blicero (the Nazi officer Weissman) and some Herero tribesmen from Africa who have been trained as German rocket technicians. Slothrop also encounters Major Marvey of U.S. Army Ordinance, a black marketeer named Schnorp, some hashish runners, the director of a pornographic horror film, and diverse other strange men and women. They all appear to be involved somehow in a great conspiratorial cartel.

As Oberst Enzian, a leader of the Herero command, says, the ‘War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted...secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology.’ The rocket takes on metaphoric and mythic significance, answering ‘to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it—in combat, in tunnel, on paper’ for each Rocket will know its intended and hunt him...shining and pointed in the sky at his back...rushing in, rushing closer...’ like a rainbow arched downward, as if by a force of gravity that is dragging mankind to earth.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 295

“Both life and the rocket rise from the rubble, burn bright for a while, and then return to the rubble to be rewoven into life again. The moment of life has been made thermodynamically possible by a continuous process of decay and reconstruction.... The fact that biological life takes the same path as the rocket is repeatedly illustrated in the novel by what could be called the compost-garden image. At least seventeen times we are shown a collection of things (animal, mineral, and vegetable) that have begun the return to complete disorder and loss of differentiation—to maximum entropy. Yet this collection of the dying is also shown as the garden of birth for life.... The law of physical order and disorder becomes a metaphor for the state of social affairs....

The respective positions of the participants are embodied in the two main figures of the book: Pointsman and Roger Mexico. While Pointsman, the Pavlovian, stands for strict determinism and predictability of material as well as psychic events, Roger Mexico, the statistician, represents the approaches of randomness governed by the laws of probability. For both groups Tyrone Slothrop’s latent talent to predict involuntarily the strikes of the rocket is a case in point.... Quite aptly Roger Mexico is called the ‘Antipointsman.’ (incidentally, in the novel Pavlov is said to have been fascinated with ‘ideas of the opposite.’ So is Pynchon, as numerous pairs of opposites besides Pointsman and Mexico testify....

It is obvious that if the Pavlovian assumption is right and everything can be *explained* mechanically, it follows that most things and events eventually can also be controlled that way. Thus Pointsman's followers pursue Slothrop as an object of experimentation which can be converted into an operational tool once his specific mechanism is understood.... The novel abounds with figures whose activities are based on the same deterministic principle. Evidently all the engineers, and in particular the builders of the rocket, have to follow the guiding star of determinism at all times.... Opposing the determinists are the statisticians, headed by Roger Mexico, but also including others, from Argentine anarchists to organic chemists. They see life as a freak deviation from the probable, representing the truly random state of nature. They bolster their case by finding more and more random events, and their symbol is the 'Poisson distribution'—a well-known bell-shaped curve used in statistics, and yet another rainbow figure....

World War II is seen as an event which is not political (and thus traceable to conflicting human interests and decisions) but a hidden consequence of technology which dominates everything.... Slothrop inevitably loses track of what exactly is working upon him. Like the rocket, like World War II, like the world-at-large, Slothrop has been sent on his specific trajectory without knowing what launched and later proceeded to propel him.... In Pynchon's own terms, 'paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*... [Therefore] paranoia has to be the dominant condition of the human mind.... [Pynchon makes paranoia a new form of traditional Naturalism in which everything is connected.] If there is any single message cutting loud and clear through the infernal din of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the message that order and chaos (and hence paranoia and antiparanoia) should not be seen as antagonists of the either/or type but as elements of one and the same universal movement. And without these elements there would be no such movement, no rainbow curve of existence, and no living universe for gravity to reign over."

Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz
"Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Contemporary Literature 15 (1974) 345-59

"By 1973, Pynchon was largely 'in' in academia, and his massive new book came forth with an extraordinary panoply of front page red carpets and intellectual champagne. Ironically, the reviews of *Gravity's Rainbow* tend to imply that everyone—not only *Newsweek* on the one hand, Poirier on the other—had known for years that Pynchon is one of the best contemporary American novelists. The book seems to have been reviewed by everybody. The 1973 *Book Review* lists twenty-eight reviews, while the 1966 volume lists only twenty-one reviews of *Lot 49*. There were, of course, many later reviews of *Gravity's Rainbow*... By and large the reviews deferred to the book even when they showed little sign of coming to terms with it. So intensely curious was the response that *Gravity's Rainbow* actually appeared on the best-seller list....

David Thorburn's "A Dissent on Pynchon" is...intelligent and sympathetic to Pynchon's talents while remaining highly critical of Pynchon's actual achievements. He identifies, fairly enough, a Pynchon cult (of which this book may be an ugly manifestation), and he mocks reviews, again not altogether unfairly, for revering *Gravity's Rainbow* simply because of its massive size. But he acknowledges the 'integrity' of Pynchon's vision and the quality of his prose which, Thorburn says, justifies the comparisons with Dickens and Joyce that have been made... 'But,' says Thorburn, 'intentions are not achievements' and *Gravity's Rainbow* is a deeply confused book, full of 'mordant comic desperation'... Pynchon's deliberately centrifugal endings take us in *Gravity's Rainbow* to a primitive Christian anarchist's vision of preterit possibilities that seems not only socially wrong but novelistically imposed, a sermon pretending to be stones....

Gravity's Rainbow is now more than three years old and is hovering dangerously on the edge of becoming—surely to Pynchon's horror—a classic. The critical labyrinths are becoming more labyrinthine and the battle lines are being drawn with—again wonderfully—no help from Pynchon at all. It may be that what seems to many of us at this moment one of the most remarkable fictional achievements of the century will, from the perspective of a few years, appear to be only a symptom of the peculiar cultural diseases of the 1960s and 1970s. We do not think this will happen. But to many other readers, of course, the book is simply 'unreadable,' as one of the Pulitzer Prize judges is supposed to have said in voting to overturn the unanimous recommendation of its literature subcommittee. The literary elect have taken Pynchon 'in,' but

in ways perhaps inevitable the people whom Pynchon most cares about are apt to have the most difficulty with his work.”

George Levine and David Leverenz, eds.
Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon
(Little, Brown 1976) 7-8, 11

“Although the genre that now includes *Gravity’s Rainbow* is demonstrably the most important single genre in Western literature of the Renaissance and after, it has never previously been identified. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is an *encyclopedic narrative*, and its companions in this most exclusive of literary categories are Dante’s *Commedia*, Rabelais’s five books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Each major Western national culture, as it becomes fully conscious of itself as a unity, produces an encyclopedic author....

Encyclopedic narratives attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge.... One of the many points of distinction between epic and encyclopedia is the epic writer’s unconcern with fields of knowledge outside his experience.... Encyclopedic narrative evolves out of epic... Encyclopedic narratives are set *near* the immediate present, but not in it. The main action of most of them occurs about twenty years before the time of the writing....

Pynchon sets the action of his book at the moment which he proposes as the originating instant of contemporary history, a gestative nine months at the end of the Second World War. Encyclopedic narrative thus achieves the double function of prophecy and satire.... An encyclopedic narrative is, among other things, an encyclopedia of narrative, incorporating, but never limited to, the conventions of heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem, bourgeois novel, lyric interlude, drama, eclogue, and catalogue.... All encyclopedic narratives include a full account of at least one technology or science. That is, they correlate the opposed worlds of aesthetic freedom (which is reflected in art) and natural necessity (which is reflected in science)...

Each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels (all encyclopedias include compendia of proverb-lore, as *Gravity’s Rainbow* lists the Proverbs for Paranoids) to the most esoteric of high styles. All encyclopedias metastasize the monstrousness of their own scale by including giants or gigantism...the titans under the earth in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and the angel over Lubeck whose eyes went ‘towering for miles’.... Because encyclopedic narratives appear near the beginning of a culture’s or a nation’s sense of its own separate existence, and because Melville has already fulfilled the encyclopedic role in North America, Pynchon’s international scope implies the existence of a new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets. Pynchon implies that the contemporary era has developed the first common international culture since medieval Latin Europe separated into the national cultures of the Renaissance....

Like the giants whose histories they include, all encyclopedias are monstrous (as they are *monstra* in the oldest Latin sense—omens of dire change). None of their narratives culminates in a completed relation of sexual love. Dante’s flesh cannot merge with Beatrice’s soul.... The encyclopedic impulse is both analytic and synthetic: in its analytic and archetypally masculine mode, it separates a culture into its disparate elements, while its synthetic, archetypally feminine mode merges them in the common texture of a single book: but it is a law of encyclopedic form that the synthetic mode cannot be localized in a single sexual relationship. Compared with other works by the same authors, encyclopedias find it exceptionally difficult to integrate their women characters into the narrative at any level more quotidian or humane than the levels of archetype and myth. Encyclopedic narrative strains outwards from the brief moments of personal love towards the wider expanses of national and mythical history, and towards the history of its own medium. All encyclopedias are polyglot books, and all provide a history of language....

Pynchon also asserts the inclusiveness of his vision through his development and use of three ‘national’ styles: a dignified and elegiac manner employed for British characters and settings, a slangy American dialect that syncopates around Tyrone Slothrop and pretends to be a stream-of-mutterings, and a heightened solemn manner used for German scenes, one which I suspect is meant to recall the prose style of Rilke. (It

is noteworthy that the only conventionally modernist sections of the book are the Slothrop sequences, with their private point of view and stream of consciousness. Slothrop's disintegration, Pynchon implies, summarizes the historical fate of literary Modernism.)...relations in Joyce are analogical and aesthetic, in Pynchon etiological and historic.... On the surface, of course, Joyce's politics seem to have wisdom, rationality, and weight [Modernism], while Pynchon's seem obsessive, aberrant, and crazed....

Slothrop progressively forgets the particularity of his past, and replaces his memory of past events with garish and crude comic-book versions of them. His disintegration of memory is not the work of those who oppose or betray him, but is the consequence of his own betrayals, his own loss of interest in the world, his own failures to relate and connect.... Yet the book insists that we are not determined, as the inanimate rocket is determined, unless, paradoxically, we choose to be... The possibilities of freedom, the whole range of probabilities that lie between and outside the one and the zero, exist in the book, but are always difficult to locate or achieve....

Virtually every event in *Gravity's Rainbow* is involved in a political process: specifically, the transformation of charismatic energy into the controlled and rationalized routine of a bureaucracy. These terms are of course borrowed from Max Weber, to whom Pynchon twice attributes the phrase 'the routinization of charisma'.... Pynchon, like Rabelais, proposes a grotesquerie that governance can never acknowledge, a vital energy that officialdom must always seek to rationalize or destroy.... One of the NTA functionaries, Igor Blobadjian, has a vision in which he is reduced to the size of molecules, and discovers that the political processes in which he participates at the level of the world 'above' have their molecular counterparts in the chemical politics of the world 'below'.... Slothrop's dream of Crutchfield the westward man resonates against the book's westward vision of the next war, whose first bomb explodes over the western city of Los Angeles."

Edward Mendelson
"Gravity's Encyclopedia"
Mindful Pleasures (1976) 161-91

"It is a 'given' of *Gravity's Rainbow* that if you are a woman in its world, to meet American Army Intelligence Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop is joyously to bed down with him; these encounters include a variety of, again more or less, bizarre sexual couplings.... Despite the fact that probably the entire range of human (and inhuman) sexual behavior as noted by Kraft-Ebing or invented by the Marquis de Sade also occurs in the novel, the final effect of such variety is to reduce the importance of gender and intensify that of sexual energy. I think Pynchon intends this effect. Further, once we examine the functions of the major women in the novel, we often see female-ness balanced by a parallel masculine figure or act; *Gravity's Rainbow* is an extraordinary web of links among characters and actions, doubles, role-playing and role-reversing....

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, as a whole, can be read as a thinly disguised treatise written to support the views of radical Feminism and its analysis of 'patriarchal history' and 'patriarchal society.' It is downright anti-'masculinist,' and Thomas Pynchon differs from [Adrienne] Rich's view only in the depth of his compassion and love for victor and victim alike. But such a reading commits violence to the novel. As the grimmer of Pynchon's characters insist on perverting coordinating systems into cause-and-effect relationships, so Ms. Rich's conflation of events turns the complex world into a simplistic dogma of sexual means and ends. Pynchon's questions and values are of a different order.... In such a world, what is it to say that, after all, the contributions of the sexes are equally dismaying? For I've meant to show they *are* viewed as equal collaborators—knowingly, willingly, or not."

Marjorie Kaufman
"Brunnhilde and the Chemists: Women in *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Mindful Pleasures (1976) 197-226

"Not worrying about *Gravity's Rainbow* fulfilling the requirements of a novel, the reader may be less disturbed, for example, when among four hundred characters he can find only a very few who are convincing or interesting on a human level. Franz Pokler, the German student and later guidance expert who gives us his family for the vague promise of the rocket, is among the extraordinarily few true characters.' Most of them are involved in such weird obsessions or jerking about in such frequent scenes of

slapstick in what seem like speedy old film sequences that they have little capacity for dimensions or pathos or the other usual requirements of full-blooded novelistic characters.

With the expectations of 'the novel' put aside, it becomes evident that the real energy and accomplishment of the book lie in its intellectual abundance and more precisely its visionary anatomy of the forces controlling twentieth-century history...and although a great deal of Pynchon's non-realism is strictly facetious, the overall breadth and gravity of the book is that of a vision concerning the destiny of man in this era. 'The Age of Plastics' is broken down and anatomized according to psychological, historical, and technological currents; then too, as the perfect paranoid, aware that '*everything is connected*,' the author is able to put it all back together in a unified vision....

The hero, as in the former novels, is a paranoid, but the object of Tyrone Slothrop's quest is no delusion. Both the figure V. and the Tristero system, the earlier quest objects, may have been little more than psychological necessities, but the rocket of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which begins as the German V-2 and ends as a visionary apocalyptic missile, is one of the most significant projects of modern history, and if there is delusion and insanity in the quest, it is a state of consciousness which has direct reference outside the padded walls of the book.

The main characters all respond in some significant way to the apparent meaning of the project; Slothrop's erections just before V-2s fall on blitzed London are characteristic reactions in that they are seemingly non-willed and instinctual. The two scientists seeking to interpret Slothrop's peculiar affinity for rockets are members of the British intelligence community and typical in a broad way of divergent trends in modern science: Pointsman is a behaviorist, a believer in cause and effect, who seeks to prove Pavlov's theory of stimulus-response through his research on Slothrop. As a child, Slothrop was used in behavioristic research by one Professor Jamf a Pavlovian, and Pointsman suspects that in those experiments lies the key to Slothrop's gift and conclusive proof to behavioristic psychology....

Roger Mexico, working for the same intelligence wing, is a statistician who believes in prediction through observation of random events. Pointsman believes that situations can best be analyzed as stimulus-response, either zero or one, whereas Mexico's science resides forever between the zero and one, in the area of statistical percentages. Slothrop's erections are typical because all of the characters are excited or stimulated in some way by the rockets. Mexico and Pointsman want to use Slothrop's reactions to prove their scientific approaches, and although Mexico eventually abandons the project for love and later for a kind of existential anarchy, Pointsman continues his ruthless machinations, hoping for a professional eclat that he never pulls off. At the end he is left wandering in 'the Zone,' a visionary postwar Germany that stands metaphorically for the postwar Western world. By definition Pointsman cannot succeed in the Zone, since, like the twentieth century for Henry Adams, it is not a place where cause and effect can be traced.... In Africa, Enzian had been the homosexual lover/slave of Weissmann, later known as Captain Blicero of the SS, coordinator of the final rocket project. The relationship between Enzian, Weissmann, and the rocket echoes Slothrop's peculiar ability and intimates the central speculative significance of the project...

What kind of victory the rocket, the crown of war and postwar technology, represents over 'the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature' points to the center of Pynchon's anatomy. It is evident, of course, that the 'victory' of the final apocalyptic rocket is a hollow one and not surprising that the main faction of exiled Africans involved in the project, 'The Empty Ones,' are in quest of the final Zero, 'in love with the glamour of a whole people's suicide.' Like most of the population of the book, Enzian's people fetishize the rocket as the fulfillment of certain cultural and countercultural myths. It is most significant that the rocket represents a fruition of ideas which have to do with the 'entropies of nature, myths which to the Germans and Africans both oppose and accomplish in the final Zero. As the book develops it becomes apparent that the principal intellectual theme is represented by this paradox and furthermore that the good guys are, basically, those who learn to accept nature's entropies and the bad those who oppose them....

Partial evidence of its meaning can be seen in the picture of Franz Pokler, the movie freak and Bohemian who becomes a rocket engineer. Pokler is one of the very few old-fashioned fictional characters with pathos, depth, and a consistently realistic life. It sometimes happens that a true character sneaks into

the flood of maddened pedants, intellectual eccentrics, and caricatures that populate an anatomy.... We first meet Pokler in the easygoing Bohemian climate of Berlin during the twenties, a setting premonitory of the American sixties... The German youth scene in the twenties was similar to that in America forty years later, but frequently in *Gravity's Rainbow* parallels pass easily into anachronisms...with characters presumably in pre- or postwar Germany acting and talking entirely like American hippies. Anachronism is one of the very techniques which contributes to the sense of vision—the unified, non-sequential sighting of forces at work in the century, the whole hodgepodge seen almost as if in a dream....

Franz Pokler is himself a dreamer who prefers a good movie to reality.... The tendency to sado-masochism in Pokler is further developed and revealed as he goes to work on the rocket project as a plastics expert. Like a number of the rocket's devotees, Franz has a vague Faustian urge for transcendence.... But like the other rocket freaks, Franz does not work so much for a purpose as out of a need... 'Pokler was an extension of the rocket long before it was built.' By continuing with the work, Franz complies with the destruction of his wife and daughter, who are kept in a concentration camp near the project center under the Hartz Mountains; Blicero/Weissmann keeps Pokler on the hook by holding out the promise of visits by his daughter.... Franz's tendency to submit himself to the 'greater' project as a mode of avoidance fantasy is related to his addiction to movies.... The daughter whom he conceived in an orgy of movie fantasies thus becomes yet more fantastic, bound to him by his narcissism....

The Schwarzgerat becomes a kind of grail object for which the hero Slothrop and a number of others wander in quest. The precise nature of the device is never made clear (just as the identity of V. is never made clear, nor the meaning of the Tristero system), but it is apparent when Slothrop finally meets Pokler that the designer himself has become disillusioned and even disinterested in the crown of his labor. Slothrop has undergone all sorts of high adventure in his search for the Schwarzgerat including near castration by the now thoroughly villainous Pointsman, and it seems somewhat odd at first when the besotted Pokler shakes him off with so little explanation. His only piece of real information is that the device is an 'aromatic polyamide [*sic*],' which Slothrop already knew. But elsewhere there are repeated similar intimations that the quest is anticlimactic, the plastic grail in this anatomy of the Age of Plastics is indeed no more mysterious than its now disinterested maker indicates....

The Imipolex G device is a kind of plastic shroud enwrapping Gottfried, the masochistic Aryan whore to Blicero/Weissmann who rides the final rocket.... The age of synthetics began in 1865 with Kekule's dream of the serpent swallowing its tail, the image that solved the puzzling structure of the benzene ring and thereby led to the development of aromatic chemistry....The age of synthetics finds man no longer dependent on the molecules given by nature.... Pynchon describes the resulting system as a suicidal energy addict: 'Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide.' The Age of Plastics is based on self-destructive illusion and 'sooner or later must crash to its death'.... The epigraph to Part One is ironic, a quote appropriately enough by Werner von Braun, the German scientist who directed the V-2 project and later took America to the moon: 'Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.' The delusion that the system can carry man 'beyond the zero' is the central theme of Pynchon's visionary replica of the twentieth century.

Mechanized anti-utopias and the control of mankind by insane systems are the most common themes of science fiction, and in this respect and others *Gravity's Rainbow* shares as much with science fiction as the anatomy. Vast secret technological projects, all-powerful authorities are classic science fiction material—themes which remain alive as they become more and more frightfully relevant in the history of this century. Pynchon's purpose, however, is to explore the motives behind these conventional themes through the forces which drive characters like Franz Pokler. Pokler is an inveterate movie freak, with a particular fascination for German Expressionist films dealing with the control and mechanization of man by outside forces. Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, *Destiny*, and Dr. Mabuse films are examples of the type, and Pokler idolizes their inventors and mad scientists because 'all their yearnings aimed the same way, toward a form of death that could be demonstrated to hold joy and defiance'....

Captain Blicero, the leader of the final project, and his two subjects Gottfried and Katje are likewise willing sado-masochistic actors in a formalized nihilistic myth...Fritz Lang's factory façade in the futuristic underground world of *Metropolis* is precisely the idea: they call it a 'scientific' world, imagining that it represents the end of the rule of myth and religion, but on the contrary, its extremes arise out of the same unexamined fears and fetishisms. The pattern that emerges among the various devotees to the rocket is best exemplified by Slothrop's erections: they are all involved in a seemingly libidinal way. They are all 'excited' or 'stimulated' by the rocket.... What he learns is precisely the central intellectual disease of the mad scientists, pedants, and bureaucrats who populate the book: that even those responses which seem instinctual are partly a hype administered by a system... The techno-political system invents delusions that deny the Zero. Enzian, leader of the Schwartzcommando, discovers this before the firing of the final rocket: 'They have lied to us. They can't keep us from dying, so they lie to us about death....'

It is clearer now why the Impolex G 'shroud,' which surrounds the passenger Gottfried in the rocket, is an aspect of the false 'grail' for which Slothrop and others have searched—because it is synthetic, a product of aromatic chemistry, which...promises to carry man beyond the rule of nature, beyond gravity, and if not to deny death then at least to make of it a spectacle beyond belief.... But it is hopeless... As in *V.*, absurd, entropic farce fills the entire book, but it gains pivotal significance as the hero Slothrop beings 'being broken down...and scattered'....The sour farce of dissipation takes over until only his old pal Seaman Bodine can see him. He is becoming invisible. Slothrop has been the Herbert Stencil (quester), the Benny Profane (street adventurer), and now he is becoming the *V.* of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the object of the quest, presumed integral with the fantastic rocket, but now...de-mystified....

The farce of *Gravity's Rainbow* is very much like that of *Tristram Shandy* in its utter impulsiveness, carelessness, absurdity, and arrangement by association of ideas. It is bawdy, loose-jointed, willful, and utterly wild. The one difference is that the farce of *Gravity's Rainbow* is not funny. It is odd, with so much commotion in these anecdotes, operettas, slapstick extravaganzas, songs, custard-pie fights, drug trips, etc., to discover so little humor. It is the stuff of imitation Beatles movies—edgy, speeding, often hysterical vignettes. The fault may be theoretically explicable: while mental slapstick like *Tristram's* is viable on the page, successful physical slapstick (albeit sententious) of the sort in popular theatre and film is harder to effect. Although Pynchon's allusions to serious movies and the borrowed techniques of cutting and framing are successful, his fictional rendering of physical slapstick is not. The great bulk of these episodes are noisy, demanding events, characters being jerked around like puppets by a nervous, angry puppeteer....

Pynchon's seemingly endless cast of jokesters lack the saving graces of the very best comics, namely balance, insouciance, and narcissistic unconcern. Pynchon's jokesters are Bergsonian—a type that may be expected in an anatomy—characters who have lost their adaptability, become mechanical, habitual, or compulsive in some way. But Bergsonian obsessives are not as funny as, say, the Falstaffs or Chaplins or comedy, who...are funny precisely because they are 'triumphantly adaptable...dynamically static, annihilating all they encounter to the requirements of their own personalities.' The best comics are the ones who brush off their coats and go about their business...

These are suggestions as to why Pynchon's hundreds of freaks and idea-robots are not as funny as all their sound and fury would seem to merit. It is partly a problem of the genre and partly an unsuccessful attempt to adapt into fiction a kind of physical comedy that is better enacted than read. With an occasional exception (Slothrop's paranoid fantasy at Harvard, for example, in which he falls down a toilet trying to retrieve a harmonica, fearful of being bugged by the young Malcolm X, the frolicking extravaganza is reminiscent of the false post-apocalyptic humor of Hunter Thompson's 'gonzo journalism' or suggestive in some way of a duty being performed, a framing through farce of what is otherwise, to the contemporary reader, a theme that might threaten to be trite or transparent. The contemporary writer carries a burden of sublimation that has almost become a curse: go ye, and if your fiction carries a message, make sure it requires a torturous puzzling through. But Pynchon's business is simply not sublimation of theme. His serious speculations and elegiac passages are rife with ideas and judgments, and his farce of nerves does little to successfully complicate those ideas and judgments. His framing and ambiguity through paranoiac puzzles is more effective, the technique used so frequently by his Expressionist forefathers.

One may rationalize the lack of humor in Pynchon's comedy as a reflection of the theme of entropy: in the same way that the big idea of the book, which Slothrop and a few others come to, is the acceptance of the Zero, as opposed to the deluded myths and machinations of technology, so the author in his manner of telling an eminently thematic story accepts the Zero, the junk, the detritus, the wearing away, the bad trips, the whole soup of physical dissipation. We have seen how the 'acceptance' of nature typically serves in anatomies as a counterforce to cerebral eccentricity. Pynchon's concept of nature is entropic, and farce reflects that view... A problem arises when we compare Pynchon's rendering of that view to those of his fellow anatomists, however, most of whom maintain some balance, distance, or good humor: Petronius, his cultured, witty cynicism; Rabelais, his full-blooded carnality; Voltaire, his bantering good humor, even in the worst of all possible worlds; and Sterne, his droll sentimentalism. Of the bunch, only Swift is as categorically dark in his view, but Gulliver's rationalism and impressionability (until the Fourth Voyage, at least) create a voice that in some way stands distant from the theme.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* this is not the case. The theme is entropy and the fictional voice is full of junky, nonsensical dope nightmares-for-fun, only a few of which are fun. Again as in *V.*, these episodes of farce alternate with quite serious lyrical, speculative, or visionary passages, as elegant as anything in contemporary fiction. One suspects that a reason for the humorless farce lies in the greatest similarity between Pynchon and his generic forefather Laurence Sterne—an inherent sentimentalism that stands as an odd paradox to his satire. Sterne will turn mirth to pathos in an instant, and so will Pynchon. But more typically, Pynchon lodges even greater pathos—pathos turned pitiable—in his episodes of mirth. The hopeless jerking around of his disappearing hero and other characters is thematically portentous. The joke is on Slothrop and the other good guys who accept nature (Roger Mexico, Leni Pokler, and others), as well as on 'Them,' the protagonists of the rocket-worshipping system. By accepting nature, they accept death by dissipation, and the author points his greatest sentiment in their hopeless actions. Their jokes, their opposition to the system, their very energy can only be hollow, since they merely speed up the end, and the more useless their action, the more hysterically farcical they become.

One can only wonder if in some odd way Pynchon has not taken the concept of entropy too seriously, allowing an idea from physics, which has validity as a psychological delusion, to dominate his own view of human life. All life—all biological and historical events immediate enough to be of human concern—involves growth and self regulation as well as decay and death, and in not recognizing that fact Pynchon falls prey to a peculiar blindness, a heady eccentricity, broad and fascinating and about as metaphorically accurate as Heraclitus' notion that all things are of fire."

Speer Morgan
"Gravity's Rainbow: What's The Big Idea?"
Modern Fiction Studies 23
(Summer 1977) 199-216

"[*Gravity's Rainbow* is] a brilliant book, but...that glow is icy cold."

Philip Morrison
Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays
ed. Edward Mendelson
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"The structure of *GR* is episodic, with vignettes from multiple plot lines intertwining like the molecules of a dozen covalent chemicals dumped together at once. As indicated by the stylized square film-projector sprocket holes used to divide the chapters, Pynchon's chosen artistic metaphor is the novel as movie; and, while the idea of the omniscient narrator as camera eye has long been cliché, Pynchon's handling of the device is consistently fresh and imaginative. *GR* is basically a takeoff on the historical-novel genre, as processed by the makes of B-grade movies about, and of, the period of World War II....

The content of the novel *GR* is a hypothetical movie—a melodramatic and occasionally musical rendition of a number of stories about World War II, themselves perhaps drawn from novels. (We find at the end of the book that we, Pynchon's readers, have been watching this movie in the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles.) But this series of Chinese boxes has serious intellectual content. *GR* constitutes a revisionist analysis of a turning point in contemporary history: the resolution of the European power struggle and the

transition to the postwar balance of terror and the on-again-off-again cold war.... Like Pynchon's two previous novels, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, the plot of *GR* takes the form of a quest attended by numerous interlocking conspiracies....Germany's and Blicero's hopes for the ultimate dominance are about to be shattered by America....

The central character, Tyrone Slothrop, is a familiar sort of American antihero and Everyman: schlemiel and victim, he is nevertheless providentially protected. His conditioning as an infant by onetime behaviorist Laszlo Jamf—who went on to develop a mysterious plastic capable of evoking erotic responses in human beings—results in a correlation, during his tenure as an intelligence officer in the London of the blitz, between the locations of his sexual adventures and the actual rocket strikes. This phenomenon gains the obsessive interest of Edward Pointsman, a master behaviorist and leader of the research group known as The White Visitation, who (with funds provided by corporate authorities who think Slothrop can be used to locate a corps of black rocket troops they want to destroy) sends Slothrop into the 'Zone' of recently defeated Germany to search for a special rocket equipped with Jamf's plastic. Pavlovian Pointsman wants a perfect test case that will prove once and for all 'the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul.' Slothrop willingly quests for the unique rocket, No. 00000, believing that its secret device (the Schwarzgerat—which Slothrop never learns is actually a human being shrouded with Jamf's plastic, Impolex G) will help him understand why and how he was originally conditioned and what it means. Like all metaphorical Grail seekers, he is really after some special understanding of himself....

Associated with Slothrop's quest are several major subplots, including the stories of (1) the perversely romantic Major Weissmann (SS code name Blicero), who develops and fires Rocket No. 00000, with his passive lover, Gottfried, dressed in white lace and surrounded with Impolex G, in the base of the rocket; (2) the engineer Pokler, whose daughter Blicero keeps hostage in return for his work on the special rocket; (3) the half-Herero, half-Russian Enzian, who leads the black rocket troops and who in his African youth was the lover and protégé of Blicero; and (4) the career Communist Tchitcherine, Russian half-brother of Enzian, ostensibly working for Soviet Intelligence but actually seeking personal revenge on Enzian for what he perceives as the career-ruining shame of having a black half-brother.

Movie techniques pervade even the finest details of Pynchon's narrative presentation. For the movie audience the mere *sequence* of scenes is sufficient; if we fail to catch the connections favored by the director, we invent others equally adequate to our needs. Thus, a scene in *GR* typically plunges us into a chaos of human appearances and material appurtenances objectively described, and we perforce read on, foundering haphazardly toward an understanding of the present action—of what is simply going on. Pynchon composes, it would seem, by first projecting an imagined scene on the screen of his mind and then transcribing what he has observed according to the unmediated sequence of raw perception. Moreover, the main significance of hardly anything of importance is ever revealed at first mention. As a result, it is virtually impossible to assimilate the book in a single reading. *GR* is designedly difficult to read because Pynchon is determined to have the manner of his fiction mirror the complexity of contemporary existence....

The determining factor in Pynchon's allegory of the human condition is the unholy alliance that has developed between, on the one hand, media, technology, and the inanimate in general and, on the other hand, the will to power of those who control the dominant commercial and bureaucratic structures.... *GR*, which has been called 'the most important novel to be published in English in the past thirty years,' has the potential to give the novel genre a new lease on life. Pynchon's spirit of experimentation...is liberating, and the example of his novel returns the genre to its original concerns with social responsibility and the human comedy.... From the beginning Pynchon's writing has been haunted by an awareness of T.S. Eliot's fundamental point—that a totally secular culture is absurd and unworkable. Having killed all the old gods, we turn and, out of the strangest materials, reify new and more terrible gods...

Western history is actually propelled by savage atavisms more deadly than those obtaining in Darkest Africa, and yet we persist in rationalizing our behavior and giving 'explanations' for the horrors that surround us. It is no wonder that Pynchon writes as one surrounded by madmen. That we tolerate the intolerable is a source of constant amazement to him, and out of that sense of wonder he writes.... Clearly *GR* is as much about the period during which it was written as it is about 1944-45.... The novel is the

etiology of the Cold War and the nuclear balance of terror, as the conclusion (in which an atomic warhead is surrealistically delivered on us by rocket in Los Angeles) makes explicit. Indeed, in innumerable ways *GR* reads like a historical product of the late fifties, when the Cold War was most intense. One reason for this is that Pynchon's sensibility was formed in the late fifties at Cornell and around Greenwich Village....

Gravity, not entropy, applies to a world that will most likely end with a bang, not a whimper. And, within the structure of Pynchon's social speculations, gravity in the macrocosm corresponds to the mechanism of repression in the little world of man, the microcosm.... Physics provides the metaphor for metaphysics, and for social theory as well. Gravity is the ultimate metaphor in the novel for the human repression that is its theme.... Although references to our special fire, the atomic bomb, are few in *GR*, they resonate powerfully.... Curiously, Pynchon seems more interested in intensifying our paranoia than in providing an answer, easy or complex....

Pynchon and [Norman O.] Brown...agree that the reason social amelioration is impossible is that the slaves love their chains. They must; else the situation would be otherwise. This interpretation is not likely to endear Pynchon and Brown to anyone with Marxist leanings, but, as it turns out, they both explicitly reject Marxism as a political philosophy and theory of human nature, and for the same reason: its materialism ignores the fact that the world is a projection of spirit, and its much touted dialectical method is merely a cover for a perverted millennialism, itself an excuse for totalitarian structures. The primary locus for the theme of repression in *GR* is, not Marxism, but a strangely similar dogma—namely Calvinism, particularly the form we encounter in Slothrop's Puritan background....

In one way or another Pynchon manages to trace back to early Calvinism some of the major perversions of the modern world: racist wars, urban blight, the cash nexus of society, sexual fetishes and dysfunctions, runaway technology, out projection of every interior evil onto a nature conceived as lifeless, inert, 'out there'—on and on.... The main reason for Pynchon's hostility to the Calvinist tradition is that it divides society, on specious and hypocritical moral grounds, into two unequal classes, which he usually refers to as the Elect and the Preterite. The universe itself becomes divided into a part that matters (the immortal and immaterial souls of the Elect, predestined for salvation) and a part that does not matter (the souls and bodies of the damned, and the entire natural world). Calvinism also splits the geocultural world into a Western Elect and a non-Western Preterite. Westerners are Faustian: aggressive, alienated, obsessed with history. For them nature, the entire natural world, is dead. Man is composed of flesh and spirit, eternally at war....

The essence of Pynchon's irony is that the repressed, reified as black tribesmen, return literally, back to that Europe which tried so hard to suppress the knowledge of their very existence. Not differently but only more openly than everyone else in the novel, they take the rocket as their totem, and the geometry of its flight becomes the model for what history they have left. Only Enzian and a few other skeptics fight a political holding action against Enzian's opposition, 'the Empty Ones,' who have the advantage because they have accurately diagnosed the meaning of Western history and intend to imitate that death wish in the microcosm of the tribe. 'Revolutionaries of the Zero, they mean to carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed. They want a negative birth rate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904'....

Slothrop's Orpheus-like trip down the toilet in pursuit of his 'harp' is a descent into a comic-Jungian...underworld of white stereotypes about blacks... The journey through the shit-encrusted sewer suggests also that the entire following action of the novel is going to take place in a hell of white Protestant fears and obsessions. This is finally made explicit in one of the disjointed episodes near the end of the novel when the narrator returns to the subject of Slothrop's racist background and spells out its psychoanalytic meaning, just in case we had missed the point: 'Well there's one place where Shit 'n' Shinola do come together and that's in the men's toilet at the Roseland Ballroom, the place Slothrop departed from on his trip down the toilet.... Scatology, some of it funny and some not so funny, is merely the most obvious evidence of Pynchon's adherence to the psychoanalytic theory [of Freud].... And his presentation of character as based in sexual orientation accords with [Norman O.] Brown's postulate that all our mental operations are extrapolations of our sexual organizations.

The central figure in Pynchon's attack on the anal-erotic character of science conceived as a program of dominance (of others and of nature) is Pointsman—whom we first encounter, appropriately enough, with his foot in a toilet bowl. Pointsman represents everything from the mad scientist of the pop media to the...enthusiasts who currently infest the classrooms of America. In a less secular age he could even be Faustus, his intellectual progenitor.... Devoted to mechanistic interpretations of linear cause and effect, Pointsman is unable to appreciate the nondeterminist implications of Roger Mexico's specialty, statistics.... In the novel's rainbow spectrum of sexual orientations, the behaviorist is naturally the onanist: masturbation is a perfect model of controlled stimulus-response....

Pointsman's self-repression is as violent as it is massive, and it requires a control of self as great as that he hopes to impose on others. Seeking a physiological basis for all human behavior, he meets his nemesis in Slothrop, whose apparent control of the V-2 strikes is the author's most telling joke on the Western fetish of cause and effect.... Slothrop discovers that he has been literally *sold* by his father to an international cartel (for Jamf's experimental purposes) 'like a side of beef.' Pynchon wants us to know, if we don't already, that we have all been sold by our father-figure authorities to commercial interests, though in ways perhaps once removed. (I suspect Pynchon was also thinking about the impact of the draft at the time he was writing.)....

Jamf's conditioning of the infant Tyrone functions as a metaphor for the Oedipal mechanism: a curse that dates from his unconscious childhood, which he cannot escape and of which he is not even aware, and that impels him toward compulsive and retributive genital contacts. The climax to all this comes right at the end of the novel when the metaphor of the Zone is applied to the entirety of present-day America—America, which has always had a special propensity for the Oedipal conflict. In this vision Weissmann, having now attained archetypal status, appears as 'the father you will never quite manage to kill. The Oedipal situation in the Zone these days is terrible. There is no dignity. The mothers have been masculinized to worn old moneybags of no sexual interest to anyone, and yet here are their sons, still trapped inside inertias of lust that are 40 years out of date. The fathers have no power today'....

There is no healthy sex in the novel because the characters are all participating willingly in a society committed to the death instinct. Each of the sexual oddities is traceable to some peculiarly Western social perversion. While homosexuality is not viewed as abnormal per se, all its manifestations within the novel's time frame are viewed as distinctly perverse, and all the other conceivable 'deviations' are labeled as such. Literary-romantic considerations cause Pynchon to soften his criticism in the case of Roger and Jessica's heterosexual affair, but repression triumphs as Roger comes to admit that 'Jessica believes Them. The burden of the Roger-Jessica subplot is not so much the limitations of genital organization as Freud's observation that 'There is no longer any place in present-day civilized life for a simple natural love between two human beings'....

It is Slothrop who carries the full curse of genital organization. His epic genital capacity derives directly from his mysterious link with the charismatic, phallic rocket (symbol of technology) and, as we should expect, proceeds in inverse proportion to his capacity for spiritual love—which is nil. His only romantic attachment, to Katje, is grotesque, given what the reader knows about her that Slothrop does not. His coupling with the child Bianca does not extend his sexual range; in fact, in the act he imagines himself '*inside his own cock*,' like Gottfried in the rocket, and his orgasm is the blast-off.... Slothrop, we learn, is an extension of the rocket; it may even be that his penis has been replaced or grafted with Imipolex G. Genital (which could be what that G stands for) organization is for Slothrop precisely a tyranny; the penis he thought was his own really belongs to the Firm, or perhaps to father Broderick, who first sold it to the Firm.... Western man bred technology out of his drive to dominance—sexual, social, and material—and now the Frankenstein monster returns to dominate man's sexual fantasies and functions, narrowing them to the exclusively genital....

The end of *GR* is, in ordinary terms, pessimistic: the Counterforce fails, Slothrop is lost, Blicero's romantic affirmation offers only sterility and death, the Schwarzkommando are eliminated from history, the bomb falls on us all in Los Angeles, the world ends. The expressions of hope along the way have been few; but Pynchon does recognize, as a minor character puts it, the possibility 'that some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History....

The runaway symbolism in *GR* (e.g., the double S) sometimes just points to Pynchon's favorite notion that all of reality is invariably a mental construct. If we take the specific constructions too seriously, not only do we miss the point, we *become* the point. There is a neat correlation between the omnibus feminine symbolism of the mons veneris in *V.* and the omnibus masculine symbolism of the rocket in *GR*; but the hopeless paranoid projections that impel the endless quests of *V.* should serve as warning. The subject is not the 'meaning' of the symbol but our very Western propensity to seek meaning, to project it into the most empty vaginal void, if necessary. On another tack, the lapses into surrealism in *GR* (e.g., the pie-throwing episode) operate as confirmations of the inadequacy of a perpetual structure based on the reality principle, and the same goes for the thematic use of drugs and movie-director talk....

Some critics complain that Pynchon's characters are merely conceptual, two-dimensional. But this objection makes sense only in terms of more traditional fictional paradigms requiring that characters have absolute psychological coherence (i.e., that they be like Shakespeare's)... Even if the external world is real, and not just God's movie, we can have no direct knowledge of it, so that the only 'rational' way to approach the world is to view it as a system of symbols relating to inner states or spiritual realities.... In the modern wasteland, with all the monotheistic gods dead and Pan still suppressed, the signs are evidence of spiritual waste. Slothrop learns to read the signs of the times in public graffiti.

One unstated metaphor is that of the book itself as rocket flight. It begins with a V-2 going up over the Channel and ends with an ICBM falling on Los Angeles, and the final section...disintegrates into flying fragments like a rocket exploding, ending, like all such charismatic events, with a loud and resonant silence.... The style affirms life... The nihilism of *GR* is only apparent; it is actually anarchy that Pynchon affirms, and the medium is the message. The orgasmic rush—the continual nowness—of Pynchon's present-tense style is a direct transcription of the life instinct. By joyfully embracing and celebrating all the death instincts of Western man in a style of unmediated euphoria, *GR* dramatizes the perpetual struggle of life against death. And thus we disaffirm the pessimism of *GR*....

Nothing really matters but individual freedom, and Pynchon knows that the best defense of freedom is not Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy, nor even dialectics, but the miracle of language itself—language, an irreducibly intuitive symbolic process."

Lawrence Wolfley
"Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel"
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"Pynchon subtly converts the structure of his long novel into a film.... [The] novel is studded with references, both explicit and buried, to Hollywood genre films of the 30's and early 40's and to German expressionist cinema of the 20's.... Those range from *Metropolis* (1926), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *King Kong* (1933) to *Die Frau im Mond* (1928), *The Return of Jack Slade* (1955), and *White Zombie* (1932).... The whole of life becomes encompassed by film....

[Pynchon see] war as an increasingly peripheral distraction from the true battles for power.... Throughout the novel the central conflict has been between those who exert a faceless, often fatal control (usually named only 'They') and vital individuals who by the end have become something of a 'counterforce.' If we, as readers, are often depicted as a film audience, They very frequently take the role of film directors, producers and, in Zhubb's case, managers. Zhubb...is unambiguously drawn as a low-life [President Richard] Nixon... Our passive death in the moviehouse is tied to the suicidal passivity of Gottfried who, while 'styl[ing] himself a passive observer,' ends as *Gravity's Rainbow's* ultimate masochist, riding the V-2 rocket in its promise of escape and final fall with gravity. Likewise our film-fan fantasies are an ambiguous consolation at best....

Late in the novel, as one might expect, the film editor has taken charge.... The complexity of *Gravity's Rainbow's* film-form comes from Pynchon's awareness that our whole way of approaching narrative itself has been altered by film. We can accept without surprise a sequence that opens mid-scene just as we can accept quick cuts or a fragmented narrative... Pynchon aids us, through literally hundreds of scenario-like expressions and film metaphors, in approaching cinematically the reading of his novel.... In part, what

makes much 'new fiction' difficult, despite that it largely forgoes the recondite and classical allusions of early Modernist fiction for allusions drawn from our popular experience, is that it is generally impossible to approach it as Realism, even psychological realism. Despite the realism of Pynchon's frequent cataloging of the dreck of our culture or his occasionally heartbreakingly acute psychological portrait (I am thinking especially of Franz Pokler), *Gravity's Rainbow* is more accessible to moviegoers than literary critics because of its reliance on the conventions of the American genre film. These conventions are far removed from Realism.... They present him with a popular myth of the vital, undauntable American. It is this myth, embodied in all American film genres, which Pynchon eventually plays against a parallel myth, embodied in the German silent films of Fritz Lang, of the death-seeking controllers.

We can generalize about American genre films and say that their basic conflict...is between an individual of some strength or vitality (whether he is Fred Astaire, Douglas Fairbanks, or King Kong) in opposition to an ossified social order. The forces *They* represent in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a repression of individual spontaneity along with an imposition of systematization or death, are the same forces fought by the heroes of the genre films. The world of the genre film is also a world of expected patterns, of conventions which can be anticipated by the audience, and such a world is indistinguishable from Pynchon's own vision of the world as a codified stage-set.

Gravity's Rainbow is a musical. We can call it a musical-comedy if we remember that it is occasionally anything but comic. Within that musical framework, the novel intermittently becomes a horror film, a gangster film, an adventure film, a romantic melodrama, and a Western. The most prevalent genre, however, is the musical: not only are scenes accompanied by music, but characters frequently break into song and dance with the same lack of preparation, the same lack of surprise from those around them, the same invisible orchestra made familiar to us by film musicals. When Slothrop begins singing a fox-trot... Or in a scene drawing from Busby Berkeley, Webley Silvernail looks down 'from a German camera-angle' on caged rodents involved in a behaviorist experiment...

In the course of the novel, the singing of Dick Powell, Bing Crosby, Carmen Miranda, and Shirley Temple is alluded to, as are musicals like *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) and *The Wizard of Oz*. This last film is very often mentioned, primarily because its progression, from drab Kansas to mysterious Oz, mirrors that of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself, which moves from wartime London to 'the Zone' of occupied Germany. Dorothy's words to her dog after landing in Oz, 'Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore,' serve as the epigraph to Section 3 ("In the Zone") of Pynchon's novel; and Slothrop later makes an escape while his cohort, Albert Krypton, skips away, humming 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road.' It is perfectly fitting that so much of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a musical, for the form of the musical, at least of the form in the 30's and 40's from which the novel draws, presents individual energy in opposition to rigidity and pretension.... Fred Astaire is the pre-World War II embodiment of the ultimately anti-social energy....

Comedy is the pervasive tone of this novel-as-musical comedy, a tone we are introduced to when Teddy Bloat enters, 'slips on a banana peel and falls on his ass'.... It is *King Kong* which Pynchon uses as one of his most elaborate metaphors, a metaphor for Western Civilization's repression and fear of both dark instincts and black people. Essentially King Kong is portrayed as a 'sacrificial ape' or, in a finer phrase, a 'black scapegoat,' who like the scapegoat carries off our common fears...an analogue to many characters' fears about the Schwarzkommando, the African Hereros who struggle to build the 00001 rocket... Tchitcherine, the major Russian character in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is completely occupied with the need to kill his black half-brother Enzian, leader of the Schwarzkommando...Tchitcherine's would-be conflict with his darker half, both as subconscious and as racial group, is Pynchon's treatment of the doppelganger theme....

In a broad sense the whole novel is a chase, a complicated pattern of Hitchcock-like pursued pursuers. (In fact, at one point Slothrop tells Geli Tripping that his name is Cary Grant...anachronistic reference to Hitchcock's 1959 paranoid thriller where, like Slothrop, the hero is chased across a continent.... Drawing together characters from *Metropolis*, *Die Nibelungen*, *Dr. Mabuse*, and *Der Mude Tod*, Pynchon is able to tie Jamf to a popular tradition of characters who seek an ultimate pleasure in death.... The references to German films in *Gravity's Rainbow* are not nearly as extensive as those to American ones, but they are significant because Pynchon is nowhere else as direct in his analysis of the disease of Western Civilization

as he is when he alludes to Lang's films. The motivating force behind Lang's Mabuse, Attila, and Rotwang, and Pynchon's Jamf and Blicero is 'the male embodiment of a technologique that embraced power not for its social use but for just those chances of surrender, personal and dark surrender, to the Void, to delicious and screaming collapse.' It is this death-wish versus the forces embodied in the musical-comedy which is *Gravity's Rainbow's* most essential conflict.... The two film traditions are used by Pynchon as essentially flip-sides of the same dream logic, with the same revealing patterns of freedom and control expressed through movie desires and fears.

There is a sense throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* that the characters live like those in a New Wave film... They are conscious of their role playing... Putting on roles from films is a way of dealing with a too-logical world.... It is, incidentally, this concept, that freedom and survival result from inconsistent role-playing, which makes it futile to discuss Pynchon's characterizations in terms of a consistent psychological realism.... His physique leads some to believe Slothrop is Oliver Hardy, but others think he's Don Ameche. His voice sometimes sounds like Shirley Temple's, sometimes like Groucho Marx's, and his attempt to play a Russian comes out like Bela Lugosi. At various points in the novel, he sings like Dick Powell, combs his hair like Bing Crosby, dances like Fred Astaire, and wears a dress like Fay Wray. Seaman Bodine, on the other hand, specializes in less popular roles, imitating William Bendix, Arthur Kennedy, and Sam Jaffe.... Pynchon manages, perhaps as much as it is possible for a novelist, to have it both ways—to keep literature's precision and range while incorporating film's cultural reflections and comic excitement.”

Scott Simmon
“Beyond the Theater of War: *Gravity's Rainbow* as Film”
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“Pynchon descended towards a new vantage point, going from an ironic modern heaven [Vheissu in V.] toward an ironic hell. He invented himself as the Devil, the fantasist whose rainbow has its origin in gravity, the spirit of the down, of depression.... World War II is an irresistible image for Death's primrose path of heroes and villains who kill each other off. Pynchon's psychopolitical fantasy of war, for all its stunning historical detail, is an apolitical circus in which national differences do not matter and allies and enemies are more dangerous to themselves than to each other....

The fastest gun in London is Tyrone Slothrop, an American officer who is the ultimate lady-killer. The places where he has gone to bed with his pickups are the exact spots where the V2 rocket falls. The psychological warfare unit knows this because Slothrop, who is a member of it, keeps a map, charting with gold stars the places where he has scored. Yes, part of the problem is that he is exactly the sort of man who would do this. Roger Mexico, a statistician, charts the bomb sites. His map and Slothrop's are identical. Is it the bomb that excites Slothrop or sex that draws destructiveness on the girls?....

America's good guys are the practical engineers who claim to have all the answers. Pynchon makes his emotional points through their 'practical' expertise. Pointsman, his Pavlovian, believes there is a point, a particular switch in the brain that turns on sex or death. If he can only find the mystery stimulus that controls the switch, he could turn off death and win the Nobel Prize! He could end the war between the sexes! Pointsman salivates while devising ways of checking out Slothrop's erections through a system of spies, seductresses and voyeurs, longing like the creep he is to kill Slothrop's one enthusiasm and eventually to castrate him so as to measure every drop of love.

Slothrop begins to suspect that his penis is no longer his own. Paranoia rules as Pointsman's stimuli leave Slothrop less and less able to tell pleasure from pain, dominance from submission.... What looks like the creative intelligence of a Pointsman is the work of a man whose models of human reality as often switches emit the gases of the grave.... What Pynchon now hates is the mechanistic.... Pynchon's anti-Pointsman is Roger Mexico, who tells the Pavlovian that there is no explanation for the identical graphs for Slothrop's pickups and the bomb sites.... Mexico is Chance, inc. He is desperately clinging to meaninglessness to avoid the obvious fact in his life: his intense sexual passion for an unloving woman will be the death of him....

Pynchon's law of human entropy orchestrates the life of the nation, the couple, the family, the individual into a symphony of death centuries in the unrolling, its pattern inaudible to any one listener because a lifetime unfolds only the most miniscule movement.... Katje, sent by Pointsman to check out Slothrop's performance, makes him feel like a hero.... The hope for a woman who will connect, who will be your connection to life, is betrayed by the recognition that the woman is as plastic as you are. What looks like the movements of love is really the dance of death. Detached sex is depressing, but involved sex may be death. Pynchon sees women who can connect you to the center of yourself, whose intimacy connects you to their center, who are in touch with their feelings, as only in touch with evil....

The Devil of male industriousness, the polluted orgasms of industry, the male mind that creates structures, forms, controls that kill life, is the putative Father. Pynchon's Devil is a formalist; his evil is his ability to rape nature with elegance, with all the classiness of Thomas Pynchon's symmetrical alignments. The Devil who did in Slothrop was Kekule, the father of synthetic chemistry, who dreamed of *his* baby, the benzene ring, with an X-ray vision that revealed all the hidden structures of life. He dreamed of it as the great Serpent who surrounds the world, its tail in its mouth, symbolizing the world as a closed thing, cyclical, eternally returning, inviolate. But he was only looking for the weak link, the vulnerable point where he could strike. His vision began the system that produced the plastic man Slothrop, that substituted for the eternal return the movement from death to death transfigured, the development of synthetic polymers whose origin and structure reflect gravity. In human terms male destructiveness is expressed in Blicero's homosexual sadism toward young Gottfried....

Pynchon tells you how this culture turns life into plastic shit.... Pynchon realized that what America was manufacturing best were plastic *people*. Imipolex-G, the polymer whose every fiber is capable of erection, is the sexiest cloth there is, the mystery stimulus that conditioned Infant Tyrone's erections.... Pynchon is telling you that you are geared to excitement by synthetics, cast into your programming too soon to know what is happening, and too ignorant to realize that your father's love for your human possibilities was so meager that he was willing to plasticize you so that, alive or dead, you would get through Harvard.

Slothrop's love-hate affair with the V-2 rocket is the paradigm of his conditioning, of your conditioning. The rocket outstrips sound; the noise of its coming arrives only after it has already exploded. Before you know what hit you, you are dead. This is Pynchon's most powerful symbol for the subliminal takeover of your mind. Every Infant Tyrone gets blasted by the violence of his patents' war with each other, by their rage toward him, by the anger of the Greta-Mother and the Blicero-Father who divide a child's physical and mental pain between them....

Tchitcherine sees a large white Finger addressing him, pointing out the rocket as the human soul.... True Radiance begins with Byron the Bulb, the bright boy light bulb whose immortal beam screams 'YOU'RE DEAD' in neon light. His real name is Thomas Pynchon, the writer who staked his immortality on being the man who illuminated the death at the heart of all experience.... The Radiant Hour for Pynchon is the hour of death, the fires of the V-2 that liberate Gottfried and Blicero from the box of their own personalities, the shut trap of dominance and submission, into the molecular flow. What radiance Blicero and Gottfried achieve in their flaming deaths is the sparkle of illuminated filth, dirt purified by heat into the streaked glow of the rainbow that is not the sign of God's covenant with Noah, but the mark of Pynchon's imaginative connection to death. Pynchon metaphorically traded his soul to the Devil for his own inviolability, his irrefutable alignment of all human endeavor on the axis of death. Pynchon embeds his own aggression in the patterning of a novel whose structure is a double cross... The novel's theme is the rush of death through life symbolized by the trajectory of the V-2 rocket....

'Beyond the Zero' (I) states the novel's themes in terms of man's invasion of the highs and lows, the rational and irrational orders of science and mysticism for explanations of death. 'Un Perm au Casino Hermann Goering' (II) stresses the constant, aggression, in every game of chance. 'In the Zone' (III) moves deeper into the tunnels of the mind and of sex as Pynchon equates the SS insignia with Leibniz's double integral sign, the formula for calculating the densities of surfaces already known. 'The Counterforce' (IV) is Pynchon's descent into the underground, the minus populations of dropouts, rebels and nuts who spend their lives in useless resistance against Death's Establishment. But it does not matter where you are in the

novel. On Pynchon's coordinate system, the only thing that can be calculated is how close you are to death. Pynchon always brings you to zero.

His seduction into order, patterns, dualities is meant to increase frustration. Those who are aroused by order and compassion are the first to go.... Pynchon survives his destructiveness by turning it into a novel too complex to escape. He is the artist of tortured entrapment and limitation. He did his bit to limit life by boxing all experience into one either/or: the mechanical symbiosis of *V.* or no life at all. But Pynchon went still further in ironically affirming limitation as the sole purpose of existence. Given our destructiveness, our need to kill, to sully life, our mission on earth, Pynchon concludes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, must be to celebrate the Devil. 'Our mission is to promote death'.... Pynchon may not believe in salvation, but in the imaginative power of *Gravity's Rainbow*, this mournful genius showed that the Devil could be a Messiah."

Josephine Hendin

Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1979) 197-209

"To Pynchon, the Second World War forced another discontinuity on the historical stream; as Adams saw the earlier break symbolized by the dynamo so the rocket symbolizes a more radical break to Pynchon. Even cause and effect are thrown away in *Gravity's Rainbow*. When the rocket strikes, it first explodes, then the sound of its coming in can be heard as 'a screaming' that 'comes across the sky.' This reversal comprises the chief terror of Part One of the novel.... Amongst other things, the rocket symbolizes certain philosophical shifts necessitated by recent discoveries in physics. One result of these discoveries...is that both deterministic and cyclical notions of Time's movements have become indefensible.... In such a universe novelty and becoming have assumed their rightful places again. History, we find, does not march inexorably forward by goose-steps, nor does it gyrate in circles....

The novel was painstakingly research from the standpoint of historical accuracy.... We may also verify that where the rockets were assembled at Nordhausen there were indeed two tunnels running parallel beneath the mountain, and see with Pynchon that by a stretch of the imagination their shape might be said to resemble two letters S's—as in the German SS, or signifying the double integral in calculus, or calling to mind two lovers curled together, asleep.... Pynchon's interest throughout his career in the Herero undoubtedly stems from [his] view of cataclysmic history. The Herero wars, which began in 1904 (just as Adams began to trace his 'Dynamic Theory of History'), are a striking example of the education of a whole people in the random, violent changes of this century....

Pokler is linked to Slothrop through his estranged wife, Leni, who has intercourse with Slothrop under the guise of Solange, a prostitute. Lastly, Pokler stands in much the same relation to his daughter Ilse as Slothrop does to the young Bianca Erdmann. But this is not to say that Pokler is stenciled from the Slothrop prototype; the importance of Pokler is that, in contrast to Slothrop, he exits from the novel with some awareness of his involvement with other human beings and a sense of his responsibility for following certain courses of action during the war years. He is one notable example of a character in *Gravity's Rainbow* on the verge of learning, in the words E. M. Forester used epigraphically, to 'only connect.' For him to do so, Pynchon had to take him beyond the limited ethical vision of the historical source from which he was drawn....

Reality in the novel often seems to the characters to be an elaborately scripted fiction put together by 'Them' with the intention of deflecting the characters' concern away from the very real nightmares around them. The process, in short, may be useful, exploitative even, in either direction.... The characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* who stand out as models for action, such as Roger Mexico and Leni Pokler, are distinguished by their ability to live with and in successive moments of random, cataclysmic change (delta T infinitesimally small) at the same time that they manage to keep their compassion, their responsibilities, and a broad sense of Time's movements intact."

Steven Weisenburger

"The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past"
Twentieth-Century Literature 25
(Spring 1979) 54-72

“Our damnation derives from the operation of a business-like multinational corporation of the ‘elect’ whose purpose is to keep the preterite imprisoned in a dehumanizing lack of communication...a vastly complex exfoliation of patterns, plots, counterplots, paranoias, and possible leaps of faith, through an interlacing web of connections between characters (hundreds of them), none of whom, even those few whom Pynchon hints are members of the ‘elect,’ know what is going on....

If there is one central character in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is Tyrone Slothrop whose Puritan heritage links him with the Bible-toting American past... The sheer silliness of [the] punning wins for Pynchon's language a few laughs which dissolve the kind of seriousness bureaucratized by formal good taste.... Pynchon attempts to escape the bad kind of bookishness that haunts Slothrop... Pynchon appears to suspect that self-consciousness serves humanity poorly. Whatever the road back, however, it will have to take into account this pervasive (perhaps decadent) self-consciousness, as *Gravity's Rainbow* does. So imprisoned in bookishness that raindrops appear to Slothrop as ‘giant asterisks on the pavement, inviting him to look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all,’ Pynchon's reader and Pynchon's communication itself are prisoners of the book; all the filmic metaphors cannot turn the print on the page into anything else....

It is not just that the ‘hard’ sciences offer systems of metaphors not usually found in modern novels, but that the book broaches the question of the interrelationship between disparate value systems.... Paranoia may be dictionary-defined as insanity, but it is a ‘sickness’ which appears to speak the only hope of salvation... All of the principal characters, as interpreters or readers of signs, have a difficult task; engaged in reading not merely as an aesthetic exercise, but as a holy activity, they attempt to make sense of the world so that they can live in it....

The process of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* is...‘to read *among* the various probably interpretations of the book’.... In the final book, ‘The Counterforce,’ Pynchon focuses on the need for the reader to participate more fully in the book's proliferation of meaning. It is not just that the main character Slothrop simply evaporates from the action, although by this loss of novelistic focus the reader is left at somewhat looser ends than he would have been had Slothrop continued to center his attention; rather Pynchon gives his reader a fictional part to play.... Pynchon does not merely parody novelistic techniques of verisimilar plotting, his indication of his reader's need for cause and effect puts the reader in a class with the Pavlovian Pointsman, a repellent character who dominates the opening book, ‘Beyond the Zone,’ by his inability to understand the statistician Roger Mexico's neglect of causation....

Pynchon raises the question of cause and effect to alert the reader to its inapplicability for reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. Connections between events in the book are not causal, but are cued by verbal subjects—light bulbs (electricity)--[and so on]... The point of the episode of the Polish undertaker is not therefore to supply a cause for an effect, but to make a thematic commentary on previous action.... One of the things the reader has in common with Enzian and with all the other characters who are, in this, like Enzian, is the search for Slothrop. Just as Slothrop disintegrates, characters go in search of him.... In the last complete segment of the book, Pynchon disappoints the narrative arc he has set up in the Enzian-Katje confrontation. Even the search for Slothrop is abandoned and appears to have been something of an illusion....

Slothrop's evanescence, either mere disappearance or transcendence, poses the reader a choice. It is more complicated than the choice Oedipa's dilemma poses for the reader because she, at least, shares the need to choose, while readers are very much on their own in interpreting the significance of Slothrop's failed quest: In great part, the choices readers make define not so much the book they have been reading, as themselves.... The grail is not found in *Gravity's Rainbow*; there is no pot of gold beneath its parabolic arch. There can, it seems, be no final decipherment of its language, divine or otherwise. It is, of course, we who are sitting beneath the rainbow's end, when the narrator invites us—‘Now, everybody’—to join in in song, just as if...the grail is within each of us....

Lost in a comic book fantasy, we must judge Slothrop's reading to have been at one point surely very trivial. But his concern with texts, along with all the other characters' obsessions with reading, makes us judge his success or failure in terms of how well he reads the signs about him. One must respect his ability

to balance multiple interpretations, and to see how each leads to another and how they all interconnect—as in his figure-ground perception of the Nazi swastika, or his seeing a crossroad’s resemblance to the underside of the V-2 rocket. Our interpretation must operate by such progression as well, for his reading instructs ours. Whether Slothrop’s last moments are to be dismissed as true transcendence or a kind of Mucho-Mass dematerialization is something, however, which the text forces us to decide on our own.”

Maureen Quilligan

“Thomas Pynchon and the Language of Allegory”

The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre

(Cornell 1979) 42-46, 204-23, 261-63, 265-78, 289-90

reprinted in *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon* 187-211

“*Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon’s rendering of a contemporary vision of hell, invites comparison to famous traditional descriptions of hell, like Milton’s in *Paradise Lost*, which continually present hell in relation to heaven. By forming and then collapsing allusions to a rationally ordered universe, Pynchon causes the reader to experience the absurd. The book opens with a rocket screaming across the sky during the last months of World War II and closes with a rocket about to destroy the observers in the theater. The rocket’s parabolic course calls to mind the arc of a rainbow. In the Bible and other theistic works, the rainbow symbolizes God’s Covenant with man for peace; in *Gravity’s Rainbow* it is an ironic allusion to the notion of God’s justice in an irrational World War II society that seems to be a hell on earth.

Pynchon divides society into the elect and preterite and thus makes explicit Puritan connections to play off against the chaos of our contemporary world. The author shows the absurdist’s desire for an ordered past as he alludes to the Puritan elect, God’s ordained, and contrasts them with their ironic counterpart in the twentieth-century society: those who mysteriously control the system that results in World War II and the Holocaust. A similar collapse of tradition is manifested in the New England Puritan protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, the ‘last of his line, and how far fallen, ‘an absurd hero’... Pynchon uses Puritan themes as a contrast to the randomness in contemporary society even though he himself is critical of a tradition that presupposes the elect and preterition...

Pynchon’s protagonist of the absurd, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, like Giles Goat-Boy, vainly tries to create order from the clues that he finds in his epic journey through the Zone. The reader, in turn, follows clues as a means to comprehend how Dr. Jampf’s conditioning of Slothrop in infancy could result in the strange connection between his sex acts and the rocket falls. As Slothrop searches for answers about the V-2 rocket, about Impolex G, about the Forbidden Wing in his past, he travels through London, Nice, Zurich, Berlin, and other parts of the Zone. At the end of his epic journey this hero of the absurd achieves not fulfillment but disintegration. He becomes ‘broken down...and scattered’....

In an absurd World War II situation, Slothrop continually quests for answers about ‘Them,’ the controlling agents, through the obsession leads him in circles; the mathematician Franz Pokler desperately searches for his daughter Ilse, who, he is told, is at a Nazi ‘re-education’ camp; Tchitcherine searches for his soul brother Enzian and observes that ‘what might have been a village apocalypse has gone on now into comic cooperation, as between a pair of vaudeville comedians.’ These characters recapitulate the desperate wandering of the evacuees in the opening pages of the novel. These tortured people are ceaselessly wandering, like the fallen angels in Milton’s hell....

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, ‘the real movement is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death-transfigured,’ that is, to a death-in-life. This movement stresses the conflict between teleological implications and a barren world. As the rocket descends, there is a sense of anesthetized time, different by far from the eternal glory of God.... At the close of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the ironically named Gottfried (God’s peace) ascends in a rocket. He holds the mystical belief that this is a transcendent experience as he carries out the will of his lover Blicero/Weissmann, and commits suicide... There are no answers; reason leads only to absurdity.”

Elaine B. Safer

“The Allusive Mode and Black Humor in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*”

Renascence 32 (Winter 1980) 89-104

[John Stark, "The Arts and Sciences of Thomas Pynchon," *Hollins Critic* 12.4: 1975]: "*Gravity's Rainbow*...is far more complex in the way that science becomes a deep and subtle element controlling the novel, rather than providing surface patterns of allusions and references... Stark provides a useful overview of the disciplines Pynchon incorporates—particularly mathematics, technological data, and psychology, as well as the obvious technology of the rocket. He is also aware of the way in which literary elements (*The Courier's Tragedy*, or the allusions to Rilke in *Gravity's Rainbow*) serve to reveal Pynchon's world."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce
(G.K. Hall 1981) 248

[Leverenz, "On Trying to Read *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Mindful Pleasures*, 1976]: "Leverenz discovers a 'dualistic melodrama,' with 'a covert structure, at odds with the dominant structure of the quest': central government vs. anarchy, white vs. colored, perverted sex vs. natural love. (Yet even finding this dualism, he acknowledges, 'shows my own system-making bent.' He blames Pynchon for imposing a Manichean fantasy of oppositions and apocalyptic fragmentation' and goes on to lament the novel's lack of resolute action, lack of a center."

Clark and Fuoroli
Critical Essays (1981) 234

[Tony Tanner, "Games American Writers Play: Ceremony, Complicity, Contestation, and Carnival," *Salmagundi* 35 (1976)] "[*Gravity's Rainbow*] 'undermines all our habitual modes of apprehension as we confront it.' The recognizable historical setting, for example, is undermined by the unconventional narrative. For characters and for Pynchon's audience the world is nearly impossible to 'read.' 'They' cannot be defined. The 'System' and the 'Zone' represent paranoia and anti-paranoia, yet characters are forced to oscillate between the two, recognizing that neither has any 'locational' or 'epistemological' stability. However, by fluctuating between the novel's poles of paranoia and anti-paranoia, of narrative order and disorder, of behavioral conditioning and personal freedom, we are able to move beyond these dualities, to experience a new relationship to the novel and implicitly to society."

Clark and Fuoroli
Critical Essays (1981) 251

[Joseph W. Slade, "Escaping the Rationalization: Options for the Self in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Critique* 18.3:1977]: "He sees Pynchon as departing from conventional characterization and risking misunderstanding by portraying characters who may not have 'a pronounced sense of self' since they seek to shed their selves. These characters are shaped by history and culture and face 'questions not of identity but of perception and interpretation.' The predominant metaphors for the self are from film and cybernetics. Further, *Gravity's Rainbow* demonstrates how 'societies prizing unity and integration have given way to others prizing analysis in differentiation.' And also cause and effect. Modern characters therefore fear randomness, a loss of rationalized control, instead of recognizing its possibilities. Paranoia seems more desirable than uncertainty. Such paranoia, even though it evades responsibility, is an attempt at spiritual wholeness, as are magic and certain holistic illuminations.

Pynchon's thinking is close to Jung's [very debatable, since Pynchon does not believe in the primal truth of metaphors, myths or archetypes]. He also alludes to Koehler (Gestalt), Freud (Oedipal conflicts), Pavlov (conditioning). Yet even the apparently deterministic Pavlov acknowledges the paradoxical and hence some uncertainty. Uncertainty is further bolstered by references to twentieth-century physics, by way of Heisenberg, the dual nature of electrons, and relativity. In *Gravity's Rainbow* Slothrop is the only character who achieves transfiguration, yet he has lost his self. Katje Borgesius [alludes to Borges] cannot lose herself sufficiently. But perhaps Geli Tripping and Tchitcherine can effect renewal. And Roger Mexico pursues 'the most viable option for the self' since he refuses to be limited to binary choice."

Clark and Fuoroli
Critical Essays (1981) 245-46

[Michael Seidel, "The Satiric Plots of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1978]: "The book both unsettles narrative ground and produces 'satiric counterfeits for virtually every action imprinted in the plot, almost as if too much of anything insures its devaluation.' The rocket that opens the book, for instance, is counterfeited at the end by the 00000 and 00001, seeming opposites. Satire inheres in opposition, and Pointsman, the behaviorist, 'plots against figures like Slothrop and Mexico, figures who, in effect, struggle to get out of the world of satiric opposites and into the world of the gradual curve, the world of human potential, the world of the traditional novel,' and who are significantly absent at the end of the narrative. As satire *Gravity's Rainbow* becomes a kind of inverted epic, celebrating entropy and the descent of monstrous mutants.

Such entropic tendencies are embodied not only in the subversion of traditional character but also in Slothrop. Like Tristram Shandy, Slothrop cannot follow straight lines—'he loses the desire to choose' and 'literally loses form.' Slothrop's degeneration could be tragic like Oedipus,' but Slothrop is treated satirically, for he lacks the energy to resist his destiny. *Gravity's Rainbow* also records a shift in historical sensibility, a shift after World War I to burgeoning, dehumanizing bureaucracy, a shift embodied in the debasement of Brigadier Pudding, such that Pointsman's treatment of Pudding parallels Pynchon's treatment of the traditional novel. A number of characters 'unsuccessfully try to resist the advance of the new bureaucratic modern order,' like the characters in much modern fiction, but they fail.

The love episodes in *Gravity's Rainbow* 'reveal the true nature of human loss,' and 'are vestiges from forgotten novelistic worlds.' Seidel argues that the intensity of Roger and Jessica's love diminishes because the war intervenes. The Christmas Vesper scene may offer some small hope, but it remains a minor diversion in the overwhelming impetus toward disintegration. Yet Seidel overemphasizes disintegration. Does the war work against Roger and Jessica's love or does it somehow permit their love by freeing Jessica from traditional structures? Is Pointsman's excluded middle really operative? And is Slothrop's dispersal at the end just a degeneration? While Seidel recognizes a significant trend in *Gravity's Rainbow*, there is a countertrend as well."

Clark and Fuoroli
Critical Essays (1981) 243-44

[Mark Richard Siegel, *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow* (Kennikat, 1978)]: Siegel sketches the spectrum of critical readings of *Gravity's Rainbow*, from the nihilistic to the guardedly positive, and situates himself in the ambiguity camp—easily the safest and sanest position, though at times difficult to maintain. In the section discussing Slothrop's fate, Siegel poises in balanced ambiguity, yet elsewhere he seems to deplore Slothrop's failure.

Siegel points to the shifting narrative stance as the primary vehicle of ambiguity. He argues that Pynchon's omniscient narrator is 'unusual' in developing a conscious relationship with the reader. The point of view can also subtly shift within a passage from third-person omniscience to the perspective of a character like Slothrop, and often we may be uncertain of the point of view. Siegel compares Pynchon to earlier writers like Henry James, whose narrators are more consistent, yet even James's narrators are not entirely consistent: Siegel calls Lambert Strether a narrator, yet, through their perspectives overlap, the narrator is actually distinct from Strether. And Pynchon's narrator might seem even less 'unusual' if Siegel had compared him more to the narrators of contemporary works. In the realm of Barth and Barthes, of exhausted and writerly literature, self-consciousness and a shifting narrative stance are not unusual.

Siegel goes on to discuss filmic narrative technique in *Gravity's Rainbow*, especially that of German expressionism. He notes a tendency toward allegory, though generally the book's structures are less dualistic and tend more pluralistically toward myth. Characterization has given many of Pynchon's critics difficulty, for Pynchon's characters do not have the psychological fullness of characters in much early fiction. Characters for such a contemporary writer as Pynchon are more projective; Siegel sees them as facets of the narrator, like Jungian archetypes. The narrator's self-consciousness distances the reader from the character, allowing the reader to judge more fairly, Siegel argues, and at the same time complicating judgment through offering several points of view. The narrator complicates further by suggesting divergent analogies: Slothrop is both Tannhauser and Rocketman, both Calvinist preterite and Tarot Fool. Also contributing to characterization is the impact of external and social forces. Perhaps the richness afforded by

myth and by the delineation of external forces can achieve a fullness comparable to that of traditional 'round' characters.

Further ambiguity is generated by Pynchon's use of metaphor—by analogies recognized as analogies, suggestive but tentative, a means by which the artist can creatively organize his experience. Siegel states that even Pynchon's use of scientific metaphors is tentative, probabilistic rather than mechanistic, for Pynchon 'constantly juxtaposes scientific explanations to each other to reveal paradox.' Siegel goes on to discuss metaphors from mathematics, literature (especially Rilke), technology, social science (especially Weber), and religion."

Clark and Fuoroli
Critical Essays (1981) 244-45

"The controlling idea of *GR* is that the world's present predicament—the system of global terror dominated by ICBMs—threatens to fulfill in historical time the apocalyptic and millennial visions which prevailed in the Puritan culture of colonial New England. Curiously, critics have failed to observe that this and related issues of Puritan doctrine are elaborated in *GR* within a formal framework that is an astonishing and brilliant reworking of the old Puritan jeremiad.... The opening sentence—'A screaming comes across the sky'—intimates a typical jeremiad symbol of God's wrath coming out of the heavens to punish errant humanity.... Pynchon directly fuses Puritan past and London present (it is September 8, 1944) in a vivid metaphoric linkage: '...slender church steeples poised up and down all these autumn hillsides, white rockets about to fire, only seconds of countdown away...*this is how it does happen—yes the great bright hand reaching out of the cloud....*' This image is reinforced by virtually every subsequent reference to the Rocket.... The basic terms of *GR*'s discussion of the possibility of freedom from history's curse are established here: past and future (the horological) vs. the chronometric Now....

Jeremiad imagery also dominates the terrifying conclusion of *GR*. 'The last image' on the movie screen at the Orpheus Theatre when the film ends is 'a bright angel of death,' and as the rocket poised above threatens to descend, the readers are asked to sing 'a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print... The imagery—the Hand of God, the Hourglass of Mutability, God's obliterating Light, the Towers of New Jerusalem, the Apocalyptic Horsemen—is a compilation of typical jeremiad figures. Pynchon, like Joyce in *Ulysses*, parodies the major forms of rhetoric used in his encyclopedic narrative; the jeremiad rhetoric is no exception....

Like the old Puritan preachers, Pynchon begins by forcing on us a vision of the Imminent End, the nearness of the day when human history will reach its apocalyptic fulfillment. But whereas the old jeremiads depended upon the concept of a blessed Covenant between God and the Puritans. *GR* is 'a demonic inversion of the divine covenant.' This inversion allows no...special dispensation for a saved remnant of the Elect; in Pynchon's scheme there is only a preterite condition for the entire human race over which the V-2 Rocket and all its more recent successors are suspended. Rare moments of 'special dispensation' are possible, but neither guaranteed nor permanent....

This contemporary jeremiad takes into account unacknowledged anxieties, temptations and fears which are primarily *collective* in nature. The two hundred and twenty characters and innumerable sub-plots of *GR* serve as a vehicle for articulating collective fears, the like of which a single prophetic voice had the authority to articulate in the Puritan jeremiad.... Pynchon views the jeremiad-narrative as a form that has the capacity to deal with the condition of apocalyptic dread in the contemporary world, which is a place in which violence is no longer linked to the human will, but rather to a set of technocratic systems that have gained ascendancy and autonomy. This dread is a new avatar of the spiritual anxieties which haunted the Puritans on a religious level...

Pynchon's adaptation of the jeremiad uses the vocabularies of scientific and bureaucratic organizations, but these remain embedded in a larger fiction which envisions its central task as the Puritan authors of the jeremiad saw theirs: to bespeak doubts and apprehensions about the American dream, to question the fraying but still powerful sentiment that America—and the technology of Western culture—have a favored place and mission in history.... Pynchon does suggest that the Puritan obsession with some other-worldly chronometric dimension as the locus of perfection has constituted a fatal denial of the here-and-now.

Furthermore, he asserts that the German (and by extension, Western) obsession with rocketry is a catastrophic secular attempt at transcending our earth-bound condition. By using this analogy, Pynchon locates at the root of our own century's malaise the ruthlessly expansive European energies that brought the Puritans (and the death of the Indian) to America, and then gave the death-dealing, space-traveling V-2 Rocket and its descendants to the West.... Despite the general applicability of the term 'Christian Europe,' it virtually never means Catholic Europe in *GR*; rather, it almost always refers to Protestant Europe and its expansion since the seventeenth century....

Slothrop's failure, as Pynchon makes quite clear, lies in part in his refusal of the moment. He accepts some adventures when they are offered to him in the ruins of post-war Germany, but none that demand from him the vulnerability of love and understanding. Though all of Pynchon's several narrators tend to be elusive in assessing behavior and judging characters, one of them is quite clear in condemning Slothrop at the point in which he accepts Bianca's playful sexuality, but rejects the rest.... 'Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost'.... The failure of Slothrop's 'assembly' of self and history...is ascribed...to...a fatal formalism....

[Pynchon] rejects end-oriented fictions...and their designs of coherence, whether purely horological or chronometric, because neither leaves room and courage to choose the uncertain possibilities offered by the moment... He not only enumerates the temptations of designs and end-oriented forms, including the Apocalyptic, but also catalogues other more mystical temptations so eloquently that many readers, undergraduates in particular, locate Pynchon's vision in these prophetic musings about a way of living that 'will have no history. It will never need a design change.... The people will find the Center again, the Center without time....' These lines are spoken by Enzian, a leader of exiled Hereros from German Southwest Africa who have survived the Second World War. In this passage, rich in echoes of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Enzian dreams of the Eternal Center as an alternative to the proposal made by Josef Ombindi, a competing chief of the exiles. The latter wants his tormented people to escape the horological by committing a form of mass suicide, by refusing to reproduce....

When Tyrone Slothrop speculates about his Puritan past and 'the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from,' he links personal history to national history, and the landscape of post-war Germany to that of the jeremiads.... Pynchon offers no easy escape from the threatening nuclear apocalypse. Yet he does not utterly abandon us, the new Preterite, to the inevitable thunderclap. Instead he insists that we acquire a meta-historical perspective of the Now as a recurring and in this sense Eternal Center. This will perhaps restore us to ourselves and to others, but it gives us no assurances on the horological level of 'society,' 'history,' and the 'future,' those dead tokens of exhausted positivism. Instead, *GR* imposes on us a relentless meta-historical sensibility.... Pynchon bids us attend, while waiting for the onrushing catastrophe, to the eternal Now-ness of the Earth and the cosmos....

As a Marxist critic would be eager to point out, this jeremiad laments the damage social ideologies have done, but the solutions are private, involving Self, Love and Nature. This reflects, for good or ill, much of Pynchon's debt to Emerson's America and to the latter's mediation of the Puritan heritage.... Pynchon may appear to have utterly repudiated the notion of mission (except in its negative dimensions), but his isolation, too, is a feature of the old jeremiad tradition."

Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan
"The New Jeremiad: *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon
ed. Richard Pearce (1981) 169-85

"In *Gravity's Rainbow* the 'new world' becomes 'the Zone' through which Tyrone Slothrop travels trying to escape pursuers of both the allies and axis, who may all be knowing or unknowing agents of the multinational synthetics industry that burgeoned on World War II. Now the very life force of the universe is also the force of death, manifesting itself in the shape of both Slothrop's erection and the V-2 rocket. But, though Slothrop draws us into 'the Zone,' he disappears two-thirds the way through a formless novel that is populated by hundreds of major and minor characters, that shifts its focus from one country to another, leaps from scientific formulas to the comics, from myth to tin pan alley, from terror to slapstick—and yet ends where it began, with the nightmare of an approaching rocket. In the dark Orpheus moviehouse

we are addressed in the second person—it is *our* senseless nightmare and inescapable reality. And we are enjoined to sing along as the rocket ‘reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof.... Now everybody--’ [Compare the similar ending of the popular countercultural movie *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*, 1964], nine years before *Gravity’s Rainbow*.]

And in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we are made to feel the cloying atmosphere of an English rooming house and the desperation of a hard-up American GI as Slothrop enters the sitting room of Darlene’s landlady and is compelled not only to stifle his desire but sample her pre-war wine jellies: the safe-looking ribbed licorice drop that tastes like mayonnaise and orange peels... But with the V-2 rocket on its way, this episode also reveals the ambiguous fortitude of the English middle-class. Moreover, it parodically reflects the sensuous taste of death that General Pudding developed in the World War I trenches and relishes in his masochistic rituals, and it foreshadows the dark playfulness of Captain Blicero’s fairy-tale sadism as he oversees the development of the ultimate rocket.

Indeed, Pynchon overwhelms us with concrete details, which critics continue to verify, not only of London during the rocket raids, but of the English intelligence operation, a general’s memories of The Great War, the events leading to the development of the V-2, the Herero wars in Southwest Africa, the revolution of the Turkish alphabet, American popular culture, the German film industry, the discovery of synthetics, and the multinational corporations that thrived and burgeoned on World War II.”

Richard Pearce, ed.
Critical Essays (1981) 3, 8-9

“The novel’s MAJOR THEMATIC SUBJECTS...give indication of its expansive perimeters: (1) the pervasiveness of paranoia, the temptation to seek ‘other orders behind the visible’; (2) the damages wrought by betrayal and conspiracy, whether by parents against their children or by bureaucracy against its individualized citizenry; (3) the ravages of waste, destructiveness, decay, communal annihilation; (4) the potentialities of transformation, either ameliorating by rebirth into new forms, or worsening by varied disintegrative processes; (5) the impelling but maybe never satisfiable need for quests and searches; (6) the contingencies of life, which demand tolerance for uncertainty; (7) the power of survival, shored indirectly here as a manual on how to survive while still faced squarely upon the inexorability of death; (8) the necessity for disorder; (9) the perils of obsessiveness, whether in the form of death wish, falsely romanticized love, overanalysis, superorganization, religious hysteria, or antipodes like emptiness, ‘leukemia of the soul,’ or ‘anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long’; (10) the factors that provoke loss of identity, the turning of people into things, and prevent personal salvation; (11) the consequences of any dominantly shaping force, such as repressiveness, of either individuals or cultures, or ‘routinization of charisma,’ especially when a pattern of control is established by systematized technology; and (12) the heedless entrapment of the powerless of the earth....

Because it is functionally chaotic, convoluted, complex, any attempt to impose critical order upon it may well impair its effects and dilute the totality of its power. In short: better to leave it alone.... “Come, come, be more sensuous, less cerebral, start dancing with the book instead of asking for meanings’.... It is not an evasion to say that the novel is fraught with paradox and contradiction—some conclusions may not be reachable, let alone stand as infallible....

As historical fiction, one of its chief intentions is to reflect inheritance of the past in the present. The major historical symbol that unifies the four parts of the novel and many of its seventy-three unnumbered chapters and that also resonates into multiple meanings for our own time is the German A-4 rocket, known more commonly as the V-2. The terrible reign of these flying bombs shattered Britain during the latter stage of the war. The Rocket is a symbol that betokens modern civilization’s obsession with technology, whether devising, building or launching the weapon, or pursuing the secrets of its mysterious potency. As a gigantic destructive phallus, it couples sex and death and links to other related obsessions. We are told, moreover, that the Rocket ‘has to be many things’ to many people, among them Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil...a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide, the two perpetually in struggle’....

The specific target, which is Los Angeles, becomes less important than the symbolic indeterminacy: the Rocket is falling during the whole course of the novel, and in the world at large the Rocket is poised to fall anywhere at any time. The main action of the novel occurs in 1944-45: the last nine months of the year and the immediate postwar period. From that span of a year, the 'present' of the novel, time is freely manipulated in flashforwards and flashbacks...into the modern freeway confusion of his parodically Nixonized Los Angeles.... More prevalent, however, are the many flashbacks of etiological nature: to biblical and medieval times, the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, but mostly to formative events of the 1920s and 1930s. With side excursions to New England, Southwest Africa, Argentina, and the Russian Steppes, the bulk of the action takes place in England, France, Switzerland, Holland, and Germany. Although at the outset the novel appears to establish a realistic series of events in London and elsewhere, later readings may suggest other interpretations. For example, a psychoanalytic critic may regard the realism as a series of delusions projected by one character or another....

To complicate matters, the author puts on an intellectual light show of such erudition that it beams bedazzle rather than clarify.... First, the novel's enormous cast is difficult to keep track of, especially in the moiling rush of their entries and exits. The unsuspecting reader may be thrown off by the initial twenty pages devoted to minor characters.... Furthermore, an important character may be dropped, not to reappear for hundreds of pages, or simply dissolve.... The complaint against him probably stems from his concern with exterior forces at work upon people, his abandonment of the realist tradition of handling character, and his elliptical method of offering very few clues to explain his characters' functions. Moreover, many dramatic and all sentimental strategies are avoided. For another reason, the characters' actions in many cases go unresolved—the reader may be left dissatisfied by such inconclusiveness. For yet another, characterization is made disjunctive by persistent uses of hyperbolic comedy and parody, which tend to distort banal realities.

This does not mean, however, that Pynchon's characters are cartoonish. Often in the novel human consciousness is so centered upon technology and its crises that expected human emotions will seem to be either awry or missing. The unusual perspective of seeing many of the characters through their war-induced work contributes to making them appear one-sidedly obsessed. Interestingly, the novel is so grounded in contradictions that an all-consuming war ends by a casual few sentences.... [Critical] analyses of characters emphasize Enzian's faith in eternal recurrence, the essence of fascism in Blicero, the failure of Slothrop as a messiah....

Touching almost every principal character of four different nationalities is the American protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, a comic but nevertheless affecting antihero. Product of a Puritan tradition, former Harvard student, unknowing victim of early sexual conditioning, he is in 1944 a chubby, insouciant lieutenant stationed in England. His numerous sexual 'conquests,' which are perhaps more fantasized than real, give evidence on a starred map of his foreknowledge of German A-4 rocket hits in London. Authorities at 'The White Visitation,' which houses a catchall agency known as PSCES—Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender'—try to find out the relationship between Slothrop's erections and the rocket hits. The worst schemer, Dr. Edward W. A. Pointsman, is an obsessed Pavlovian whose bent for determinism and control dialectically opposes the beliefs of statistician Roger Mexico. This young British lieutenant happens to be largely preoccupied with his tenuous love affair with the British Army girl Jessica Swanlake, who also has been manipulated by Pointsman.

Convinced that 'They' are out to get him, Slothrop escapes into the chaotic randomness of central Europe's Zone. (Like the 'Combine' of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 'They' can be any oppressive, controlling, or conspiratorial group, be it specifically leaders of PISCES or more generally the Firm or the Elect.) Slothrop's paranoiac flight is combined with his search for the mysterious 'quintuple-zero' rocket and its facsimile, which the Firm also wants to find. Thus Slothrop becomes both 'seeker and sought,' both 'baited and bait.' Under various disguises and aliases, notably as Raketemensch in green cape and hornless Wagnerian helmet, Slothrop makes contact with nearly every important male character. They are mostly connected with rocketry, like Franz Pokler, a passive German chemical engineer, or black marketeering, like the energetic German film director Gerhardt von Goll, who goes under the [name] Der Springer. Excepting Jessica Swanlake, Slothrop is sexually intimate with every important female character: Katje Borgesius, a Dutch triple agent, whom he rescues from a trained octopus on the Riviera; Geli

Tripping, 'apprentice witch' and German girlfriend of Vaslav Tchitcherine, a Soviet intelligence officer; Margherita (Greta) Erdmann, an aging German film actress, as well as her young daughter; and Leni Pokler, a German Marxist and Franz's former wife who becomes the whore Solange.

An enigmatic figure links Slothrop to the major German side of the story. He is Dr. Laszlo Jamf, who sexually conditioned the infant Slothrop in America and who later in Europe developed Imipolex-G, a polymer used in the Rocket. It insulated the Schwarzgerät, or S-Great, a mysterious propellant 'hardware,' which is also the object of varied searches. Ironically, in the climactic launch it turns out to be a human being. Obsession with rocketry is represented, at fanatical extreme, by Lieutenant, then Major, Weissmann, who under the SS code name of Captain Blicero ('white death') demonically commits himself to the launching of the final secret 00000. The replica of that rocket, 00001, is being assembled by the Schwarzkommando, Hereros exiled in Germany. They are under the command of Oberst Enzian, who as a boy in colonized Southwest Africa was the homosexual protégé of Weissmann. Also, because Enzian is a stigmatized black half-brother, Tchitcherine seeks to kill him.

These intricate relationships are further complicated by fourteen other fairly important minor characters, separated here for convenience's sake by categories. *The White Visitation*: Brigadier Ernest Pudding, the decrepit superior who eats shit (in a repugnant scene that continues as locus of critical controversy); and a key victim, Oliver 'Tantivy' Mucker-Mffick, a likable young British officer whose strange disappearance and death prompt Slothrop to flee into the Zone; *black marketeering and drug dealing*: Seaman 'Pig' Bodine, AWOL from an American destroyer (like several others, he appeared in Pynchon's *V.*); Emil ('Saure') Bummer, former cat burglar and exponent of Rossini music; and Blodgett Waxwing, oafish fan of American cowboy movies; *Hereros*: Josef Ombindi, as leader of a faction, the Empty Ones, this compatriot-opponent of Enzian favors racial suicide; *exiles*: Francisco Squalidozzi, whose followers have stolen a submarine in Argentina and invertedly seek asylum in Germany; *German rocketry*: Gottfried, captive German youth and Blicero's homosexual lover who is launched in the 00000; Kurt Mondauger, radio electronics specialist and friend of Pokler at Peenemunde; and Ilse, Pokler's daughter and/or her surrogates who visit him every summer 'to create for him the moving image of a daughter'; the *Anubis* boat of the damned whose passengers include Bianca, Greta's precocious nymphet daughter; and Greta's sadomasochistic husband Miklos Thanatz; and *intelligence*: Major Duana Marvy, a brutish American who partakes in the pursuit and becomes himself a victim of the castration intended for Slothrop; and Prentice, the British commando, who has the 'odd talent for living with fantasies of others,' and who, like Katje and Slothrop, dissolves away.

Behind them crowd about three hundred incidental characters, often wackily named—a Pynchon trademark. Some are fictional and located in the past, like Slothrop's Puritan ancestors; many are historical personages, like the German organic chemist August Kekule, the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell, the German industrialist Hugo Stinnes, and the American gangster John Dillinger. Also, a cast of real people figure in the novel's present, ranging from actor Mickey Rooney to rocket expert Wernher von Braun to Nazi Munitions Minister Albert Speer. In most instances the actual people are woven into the background—they do not play important roles in the narrative.

Besides the difficulty of keeping all the characters straight, the reader encounters difficulty following the lines of action. Just as Pynchon abandoned some traditional notions of characterization, he also dispenses with some of the standard and familiar guidelines for constructing plots. In a novel filled with schemes, conspiracies, spying, networks, conglomerates, the plotting cannot be disentangled with an ease, nor should it be. The same holds true for the intricate path-crossings of individuals, all in search of something or other: a rocket, relatives, lovers, power, secrets, drugs, kicks, or their own identity. The main threads, however, are the pursuit of Slothrop and his own 'grail quest,' the dissipative later attempts of the Counterforce to help him, the making and firing of the 00000 by Blicero and the building of the facsimile by Enzian's Schwarzkommando, the devotion of Pokler to rocket development and (in the clearest, least-interrupted story line) his obsessive reunions with his daughter(s), Tchitcherine's search for his half-brother, and the futile love affair between Roger and Jessica.

On the one hand, the strands seem quite lax. Varied plots, major and minor, result in anticlimax, they get nowhere, they fizzle out. On the other hand, for all their open-endedness and lack of resolution, the

multiple plots also show that ‘everything is connected’—at their most formidable level by an international rocket cartel that has been enormously influential in shaping the history of modern Europe. In this respect, whether by individual confluences, acronymous bureaucracies, or powerful shadowy corporations, the novel spins out webs of interrelated systems.

Although treatment of characters and plot may seem initially overwhelming, like a parody of an internationalized soap opera (and surely in the telling as absurd as the summary of *The Courier’s Tragedy* in *The Crying of Lot 49*), the two problems can be surmounted. Many novels of the past—typical social novels or family sagas from Russia, Britain, Scandinavia—have had huge casts and multiple story lines. But Pynchon’s ways of telling his story require some readjustment by even the most practiced readers. His narrative methodology confirms that the timeworn critical tactic of affixing convenient plot, characterization, motives, and so on may be in large measure an inappropriate enterprise. The episodic, discontinuous structure manages to work effectively for conveying varied modes of experience, and, in turn, for reflecting the chaos of fragmenting cultures. The swift movie-cutting, the mixture of styles, the picaresque movement, the sporadic pacing, the emphasis on poetic evocation, the crazy quilt of subject matter, historicity, and the outright subversion of that same historicity by comedy and surrealism, amply reveal that the reader who is used to the staples of consistency, causality, credibility, and unity of effect is in for many surprises.

One of them is digressiveness, which allows Pynchon to pursue any tangent, whether a scientific discourse or the history of generations behind a character. The reader must adjust to supplementary set pieces on, for example, the extermination of dodos by one of Katje’s ancestors on Mauritius. Tchicherine’s winter of alphabet politics in Central Asia, a rescue of the Radiant Hour in a fantasized future Rocket City (the Raketten-Stadt), the properties of polymers, the Masonic mysticism of Lyle Bland, the derivation of phrases like ‘Ass Backwards’ or ‘Shit ‘n’ Shinola,’ the details of a toiletship...the shenanigans of a pair of kamikaze pilots in the Pacific. Unquestionably, some of the detours are long and self-indulgent. Creative genius may on occasion give way to excess, particularly when the artist is a put-inner like Pynchon, rather than a take-outer.

Once begun, the putting-in process becomes difficult to stop, a problem clearly evident in, say, Joyce’s later fiction, in Jean-Luc Godard films, in the music of Stravinsky. Although this novel might have profited from greater selectivity in places, the detours eventually come to be regarded as within the itinerary. In fact, upon reflection most are found to be integral, and a few are positively brilliant, like the hilarious story of Byron, the immortal light bulb, Kekule’s discovery of the benzene ring and the implications of his dream of the great serpent with its tail in its mouth, the briefer sections on the Mother Conspiracy, the Titans, the death of John Dillinger. Overall, the digressions contribute rather than detract, so that in the end—to use Pynchon’s words from another context—‘It was worth the trip, just to see this shining....’

The narrative voice is extremely flexible. Of indeterminate gender, it often stays detached to maintain an objective third-person point of view, but it also rises in protean ways to become involved, intimate, even paranoid. It speaks pointedly to the reader (‘You will want cause and effect. All right.’), makes frequent other uses of second person (‘You have to be on your toes for this: you trade four-line stanzas....’), and on rare occasions gives parenthetical advice, like its recommendation that the reader check out Ishmael Reed. During an intimate scene between Roger and Jessica when Pynchon flouts a cliché of personification about a room Heaving a Sigh, he playfully inserts ‘oh me I’m hopeless, born a joker never change’....”

Charles Clerc, ed.
Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow
(Ohio State U 1983) 4-24

“England was struck by 1,115 V-2s, and Antwerp, the Belgian city that was a major supply port for the Allies, was hit by 1,265 more. In London the toll was 2,340 dead and 6,000 wounded. This figure, however dreadful in human terms, is less than half the casualties caused by the V-1, and shrinks into insignificance compared with the 130,000 people killed in one day in the Dresden raid by the Allies. (That even inspired Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*.).... The V-2 looms large in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the focal point of a grisly ‘romance’ between men and technology...which help[s] him satirize the dream about

which he shows the greatest ambivalence, that of transcendence achieved through technology.... Pynchon's diagnosis: the real disease of our century, most clearly revealed in 1944-45, is best represented by Germany's creation of the military-industrial complex, whose main achievement during World War II was the V-2.... The facts of World War II lead to that vision of imminent Apocalypse which dominates *Gravity's Rainbow*, from the first nightmare of evacuation to the last moment of Damoclean suspense, when the Rocket of the future hangs over the theater of the world....

The events of *Gravity's Rainbow*—barring cinematic flashbacks and flashforwards—occur in the year extending from September, 1944, to September 1945. This decisive period at the end of World War II shaped the map of today's Europe, and was marked by the unveiling and use of a number of technological and military innovations, many of which are either alluded to or of central importance in *Gravity's Rainbow*.... War—and the diagnosis of the history of the twentieth century as an endless war waged by the Elect against the Preterite—has been important to most of Pynchon's fiction.... 'Reading' the Rocket is a major part of the effort to understand War in *Gravity's Rainbow*. For individuals it may contain secret messages (Prentice), or be the vehicle of occult mysteries, or may hint at the secrets of a personal past (Slothrop); it may also point to needed changes in the perception of the scientists who must cope with the results of its use (Mexico, Pointsman). Readers begin by wanting to decipher the mystery of Slothrop's erections; by the end, it is the suspended Rocket and the ever-imminent war it symbolizes that become the dominating facts of the book....

Despite their enormous differences, the communities of major encyclopedic texts, like the *Iliad*, *War and Peace*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, are similar in this: in each, war or some other form of violent struggle is the organizing authority that drives men on, and in each we encounter a behemoth, a gigantic object capable of violence, that can be 'read' as a text. In this context, the great white whale and the 00001 become analogous megatexts. [The white whale is a natural symbol of divinity in the cosmos—transcendent—whereas the white Rocket is an artificial symbol of limited human nature.].... In our time, Pynchon claims, we are...people of the Rocket; that is why the V-2 must not be seen as a specifically German object; it entices us all, and encroaches on every sphere of life. It is both a product and a symbol of the kind of activity that Western technological society idealizes. The Germans who make it and the Allies who seek to contain, counter, and eventually obtain it all share certain values. *Gravity's Rainbow* does not stress the most atypical or abhorrent aspects of Nazi Germany; it does not, for example, make the genocide of the Jews central, and deals instead with the colonial heritage of the 'lesser' genocide of the Hereros, committed by Germans in Africa, in a way that is typical of the major Western powers. Pynchon wants us to see Germany as an embodiment of the most extreme tendencies of technological society: hence it is the Rocket, and not the Holocaust, that is central to his vision of World War II....

Gravity's Rainbow is...a fictional alternative to available historical versions of the real world, made up of fragments of reality welded together by an extraordinary imagination....whose imagined characters and events are embedded in a scrupulously accurate historical context.... The accuracy of his historical and scientific details can be nothing short of astonishing.... In Pynchon's references to Blizna, we again have an example of his combination of encyclopedic realism [Naturalism] and imaginative control: the materials of history are made to serve his vision of the role of shit, which symbolizes decay and is taboo to the Elect, who seek to escape the organic by the Rocket.... The design, manufacture, use, and symbolic value of the Rocket ultimately displace Slothrop's search for his personal history as the central concern of the book....

If Pynchon has any fault...that fault lies in his attitude about human nature, which is to say, about the motivations he ascribes to his own characters. He is sometimes confused, and his assumptions range from the Calvinistic to Rousseauvian. I mean that even if his characters are not full of sweetness and light, they do manifest a tendency to illustrate freak-and-hip-culture 'philosophies' of the sixties...according to which man is inherently good but for the corrupting power of the systems in whose power he is held prisoner. In this scheme man is especially good when he is a 'noble savage' close to his natural roots; note all the assertions of Herero goodness.... The most painful aspect of Pynchon's vision, and the one for which 'humanist' critics blame him most, is that he seems to think a world without boundaries to be no more likely on the personal scale than on a public one. Only [in] 1945 is the Zone without boundaries, providing a glimpse of all that can be; ironically, this vision is made possible only by the ravages of war.... The genuine connections of flesh and spirit are fleeting, illicit, often driven to sadomasochistic extremes."

Khachig Tololyan
“War as Background in *Gravity’s Rainbow*”
Approaches (1983) 31-32, 40, 45, 47, 51-52, 56, 59, 61, 65

“His major work to date, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), has 760 pages, at least 300...characters, and a tangle of plots so thoroughly contaminated by the naturalizing conventions of dream, hallucination, fantasy, film, theater, and interpolated texts that it is nearly impossible to say even in a provisional way what happens in it. The novels all celebrate diversity, multiplying situations, interrelationships, characters, voices, and attitudes with such abandon that they perplex understanding. Thus the reader seeking his way is likely to welcome the suggestion, which runs through all three novels...that this apparent diversity merely disguises an austere metaphysical binarism....

Because of the fragmented narrative line and the shifting perspectives in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, there is no general agreement... The novel offers no standard of ultimate reality or unreality. It remains plural, open to any number of mutually contradictory, self-consistent, and non-exhaustive readings...*Gravity’s Rainbow* denies the existence of a single plot by refusing to take a transcendent perspective on the action....The effect is of multiple ‘inside’ perspectives with no ‘outside’ standard against which to measure them.... If the narrator is omniscient, he is also irreconcilably plural, a cacophony of voices, each knowing a different version of everything.... Because secular history can invoke no single principle of subordination, the historical minutiae of the novel multiply.... The novel wallows in its setting.... Details are not organized in a rigid hierarchy of significance....The associations are evocative; they do not integrate to a clear revelation....

Thematically, the novel challenges the commonsense dictum that experience illustrates general truths about a unitary and at least theoretically comprehensible universe. Structurally it challenges one of the most embedded assumptions of literary orthodoxy, that any novel is at root a coherence system, introducing formal innovations only within a controlling convention so that surprises, when properly understood, cease to be surprising.... Pynchon opposes inevitability.... The ongoing project is one of making meanings, in the company of a vast panorama of characters engaged in the same activity.... The narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* licenses both the proliferating points of view in the novel and the comprehensive sympathy that makes plurality compatible with community....

Gravity’s Rainbow confronts its readers with the spectacle of a post-religious society committed to a vision of apocalypse, and duplicitously invites them to share this vision by trying to fit outrageous humor into a predestined tragic pattern. The comedy results from the fact that [in his Atheist vision] things do not fit.... In its extreme decentralization, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers itself as a secular rather than providential history.... The book becomes...the twentieth century’s epic response to that great Puritan epic *Paradise Lost*, asserting that there is no God but gravity and no way—or need—to justify the way of gravity to men. The initial Fall, however it is construed, set history on a predetermined track. The tendency toward narrative fragmentation thus contributes to the structure, for the seemingly endless proliferation of human experience only shows how far secular history is from ideal unity.... The text of *Gravity’s Rainbow* explodes into complexity, even as it purports to yearn after an ideal simplicity....

This cosmology appears to arise from the combination of two images: an explosive Fall hurling shards of the Center infinitely outward, and a static, finite arc representing the track of postlapsarian [after the Fall] history. Together, these images should produce the twentieth-century vision of apocalypse. But the two images do not really go together. The Fall results in a universe diversifying endlessly, out of control, abandoned by the gods. The arc is a metaphor for containment. The incompatibility of the two models attests to a failure of integration, where ‘to integrate,’ following the paradigm provided by rocket technology, ‘is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled...’ The Fall should provide a myth of origins for the eternal, determining parabola; it should be integrated to the immutable pattern of providential history. But in *Gravity’s Rainbow* this explosive Fall becomes the explanation for another sort of tendency, the tendency of experience to diversity beyond prediction and control....

The Encyclopedists [1700s] abolished the redundant concept of God from the Newtonian system and announced that the only principle necessary to account for the integrity of the universe was gravity. With the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics in the mid-nineteenth century, science both subsumed gravity to a higher principle and recovered a version of providential history by giving the clockwork universe a direction and a destination. The second law is frequently called Time's Arrow because it is the only physical precept that makes physical processes irreversible. It gives the universe a *telos* in universal decay, dictating that higher forms of organization, the life forms, will be the first to disappear. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the rocket incorporates this promise of entropic dissolution and accelerates it. As the embodiment of Time's Arrow, the V-2 acts as both a totalizing principle and the principle dooming the totality to destruction. The unity of the system is its betrayal: a thermodynamically closed universe must run down, and the world of the novel is bounded by the rainbow, the track of a one-way trip. But in this version of providential history, there is no Election; no one will be saved....

In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon takes the rigidity of causal relations a step further, making such relations the necessarily incomplete perceptions of a time-bound humanity viewing an eternal structure. The arc of the V-2 rocket, the 'gravity's rainbow' of the title, functions as a sort of visual aid to conceiving history as a preordained curve with a clearly demarcated beginning, middle, and end. But this totalizing metaphor does not contain the action of the book, for the action continues to burgeon in unanticipated directions, revealing new resemblances in the process until it seems that things cannot add up to a coherent whole *because* they are so intricately interrelated. Furthermore, the protean narrator serves as a reminder that there is no privileged outside perspective commanding a view of 'the whole shape at once'.... Pynchon refuses to establish a hierarchy among the cacophony of voices in *Gravity's Rainbow*....

The world exists as an indefinite number of partial, contingent, and overlapping versions; and by shifting points of view, often with unnerving rapidity, this narrator multiples angles and opens up new vistas of possibility... By diffusing his personae in this way (rather as Slothrop diffuses into multiple manifestations in the last part of the novel), this narrator manages to be authoritative without being omniscient in the conventional sense—which is to say transcendent. Through this narrator Pynchon is able to evoke a world perceived from inside.... From inside, the universe is full of connections, but no quasi-authorial sanction guarantees that one idea of order is the ultimate one. Experience becomes a layering...of orders, growing more complex and more interconnected with every new perspective, never resolving into a single comprehensible pattern. For all its rhetoric of inevitability, *Gravity's Rainbow* is an open structure...

In the phrase 'Holy-Center-Approaching,' the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* encapsulates the formula of the quest romance. The Holy Center is the terminus of the quest, the epiphanic point in both time and space where the questing hero realizes the full meaning of his search, life, and world. It is thus the conclusion toward which the narrative tends. In Pynchon's books no major character reaches this Holy Center. The pattern of the quest is an infinite approach, one that brings the seeker closer and closer to a terminal revelation without allowing him to reach it... In the theological terminology of *Gravity's Rainbow*, words remain an infinite distance from the Word. It is no accident that Pynchon's experiments with withheld meaning led him to adopt the technical language of Christian theology, and specifically of Calvinism, for Western culture traditionally expresses concern with an ultimate reality existing beyond the possibility of signification in terms of transcendence.... For as there is no transcendent God behind the apocalyptic schema, man has had to invent him....

Election is always a dubious concept in *Gravity's Rainbow*, associated always with manipulation and control, the earmarks of Them. The Puritan God who saves and damns without discernible criteria appears as the last distorted trace of an inexpressible presence that was once center, origin, and guarantor... All three books express nostalgia and a desire to 'get back' to a sort of primal oneness. Yet the language of the novel flies from this center, as the images of the diaspora and the expanding universe in *Gravity's Rainbow* illustrate.... [Note] the string of metaphorical predications implicit in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the rocket is a phallus, is a thrusting middle finger, is an index finger pointing to ultimate meaning, is a pencil inscribing meaning, is Time's Arrow (in thermodynamic theory), is Zeno's arrow (in several of the paradoxes), and so on, in endlessly receding vistas...where events parallel one another, exposing latent similarities, rather than following one another in successive 'slices' from a time-line....

In its encyclopedic scope, the novel appears dedicated to the proposition that *everything is connected*: there are insinuated links between synthetic polymerization and the evolution of the earth; between astrophysics and psychic phenomena; between African dialects that Rilkean poetics; between international cartels and Freemasonry; between comic books and covenant theology; between Orphism, Parsifalism, Tannhauserism, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; between German idealism, Pavlovian psychology, and the American cult of the good-guy loner. Just as these links could be extended, so the connections reach out in all directions, associating disparate bodies of knowledge in such intricate configurations that the universe seems on the point of cohering like a giant molecule dreamed by some macrocosmic Kekule. But the...synthetic dream never occurs. The text refuses to yield a culminating vision of the universe as 'blindingly One.'

The totalizing tendency of the thematic connections is so pronounced that this refusal might appear simply perverse. Scott Simmon has speculated that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel in which things are more important than people and ideas are more important than things, and his observation suggests that Pynchon's third novel is more committed to a purely conceptual model of coherence than either of the previous works. Both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* offer something that looks like a conventional narrative as a guiding thread through their labyrinths of thematic complication, although both books ultimately subvert the integrity of the narrative. *Gravity's Rainbow*, on the other hand, introduces a panorama of characters and an unstable narrative voice in its opening pages, thwarting expectations of conventional narrative continuity. The unity of this novel accordingly should derive from its controlling vision—from what one critic has termed the Big Idea. But although it cannot be denied that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel of ideas, it is far less clear what these ideas add up to.

The problem is not simply that the novel is fiendishly complex, or that it frequently takes a parodic attitude toward the multiple theories it purveys. Both of these characteristics are common to the encyclopedic narrative, a genre...defined in terms of 'the drive toward comprehensive knowledge and schematization.' This drive to contain and schematize is one of the salient features of *Gravity's Rainbow*; most of the book's rhetoric agitates for a central insight, a route In. But at the same time, an opposed, centrifugal tendency seems to be sending information flying outward like the alternative Zones of the novel's postwar reconstruction, speeding 'away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center.' This decentralizing tendency is especially apparent in the closing chapter, where even the discrete sections of an already convoluted action begins to fragment into shorter and less obviously related segments with titles like 'LISTENING TO THE TOILET'...

This marked diffusion of the narrative energy so near the conclusion suggests that the text is thematically committed to incompleteness.... Fundamental enigmas—the nature of Slothrop's relation to the Mystery Stimulus, the direction and target of Blicero's Last Firing, the purpose of the Hereros' rocket—are either left ambiguous or dropped entirely. Problematic knots in the plot refuse to unravel, and thus no denouement—literally, an 'untying'—can occur.... Yet *Gravity's Rainbow* dictates the terms on which totalization should be possible, even as it resists totalization.... [It] derives its ultimate coherence from a governing structural metaphor.... 'A screaming comes across the sky,' describes the birth-cry of the supersonic missile heralding the first V-2 offensive on London during September of 1944. On the closing page the final rocket is poised above the heads of 'us,' and the switch to direct address implies that this rocket's menace is universal. These two events become the extremes of a historical trajectory, containing the labyrinthine plot while acting as exaggerated external pointers to a 'rising action' and a 'falling action.' The structural metaphor is therefore linear, teleological, and deterministic. The parabolic path of the rocket is 'that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return.' To the extent that it controls and structures the novel, this parabola encodes a unified vision of a world hurtling toward annihilation and signifies what Josephine Hendin has called the message of the book, 'the death at the heart of all experience'....

The irony that Pynchon explores in *Gravity's Rainbow* is that such a system always betrays its creators by claiming autonomy for itself. The more comprehensive the structure, the more likely it is to look like fare, so that humanity finds itself serving an antihuman Higher Purpose when it is seduced by the clarity and coherence of its own explanations. The implicit model for all such totalizing systems is the myth of the providential plan, which purports to account for all aspects of human life by directing history to a predetermined end.... In *Gravity's Rainbow* any comprehensive system for putting everything together is

ultimately a variant on the Judeo-Christian myth because it appeals from a time-bound order to a transcendent perspective. The rainbow of the rocket's trajectory recalls the covenant between God and Noah in which God promised not to destroy the earth with water—an ironic bargain, as it turns out, because the rocket seems destined to destroy the earth with fire. This pact is the first of a succession of covenants that direct providential history to a preordained end and guarantee immortality to those whom God has chosen.... America's Elect thus put God squarely behind their expanding cartels, claiming divine sanction for their own megalithic 'structures of death'....

The lure of totality is so great, Pynchon suggests, that people will assent to a system in which '*everything is connected*' even if the system guarantees their destruction. The culminating irony is that to assent to such a system is to internalize its assumptions and thus to help translate it into reality. In accepting the parabola as the shape of destiny, humanity has simply modified a familiar constellation of beliefs, so that it addresses the inscrutable gods of technology with the old quietistic maxim, 'Thy will be done.' But although *Gravity's Rainbow* takes a pessimistic view of the twentieth century's flight into totalizing systems, it also insists that such systems do not have intrinsic authority...The arc of the rocket is the emblem of a paranoid vision of reality in which '*everything is connected*' in a way that contains history in a preordained pattern.... Between the extremes of providential history and no history at all is secular history, where multiple connections of different sorts give meaning to experience without closing it down....

By providing a 'structural' or 'controlling' metaphor that falls short of structuring or controlling a novel that is radically uncentered and diffuse, Pynchon sets up a formal correlative for his lengthy and ebullient meditation on these two concepts, structure and control... He addresses directly the premises behind any totalizing conceptual system.... Pynchon exploits the assumptions of his chosen genre only to subvert them.... *Gravity's Rainbow* offers a vision of perfect control and then generates its energy—and its humor—from a refusal to pledge allegiance to that vision.... A reading guided by the structural metaphor passes over far too much, and in particular it subordinates or simply ignores most of the humor of an extraordinarily funny novel. This humor has nothing to do with divine comedy or abstract programs of salvation. It always arises from violations of an apparent order: from liberating, if generally unnerving, surprises.... To take the arc of the rainbow seriously as a controlling metaphor is to betray a richly comic novel to the excessive gravity of its provisional plot....

The history of polymerization, which has made the I.G. an international cartel and given the Reich [Nazis] the economic power to make war—and rockets—has been in reality the unfolding of a cosmic plan to perfect death's reign over the earth. Rather than discovering new possibilities, technocrats are progressively revealing a pattern immanent in the nature of matter.... From the Other Side, death is reality and life is a sort of hallucination fostered by the aberrant vision of human beings trapped inside secular history.... The book begins by describing an assortment of human machinations: The Allies' baroque propaganda schemes to frighten the Germans into surrendering; the I.G.'s attempts to enlist the aid of spirits to help control the international marketplace Pointsman's efforts to plumb Slothrop's psyche for the key to his spontaneous erections.

But there are already copious hints that human control is a delusion and that human actions succeed only when they conform to a sort of Hardyesque Immanent Will that technology has released from the earth. The rocket, Enzian tells Slothrop, has 'a Destiny with a shape'.... The rocket is to the Zone-Hereros as the Kabbala is to the Jews, and the capital 'R' that Pynchon bestows on the word 'rocket' throughout suggests the extent to which this apparatus is personified by its beholders, or at least granted the ambiguous status of a totem.... The Zone-Hereros' mistake was to view the rocket as an isolated entity, one particular destiny among many. The real Text is not a single Aggregat but the whole world reshaping itself according to the mandates of technology.... Read in this way, *Gravity's Rainbow* itself resembles the Hereros' apocalyptic Text: Certainly the information that Pynchon has assembled around the rocket's arc corroborates Rathenau's pronouncements and Enzian's paranoid vision. The novel incorporates most of the available information on the collaboration between German, American, British, and Dutch corporations throughout the war; 'Don't forget,' the narrator cautions, 'the real business of the War is buying and selling'; and again, 'Secretly [the War] was being dictated...by the needs of technology'....

When Slothrop eludes his observers and, following the track of this Destiny, reaches...the Zone, his escape promises freedom. But after this midpoint Slothrop goes into a decline; he begins 'to thin, to scatter,' and the novel reflects this descent by fragmenting into shorter and less obviously related sections as it approaches its conclusion. The analogy is a system running down: a biological life losing cohesion as it nears its terminus; the universe gaining entropy as it makes the energy exchanges necessary to hold it together; providential history arriving at the decadence of its Last Days.... Like *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* plays with the idea of a point in history where the weight of technology overcomes human purposes and takes its own path, leaving behind the inhabitants of an older organicist universe....

The story of the rocket's rise and fall is the story of how America appropriated the Nazi [technology] and with them the Nazi bent toward annihilation.... As Raymond M. Olderman has observed, '*Gravity's Rainbow* is, at least in part, a history of Nazi consciousness and a demonstration of how that consciousness is potentially common to everyone.' Blicero is an avatar of that consciousness, and his entrenchment within the American hierarchy indicates how completely his White Death has infected America. But as Olderman suggests, Blicero is a symptom, not the source of the disease.... As Enzian suspected, the war was only one phase of the rocket's development. The V-2 could not become the delivery system for global catastrophe until it was combined with America's own contribution to the war effort, the atomic bomb.... Coupled with the rocket's arc, the promise of nuclear catastrophe assumes the shape of inevitability. Gravity's rainbow gives geometrical form to the truism that what goes up must come down....

The world of *Gravity's Rainbow* is in decline; in terms of the rocket's arc, it is falling. But because it is imprisoned in a preordained historical trajectory, there is a familiar sense in which this world is already fallen—from Eden, from the innocence of its infancy, from the undifferentiated unity of the id [Freud]—but always into time. The novel is pervaded by a rhetoric of nostalgia that takes the fact of history as a tragedy. Time is a betrayal precisely because it is irreversible; each development brings humanity closer to the Final Zero, the end point at which death will have perfected its reign.... The Fall introduces the vast sweep of providential history by plunging mankind into what Slothrop, invoking his Puritan forebears, calls 'a sucking marshland of sin'.... Pynchon supplements the traditional Christian imagery with historical, scientific, mythic, and mystical allusions to evoke a vision of the Fall and flight from an original timeless center. This center is associated with 'the infinitely dense point from which the present Universe expanded,' but characters find the Fall so appealing an explanatory structure that they adapt it to their own situations by locating a particular Eden in national or racial memory.... The original center was not only unity but a primal community....

In *Gravity's Rainbow* these multiple versions of the Fall provide a common origin for two important modernist images, the disintegrating center and the linear track of history accelerating toward its own destruction. These images frequently converge, as in Slothrop's personal fall, which seems a variation on the Romanticist descent from the innocence of childhood. The arc of Slothrop's life begins with an original banishment by the Father; after his ascent to apparent freedom, his fate is to become 'one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell—*stripped*. Scattered all over the Zone.' This Fall also provides a genesis for the increased alienation of consciousness and the progressive fragmentation of understanding....

[vertical] Consciousness here is both the repressive force of civilization and the isolating ego that cuts off instinctive urges within the psyche. Its weapon is Modern Analysis, which Blicero identifies with Original Sin; and it is the analytic legacy that produces the two major methods of falsifying experience, 'film and calculus, both pornographies of flight'.... Finally, this Fall is what has divorced words from an original coincidence with the things they stand for and has allowed language to proliferate...setting namer more hopelessly apart from named...the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words... The more luxuriant language grows, the father removed it is from original Presence. By this token alone, *Gravity's Rainbow* is a failed revelation, its explosions of language testifying to its inability to recover a primal unity....

First of all, Slothrop has his erections on V-2 targets before the V-2s are even launched. If there is a causal link between phallic character and phallic rocket, the rocket should be responding to Slothrop, rather than vice versa. Second, Impolex-G is not standard V-2 hardware; it is incorporated into only one rocket, the rocket that carries Gottfried as its payload. The Mystery Stimulus has no connection with the

distribution of targets, and it is this distribution that the stimulus response theory attempts to explain. Third, and most important, it turns out that Slothrop has falsified much of the information on his map, so that Pointsman has to hypothesize, finally, that Slothrop's fantasies, not Slothrop's behavior, need explaining. At this point Pointsman's project of enclosing Slothrop in a 'labyrinth of conditioned-reflex work' seems doomed, as Slothrop's affinity with the V-2 recedes into a pattern of appallingly 'Kute Korrespondences.' But the correspondences are so intrusive that they suggest a more occult connection underlying surface similarities....

As a personified penis (for his erections are his defining feature, at least initially), Slothrop resembles both the rocket and Imipolex G, 'the first plastic that is actually *erectile*'... And it is possible to construe his story in terms of the parabolic trajectory. Slothrop's 'launch' occurs in his infancy, when he is conditioned to respond with an erection to a chemical stimulus. Like the rocket he 'ascends' under guidance, provided first by Laszlo Jamf's emissaries in America and later by Pointsman and certain of his colleagues at The White Visitation. When Pointsman allows him to escape into the Zone, Slothrop metaphorically reaches...the midpoint of his flight path at which control is deliberately terminated. At this point Slothrop believes he is about to discover the truth about his situation, and conventional wisdom would suggest that self-knowledge will allow him to take responsibility for his own destiny. Ironically, it is self-knowledge that seems to shatter him, leaving him free only to fall. He eludes Their control only to be betrayed to gravity; as the story continues, his personality becomes more and more diffused as he loses his ability to keep information together [like Mucho on LSD in *Lot 49*]. This 'descent' brings his trajectory into conjunction with the fragmenting Fall and affirms that dreams of escape and autonomy are delusions. In this way Slothrop's decline becomes an allegory for the tendency of things to fall apart as civilization accelerates the universal entropic process....

When Slothrop enters the 'descent' phase of his trajectory, he loses his mysterious resemblance to the rocket—although not through any plan or exercise of will—first by diversifying his supposedly determined sexual behavior and later by diversifying his whole personality to the point where he is no longer available for study. As a consequence, he escapes the rocket's destiny, although his own destiny remains not only uncertain but in a sense inconceivable. By the end of the novel, Slothrop has lost his identity; he is no longer a unified character. However unsettling this outcome maybe, one implication is that he has escaped control, for it is his phallogocentric identity that has 'placed' him in the apocalyptic pattern. By fragmenting beyond containment, Slothrop ceases to be what the [radical] political philosopher Herbert Marcuse calls a one-dimensional man, wholly defined by his technologized society. He becomes instead the hyperbolic embodiment of many-dimensional man, decentralized beyond control, beyond containment, and so in the root sense beyond comprehension.... He becomes radically uncentered, a fate that brings him to the opposite extreme of his initial characterization as a personified penis.... It is possible to naturalize the idea that Slothrop 'thins' and 'scatters'...by regarding Slothrop's dissolution as psychic breakdown, amnesia, or death. But all such attempts to enclose Slothrop in an explanatory structure...fail to comprehend him....

Slothrop cannot be dismissed. He saturates the last part of the novel: as a topic of rumor and conjecture; as a type of the Fool, the Rilkean Angel, Orpheus, and Christ; as Byron the Bulb, a rock kazooist, the harmonicist named Adenoid, and the hero of a number of surrealistic flashbacks to his childhood and adolescence; and as a sporadic influence on the narrative voice.... By giving Slothrop this peculiar omnipresence, Pynchon thwarts his characters' desire to encapsulate Slothrop in an explanatory structure and in this way to transcend him.... 'They' is always the name given to the detached, manipulative Others, but perceptions of just who They vary depending on the position of the perceiver. Sometimes They are simply authoritative figures: the Elect of the Puritan church, political leaders, corporate executives, even parents. But members of such elite groups derive their authority from higher and more removed sources: the Elect from the finally inscrutable will of their God; the political figures from their corporate bankrollers; these corporate heads from their products, which in turn depend on the internal configurations of matter; parents from *their* parents, trapped in a patriarchal system....

Voices from the Other Side haunt the narrative, combined at times with hints that the real They operate from a sphere where history is already finished and time is only a record of moves that have been made for all eternity.... They are simply inhabitants of the Other Side—the flip side of a single system, this name implies. The true They ought to transcend the system entirely. By offering this motley collection of spirits

as representatives of the superhuman, Pynchon parodies attempts to imagine a completely transcendent They-system.... Paranoia becomes a configuration like a Chinese puzzle, where every system of control turns into evidence for a more encompassing system.... In *Gravity's Rainbow* They-systems arise when people try to become Them by objectifying the world of experience as a conceptual totality.... Totalizing conceptual structures invariably damn the consciousness that creates them in *Gravity's Rainbow*. And in their efforts to make such structures into realities, theorists like Jamf reify their nihilistic premises in totalitarian systems.... In *Gravity's Rainbow* there is always a Pogo-like sense in which They are Us, a fact that is not necessarily consoling but that does present some room for unanticipated developments.... The project of accounting for Slothrop is central to the novel precisely because Slothrop's affinity with the rocket promises to make him a mirror of all the forces at work in the cosmos....

The persistent irony is that human beings are never allowed to transcend their condition [no such thing as mystical experience]: the hyperbolically inclusive description of the rocket's final descent implies that to close the action is to annihilate even the reader. The impulse to provide conceptual unity traps consciousness in its own labyrinth. For this reason it is thematically significant that the novel, like Slothrop, is difficult to hold together, even as a concept.... If the parabola shapes the novel, the central character is the rocket, and human actions are only accessories to what the narrator at one point calls the Fearful Assembly. Virtually all the major characters are haunted by this reading of their experience, and consequently their various interpretations of the rocket's mission and message condition their understanding of their own situations.... The rocket is a 'dream of flight' from human limitations, even if it promises racial extinction....

The novel deals with some of the most horrifying prospects of contemporary life: the rise of megalithic international corporations, the corresponding dehumanization of twentieth-century society, the immanent purposes of technology, the threat of global annihilation. But though the text insists on a polarized vision with indelible lines drawn between Us and Them, it does not condemn any of its characters.... Although certain characters attempt to transcend the world of the novel, transcendence is impossible; the great irony is that everyone is Preterite, and They are only a perverted ideal. It is in the pathetic attempt to become Them that characters erect totalitarian 'structures favoring death'—only to find themselves trapped within these structures....

The narrator tends to modulate into direct address whenever a character says or does something that might alienate the reader and provoke an unsympathetic pejorative judgment, as when Jessica 'has gone into her Fay Wray number,' a move that unnerves her anxious lover, the thoroughly likeable Roger Mexico, and seems on the face of things to be an unwarranted affectation. But here the narrator intervenes with a helpful gloss: 'This is a kind of protective paralysis, akin to your own response when the moray eel jumps you from the ceiling'.... Jessica's action becomes intuitively intelligible and thus sympathetic....

One index of the narrator's protean capacity to enter into the motives and desires of the characters is the way that Blicero, the Nazi, sadist, sexual pervert, nihilist, and murderer, emerges as disconcertingly comprehensible and almost tragic. Blicero kills his paramour and symbolic son, Gottfried (whose name, 'the peace of God,' is heavily ironic), out of intense loathing for the natural world. By invoking an alluring synthesis of Greek and Hebrew mythology, German idealism, and Kabbalized technology, the narrator is able to communicate this loathing and the extent to which it permeates Western civilization.... Gottfried is sacrificed on the altar of the rocket, the principle of totalization and thus of hierarchy and subordination. The rocket dictates that the sweep of history arches over trivial human lives.... [Blicero] plays Abraham to Gottfried's Issac, acting out a familiar paradigm of denying human ties in obedience to a seemingly irrational higher will.... His example is representative of the way in which totalizing structures minimize the relations of caring between individuals. Pokler's immersion in the intricacies of rocket design 'allowed him to put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconveniences of caring'...

By taking a succession of points of view and accepting the limitations intrinsic to each, the narrator defers closure, and with each deferral emphasizes the futility of trying to image experience as a coherent state of affairs. Such a totalized theoretical 'state' has as its political corollary the totalitarian state, and in *Gravity's Rainbow* all such 'states' are both artificial and arbitrary.... Religions change—Wimpe is discussing Marxism—but their purpose remains to subsume human concerns to the bogus will of a higher

principle.... The only unity worth bothering about is the transient community of people who have come together around the acknowledgement of their common frailty.... Communities arise among people who perceive themselves a fallen: victimized, frail, fallible, and mortal....

Pynchon flirts with the impossible: he tries to confront his readers with their own mortality, vulnerability, and preterition. This last term, 'preterition,' is the most overtly technical; in Puritan theology it is also the most nearly empty, designating the negative category of those who are not chosen. In increasing the extension of this word until it covers everyone, Pynchon also multiplies its connotations until the novel becomes the attentive, compassionate exploration of what it means to belong to that transient community, the mortal state....

In a novel that wallows in excremental imagery, it is worth noting that Pynchon grants shit a great deal of significance—and a great deal of variety. The Hereros, like the proverbial Eskimos who have nineteen words for nineteen different kinds of snow, make linguistic discriminations between different kinds of shit. They have more intimacy with the subject, a fact that follows from their acute awareness of their own status as human detritus.... People in abstraction can be grouped as an undifferentiated mass of waste, and by a political euphemism they become the People.... For all its preoccupation with ideas, the novel emphasizes relations of concern over totalizing structures.... It is...a novel that affirms the nonsystematic, nontotalizing connections of a community based on making meanings."

Molly Hite

Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon
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"The 'apocalyptic and millennial visions' of *Gravity's Rainbow* are reminiscent of the old Puritan jeremiads, which prophesied the end of history for a people offensive to a righteous God. Pynchon's jeremiad warns against the excesses of post-industrial society whose destructiveness is symbolized by lethal weaponry. More significantly, it indicts the Protestant tradition from which the destructiveness derives. Pynchon's version of Protestant history condemns the Calvinist compulsion to reduce the teeming fullness of the world to the two-dimensional plane of economics. In building his markets, the Protestant—the dominant political figure of modern Western culture—has manipulated, exploited, and laid waste an organic nature. Worse, he has impoverished himself spiritually, perhaps beyond his ability to make amends. His greatest error has been to secularize his world: for that reason he can no longer read the primary text of Creation.... [Pynchon] charges that an impulse originally religious has led to the desacralization of nature... Nature for Pynchon is not pastoral but paradoxical... Pynchon rests his theology...on the laws of thermodynamics....

Pynchon adapts the sociological scheme of Max Weber in order to demonstrate a linkage between economic and political systems on the one hand and thermodynamics and religious sensibilities on the other.... The Weberian scheme articulates neatly with slightly reductive manipulations of thermodynamic laws and their corollaries in information theory, and beyond them, with reflections on life and death.... Pynchon seems to have grafted Thorstein Veblen onto Max Weber. Veblen worshipped technology as the fountainhead of progress but despised the businessman as the perverter of creative inventors by exploiting markets, rigging shortages, and eliminating competition—the very practices of 'Them' in *Gravity's Rainbow*.... This affinity notwithstanding, Veblen would have balked at the spirituality with which Pynchon endows man's inventions.... Pynchon can himself seem puritanical when he excoriates the entrepreneur.... The bombing patterns around Jamf Olfabriken Wereke AG...indicate the seamless transition from prewar cartels to postwar multicompany systems.... [According to Enzian] the implication is that America has an obligation to defend the freedom of the as yet incompletely rationalized Third World through technology [a view supporting the Vietnam War]....

"[Norman O.] Brown's theories are a restatement of ideas drawn from Freud and Weber. Of the two, Weber takes pride of place among the influences behind *Gravity's Rainbow*. What remains of Freud in the novel is filtered through Weber, as in [the] adaptation of paranoia to the imperatives of rationalization, and through Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse, for example, sees promise in what he calls the 'desublimation' of a rationalized culture, a goal that is to be accomplished through the 'release of sensuality' and by the refusal of the individual to make sacrifices in the name of society. But he also stresses the power of rationalized

structures and warns that established culture will probably co-opt rebellion, a notion that helps to explain the failure of the Counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow*.... Even the drug subculture simply replicates the market economy of rationalized capitalism....

Untrustworthy as they sometimes are, symbols, signs, and metaphors, particularly comic ones, are for Pynchon the crucifixes humans hold before vampires; they ward off evil—repression. Symbols are lightning rods for spiritual energy, drawing it to ground, sometimes literally, it would seem, as in the case of the Iron Toad and other examples of electric revelation. *The Crying of Lot 49* described 'the act of metaphor' as 'a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost.' For all its ambiguity, the ability to metaphorize and symbolize is the most powerful weapon in the human psychological arsenal, and Pynchon's faith in its efficacy brings him down firmly on the side not of Freud but of his rival, Carl Jung.

Jung discounted many of Freud's theories, turning instead to a conviction that unsatisfied spiritual needs lead to personality disorders, a theme that Pynchon phrases and rephrases in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In opposition to Freud, Jung held that the libido is not an exclusively sexual force...it is the primal drive behind the will to live. A similar close association of libido with life clarifies Slothrop's negentropic function: his erections symbolize life itself. Allusions to Jung are frequent in the novel. Mondaugen's mystic vision...minus the electric terminology might have been lifted from Jung's writings. Slothrop's ruminations on 'four-fold expressions' and the adventures of 'the Floundering Four,' a sequence apparently spun out of a childhood memory, recall Jung's fourfold division of the psyche. Rather more importantly for Pynchon's purposes, Jung recognized chance events as possible signs of the sacred and as indications of other worlds....

At the deepest psychic level, humans do share a community of symbols, a true collectivity of which the corporate organization is only a parody.... Synchronicity represented Jung's attempt to use Heisenberg's principles to illuminate psychic states by wedding psychology and physics. In contrast to the Viennese school, which based its psychoanalytic methods on cause-and-effect relationships, Jung decided that causality was 'merely statistical truth and not absolute'.... The narrator embeds a Jungian explanation for Slothrop's growing inefficacy in the tale of Lyle Bland, the corporate czar....

The experience of the Hereros anchors the Weberian framework of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The religion of the pre-colonial Hereros shaped their society... Western missionaries, especially the Germans, destroyed the healthy dichotomies and replaced them with categories. What had happened to the Hereros...was what then afflicted the buddhists in Vietnam: the grafting of a culture that prized classification and division onto one that exalted the holistic. The connection helps explain the hints that the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a Vietnam veteran strung out on mysticism and dope.... The Hereros' death wish stemmed from their religious orientation, which led them to feel that each human was part of all creation, a vision experienced as mysticism, rather like being high on drugs. Collective suicide, envisioned as a return to unity, seemed plausible considering their understanding of a holistic universe...

According to the quasi-Weberian scheme of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Western Protestant has traditionally recoiled from the chaotic fertility of Creation... German Christianity in particular embodied the worst characteristics of Western rationalization.... Primeval scenes terrify Pynchon's Protestants, whose reflex is violence.... What Protestant history has produced is a massive structure of discipline, the equivalent of a gigantic closed thermodynamic system, a world, in fact, that overlays the world of Nature.... Without a vision of natural wholeness, prevented by the fragmentation of Creation, modern man is alienated from Nature and from his fellows. Rationalization has swept aside earlier cultures and religions. Gone are ritual, dogma, and tradition. Bureaucracy has destroyed intimate human relationships. Gone are the organic ties of family, friends, and folk. In their place are contractual bonds, formulas of impersonal trade, that render government, industry, education, religion, the military—every aspect of society—abstract and anonymous.... Like T. S. Eliot and Ludwig Wittgenstein, two early intellectual guides, Pynchon doubts that humanism can flourish in a secular world.... The Zone is a microcosm of the modern world....

[One] subplot of the novel involves colonial oppression through linguistics. Once humans begin writing, Pynchon believes, that technology becomes as dangerous as Van der Groov's musket...as if bureaucratic

discipline were by definition a Protestant monopoly.... Language facilitates analysis, the tool of rationalization, the process by which Western man subdues nature and creates his own systems of organization.... The more man analyzes, the more he sets himself apart from Nature and the more he insulates himself from chance manifestations of the sacred. Of necessity the process demands the establishment of dualities: order as opposed to disorder, the rational as opposed to the instinctive, fragmentation as opposed to unity...

Enzian is...the name of a twelve-foot-long, 600mph surface-to-air missile 'passed over' in favor of the V-2 shortly after Wernher von Braun moved his rocket technicians to Peenemunde. Jamf is an acronym for an American street term, 'Jive-Ass Mother Fucker,' [Black slang, Freudian concept] denoting 'the system.' Slothrop's name...contains an acronym (S-l-o-t-h) for the second law of thermodynamics. But the name also indicates the reason for Slothrop's failure as a messiah, as the 'pig that wouldn't die': he is too slow. At first Slothrop searches for information, about the V-2, about the *Schwarzgerat*, in an attempt to define himself and his miraculous powers, but he cannot process the information and eventually forgets why he is seeking it.... Other characters are far more adept as information gatherers and sorters: Pirate Prentice translates dreams and fantasies, Eddie Pensiero reads shivers, Saure Bummer reads reefers, and Milos Thanatz reads whip scars. Mister Information dispenses data, and Byron the Bulb radiates pure information. But Slothrop radiates nothing. As he loses momentum in his quest, Slothrop's energy wanes. 'Keep it bouncing,' Pierce Inverarity advised Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, 'keep [information] cycling.' Slothrop cannot. Great as they are, his powers are not sufficient to explicate the paradoxical relationship of order and disorder in the world.

Scientists can resolve the paradox statistically, and the strongest characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* are skilled at statistics. Mathematical odds are part of Enzian's faith. During one of their encounters, Enzian explains to Slothrop that human existence can be construed in terms of probabilities... Enzian is the lesser of the novel's two statisticians; Roger Mexico is the more capable of mathematical notations of the universe and its transformations. Mexico comes closest to understanding that Slothrop is chance raised to near-divine order, a being fueled by the chaos manifested in the random rocket strikes that may or may not erect his penis. Mexico knows that indeterminacy can preserve humans from total programming.... Mexico resembles Slothrop: 'They're two of a kind, aren't they,' Jessica Swanlake decides.

Were Pynchon not so steadfastly anti-Christian, Roger might be a John the Baptist to Slothrop's Messiah. Mexico's 'mother' is the War, for he too responds to disorder, and is in fact dependent on it: "The day the rockets stopped falling, it began to end for Roger and Jessica.' Mexico, the statistician willing to 'junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle,' maps rocket strikes and Slothrop's erections in Poisson distributions of probability, as if from an 'angel's-eye view' of London.... To Roger is given a vision of the original Christ-child—with Whom it is easy to associate Slothrop—before His career succumbed to rationalization.... Slothrop is supposed to light the path. For much of the novel, he oscillates between the thermodynamic world of nature and the informational world of man, receiving messages from both but unable to interpret the signals from either. His penis erects in the midst of explosions when he takes in energy and also after his 'study sessions' with German rocket manuals.... As a 'natural' man in an artificial world [he] is unsuited for his environment, out of phase with both worlds.... He is lazy....The second reason for Slothrop's incompetence as a messiah is his fear of 'buying and selling,' the 'the real business of the War' and of the modern human world'.... He cannot love, and sex without love does not render wastelands fruitful.... The extremes of love in the novel are represented by Blicero and Roger Mexico....

Eventually, because he is a 'natural' phenomenon, a 'singularity,' he will return to nature, where, because man has overlaid the natural landscape with artifice, Slothrop will become invisible to his fellows.... By becoming sound, he leaves the temporal boundaries of a script-print culture for the rich, imaginative enchantment of an oral stage; he regresses, from adult to child, and from the world of cities to the world of rural serenity.... Like the counterculture children in America during the sixties, Slothrop returns to Nature without understanding. Such a transformation is sterile.... Slothrop fragments because he can not achieve...a transformation that preserves information'.... Slothrop is America: innocent yet ignorant, miraculous yet mundane, generous yet uncommitted. America was the land of promise, of second

chances; she has failed her mission, as Slothrop fails his... Slothrop cannot understand... He is part of the system and that he cannot escape his responsibilities despite his desire to cast himself as victim....

Slothrop lacks the courage to doubt his convictions. As a result Slothrop functions as a diffident and inarticulate bearer of a blessing, a character-type that has become Pynchon's trademark. On one level, he fails as a redeemer of the modern wasteland because he loses his fertility as he loses his ability to convert information to understanding.... He should realize that the mystery stimulus is irrelevant, that he is free, but he does not. Because he does not, he never really understands that his sexuality is of the Earth itself, although he picks up clues before he floats off into the void of failure opportunities. Sexuality can be programmed to some extent by childhood experience and cultural reflex.... [Slothrop] is a...reminder that chance still rules. Nature—earth, the World, the substratum and support of the rationalized human world—persists, and, because it does, so do the prospects for freedom and spiritual triumph. To rationalize the world is not to control it utterly, for 'natural' surprise, described as chance, fortune, Murphy's Law, Godel's Theorem, or just plain accident—the words that make up the vocabulary of Thomas Pynchon's liturgy—will always disrupt contrived order.... Man has tried to make of his world a closed system that will not stay closed, thanks to singularities that actually quicken its energies, just as the universe itself has loci where entropy can be reversed... Slothrop has been educated in the Protestant ethic. Manifestations of chance are foreign to his need for certainty, and he can cope with them only with a paranoia, 'a Puritan reflex'....

Paranoia is a legacy of rationalization, religious only in the sense that it arises out of the Protestant passion for certainty that touched off the rush to rationalization in the first place. The paranoid denies chance by insisting that nothing that happens is accidental, and thus closes himself off from actual manifestations of the sacred. Because it imposes a false gestalt on the information that the individual receives, paranoia is thus at best inferior to true religious experience.... By attributing menace to forces beyond his control, the paranoid sees himself as a victim and claims a refuge against taking responsibility for his actions. By assuming that every event is determined, the paranoid robs himself of surprise and the wonder of authentic revelation....

Most of the psychologists in the novel, from Pavlov to Pointsman, are behaviorists interested in conditioning, which rests on determinations of cause and effect and implies a Newtonian model of the human mental universe. The System achieves its dominance by programming through culture and upbringing. Although most parents do not sell their children directly to 'The Firm' as Slothrop's did, fathers and mothers do betray their offspring by molding them to the demands of a rationalized society.... Of the two, mothers are more insidious than fathers. If mothers train their children for bureaucracies, fathers become impotent, rendered ineffectual by officially sanctioned romantic dreams... That males sell out quickly is obvious to their children, whose hatred for their fathers curdles into contempt and indifference, especially if the families are American. Lyle Bland's household is typical. Bland is perhaps the most powerful man in America; on the night he dies, his son goes to see *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Broderick Slothrop is part of the 'Father-conspiracy' almost by courtesy; he seems too foolish to be able to kill his son, as Tyrone imagines him trying to do.... Doting girls become devious parents, members of the 'Mother Conspiracy,' and youthful swains become impotent fathers....

Ostensibly Freudian [Pynchon] actually shifts the onus to Weber's repressive culture by asserting that economic constraints have entirely supplanted the ethical social norms that Freud found too rigid.... Following Weber, Pynchon concludes that culture cannot liberate.... Although Pynchon can hardly sidestep Freud's ideas, those he does borrow reinforce the novel's religious framework. Pynchon's [Atheist] affinities lie with [Christian] T. S. Eliot rather than with mainstream psychoanalytic tradition, and his desire to hold a secular century accountable for its loss of faith makes him an indifferent psychologist. Besides, Freud's tripartite division of the self too much resembles the 'false' dualities and boundaries rejected in the novel's historical survey of the West. Pynchon is far more comfortable with the lexicon of the behaviorists....

By associating the Elect with the kind of deception practiced by mothers, Pynchon intimates that parental conditioning is just another category of artificial bureaucratization. By associating conditioning with Newtonian cause and effect, as spelled out by Pavlov ('His faith ultimately lay in a pure physiological

basis for the life of the psyche. No effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages'). Pynchon can exalt chance and paradox as sacred counters to the secular determinism.... According to [Miklos] Thanatz, humans learn submission from their mothers, and as a result acquire the lust for dominance that is but the other side of the coin. He wishes to undercut the guilt-controls imposed by a rationalized society by fostering sadomasochism on a personal level. Playacting of this sort will rob the System of its power, as if by sympathetic magic....

Sadomasochistic acts are common in *Gravity's Rainbow* as attempts by characters to break through the boundaries of the individual self and to reestablish the sense of community that an impoverished spirituality has forestalled. Together the sadist and the masochist create a community of pain and shared fantasies within an erotic world of coherent proportions.... Sexual perversions are reactions against the belief that life is determined, subject to social control. Implicit in the acts is a recognition of the limitations of the romantic self: the intent is to transcend that self by breaking free of its borders, perhaps by annihilating the self altogether in order to escape into void. In a rationalized culture, only sex and death remain mysterious. Aberrant behavior links the tow under the banner of rebellion. To participate in perverse acts is to join others in a theatrical uprising against an oppressive culture—or so the participants hope. The transgression of social taboos encourages mutual complicity, which in turn is designed to liberate.... The more a culture promotes sexual release, through pornography and commercialization or exploitation of sensuality, the more sexuality loses its erotic power to subvert control. Thus, in searching for community, in trying to overcome isolation, the S and M enthusiast retreats to groupings of anonymity that do not overcome the anguish of separation from his fellows....

Measured against the debasement of spirit that Pynchon sees as the principal affliction of the twentieth-century wasteland, sexual aberrations, though frequently distasteful, are more human than alien.... What grace there is in Pynchon's world descends upon those who dare.... Pynchon implies...the drawback to homosexuality is its narcissism, a fairly standard critique of homoeroticism. When Blicero torments Gottfried, for example, he torments himself. Love is supposed to proffer a window on the soul, not a mirror. The narcissistic aspect of his character diminishes Enzian, who can hardly bear the thought of Blicero's death because without his former lover 'there is no heart, anywhere now...'

Enzian derives substance as a character and a leader from a mythic faith in divinity and in the doctrine of eternal recurrence.... His openness to chance lends him authenticity as a priest of Pynchon's theology. Enzian knows that mystery still supports the world despite the fascination with 'masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing'... Like Blicero, his former lover, Enzian needs meaning too.... Blicero's Rocket is for Enzian not just the emblem of the West but also a symbol of wider importance, an annunciation that human control is not secure.... In other words, the Rocket restores uncertainty, undermines order, and—in a sense—resacralizes the world.... That a rocket can be both profane and holy is no more startling than the contradictions inherent in language, whose power can freeze and fragment yet also exalt and protect.... The route to the sacred place of renewal lies in myth...

At the head of the tribe, Enzian tracks Blicero's legendary white rocket, an instrument of death that carried life, to its point of firing, to the holy center of the new totem of his people, in order to assemble a copy, the black rocket 00001... The duplication—ideally—will counter the unique destructiveness of the first launch, restore the covenant, and rejuvenate the wasteland, for Enzian will fire his missile at the very wellhead of the secular world, which must metaphorically intersect at that point with whatever other worlds there be.... The rainbow Enzian hopes for is the sign of a new covenant; he would be a Noah left serene after the war's destruction has cleansed the planet....

Like Rocketman, Slothrop himself, the Rocket cannot be totally programmed: ostensibly under the launcher's direction, the Rocket actually falls within an Ellipse of Uncertainty. Moreover, the Rocket's real launching pad rests upon a human dream, the hope of transcendence, of flight over human limitations, far above the rationalized grids. Dreams are the source of all technological achievements, like Kekule's wonderful discovery of the benzene ring, subject of a lament by the narrator.... Slothrop...holds the potential for 'life-in-death'; he is the redeemer of the wasteland. But Slothrop will not function as the link between secular and spiritual worlds...will not rejuvenate his culture.... Slothrop is a human Maxwell's Demon, and, like his predecessor in *The Crying of Lot 49*, he is supposed to mediate between the world of

thermodynamic reality and the human world of information. He is also something more... Slothrop can apparently convert disorder—in the instance of rocket explosions—into order—in the instance of sexual potency. When he first appears in the novel, he is unconsciously comfortable with randomness, a condition symbolized by the amazing disorder of his office desk, and clearly on the side of life through his sexual, i.e., fertilizing responses to death....

Pynchon's portrait of Captain Blicero reveals the essence of fascism. The welter of postwar events has obscured the outlines of Hitler's fanaticism, which rose out of a contradiction perverse enough to mock the paradoxes of nature. Pynchon grants Hitler's appeal by asserting that charisma can be revitalizing as well as dangerous and reminds his readers that a swastika is also a mandala. Hitler idealized the past, romanticized the ancient heroic culture of the Teutonic peoples...wanted to reestablish the 'organic' ties of family and folk.... Spurred by desires similar to Hitler's, Blicero attempts to break out of 'this cycle of infection and death,' his term for the systems of rationalization he has correctly apprehended, in favor of a romantic love/death.... 'some ancestral version of himself.... He had left 1945, wired his nerves back into the pre-Christian earth we fled across, into the Urstoff of the primitive German....

Repeatedly characters experience singularities, sometimes spontaneously, more often by contrivance.... As usual with Pynchon's characters, however, perception and sensation are untrustworthy. Those who experience singularities cannot tell whether they are secular or sacred, whether the suspension of time holds the immanence of transcendence or merely the immanence of death.... Blicero manipulates such dualities. Obsessed by 'bookish symmetries,' he must align opposites into a mandala-like pattern in order to 'transcend.' As witch, he represents mother and father, roles complementary to his bisexuality. As creator of the rocket 00000's *Schwarzgerat*, a black womb for a white human, he turns destroyer when he actually encases Gottfried in the weapon. Blicero then completes the charade apparently by stepping into the over-like flames of the final lift-off.... Blicero wishes to restore 'the primacy of the "conscious" self and its memories' by freighting the psyche with guilt, then obliterating it in expiation. His self-loathing, so readily converted to fascism, is surpassed only by the narrator's. Blicero's hope that his perversity can exfoliate into *Gotterdammerung* pales beside the narrator's vision in his worst moments of man as the despoiler of the *whole planet*, a sin punishable by unspeakable apocalypse.... This perversion of both sexuality and technology is the affliction of the wasteland, which suffers, in Eliot's words, from 'death-in-life'...

Perhaps the most amusing of Pynchon's McLuhanesque devices is Byron the Bulb, whose career parallels that of Tyrone Slothrop. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan asserts that 'the electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message....' Byron functions as an immortal icon of the Preterite, a counterpart to other lights and illuminations, all symbols of information."

Joseph W. Slade

"Religion, Psychology, Sex, and Love in *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Approaches (1983) 153-96

"Pointsman can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive anyplace in between.... But to Mexico belongs the domain between zero and one—the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion—the probabilities.' Oedipa Maas recognized such 'excluded middles' as 'bad shit.' Pointsman, a Pavlovian, seeks 'the true mechanical explanation' for phenomena. 'No effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages'.... This is what bedevils him about Slothrop: the response (a sexual encounter) seems to precede the stimulus (a rocket strike).

Mexico, however, believes 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 breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle.' Contemporary science and Pynchon stand with Mexico. Leon Brillouin observes that in light of Heisenberg's uncertainty and Bohr's complementarity, 'absolute determinism does not apply any more. Physical laws take on as essentially statistical value, but do not apply to the detail of movements.' Mass behavior is predictable, but individual behavior is not....

Gravity's Rainbow seems at times like a gargantuan X-rated comic book filled with puny forms randomly colliding like subatomic particles—two-dimensional figures racing about chaotically against a

four-dimensional backdrop. The third dimension, home of traditional representational art, the middle ground, has been dropped.... Pynchon presents the energy—the thought, action, or sensation—before identifying the matter.... The simpler characters recall comic book figures. Even those who don't dissolve into a group or assume different guises have ridiculous names that 'often suggest specific attitudes or ideas,' as Charles Harris notes. With the use of 'two-dimensional, "comic-strip" characters...normal processes of life and death, not to mention of pain and sorrow, are temporarily suspended'—as they would be, for example, in a Roadrunner cartoon....

Even a more developed character such as Franz Pokler comes to the reader not so much as a person with a solid form but as a locus of emotions—guilt, fear, timidity—refracted as they pass through remembered or fantasized events. Such characters are no more integrally cohesive or ontologically sound for being complex.... The self is unfixed, insubstantial, contingent. It varies with the different identities one adopts like comic book roles (consider Rocketman)... Joseph Slade notes that in Pynchon the self is 'predicated on shifting multiple states of consciousness, endlessly fluctuating, as if frames of film were sprocketing through a field of view'.... Pynchon builds his novel on an unbounded range of perspectives...

Like the contemporary atomic physicist, he resorts to 'complementarity' in trying to give a fuller accounting of phenomena than any one interpretation can.... Through such complementarity, the narrator forces the reader to shift suddenly, even violently, between opposing attitudes and tones... Sometimes the narrator will perform such switches within switches within switches....These leave the reader no sure ground from which to respond to the fictional events... The perspectives become highly mobile and endlessly multiple as the narrator bounces back and forth between different coordinate systems...to emphasize both the infinity of possible outlooks on a situation and the incompleteness of each one. As in the Zone, borders are illusory. As in twentieth-century science's models of the universe, separate entities dissolve into a continuum....

As a result, we can never be quite sure which voice or perspective we are getting. With such disturbing inconsistencies, the reader can never fully have faith in anything in the narrative; he can never come to rest or settle on the meaning, the definitive version. The confusing inconsistencies in the narrative voice (or voices) could on the one hand be functional, brilliant devices to trap the reader in uncertainties and in versions he must question. On the other hand, the narrator or the author himself may simply lose control of his materials in place and succumb to confusions and irresolutions of his own. The narrator develops a contradictory attitude toward Slothrop in particular.... Whatever success he achieves is severely qualified. In transferring from plot to plot, character to character, fantasy to fantasy, the narrator may act on a similar hope and yet feel that he has succeeded no better than Slothrop. [The critic] Mark Siegel has compared the narrator to a court jester, not a 'charismatic leader' but, 'by his own account, the Fool who fulfills his courtly role as an entertainer and advisor by disguising his meanings as "mindless pleasures"....'

Gravity's Rainbow is Pynchon's most faithful 'isomorphic representation' of the new cosmos.... It exists in a seeming infinity of moments, things, details, and events. It allows uncertainty and possibility, yet its apparently disparate elements coalesce in a field that they create about themselves; insofar as they hold together, they do so by the gravity—the geometry of relations—of that field.... Although the elements of the novel reflect or echo one another, they do not form what Pointsman would call 'a clear train of linkages.' The belie causal sequence, chronology, and linear organization, the Newtonian mechanics of the traditional novel, thus suggesting 'probable associations' and 'tendencies to be related,' less confining notions which contemporary science has preferred in making its own models of reality. Pynchon's model of reality, his novel, works like Leni's astrology: by 'parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems.... Relativity theory supports Leni and Pynchon, declaring that all reference systems are equivalent for description of natural laws and phenomena.... There is no suggestion of casual connection but rather of parallel movement in accordance with some all-subsuming process that makes it possible to talk of one thing in terms of another. Pynchon's method of parallel construction extends from his scenes to his sentences....

Pynchon has associated the Serpent with gravity through images, for example the 'rainbow lashings' of both their coils. And Pynchon tries to make his novel function the same way. As a gravitational field, it is a geometry of relations curved back upon itself by its own matter. The end is in the beginning, the

beginning in the end, for the novel opens with an aftermath and closes with an advent. What immediately follows and precedes is 'all theatre'.... Slothrop sees 'a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth.' Frequently the rainbow designates a limit of the senses, a border of perception, or an interface between systems or cycles. But just as frequently it betokens love and earth-lust: Pan appears as a 'beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky.' The two meanings come together in gravity, the integrating force—or geometry of relations—that functions like Kekule's Great Serpent, binding 'the World' together. Pynchon, finding the mystical in the physical, searches for the unnameable 'Function' in patterns of energy.... In *Gravity's Rainbow*...physical forces appear to be spiritual, even loving if considered from a mystic's perspective....

In the relativistic cosmos, everything bears on everything else, in all directions at once. Hence *Gravity's Rainbow* often dispenses with 'the one-way flow of European time'.... The very volume of detail suggests hidden patterns and latent connections that stretch beyond one's ability to process them...Because Pynchon assets a radically new type of structure, he seems to throw these diverse components together at random, without system or coherent design, like items in a junkpile. But Pynchon's junkpiles have held possible redemption ever since the first one appeared in 'Low-lands'... His junkpiles have always opposed the rigid world of programming, rationalization, and routinization with the chaotic virtues of spontaneity, surprise, and discovery; they have always countered the linear motion of entropy and exhaustion with the circular motion of recycling. Such beliefs could explain not only the novel's junkpile slew of jumbled perspectives but also its sheer bulk of apparently unorganized detail."

Peter L. Cooper

Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World
(U California 1983) 180-84, 197-201, 212-17

"*Gravity's Rainbow*, whatever failings it may have as literature, has become the *Ulysses* of the seventies: a work whose difficulties, abstruse references, and historical sweep recall Joyce's plan of the twenties.... Part I of *Gravity's Rainbow* is called 'Beyond the Zero,' and it establishes some of the interconnections of rocketry and human fallibility: technology as deeply embedded in the individual as well as the culture.... The outrageous, the tall tale, the poignant, and the technological interpenetrate... [Barth and Pynchon] load the dice, especially in Pynchon's case, by intermixing a pop culture with a serious event, creating cultural levels which intersect without touching. Pynchon, for example, uses personal names that also fit rock groups, then he thrusts his characters into situations with tragic implications, comic names involved in deadly games. The names suggest people with platitudinous personalities and pop responses reacting to random events which are nothing less than cosmic: fall of rockets, knowledge the Germans are preparing a knockout blow for England, awareness that events are narrowing down to Armageddon.... The rocket is a representation of the All, a Jungian archetypal image....

Part II's title, 'Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering,' refers to the Allied laboratory set up to investigate German rocket plans. The epigraph is pure pop: "You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood,' words spoken by Marian C. Cooper to Fay Wray, indicating that her suitor will be King Kong. Into the deadly game of rockets Pynchon inserts Kong, the idea of Kong. Behind Kong lies the idea of Tarzan, and behind both is a witty sexual pageant.... But while Tarzan is easy to accommodate—he is a 'jungle dreamboat'—King Kong presents problems of race, size, suitability.... Kong: the ultimate terror weapon, a huge black penis, the shadowy presence in every white woman's nightmares. The end game with all the Kong references is the idea not only of rape but of the size of his weapon....the ultimate threat from Africa, the third world, a politically unsatisfactory creature with legitimate claims. Racism, imperialism, colonialism, sexual repression, creative energy, repression of ultimate desires all come together in a dual to the death....

Further, if we keep the 1960s firmly in mind, Kong represents that Dionysiacal principle suggested by Norman O. Brown and others who sought liberation in orgiastic abandon: sex, drugs, groupies, etc.... No writer, not even a with-it poet like Allen Ginsberg, can catch the popsicle nature of pop culture as devastatingly as Pynchon, perhaps because he derives his humor from its banalities.... Like a novelistic Lenny Bruce [stand-up comedian prone to obscenities], is Pynchon, the self-conscious, intruding author, unable to leave his artifact alone for more than moments, bubbling with commentary, one-liners, words directed at both characters and audience. Bruce's dialogues with his audience seem the basis of many of

Pynchon's short bursts: brief vaudeville or stand-up comic routines. Unlike Bruce, however, who martyred himself to the audience's own desire for guiltless scatology, Pynchon drifts off, thrusting out a line or dare, then withdrawing.... Bruce sought to convey disorder, whereas Pynchon's energies are devoted to creating patterns, distribution curves, parabolas....

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon positions scenes and characters somewhere in a void or in middle areas beyond touch.... His object is to find in people and scenes the correlative of the rocket, rockets incoming, apocalypse not portended but in the making.... The method introduces people and matter by way of accretion of detail, in the manner of accumulation, until pieces, as in a puzzle, fit. The work shapes itself in the reader's mind. The reader *makes* the novel.... We must fit the rocket together to gain the novel.... Like that 'screaming across the sky' of the approaching projectile, the novel will shriek across, theater and spectacle in a buzz bomb of elements.... [Pirate] communicates with a gigantic Adenoid slowly consuming all of Europe. The episode is a fantasy replica of the German monster, now using rocketry to savage London...

Slothrop, who derives from an old family reminiscent of Pynchon's own (the Pynchons of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*), has sensory antennae which pick up what others are too coarse to sense.... He explores fantasy worlds by way of ordinary elements—a men's john, a shoeshine boy (who happens to be the young Malcolm X), a toilet bowl—all juxtaposed to a much larger plan, which is to determine whether Slothrop under the needle can divulge the way his special gift operates.... In the men's john, Slothrop goes in pursuit of a mouth harp, which drops into the toilet. As he plunges in after it, the scene takes on the wildness of a homosexual nightmare intermixed with the water imagery of a birth. At one end Slothrop is offering his buttocks for rape by a black gang led on to racial violence by Malcolm X; at the other, he is moving down through the world of excrement toward some birth or rebirth at the far end, if he can reach it. Along the way, he reads the 'toilet world' as one reads road signs...

The point about Slothrop is that he may have achieved a reversal of cause and effect; that is, he may be a perfect case of Pavlovian psychology, but in reverse.... When the V-2 rocket exemplifies first explosion, then sound, it reverses our conditioned reflexes, as Jamf's experiments on infant Slothrop revealed. That reversal of normal conditioning is, in one sense, a great form of consciousness.... With our expectations no longer sustained, we perceive the rocket as forcing a reordering of experience... The rockets do fall into a pattern.... Embedded somewhere in his reflexes is the sensory perception of the rocket pattern....The map he keeps in his office, with a record of his female conquests, is actually a map of rocket strikes according to that Poisson distribution: hardons, girls, and rockets all interconnected in Slothrop's 'gift'... The Pynchon paradox is apparent: chance by way of the cosmos is unacceptable, while chance by way of individual choice is accommodated. The two, of course, must conflict... His 'culture of death' is the inescapable fact that human rationality cannot obtain in a world of infinite chance; that rationality is absorbed into the irrational, or into forms of doom, as rapidly as it asserts itself: that the two are like Siamese twins, so joined that separation is itself a form of the culture of death....

A good deal of the second part of *Gravity's Rainbow* is devoted to the plot to find out what Slothrop knows, through the agent and counter-agent Katje and a linguistics genius named Dodson-Truck.... Pynchon is attempting the novel of flow, of spatial and temporal process—what we catch in Joyce's desire to create process of time and space by way of one day in a fixed place. Joyce used an enclosed spatial and temporal unit in order to create its opposite; whereas Pynchon moves across the cosmos, gravity's rainbow, for much the same effect: to join individual fortunes with those vast temporal and spatial empires which, by contrast, make human life miniscule....

Characters assume different guises, even different shapes, in order to work along the model of the cellular structure. About one-third through the novel, Tyrone Slothrop has taken on a new name (Ian Scuffling), a new role as an English war correspondent, and a new function, to enter a different time and space medium. He will work out the cellular structure of Slothrop by posing as another, then slowly move back toward what he was: his quest to find out. Thus, the novel is poised: Slothrop and rockets, individual and gravity's rainbow.... Tyrone Slothrop (T.S., himself [Eliot]) becomes Ian Scuffling, and yet the new name and new role as correspondent are not a nuclear change, only a cellular one. The center or nucleus, the identifying element, remains, while the actual molecular structure is altered to allow for narrative

progression. In still another way, the cellular structure takes on a crucial role, in the association of those gigantic cartels with individuals, whom they control.... The cartel, like the cell, contains the nucleus (what it originally was) and yet it transforms itself by way of changes in its molecular structure.... Slothrop's choices are controlled by cartels, which have used him since infancy in the Jamf experiments. Slothrop is a victim of capitalists at the highest level, a tool in Marx's sense....

This novel of seemingly endless chaos is, in reality, tightly organized. Pynchon extends the molecular makeup of the cell to language itself: 'How alphabetic is the nature of molecules.' Like the polymers in plastics, our words 'too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in worldwide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences, like the seen parts of a tapestry. Furthermore, Pynchon uses chess as an analogy to the molecular theory which underlies cells... We observe how chess randomness works out: within characters, in the strange sibling relationship of the Russian Tchitcherine and the African Enzian, who heads the Schwarzcommandos. Tchitcherine's father, a sailor, had deserted from his ship and lived with an African, which resulted in Enzian, half-brother to the younger Tchitcherine, left behind in Russia. The two are like a single cell broken off, or like movable molecules in a given cell, thus creating combinations analogous to those in plastics or in a given chess game.

Tchitcherine, preparing a rocket of his own, is working the seams of a zone caught in the German vacuum—a role which fulfills his compulsive need to annihilate the Schwarzcommandos and his 'mythical half-brother Enzian.' Not to be confused with the Tchitcherine who helped negotiate the Rapallo Treaty with Tathenau, this Tchitcherine is nihilistic; there are in his ancestors 'any number of bomb throwers and jubilant assassins.' His heritage is those students who threw themselves under the wheels of carriages or died in the Czar's prisons. Tchitcherine, whose needs will intertwine with Slothrop's fortunes, is a driven man, propelled by the need to gain power so as to destroy. His ruthlessness is equaled only by that of Enzian and the Schwarzcommandos, those strange Herero Africans caught in the interface of cultures. Everyone is a spin-off, a molecular peculiarity. Tchitcherine can rightly be seen as a supermolecule, Enzian as a property in himself, an enzyme... The duplication and triplication of characters, the assumption of new names and identities, the element of theater...are connected to plastic molecules and the cellular structure they represent....

Pynchon uses Weissmann, a key organizer of the rocket construction project, in conjunction with Mondauger, both of whom occupied the villa during the siege in the Sudwest. Once involved in the desecration of the Hereros, they are reunited for rocket work, which is to desecrate Europe.... The Hereros, led in post-Nazi Germany by Enzian, are an excellent example of an entire people caught in the Heisenberg principle...the indeterminacy principle, which questioned absolutes in nature.... For in their struggle for independence against German rule of South West Africa in the early twentieth century, as we saw in *V.*, they were virtually exterminated. As a foreshadowing of German extermination of the Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies, we have the Hereros. The Germans treated them like so many slugs clustered on the plants, not people, not even bodies (except for the women), but inorganic matter.

Yet the Herero response to the failure of their rebellions from 1903 to 1907 was a kind of suicide. 'They want a negative birth rate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904.' The Schwarzcommandos—Hereros the Germans were training as 'black juntas' for the eventual takeover of British and French colonies in Africa—are filled with that sense of sterility and death. Called the 'Empty Ones,' they have chosen tribal suicide (their own form of death) over Christian death (dying for any other cause). These 'Empty Ones,' now exiled in the Zone (an interfacial area), 'calculate no cycles, no returns, they are in love with the glamour of a whole people's suicide—the pose, the stoicism, and the bravery. These Otukungura are prophets of masturbating, specialists in abortion and sterilization, pitchmen for acts oral and anal, pedal and digital, sodomistical and zoophilic.' Their goal is the day when the last Zone-Herero will become 'a final zero to a collective history fully lived.' It is against this that Enzian must struggle to carry out his plans of leadership, revenge, revitalization... Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty in nature has become embodied in a race: its desire to survive in its own perverse way against the perversity of those who would exterminate it in their way. By choosing tribal suicide, they make procreation itself the enemy....

Pynchon [searches] for certainty amidst indeterminacy. He reflects the 1960s intensely: that striving, not for existential authenticity, but for some human principle in which the addiction (drugs or otherwise) is not worse than the analgesia (however powerful). The Hereros, an ostensible play on 'heroes,' are the Jews of Africa, hunted down and yet refusing to buckle under. Their choice of extinction is like that of the besieged at Masada, preferring tribal suicide to death at the hands of the conqueror. Yet the group that splinters off when it is taken to Germany, the group that reforms as the Schwarzcommandos, asserts a new feeling, like the Jews who fought to establish Israel against overwhelming odds.... The Hereros, that group marked by the Nazis for black power, are now struggling for just that, with Enzian its leader and ideological mouthpiece—the ultimate Black Panther.

In another way the rocket has parallels to the struggle to create nuclear weapons. That Zone Pynchon refers to as a separate state is an appropriate representative of the state created by the bomb, the bomb as a state of mind... By way of this extended conceit, Pynchon connects the Rocket State to the individual situation: because of his unique gift, Slothrop experiences the sense of the rocket rising, the result of Jamf's conditioning of erection and coming. Slothrop here is both launcher and what is launched, outside and inside his own organ, as the rocket is both within and without our experience. There is, by way of association between individual and rocket, an effort to consolidate the various meanings of the novel....

The Rocket State has already taken over, in that Pynchon blend of immediate postwar rocketry with America of the sixties and seventies. The Rocket State becomes a giant 'factory-state,' rather pleasant, but with a villain, 'serious as death': It 'is this typical American teenager's own *Father*, trying episode after episode to kill his son. And the kid knows it.' Pynchon is referring on one level to the Vietnam War, in which a boy who had a father (and mother) supporting the war was doomed to fight and possibly die in it, with sons reliving war exploits for their aging fathers; but on another level, a form of death embodied in what Pynchon calls the 'Radiant Hour,' a form of mechanical and technological death....

Particularly brilliant (inevitable pun) as an insert is the tale of Byron the Night Bulb.... Its brilliance derives from its presence as a saga of endurance. In a controlled state, whether socialist or capitalist, it creates panic because it is a perfect technological feat. It will burn forever, and therefore it is destructive of the market. The cartel which created it, Phoebus (Apollo, the sun personified), monitors the Bulb and tries to destroy it. The attempt by Byron to survive against repeated efforts to blacken it is the epic of a survivor and rebel.... The Bulb personifies the interplay of technology and humanity in which everything is given life, yet is based on systems which move outside our control, even as we hope to control them. Systems split off functions into separate roles—Tchitcherine and Enzian, half-brothers, personify this. In the Pynchon world, the search for roles goes on compulsively, the only certainty being that no role will be found even when the search seems completed. He is so intensely American....

Slothrop... becomes, as do all the other major characters, an acrobat in a farcical drama, a performer in a vaudeville revue, in the theater of war and death'.... Central to Slothrop's dilemma is that in order to discover his identity, behind the Jamf conditioning, he must escape all systems of thought and action. His quest, however, is impossible: systems claim all, and even Slothrop's perception of himself as unique cannot exclude him. He is scattered to the winds, a kind of Osiris, whose pieces will be hunted down by Isis. Only Byron the Bulb, who can slip outside the system, will survive. But he must do so at great personal cost, for his transcendence was 'clear subversion'....

Pynchon is moving the novel back into spaciousness, into full systems, although his inability to write about love (as apart from coupling and sex) hobbles his achievement.... There is here, Pynchon's penchant for sophomoric amusement, which is never distant from his work.... Although Pynchon has his share of doom and apocalypse, they are manifested within contexts of enthusiasm, enjoyment, even gratification, however bizarre. The play of sixties roles looms large, a spread of splendor.... Although many passages are adolescent posturing—the sex, for example—the overall drama makes the lapses acceptable.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 444-56

“The world of human meanings that Pynchon depicts is also ‘but an iridescence in the void.’ It is acutely aware that it rises out of nothingness and is ever threatened by a collapse back into nothingness.... Pynchon’s three novels describe a rage for order run amok, a struggle for survival that in its excess has become suicidal. Each of his books, but especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*, focuses on the fateful dynamics of the assertion and petrification of meaning systems, whether they be linguistic, religious, political, economic, scientific or sexual; indeed, any pattern of order that people assign to their lives seems to follow the same semiotic logic, the same patterns of the creation, intensification, and final failure of essential meaning. Yet through Pynchon’s parody of this semiotic rage, his own self-consciously excessive system-building, his mammoth creation of the evanescent world that makes up *Gravity’s Rainbow*, he offers us an insight, as well as a critique of, the...idols of our culture....

Pynchon’s ultimately self-reflexive focus on the linguistic basis of meaning systems provides the thematic and formal coherence of the book as well as determines the distinctive qualities of his style and linguistic richness, particularly his wonderful use of metaphor....*Gravity’s Rainbow* is but one manifestation of widespread literary fascination with the nature and limits of aesthetic and social language during the past two decades. Whether it be the books of Burroughs, Gass, Coover, Barth, Barthelme, or Reed, the ‘new’ and poststructuralist novels of Robbe-Grillet, Sollers, or Maurice Roche, the writings of Handke, or of a myriad of South American fabulists, the fiction of our era offers a radical critique of art as language, of language as social behavior, and correspondingly, of social behavior as versions of semiotic systems.

These writers’ preoccupation with language, especially with the ceaseless dialectic of assertion and collapse of meaning—of creation and deconstruction—generates the self-reflexive linguistic play that has become the primary aesthetic style of our period, the period known as the postmodern.... It is entirely within the framework of socialized behavior—humankind’s self-projected semiotic systems—that postmodernism situates us.... Consciousness is deemed to be determined solely by language. Only that which enters into language has meaning [So babies and deaf mutes have no consciousness?]....The Counterforce’s...tentative, self-deconstructive, and perhaps self-defeating play with language indicates both the liberating aspects as well as the severe limits of postmodern aesthetics.... Any alternative to the System is itself a system....

Gravity’s Rainbow offers us a vast superstructure of these interpenetrating systems of meaning and control, be they malevolent or benign. It is a parodic, panorama of life in late-capitalist, post-industrial society, in which individuals live at the mercy of diffuse economic, political, corporate, and technological orders, and struggle within behavioral patterns shaped by psychological, parapsychological, and sexual determinants. But even more diabolic, Pynchon implies, is that even if antagonistic to each other, all these systems are analogous. All behavior, all knowledge, all *reality* seem to exhibit the same structure and logic. Indeed, they appear to suggest, as many of the characters in the novel believe, that they are ultimately all connected and controlled by an omnipresent and malevolent agency.... Language, which determines the structure, hence the operation, of consciousness and culture, consequently provides the universal analogy of control and decay in Pynchon’s world. But if it often appears to be the villain of the work, it is also the primary agent of healthy creation and potential liberation from the reign of oppressive systems....

The Fall is into consciousness, into language. The desire to know, and ultimately to control, existence is the primal transgression of humanity against the natural order... Culture, the projected world of human dimensions, presents itself in dramatic opposition to the ever threatening world of nature.... The Christian paradigm of the hatred of a fallen life governed by death, and transcendence found only through death [This reduction falsifies Christianity], is reflected in the rocket-builders’ obsession with death and the prophecy of Escape that the rocket offers. But the shift from an absolute, externally defined system (God) to a human-oriented and established secular world makes humanity entirely dependent upon its own powers of control and transcendence. It is a faith that is not justified... Just as the actions of language and consciousness result in a move from a forced fragmentation of existence to an imposed and ultimately repressive systemization, Pynchon’s characters find their lives to be fragmented, and themselves to be but fragments of a much greater and finally oppressive social homogenization.... Pynchon’s figures fear the results of all systemization. They realize that the world human have created to protect themselves is more threatening than what is shut out....

According to Pynchon, we are all living inside the System faced with the same dilemmas as Slothrop and the Preterite.... And if finally Slothrop slips over into the world beyond human systems, language, and consciousness—at the price of individual identity while regaining ‘naturalness’—the rest of the Preterite are left behind to form the Counterforce.... Slothrop will never return to America.... Pynchon and the Counterforce must remain within that human, and basically romantic, dilemma: to strive to overcome through language and consciousness the state of alienation from existence that is the product of language and consciousness. Finally, as much as Pynchon’s critique of the System is based on a theory of transgression by consciousness against the natural order, there is no sustained suggestion that a return is possible. It is not an ideal reality, a primal and pure existence, that is being offered, but more a nostalgic vision that sets the present decadence and victimization in relief....

Invariably...those who fear death the most and who attempt to use it become its submissive agents. Jamf seeks to be its voice, Brigadier Pudding its lover, Blicero its mystic votary. As he did in *V.*, Pynchon depicts the dark romanticism of those who in struggling against the reign of death come to acknowledge their ultimate failure, and who consequently prefer to embrace death and to bring down upon themselves and the world a triumphant, self-annihilating apocalypse....

In a paranoid society, everything appears ‘meaningful.’ And in Pynchon’s totalized world, everything may indeed be meaningful. If we only knew how to accurately apprehend and interpret it.... Connections are made, but not codified. Instead of ‘interlocking’ in as coherent a manner as the System attempts, the Counterforce promises randomness and improvisation. ‘*They’re* the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements.’ Indeed, all the positive characters in the novel cultivate improvisation—the temporary assumption of a seemingly effective order suitable only for a particular moment. The magic that Geli Tripping practices is exemplary.... The only alternative Pynchon offers is the refusal of stultifying codification and the warning that one should not become enmeshed in one’s own system of paranoia. It is a lesson Slothrop learns from Geli....

Temporary, self-conscious arrangements, these are the only patterns of meaning one can trust. [In other words, don’t marry the girl.] Rather than codification, Pynchon suggests, we need improvisation, an active and creative association of disconnected parts. If, indeed, the creation of imaginary unities out of fragments lies at the base of the restrictive systems of the Firm, the only thing that differentiates the Counterforce (and Pynchon’s own mammoth work) from the System is the self-consciousness of their venture—the full awareness of the origin of the linguistic principle of systems. Instead of the seductive delusion of causality [In other words, deny you’re the father], Pynchon offers the more suggestive, if basically fictitious, principle of analogy.... ‘Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems’.... Metaphor—this ‘thrust at truth and a lie,’ the ‘Great Lie’—is a constant concern of Pynchon’s novels. Metaphor and the principle of analogy allow both a truth and a lie. They both create meaning and are, in essence, fictions.... It is the disparateness of the terms of any metaphor that he focuses on, and it is the silence, the void between the terms, that he accents. Thus in every attempt at an order, Pynchon offers us its potential insubstantiality...

Yet, as Pynchon suggests, all human meaning systems are organized according to their principles.... The poet’s responsibility, Pynchon implies, is to reveal the tentative and transitory base of all meaning systems. His challenge is to allow himself the freedom of dismantling his own creation.... He calls attention to the unstable base of the work as it playfully unfolds itself. This self-conscious, or rather self-reflexive, creation offers itself in the works of Pynchon and the postmodernists as a paradigm of cultural freedom. Rather than acquiescing to the inherited meaning systems imposed by society, one is offered the possibility of self-consciously creating one’s own system of reference while demystifying society’s.

Gravity’s Rainbow is a vast edifice built out of an intricate and self-supporting system of metaphors and analogies, all of which ultimately point to their extreme tenuousness, their necessary artificiality, their suggestive truth. It is a significant panorama of cultural complexity, yet its own parts barely hold together. It sustains a narrative for more than seven hundred pages, yet constantly dismantles all emerging plot lines. Ultimately, the book offers at once an insightful and ‘realistic’ portrait of the interconnecting systems of meaning and meaning-making in our overdetermined society, and a grotesque parody of that world. Its goal

is to unmask and mock its culture. Rather than denying the rage for order that dominates contemporary society, Pynchon parodies its excess. His comedy is that of the overdetermination, the profusion and chaos that result from uncontrolled systemization. Rather than stability and restrictiveness, his world engenders discontinuity and a surreal self-destructiveness....

For in surrealism is not only a deconstructive cultural politics but a principle of anarchic creative action.... This anarchic and surreal impulse is basic to most postmodern literature, especially in the United States. The spirit of rebellion and liberation of vision in the works of Vonnegut, Coover, Barthelme, Sukenick, Brautigan, Reed, Burroughs, and Charles Wright, for example, thrives on the absurd and comic juxtaposition of fragmentary images ripped free from their cultural context. These writers cultivate the 'mindless pleasures' that, in their life-affirming antics, are threats to unquestioned order.... Postmodern playfulness must turn the deconstructive process back upon itself as well, even if this process implicitly raises deeply troubling questions about its ultimate value. As Pynchon knows, these 'antisocial and mindless pleasures' also ravage the brain. A life that denies causality, that revels in the shifting and temporary alliances of chance events, threatens itself with its own ultimate dissolution....

The problem that the Counterforce, Pynchon, and many postmodern writers face is that of the viability of what amounts to an anarchic response to social totalization. Their alternative systems are threatened, on the one hand, by all the dangers inherent in systemization—such as Enzian's and the Counterforce's tendency to create their own bureaucracies—or, on the other hand, by complete disintegration into mindless and destructive pleasures. The anarchy of the Counterforce is in danger of becoming more like the System the more it focuses on its opposition to the System.... The work of Pynchon and the postmodernists may stress the demystification of cultural codes of ideology and behavior, but they are unable to offer any response other than the continuous process of self-reflexive assertion and the dismantling of private alternate visions....

Pynchon's work here, as in *V.*, is based on an analysis of the historical development of this repressive totalized culture, but its central message is the denial of history, the denial of the possibility of significant change. History is presented only as the record by which we read the progressive dehumanization of culture and the increasing growth of a death wish that seems to govern society. There appears to be a natural law of history, as of all systems—that of a diabolic entropy. All systems tend toward decay and death.... According to Pynchon, history is only a construct that one reads in hindsight. The authorities define it as meaningful and progressive, whereas Pynchon shows it to be destructive.... History is a false construct, Pynchon implies, because it depends on a belief in cause and effect, and thus on the continuity of identifiable and controllable forces.... Indeed, if history exists for Pynchon, ironically it is a version of religious history—the history of the Fall. The progressive decline of humanity, the accelerating self-destruction of the modern world—these are the historical visions of Thomas Pynchon. It is an organic record that he traces, our ambiguous role in the struggle of life against death....

No unified vision of an alternative world is possible, or permissible, in the postmodern aesthetic. Rather, Pynchon offers us a massive system of analogies of decay and destruction, of repression and fragmentation, analogies that may only fall apart as does the book in its final section. And out of this dismantling—a promise? The art of fragments—whether they portend death or revitalization—this is the final gift of Pynchon. It is an anarchic vision that promises either freedom or impotence, creation or mindless pleasures.”

Charles Russell
“Pynchon's Language: Signs, Systems, and Subversion”
Approaches (1983) 251-72

“The struggle between freedom and determinism is played out large in *Gravity's Rainbow* in Slothrop's Progress: whether or not and how Slothrop can free himself from the control of Jamf, the IG, Pointsman, and the Firm is the central issue of the book's main plot. By the time Slothrop enters the Zone, our impression (and his too) is that he is the totally conditioned man, programmed, manipulated, and monitored since infancy by conspiracies within conspiracies; he is a test case, the perfect 'fox' for testing and perfecting Pavlov's and Pointsman's theories of behavioral determinism. Slothrop's subjugation to these forces is symbolized by 'The Penis He Thought Was His Own,' which may seem at first a fanciful and

comic symbol. But the penis is not a purely comic organ; it has been a symbol for serious matters for a long time.... Jamf's grotesque study of Infant Tyrone's tiny penis is not so farfetched: several studies have actually been done of infantile erections.... The conditioned and uncontrollable sexual response and the guilt it generates are an important tool society uses to control the behavior of its members [pun?]...

The many forces so sternly opposed to the idea of human freedom in the book are more or less abstract and invisible; the most visible is Pointsman the behaviorist, who epitomizes its most conscious and evil form. But behaviorism is only the theoretical and experimental arm of a larger determinism.... Pointsman makes it clear that his behaviorism depends upon the universal validity of this causality and rational analysis, and as he searches for the connection between Slothrop and the rocket, he thinks, 'When we find it, we'll have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul'.... This frightening attitude represents the main thrust of the European philosophy of science and culture from Spinoza to the positivists of the late nineteenth century.... An even deeper irony is hidden in Pointsman's name.... The pointsman recurs in modern discussions of free will, as a metaphor, in fact, for free will itself. James Clerk Maxwell first developed the metaphor of 'singular points' in his essay 'Science and Free Will'.... We should see through Pointsman's rigid determinism, and see the irony in his inability to be his own pointsman, though he tries to be everyone else's.... Pointsman, the representative of an intellectual order flourishing well beyond its time, hopelessly out of touch with modern science...

'If ever the Antipointsman existed, Roger Mexico is the man.' As a statistician interested in probabilities Mexico shares none of Pointsman's assumptions about rational analysis and mechanistic causality. And Pointsman is horrified by the implications of Mexico's probability theory—his ability to predict the shape of future events in large numbers, and his absolute inability to apply his knowledge to particular events.... Statistics and probability theory uncover a deep flaw in the notion of mechanistic causality, which is the basis of classical scientific thought as well as our commonsense interpretation of experience.... By the end of the book, Mexico's generation will have learned to recognize and reject the behaviorist's lockstep mechanism of cause and effect, the stimulus-and-response; they will come to reflect a new historical order, freed from mechanism, causality [Go ahead and jump off that cliff, there is no cause and effect.], determinism, conditioning, and even from rationality itself—a Counterforce, determined only to be free, in the belief that there is an underlying natural order even to its own randomness.

Roger confronts Pointsman directly on the subject of analysis and causality.... Analysis is the cause of Europe's irreversible fall from that natural state to which we must return by ourselves.... It is Europe that has to bear this responsibility for destroying the natural human condition, now having finally Europeanized America [Here Pynchon himself is engaged in analysis of causality].... Pointsman can see only chaos in the abandonment of causality.... Acausality, randomness, probability, and uncertainty have become part of the scientist's stock-in-trade, and theoretical tools have been developed for dealing with them. It is Pointsman, not Mexico, who is out of step with science and the modern world.... The world remains orderly, even if we come to see it as constituted of random events with no causal links—*too* orderly, in fact, for the true paranoid. Slothrop discovers the historical basis of these laws in the Spielsaal, where the fames of chance reveal the same unfathomable laws as the regularity of Roger's rocket-strikes and Their control over him and Katje....

All the supernatural elements in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be interpreted in terms of this dualism between the order we perceive in the world and 'another order of being,' the 'identical-looking Other World,' our intuition of greater, invisible, and incomprehensible forces [compare Frank Norris in *The Octopus*], which gives us the sense of haunting and unaccountable structures in the world and in history. Quantum and relativity theory have brought us to what seem to be the outer limits of rational thought, where mathematics, common sense, and imagination confront the dead end of paradox. Paradox itself has become such a fundamental part of physical theory that it has been elevated to the rank of a principle: Niels Bohr's principle of 'complementarity' simply asserts that mutually exclusive interpretations of phenomena are a basic fact of life in the new physics.... Pynchon is saying that freedom is possible; we can at least free ourselves from all but the laws of nature—and even the laws of nature are no longer the hard mechanical laws of the old science....

As Pynchon depicts the struggle between the old order and the new, there is no question of their moral values: the old order is that of mechanism, society, and death, and the new is of freedom, nature, and life....

[This is] a vision of the possibility of human freedom based on the dissolution of social structures founded on reason and analysis, and the restoration of a natural order [Romantic primitivism in the tradition of Rousseau, reflecting the 1960s Counterculture].... For it is too late in history for the world, or even society, to effect such a return. Only the individual can recover this freedom, and to do so he must step outside the social order to escape the mechanistic controls it exerts over him. So when Slothrop 'returns,' he becomes invisible to those around him; he becomes an exile from the army, from America, from his family, and even from his friends. Similarly, when Katje and Prentice enter the Counterforce, they do not find a society there, but only a collection of individuals dropping out each in his own direction; and they realize that their new situation alienates them forever from the People they have only lately learned to love....

Blicero, in whom Europe's love affair with the forces of death is symbolized, plays Pointsman with Pokler. Like Pointsman, he too is a behavioristic social engineer, and his cinematic methods for behavior modification are emblematic of the dangers to human values posed by the philosophical error that underlies the rationalistic and mechanistic interpretation of the world—all the more dangerous in an age that no longer believes in God or the soul, and so has mechanized everything... 'every soul'....

This is the particular theme we have been developing in *Gravity's Rainbow*: first, that rational analysis, as the modern world's characteristic mode of life, has stolen man's freedom by seducing him intellectually into a 'stone determinacy' at every level of his being; second, that we can return to our freedom, but only individually and alone—only at the cost of relinquishing society, because society cannot see its own enslavement to reason, does not understand its dangers, and so pushes it upon us aggressively, wrongly, and mortally, even if innocently; and third, that our solitary return into freedom is experienced both by society and ourselves as a dissolution—a loss of the self that is, paradoxically, an act of identification with the world and all of those who constitute the very society we cannot belong to.... [See] the popular psychoanalytic vision of Norman O. Brown, the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger... Compare to Bergson's vision those given to so many characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, most clearly to Slothrop, Lyle Bland, and Geli Tripping.... Each provides us with a partial commentary on Pynchon's theme.... Phenomenology, like existentialism, is first of all a philosophy of *freedom*."

James W. Earl
"Freedom and Knowledge in the Zone"
Approaches (1983) 229-47

"Freaks are...people who perceive themselves as trapped in the System, and who want Out... The freaks of the World War II period are related to the freaks altered by the events of the sixties—it is all part of the same moment.... The book is, among other things, a terrific comic book for synthesis freaks, pitting the floundering freak against the evil forces of death. It is like pitting a silly, cosmic Captain Marvel against that scientist, Sivana, who wanted to rule the world—the one who says 'heh, heh' all the time, as the narrator does, for example, when reading Slothrop's tarot cards... The continued existence of the freak part is hopeful, but the broad separation between the freak part and the straight part of our consciousness...turns us into cartoons... The Adenoid turns out to be Richard M. Zhubb [Nixon], night manager of the Orpheus Theatre....

Slothrop gets away and lives to fight back in an aerial pie fight, but the chase goes on until in a magnificent comic reversal all this penis preoccupation comes to a jovial end—so to speak. Evil scientist Pointsman sends a couple of hack doctors to perform a castration on Slothrop, who at the time is trying to get some ID papers and is kicking around in his pig suit. Unbeknownst to Major Marvy, an accidental switch occurs and everyone ends up with his or her just deserts. Marvy gets a pig suit; Pointsman gets Marvy's balls; and merry Slothrop gets away with Pig Bodine, Albert Krypton, and Shirley the Red Cross Lady.... The humor of the freak world view...is actually everywhere in *Gravity's Rainbow*....

Freaks...are relatively free from devotion to form and particularly free from linear cause-and-effect logic, free to inhabit elaborate fantasies from a variety of perspectives, and to pursue connections for the sake of the process.... The freak, or the inside-outsider, borrows from the tradition of the oppressed to create a new version of the mythical trickster... *Gravity's Rainbow* records the interplay between freaks and defenders of the old world view, and it offers a sympathetic critique of the freak's version of the new

consciousness.... Defenders of the old world view are 'straights.' But we all have both straight and freak aspects of consciousness that coexist like the left and right hemispheres of the brain....

The old world view is equated with the Father, with Patriarchy, with the 'White Metropolis,' with the Man, with Them—and it primarily has hold on the men of *Gravity's Rainbow*. It has created a 'branch office in their brains' and a 'colonial outpost' in their bodies. Men like Slothrop, Tchitcherine, Enzian, Pokler, Mexico, Pirate Prentice, Fat Ludwig, Lyle Bland, and Igor Blobadjian have to go through a spiritual/political journey in order to escape their own patriarchal behavior.... *Gravity's Rainbow* sets up a continuum from the straight consciousness to the freak consciousness, roughly from Major Marvy to Geli Tripping.... The key element of the journey is the encounter between freak and straight. Such encounters happen often, and their function is to reveal the world views of both freak and straight, and to mark the freak's particular stage of progress toward getting Out of the System....

The new world view...broke into mass political life in the sixties.... The very idea that a new consciousness and a new description of reality has emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century polarizes people, particularly in the religious and intellectual communities. In Pynchon's history of Western Consciousness, the old world view—with its rationalism and institutional religions, its Newtonian science and great chain of being—has entropied. It has reached a doddering old age and become a romantic totalitarianism of the soul; it has become the launching pad for the Nazi mind [Political Correctness?]...

Everyone in Pynchon's world...is trying to get off: on dope, on sex, on power, on violence, on death, on spiritual promise... The escapes sanctioned by our culture that entrap the straight consciousness in the illusion of escaping the ordinary are primarily: sex, death, spiritual detachment, movies, and dope.... Slothrop is a freak getting out of the System, and sometimes he is a straight escaping life.... I think the experience implied in scattering is another dooper's side effect. It is when the dooper has glimpsed infinity or mystery and does not want to come back to daily life. Scattering is a difficult state in the freak's journey because it also plays a positive role in throwing off the rigidities of the System—it plays the role of 'deconstruction'.... It is as if Pynchon were indicating the spiritual state of American freakdom—a little too strung out, so that its world view is scattering at a dangerous rate....

Roger is Pynchon's spokesman for love. (He is not as successful at actually loving as Geli Tripoping is--he needs a little magic in his freakery.) And love, believe it or not, is the most important counter-entropic force in the book, the heart's own gravity.... Geli's magic spell transforms Tchitcherine. She is the spiritual daughter of Oedipa Maas—the product of Pynchon's immaculate conception and revelation in *The Crying of Lot 49*. She is the agent of revelation striking Tchitcherine as lightning struck that Undertaker in his metal suit.... It is Pynchon's best union of freak and straight, effective enough to deflect Tchitcherine from the vendetta against his black brother... Straights are paranoid, too, but they will not admit it."

Raymond M. Olderman
"The New Consciousness and the Old System"
Approaches (1983) 199-27

"Pynchon shows a sound knowledge of movies and the film industry. He ranges from embryonic beginnings through the heyday of Hollywood up to the early 1940s, with major emphasis in between upon the pre-Hitler Golden Age of German expressionism.... Franz Pokler and Tyrone Slothrop represent two major types of fans who retain and react to countless images from the movies.... In various...situations of *Gravity's Rainbow*, characters and people make little or no distinction between film and traditional reality—they are virtually equalized. Farfetched as it may seem, a linkage is established between Slothrop and the American gangster John Dillinger.... The real world is the reel world.... Pynchon has liberated the novel in ways that resemble the liberation of film by austere directors.... Quick cuts, dominant contrast, flashbacks and flashforwards, montages, dissolves, texturing, medium-long-close shots, freezing, and a host of other cinematic devices... Pynchon is an enthusiastic movie buff...

Pynchon also suggests that any imitation of life—the illusion given by film—is untrustworthy. It distorts and falsifies, it cheapens and removes... Techniques aside, it is quite possible to take the novel itself as film, an episodic World War II movie showing definite leanings toward the genre of musical comedy....

Significantly, too, the German movies are mostly expressionistic fantasies. There are ten in all: five are imaginative, and five are actual silent films made by Fritz Lang during the 1920s.... Emphasis upon expressionistic fantasies by Pynchon is perfectly suited to his narrative methods and to his thematic intentions. These films by and large reject imitation of external reality or deliberately distort it. They stress inner feelings and qualities by either transforming exterior facts into interior elements or by externalizing psychic states.... Surface reality is deliberately distorted to express what Pynchon and his characters believe to be inherent reality. Solipsism is a vital ingredient, whether it dictates the perceptions of an author like Pynchon or an expressionist director like Lang or the fictitious von Goll. Accentuation of the self, individualistic vision of the world, warping of reality are among factors that come to have historical significance from the standpoint of some cultural historians who have detected a connection between these films and the emergence of Nazism....

“*Dr. Mabuse* [German film by Lang, 1932] parallels situations of manipulation and control in *Gravity's Rainbow*.... It was an anti-Nazi picture confiscated by officials of the Third Reich; directly afterward Lang fled to America.... The Mabuse figure is Blicero/Weissmann. He is obsessed, depraved, cunning, anarchical, antisocial. The enslavement of Katje and Gottfried for his own sexual perversions and the hypnotic manipulation of a select staff for the building of the Rocket are a microcosmic form of Dr. Mabuse's machinations. The strongest parallel is in their fates, for quite like D. Mabuse, Weissmann becomes at war's end 'a screaming maniac'.... As the movie implicitly criticizes society for engendering a Dr. Mabuse, so the novel implicitly recognizes the national fanaticism from which the power of Weissmann springs. Of course, this very kind of society allowed and indeed encouraged the emergence of a Hitler. With history thus providing yet another parallel, the use of the Dr. Mabuse film becomes both prophetic and profound....

The epigraph to part three cites Dorothy's remark to her dog upon their arrival in Oz: 'Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more....' Slothrop's escapades and encounters in the Zone are roughly akin to Dorothy's in her fantasy land. The Oz motif is depicted comically during one chase scene when a navy corpsman helps Slothrop escape: 'Follow the yellow-brick road,' hums Albert Krypton.... However, the Zone is as different from Oz as the objects of Dorothy's and Slothrop's quests. If the Secret Rocket (or Blicero) is the Wizard, then the Wizard has been inverted for diabolic purposes. Another use of the Oz motif occurs in the brief history of Amy Sprue, one of Slothrop's 'crazy kinfolks' in early America.... Slothrop becomes the perfect instrument by which Pynchon can show impressionability and convey the enormous influence of cinema upon the human psyche.... When Slothrop dreams, he dreams about movies and about actresses.... Cinema has contributed immeasurably to his loss of being. Existing as he does at times surrealistically, composed as he is of many identities, none of which represents a wholly integrated person, we are more easily persuaded of his evaporation....

As an object of adoration and lust, [Greta] symbolizes woman victimized and manipulated by a male-oriented, sexist-militaristic society. Its perversions convert her into depravity, its furies pursue her into paranoia. But other symbolical resonances are equally significant. She is perverted Earth Mother (Erdmann = earth man); she is a perverted form of Mother Germany....The most intricately developed thematic idea is the connection between King Kong and blacks, especially the Schwarzkommando, the black rocket troops who are considered mutants in an Aryan Nazi society. Furthermore, the mutant ape is likened to mutant rocketry, and both ape and rocket are linked by phallic imagery: the ape atop the Empire State Building and the potent 00001 rocket spawned out of A-4 research and development....

The various sequences, including a dog chase by Mexico and Pointsman, a wild chase in the tunnels of Nordhausen, and the duel between pie-throwers Slothrop and Schnorp in a balloon gondola and Major Marvy and his beer-sodden cohorts in a rusty old reconnaissance plane, all smack of modernized Keystone Cops routines.... In all cases the chase heroes, who are used to appearing in the nick of time, arrive 'too late' in their rescue missions.... An assortment of references about Roger Mexico ranges from Dracula to Douglas Fairbanks. He and Jessica are the novel's only 'normal' lovers, yet their romance takes on cinematic qualities that heighten its illusoriness.... Their erotic abandonment has helped free her from repression, and yet she is afraid of it. This 'kind of protective paralysis' leads her to reject Roger for the security of life with stodgy 'old Beaver' at war's end....

The trajectory of a rocket is traceable in the same way from innumerable frames: blast-off, ascension, peak of flight, fall, and crash. So a human life: birth, growth, maturity (including peak of experience), decline, death. So, were it filmable, the history of the earth in a rock.... A Frankenstein monster out of the control of its creator, the Rocket is a possessive, demoniac force. It becomes a symbol of rampant but fascinating evil. The monster stalks from our fears of the excessiveness of scientific research and technological assemblage, the vampire arises from our deep-seated fears of sex, the devil, night, pain, and death.... As is characteristic of him, Pynchon relies upon the movie transmutations, rather than upon the original literary sources....

When Pynchon cites popular, enduring movie stars, he is on safe ground, but when actors are less well known—say, Deanna Durbin or Dennis Morgan, George Formby or Brigitte Helm—the connection may be lost upon his audience. The problem is compounded for the reader unfamiliar with mediocre movies of the thirties and forties.... Is it appreciated only by film scholars and trivia buffs? The writer faces a two-sided problem when using movie allusions, metaphors, associations: they may be either too obvious or too obscure. The obscure references may be missed by the audience; the obvious comparisons may be regarded as inferior because they are crude, unimaginative, and easily made. In either case, the chief disadvantage of this sort of metaphorical writing is the ephemeral nature of topical references.... Our total experience with ‘the great conference’ comes down to Mickey Rooney on a balcony...the wrenching together of high art and low comedy....

Pynchon’s kindred spirit in the arts is Hieronymus Bosch.... [At the end] Pynchon’s movie audience retains an image, ‘a film we have not learned to see...it is not a closeup of the face, a face we all know--’ Perhaps it is the face of the ‘human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star’—thus, each of us, Everyman. It may be the face of Gottfried encased in his Impipolex shroud in the Rocket. It may be a transmutation into the face of ‘a bright angel of death.’ Maybe it is the face of God or Satan. We find the answer within ourselves, or not at all, compelled as we are for comfort to take the hand of the person nearest us, follow the bouncing ball, and sing a hymn.... For the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, the rocket would circle forever, breaking the sound barrier of vocabulary, endlessly repeating cycles of myth. Pynchon’s rocket comes down. Down and down. As apocalyptic writing, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is unmatched in its creation of an aura of impending cataclysm.”

Charles Clerc
“Film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*”
Approaches (1983) 103-51

“‘Gravity’s rainbow,’ another oxymoron for the soft machine, combining the rainbow-promise of transcendence with the inevitability of terminal descent.... Pynchon portrays entire sciences vying to explain the behavior of a single individual in a single moment in history, poor Tyrone Slothrop, whose copulations just happen to precede the fall of V-2 rockets on London. Dr. Edward Pointsman is the behaviorist, armed with statistical and Pavlovian techniques and a belief in the utter efficacy of theories to explain behavior. Against Pointsman stands Roger Mexico, another statistician, who finds comfort (and pain) in the uncertainty of everything. A romanticist, Roger’s love for Jessica Swanlake carries him out of the merely technical domain into some more vulnerable territory.... Mexico is Pointsman’s ideal subject....

Gravity’s Rainbow is filled with similar competitions between ‘sciences’ or epistemologies. On the one side always stand technologies that lead to death. On the other hand stand individuals who seem to be gripped by non-casual, transcendent explanations, whose behaviors remain richer than any point-plot, and who indulge in exotic explanations more plainly akin to metaphor...than their opponents’ constructions. As Leni Pokler remarks, ‘Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Mapping onto different coordinate systems.’ So Pynchon offers us tarot, ESP, death cults, sexual extravagance and minority tastes, mysticism and love on the other side. Understanding this essential dialectic helps us to cross the bridge from his epistemology to his aesthetics....

In this world, the central icon is a single inexplicable machine, the Rocket bomb that ‘come screaming across the sky’ in the overture to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and whose descent we still await on the novel’s last page. It is the rocket bomb which lies at the unattainable center of this labyrinthine work and at the center

of the rocket is a cybernetic device, the Schwarz-great or S-great: the dark thing, manifestation of the unknown. The bomb's S-great makes ever more finely attuned adjustments to the rocket's aim (desire) in order to unleash its great violence.... Knowledge, like the Rocket, is always almost arriving.... We watch society itself caught in the positive feedback loop, on the verge of reaching critical mass both figuratively and literally, for certainly one of the many overlaid trajectories of the V-bomb leads to fission and the atom bomb."

David Porush
The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction
(Methuen 1985) 121-22, 131

"While both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* attracted admirers and detractors, *Gravity's Rainbow* created a literary sensation and made Pynchon the object of more critical books and articles than any of his contemporaries. A vast book centering of Europe at the end of World War II but encompassing elements of the history of the Western world over the last three centuries, *Gravity's Rainbow* goes beyond the earlier novels in its evocation of paranoia and of entropy (a term Pynchon, following philosopher Henry Adams, adapts from physics: The loss of energy in any action within a closed system will lead ultimately to the death of the universe).

Gravity's Rainbow describes a world in which characters with any spark of decency find themselves (along with the entire world) threatened with destruction. A mysterious and hidden 'They,' acting through agents, seek to control and direct all life, removing emotion, chance, and love. 'They control gigantic business and political organizations which use technology to manipulate the war for their own ends. Resistance to 'Them' is possible but temporary. Art is the only real defense and not a solid one; in the end, technology and its products may succeed in abolishing life on earth. The novel ends with an atomic missile about to strike the theater in which the book's audience sits.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, as in the earlier novels, wild humor is used to leaven the grim message Pynchon conveys. Characters with humorously unusual names (Bloody Chiclitz, Roger Mexico, Jessica Swanlake, Miss Muller-Hochleben) engage in fantastic antics: Two men try unsuccessfully to trap a wandering dog in a bombed-out house, the dog at one point speaking in the voice of a radio comedian Fred Allen; the central figure, Tyrone Slothrop, is installed in a pig costume to act in the pageant staged in a small German town and lives for weeks in the costume. The grisly, the obscene, the tragic, and the burlesque all combine in Pynchon's imagination."

John M. Muste
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
Frank N. Magill, ed.
(Salem 1989) 1233-34

Pynchon's major novel is an Atheist response to Wernher von Braun, the renown scientist who directed the German V-2 rocket project in WWII and later masterminded the American space program. Von Braun's expression of faith in an afterlife is quoted as the epigraph to Part One of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death." Believing in both laws Von Braun cited the *First Law* of Thermodynamics and built real rockets that reached the moon, whereas Pynchon believes only in the *Second Law* and built a fantasy rocket aimed at President Nixon. Pynchon is a leftwing evangelist preaching the end of the world with a smirk on his face.

Gravity's Rainbow is set mostly in London and Germany at the end of World War II in 1944-45. For its lift-off and thrust, the massive novel relies upon a predictable penis, recounting its conditioning in infancy and its erections in response to incoming V-2 rockets. "Slothrop...only gets erections when this sequence happens in reverse. Explosions first, then the sound of approach: the V-2." Thus, he contradicts the dogma of cause-and-effect. In the vision of *Gravity's Rainbow*: God does not exist; Technology is the modern religion; the Rocket is the international totem of the 20th century; greedy cartels rule the world; America is to blame; Americans have succeeded the Nazis; murderers are as deserving of sympathy as victims; gravity explains everything; entropy is everywhere; the self-destructive human race is doomed probably sooner rather than later; if there is any transcendent force determining history it is malevolent; it is more likely that

everything is random and meaningless; hence paranoia is enlightenment; solipsism is adaptation; love is unlikely; families are deadly; all forms of order are oppressive; anarchy is the best politics; Death is the end, folks; our only consolations are rebellious humor and unrestrained hedonism; wars are caused by sexual deprivation, cartels, and a lust for immortality—which ain't gonna happen.

The best features of the novel are (1) the central symbol of the Rocket; (2) the various metaphors linked to the Rocket—the motivations of its builders, components, sounds, trajectory, and so on; (3) the abundant accurate historical and technological details that are the foundation of the novel in the literary tradition of Naturalism; (4) the elucidation of scientific concepts; (5) the overriding structural imagery of the Rocket screaming in overhead at the beginning and the Rocket descending at the end, as though the book itself is a Rocket in flight throughout; (6) the episode in the tunnels at the construction site and various others; (7) the insights into the homosexual relationship of Blicero and Gottfried. The Rocket is the most appropriate, timely and powerful literary symbol of the 20th century, due to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the continuing possibility of apocalyptic war. It has the most resonance of any central literary symbol since Moby-Dick. The white whale is an organic avatar of divinity in Nature, whereas the white Rocket is an artificial symbol of human nature and technology in history. The white Rocket has all the limitations of humans, whereas the white whale is a monad of the whole Universe.

The image of the Rocket and its parabolic arc are Neoclassical—simple, economical, clear, symmetrical, linear, coherent, efficient—a product of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Below the Rocket in flight, the aesthetics of the novel are Postmodernist, contradicting the prevailing aesthetics of Neoclassicism, Realism, Impressionism, and Modernism. Had the aesthetics of the novel been those of the Rocket, the book would have been more clear, engaging, and powerful. Before the 1960s *Gravity's Rainbow* probably would not even have been published. Editors would have considered it too unfocused, diffuse, obscure, and obscene. As John Irving has said, it is easy to be incoherent and unclear.

(1) Pynchon's narrative is incoherent because he mimics recent scientific concepts such as discontinuity, randomness, exceptions to cause-and-effect, and the "uncertainty principle." However, readers do not live at the subatomic level. They are larger than that. Pynchon is dramatizing abstractions in science rather than concrete real life as people experience it. Accordingly, he discourages belief in cause-and-effect, a foolish attitude especially with respect to driving, sex, drugs, and suicide. The failure of voters to link causes to effects has led to national disasters. Pynchon needs to take a basic course from Babette in *White Noise* by DeLillo—like on how to cross a street.

(2) Pynchon's disregard of cause and effect applies to the reader. Whereas the Modernists studied how their writing affected a reader—Eliot and Hemingway in particular—Postmodern academic Expressionists are elitist. Postmodernists would rather masturbate than have intercourse. As put by David Foster Wallace, who said he was most influenced by Pynchon, "I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader." (3) The attempt to make *Gravity's Rainbow* a musical comedy film set in the ruins of Nazi Germany is the worst strategy by a major novelist in American literary history. His stage for merriment is crowded with millions of bodies and walking skeletons. (4) He flies over the death camps and throws pies. When we reach Berlin and expect to see Hitler, he gives us Mickey Rooney instead. The jokes and slapstick in this context are the stupidest blunders ever made by a major novelist. Discontinuity, trivia, nonsense, and adolescent bad taste deconstruct and stall the Rocketbook in flight until it falls to the ground in pieces like V.

Apologists for Pynchon have said that by not mentioning the Holocaust he was being faithful to the limited knowledge of his characters at the time, but he could have transcended their ignorance of the camps as the narrator does routinely otherwise, as in the flashforward almost thirty years at the end of the novel. (5) Pynchon gives his highest priority to personal freedom, but he displays indifference to the freedom of others--whole populations--by ignoring the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe and the implications of the Cold War. Rather than depict the horrors of WWII and its geopolitical implications in relation to the Rocket, Pynchon plays Trivia. (6) He wasted the opportunity to make the most of his Rocket and went limp in his wet dream of himself as tumescent Slothrop (sloth/slow).

Rather than individuate toward wholeness or revelation, Slothrop fragments and vanishes from view like Pynchon, preferring the ruins of Nazi Germany to America. As Wallace said, “We seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have either to make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition...or some shit....a fugue of evaded responsibility.” Slothrop and Gottfried are projections of Pynchon’s self-pity. He should have included among his movie inserts Shirley Booth crying out to her lost doggie, “Come *back*, come *back*, little Sheba!” but in the same pathetic tone, “Come *back*, little Slothrop!”

(7) With his overload of allusions and analogues to popular rather than to high culture, Pynchon makes his novel more ephemeral—more an encyclopedic period piece. Literary classics and ancient myths endure because of universality. Pynchon’s favorite old movies are familiar to a very few people who are dying off. His disbelief in the truth of metaphors, his disregard of literary classics and his elevation of pop culture, politics and theory above literature accommodated Feminists and the other Postmodernist academics who abandoned literary values and the canon of American literature. (8) Setting the trend as a “metafictionist” Pynchon deconstructs his own narrative with demonstrations of theory like the academic Deconstructionists who bored students to death and halved enrollments in English departments during the 1980s.

(9) Adopting the narrative voice of a paranoid, Pynchon presents himself as a victim of the capitalist System and evades responsibility for accuracy or truth at the cost of impeaching himself as a reliable witness to history or anything else, epitomizing Postmodernism: (10) “The white image has the same coherence, the hey-lookit-me smugness, as the Cross does.... The four fins of the Rocket made a cross.” Pynchon detests the “smugness” of both Christians and Capitalists. He satirizes them both at once by paralleling them. Then he tries to use the exceptional to symbolize the rule: To imply that faith in Technology—an expression of Capitalist materialism—has replaced Christian faith in an afterlife, Pynchon had to invent two suicidal Atheist homosexuals, Blicero and Gottfried, to worship the phallic Rocket, because the scientist who actually built the rockets believed in an afterlife.

Pynchon’s predictions in *Gravity’s Rainbow* have not yet come true: (1) The world has not come to an end; (2) America has not used rockets to conquer the world; (3) as of 2014 America has been made to resemble Nazi Germany by the Left, not by the Right; (4) currently the threat of a nuclear apocalypse is from the Muslim world not from the Christian; (5) America may soon be energy independent and a world supplier. Pynchon predicted hysterically that capitalist America “must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply.”

Michael Hollister (2014)