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## ABSTRACT

This project documents and analyzes three major systems in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* that aim at understanding and controlling the 00000 series of the Aggregat 4/V-2 Rocket, which functions as an antagonist to all the characters in the text. In addition, I attempt to demonstrate the failings of two of these systems -- as a result of their limited and dogmatic methodologies -- the relative success of the third, and the consequences and repercussions of each system's approach and execution.

**Little Slothrop and the Big Bad Rocket:**  
Approaches to the Mythological and Mechanical Rocket-God  
In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

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INTRODUCTION  
ASCENT INTO THE ROCKET

“You May Never Get to Touch the Master But You May Tickle His Creatures”  
-Proverbs for Paranoids I (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 237)

We begin to suspect as Pynchon sets up the various episodes, the burgeoning web of characters, and the harrowing truth about the V-2 rocket, that our own paranoia -- This *is Gravity's Rainbow!* It is an important book! It will be *impossible* to understand!-- ‘is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery *that everything is connected*, everything in the Creation...’ (1973, 703). (Coale 151)

This project began in the second semester of my junior year, as a 395 Independent Study with Professor Christopher Benfey. My goal was simply to read *Gravity's Rainbow* and approach some understanding of it; I had always enjoyed Pynchon, but this particular work was daunting and I had failed at reading it on my own several times. However, my interest and involvement with the text grew during the semester, and when Professor Benfey suggested that I continue my work as a senior thesis, I immediately said yes. As a prelude to this project, I began to identify particular aspects of the book that interested me. The first was the presence of mythological systems and undercurrents throughout the text. From there, I was able to discern several other systems within the work that appeared to provide a basis for at least a partial understanding of the book -- even

though, to this day, I maintain that a full comprehension of *Gravity's Rainbow* is virtually impossible.

Once I had identified and, to some extent, categorized these systems, my examination led me to discover what I see as their single root and purpose. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the A4 Rocket is at the hub of a wheel of paranoia on which every character revolves; the Rocket's centrality is for the most part due to its vast, frightening, and murderous nature. The characters in turn react by attempting to decipher and comprehend the Rocket and its movements through two distinct systems of order and control. These systems seek to quantify the Rocket's powerful effect with the aim of disarming its ability to horrify and haunt them.

The modern system of order and control, as I will examine in chapter one, analyzes and tracks the Rocket in a scientific way, attempting to understand its movements through methods such as statistics, mappings, calculus, physics and other forms of "rocket science." Those involved in this type of research constitute the scientific community of the text, including characters such as Edward W.A. Pointsman, Roger Mexico, Kevin Spectro, and others who work in the White Visitation, for PISCES or Operation Black Wing.

Second, the premodern set of systems, which I will discuss in chapter two, primarily attempts to understand the motions of the Rocket and to pacify it



through various forms of worship and mythological “reasoning.”<sup>1</sup> These approaches include ancient religions, the occult, astrology, mythology, rituals of life and death, and forgotten alphabets. Those who adopt these practices, such as Oberst Enzian, Brigadier General Ernest Pudding (who, although he is the commander of PISCES, engages extensively in supernatural rituals) and, most notably, the Herero society, proceed in the hope that this “god” will be thus appeased and refrain from falling on their heads.

The last system that I investigate, in chapter three of this project, is executed solely by the protagonist, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, who approaches the Rocket in a wholly different fashion. Slothrop, instead of confining his study of the Rocket to one form of examination or another, collects and analyzes all the information he can access about the A4, regardless of its categorization. As a result, he will steal documents from The White Visitation and PISCES and take note of their responses to the Rocket, but also participate in Herero Rocket worship and other paranormal activities. Slothrop’s system mirrors the Rocket’s own postmodernity, in that it does not assume the Rocket’s nature to be solely mythological or mechanical in origin, but an exponential combination of both. His method is thus the most “correct” in the text and eventually leads him to undergo a *sparagmos* which spiritually aligns him to the Rocket and allows him access to the veld.

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<sup>1</sup> By mythological reasoning, I mean the attempt to explain and understand the actions of the Rocket in fantastical terms, often associated with mythology or the occult.

Early in my research, Professor Benfey and I agreed that before I looked closely at any Pynchon critics and their interpretations of the text, I should develop my own theories about the book. This approach, though unorthodox, has helped me to arrive at my own method of reading and understanding Pynchon, without swaying my vision with other techniques, whether contradictory or consensual. While I am aware of other theories on the text, my involvement with other “Pynchonian” critical approaches in this work is purposefully minimal. Instead of relying primarily on the work of other Pynchon scholars, I chose to utilize outside sources that dealt, not directly with Pynchon, but with similar topics and theories: hence my focused use of Bakhtin, Kuhn and Gleick. These three scholars not only speak to and enhance the systems I identify in the text and their composition but, because they are not simply literary critics, they enhance the interdisciplinary postmodernity of the text and my approach to it. In addition, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* provided me with a basis for understanding satire and Pynchon’s appropriation of the classical quest-myth and his more general use of mythological literary traits.

Because *Gravity’s Rainbow* has been in print for just over thirty years, very little established literature on the book exists, although the amount of criticism on it is expansive. As a result, I attempted to limit my use of critical works on Pynchon to those widely referenced and respected in the field. Although my reliance on other Pynchon scholars has been minimal, their work (especially

those I have used directly) has been important to my study. Molly Hite, in her book *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, also studies the presence of order in the text, but her approach greatly differs from mine. Instead of analyzing specific systems of order within the text, she documents the use of order on a larger scale by examining totality and the overarching order of the entire work. She does, however, arrive at the same conclusion as I: that Pynchon, or the implied author, shuns simple, dogmatic systems of order and understanding, and calls for a more inclusive and interdisciplinary method of comprehension. Her book has greatly helped me in navigating the scope of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and supplementing my own interpretation of it.

In addition to Hite's text, Thomas Moore's *The Style of Connectedness* provided me with several essays on *Gravity's Rainbow* about Pynchon's use of science and god in the text. Moore catalogs the types of scientific and mathematical structures Pynchon employs and analyzes the connection between those codes and the historical and philosophical components to the book. In addition, Moore also presents an essay on the "god" in the text and the various forms this god takes, from a traditional Judeo-Christian God to a more conspiratorial Big Brother figure. Both essays, especially the first, were helpful in my general review of *Gravity's Rainbow's* themes and were expansive in their scope and the amount of information Moore synthesizes. Charles Clerc's book, *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, a collection of essays by noted Pynchon

scholars, supplied me with a similar extent of interpretations of the book from various lenses. I referred to his book for everything from minor plot details (such as the exact connection between the Hereros, Operation Black Wing and The White Visitation) to readings dissimilar from my own that allowed me to imagine *Gravity's Rainbow* in a different light and provided me with the distance from my own study that I needed at certain points. In *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow* Douglas Fowler maps various influences and connections throughout the text and his study allowed me to begin my investigation of the involvement of science fiction in the text. He also provides a page by page analysis of events that I found extremely helpful when working my way through the text and attempting to connect my own thoughts. I also frequently consulted "Pynchon Notes" -- a literary journal devoted solely to publishing articles on Pynchon's work -- for obtaining an idea of the current issues discussed.

These works were greatly beneficial in my study of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and in my own work I have attempted to use the information and analysis expounded to develop my own conclusions about the book. In the cases of Moore and Clerc, I did not reference them directly since their theories did not directly influence my own; however, their approaches often provided me with a point from which to begin my own early investigation of the text. Like Hite's work, their texts stimulated my thought process and allowed me to branch from already established ideas in order to initiate my own method of reading. I have attempted

in this thesis to generate a different type of study: one that produces an extended focus and close detail analysis of specific moments in the book and explores how these moments are connected to larger themes present. Most of the works I reference above deal predominantly with more sweeping topics in the text and do not emphasize individual episodes and how the particulars within speak to these more general themes. I consider my type of analysis important because it highlights the weight Pynchon places on the details of the text and how they endow the text with specificity and craft.

I also used Samuel Chase Coale's essay "Thomas Pynchon: The Functions of Conspiracy and the Performance of Paranoia" to enhance my interpretation of paranoia in the text. I found his assertion that "Not only does Pynchon focus on conspiracy and paranoia as distinct American obsessions and anxieties, but he also employs all the postmodern techniques in doing so to form an assault on linear metanarratives" (Coale 135) particularly helpful when I approached Pynchon's use of paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*; this statement is, indeed, the thesis of Coale's essay. But, while Coale details the experience of reading the text as one that entices us to "play the conspiracy game" (152) and connect the seemingly limitless dots of name and places in the text, he chooses not to focus on one particular thread and instead touches on many throughout the book. His conclusion concerning the text, however, is akin to mine:

Critical analyses of the novel stand divided between a blessed rage for order that lies within the text for critics to ferret out and identify, and a ribald rage for disorder, an ultimate chaos that totally undermines and deconstructs Western logic and rationalism. Such a bipolar battle often fails to recognize a third category, which I favor, that envisions disorder and disruption as themselves an immanent order. (160)

It is this postulation that I arrived at early in my investigation of *Gravity's Rainbow* and have attempted to embrace in my study. Through my analysis of the three systems of order and control I have identified in the text, I have tried to demonstrate how absolute, bounded order leads to failure and a lack of understanding, and how embracing seemingly chaotic randomness actually reveals hidden patterns and allows for the creation of a more interdisciplinary, postmodern order. What I believe Pynchon is calling for in the text is the ability to synthesize and integrate a vast, varied amount of information in order to recognize all and comprehend some of the complexities in existence and the relationships between objects and beings. Slothrop's search for and study of the Rocket is, on some level, akin to the human search for meaning in existence: it is impossible to grasp a larger purpose of life without recognizing that one cannot understand it all, and that any narrow explanation is bound to exclude other, just as valid, explanations.

This project is thus an attempt to document several operant systems in *Gravity's Rainbow* without falling prey to that failure: my interpretation of the

three systems demonstrates the limits of the first two and the relative success of the third. Pynchon's inclusion of these three approaches to the Rocket not only serves as a point from which to understand the A4 and the larger issue of remaining nondiscriminatory and receptive to new forms of understanding but also enhances the text's satiric quality. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a highly stylized form of Menippean satire that aims at critiquing the separation of science and nature and, on a larger scale, humanity's interpretation of the connection between ourselves, our "purpose," and the world.

I believe that, on some level, Pynchon uses the Rocket as a metaphor for Western civilization and the industrial, alienated form of our society brought about by political paranoia (contemporary to the text, which was written around the time of the Watergate Scandal and the Vietnam War) and capitalist materialism. If such is the case, Pynchon appears to be arguing that in its present shape, our society's population has fragmented into highly compartmentalized intellectual sections -- much like the separate systems that attempt to understand the Rocket -- that never coalesce or even relate to one another. We approach and exist within our own "Rocket" -- the theory and practice of Western society -- in narrow, rigid ways that allow us to operate under the illusion of safety and comprehension, when in reality our limitations prevent us from accessing any liberation from this political paranoia and contemporary materialism. Only through a system such as Slothrop's, one that is unbiased, tolerant and receptive to

many forms of awareness and knowledge, can we hope to escape these restrictions and embrace a more meaningful and profound existence.

The interpretation of *Gravity's Rainbow* as satire supports this analysis of the book. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye claims that

satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. ... Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude to experience. ... Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. (Frye 223-4)

With this description as a foundation for understanding the satire in the text, Pynchon's moral norm would be his insistence that narrow, limited approaches to aspects of existence fail in truly understanding it. He measures their grotesque and absurd qualities through his use and satire of the modern and premodern systems. The grotesque nature of the worship of and search for the Rocket, and the ridiculous actions this search engenders in the book's characters (such as the octopus incident I discuss in chapter one and the Herero Rocket raising I discuss in chapter two) highlight the absurdity of each characters' fear of and devotion to the Rocket. Pynchon also satirizes Slothrop's more holistic system but not nearly as violently, and the comparison between his treatment of the first two systems



and that of Slothrop clearly points to the former as the main objects of the book's attack.

Frye's analysis of Menippean satire places the book in that category as well and allows us to further understand Pynchon's critique of Western society:

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, perverts, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent. ... A constant theme in the tradition is the ridicule of the *philosophus gloriosus*,<sup>2</sup> already discussed. The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines. (309)

Many of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s characters symbolize larger ideas or theories:

Pointsman represents Pavlovian study and theory; Enzian personifies a Squanto figure, as a mediator between the white colonizers and the Herero society; and Katje Borgesius portrays corruption and seduction. Every character -- with the exception perhaps of Slothrop, who ultimately embraces too many theories and ideas to symbolize any single one -- augments Pynchon's critique as

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<sup>2</sup> The *philosophus gloriosus* is "the learned crank or obsessed philosopher," who is "someone recognizably like ourselves ... broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world" (Frye 39).

representations of separate, alienated segments of Western society. The characters' individual separation from one another is key here: although as a whole they represent different aspects of society, their isolation from one another prevents them from achieving a comprehensive understanding and appreciating the different theories of existence that each might offer as a component of the whole. "Evil and folly," then, exist within each character -- the inability to connect -- and as much as each is a *philosophus gloriosus*, each represents the failure of the finely sectioned intellectual: "dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named" (Pynchon 391). Even Slothrop falls prey to this early on, but his insistence in gathering information without immediately compartmentalizing it eventually allows him to escape alienation and achieve a spiritual, as well as a material, connection to the Rocket.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is thus a Menippean satire that meditates on the failings of alienated Western society. The scientific and mythological systems of order and control I have identified in the text indicate this by representing the different forms of failure society can take, while Slothrop's system presents an alternative approach to existence that embraces a more complete and unbiased method. Reading the book through this lens has enabled me to understand one of its larger messages about Western society. However, the expansive and encyclopedic nature of the text prevents me from asserting that this meaning holds any more or any

less validity than any other present in the text. Pynchon's work, one that impressively deviates from the standards of the contemporary novel, transcends any simplistic interpretation, thus providing the reader with a limitless labyrinth of analyses to follow and explore.

## CHAPTER ONE INTO THE DARK

“If they can get you asking the wrong questions,  
they don’t have to worry about answers.”

-Proverbs for Paranoids III (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 251)

In 1927, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, the renowned Russian psychologist, physicist, and physiologist, published *Conditioned Reflexes*, a revolutionary work that examined the causal relationship between stimulus and reaction. This scientific study investigated the involuntary reflexes that occurred when Pavlov exposed his canine subjects to outside stimuli and their subsequent conditioned reflexes. Pavlov is most famous for his work with the “drooling dog,” which he presented in *Conditioned Reflexes*. He documented several dogs’ physical reactions when placed in the vicinity of a food stimulus. Pavlov noted that often the dogs’ reactions included what he called a “psychic secretion,” the presence of saliva before the dogs actually received the food:

If in conditioned food reflexes we should start consistently from a food stimulus of definite strength (18-22 hours after the usual satisfying feeding), the fact of a definite relationship between the effect of the conditioned stimulus and the physical strength of that stimulus becomes clear. The stronger the conditioned stimulus, the greater the energy simultaneously entering the hemispheres, the stronger is the effect of the conditioned reflex ... the more abundant the flow of saliva, which we

customarily utilise in measuring the effect. (Pavlov 48)

Subsequently, he reconditioned his dogs' reflexes by manipulating the stimuli that occurred before the appearance of food and tailoring the timing and details of their reactions.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon uses this basic understanding of stimulus and response and conditioned reflexes as the groundwork for his characters' scientific study in the text. Those who engage in this research apply its principles to all facets of their work, and one of Pavlov's books, *Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes: Volume Two*,<sup>3</sup> acts as their Bible. Pynchon reveals the importance of "The Book" early on in the work, to establish how fundamental Pavlov and his findings are to *Gravity's Rainbow's* scientific community:

Spectro is one of the original seven owners of The Book, and if you ask Mr. Pointsman what Book, you'll only get smirked at. It rotates, this mysterious Book, among its co-owners on a weekly basis, and this, Roger gathers, is Spectro's week to get dropped in on at all hours. (Pynchon 47)

This first mention of The Book directly connects its mysterious but profound significance to two prominent scientific figures in the text -- Dr. Kevin Spectro, "neurologist and causal Pavlovian" (47), and Dr. Edward W. A. Pointsman, a physician employed by PISCES (an organization discussed below) to study

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<sup>3</sup> This volume includes Pavlov's scientific articles and speeches, between 1928 and 1936, which were concerned with stimuli and response and conditioned reflexes.

Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket -- thus verifying the power it exerts over their community. Pynchon appropriates Pavlov and *The Book*, the latter of which is never directly identified in order to preserve its iconic, sacred status<sup>4</sup>, to provide the scientific community with an underlying method of explanation to base its major investigation of the Rocket and Slothrop, and the connection between the two.

Pynchon's inclusion of Pavlov and *The Book* allows him to explore the scientific possibilities of stimulus-response and conditioned reflexes without the limitations of actual practice. This scientific speculation gives him the freedom to reimagine Pavlov's experiments in a creative arena and to apply his theories to objects, such as the Rocket and Slothrop, in a fantastical way. The existence of this practice in the book might lead the reader to assume that *Gravity's Rainbow* could be categorized as a work of science fiction. As writer and critic Robert Heinlein stated in a series of lectures on science fiction given at the University of Chicago in 1957,

A handy, short definition of almost all science fiction might read: realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and

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<sup>4</sup> However, Pynchon identifies "the volume preceding *The Book*--the first Forty-one Lectures" (88), which can refer only to the edition preceding *Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes: Volume Two*.

significance of the scientific method. To make this definition cover all science fiction (instead of “almost all”) it is necessary only to strike out the word “future.” (Heinlein 22-3)

Heinlein’s definition, especially with its exclusion of the word “future,” might apply to Pynchon’s book, as *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes place during World War II, which ended twenty-eight years before the book’s publication in 1973. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is both a “realistic speculation about possible ... events” -- how conditioned reflexes based on stimulus and response could apply to Rockets and men as well as dogs -- and “based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world ... and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method” -- Pavlov and his studies providing the “adequate knowledge” and Pynchon’s own scientific background<sup>5</sup> the “thorough understanding.”

However, to classify Pynchon’s work solely or even primarily as science fiction would be mistaken, as the book does not conform to many other established conventions of science fiction, such as an imaginary future, unearthly settings, or the presence of fantastic beings. Instead, Pynchon employs several facets of science fiction to endow his book with an aura of the fantastic without abandoning the book’s realistic characters or situations. As critic Douglas Fowler wrote of Pynchon and *Gravity’s Rainbow* in his essay, “War of the Worlds,”

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<sup>5</sup> Upon first entering Cornell University to pursue undergraduate studies, Pynchon majored in engineering physics before leaving to join the Navy in 1955. He returned in 1957 to pursue a degree in English.

All of Pynchon's fiction presents to us a War of the Worlds. The evocation of H. G. Wells' famous science fiction novel is intentional, for it is helpful to think of Pynchon's work as science fiction raised to art by the power of genius. But we should not lose sight of the fact that his fiction is *fantastic*, and that the basic narrative energy in his novels derives from the clash between this world and what I will abbreviate as The Other Kingdom-between our world of logic and rationality and the five senses and a nightmare world that has begun to permeate it and threaten it. (10)

Fowler's concentration here on the clash between two worlds -- the "real world" and the world Pynchon is proposing in the text -- is key to understanding Pynchon's use of science fiction in the book. This clash is a common theme in science fiction and serves often as a springboard for critiquing modern society and social and political systems. Pynchon's clash achieves this effect, but as a result of his gestures towards other styles and techniques such as postcolonialism (which I explore fully in chapter two), *Gravity's Rainbow* transcends easy generic definition. Pynchon's use of the tools of science fiction allows him to generate a certain atmosphere of scientific discovery and exploration in the text but does not limit his expression to one set of ideals or guidelines.

Pavlov and The Book, and the methods derived from them, supply the backbone of *Gravity's Rainbow's* modern systems of order and control, which are managed and conducted by those in the scientific community. These scientific,



modern systems (which I will explain in full detail below) endeavor to explain, manipulate, and control the Rocket and Slothrop, as both are regarded as a threat to the scientific community: the Rocket because it causes destruction, and Slothrop because he anticipates and, some fear, brings the Rocket.<sup>6</sup> In order to dispel these threats and minimize the control they have over the scientists' lives, members of the scientific community such as Pointsman and Spectro use Operation Black Wing, "the Firm's latest mania" (Pynchon 34),<sup>7</sup> to explore and understand Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket. In fact, Pynchon often suggests that the scientific organizations of *Gravity's Rainbow* devote themselves exclusively to the study of the Rocket and Slothrop, reinforcing the importance of each. In addition, because the actual Rocket is too inaccessible to study directly (in Parts I and II, the closest The White Visitation ever comes to examining the Rocket itself is when the organization inspects the V-2 impact sites), "the Firm" concerns itself chiefly with researching Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket.

Pynchon's "Firm" is "a catchall agency known as PISCES--Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender," although, to add to the bizarre

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<sup>6</sup> The existence of a map that Slothrop keeps throughout the book concretizes the connection between him and the Rocket. This map documents Slothrop's "sexual conquests," which coincide with the location of the V-2 explosions (Pynchon 17-19, 22-23, 84-85). However, this map is partially falsified and the causal relationship it suggests between Slothrop and the Rocket is not accurate and does not actually explain much.

<sup>7</sup> Pynchon describes Operation Black Wing as "a careful construction, five years in the making .... It was General Eisenhower who laid down the controlling guideline, the 'strategy of truth' idea. Something 'real,' Ike insisted on: a hook on the war's pocked execution-wall to hang the story from" (74). However, Pynchon goes on to suggest the involvement of racism, the Hereros, Slothrop, the Rocket, exiled peoples in Germany, and the connections among all five and even more, implying that the Operation itself is suspiciously blurry and indistinct.

atmosphere surrounding such enterprises, “Whose surrender is not made clear” (34). This is the extent of Pynchon’s direct description of PISCES; any other information about the mysterious group is provided through the characters’ experiences with it and descriptions of the building it is housed in. Parts I and II of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which deal extensively with PISCES and Operation Black Wing, take place in sections of England and Germany most affected by the war, areas where such institutions would prove most necessary. Descriptions of these areas as simultaneously dark, metallic, cold, and scientific underscore the Firm’s inability to reach any understanding of the Rocket or its area of effect through their scientific explorations. *Gravity’s Rainbow* begins by establishing this type of setting, thus informing the reader’s view of the region for the duration of Parts I and II:

A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now.

It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it’s all theatre. There are no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere. Above him lift girders old as an iron queen, and glass somewhere far above that would let the light of day through. But it’s night. He’s afraid of the way the glass will fall--soon--it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing.  
(Pynchon 3)

In this, our first encounter with the region, Pynchon’s description concentrates heavily on the darkness and hopelessness of the situation. The “screaming” that

“comes across the sky” is a rocket -- theoretically a V-2, the type of rocket at the center of the text -- and the immediate reaction it provokes evokes a doomsday setting. The Rocket, even before it has a formal name, is the root cause of the fear and anxiety highlighted in these first few pages. Darkness -- “no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere,” “But it’s night,” “But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing,” -- plays a prominent part in this hopelessness and foreshadows the darkness that the characters in the book, who attempt to understand and control the Rocket, are subsequently cast into.

Pynchon’s second description evoking this shroud of darkness and despair amid (and despite) scientific discovery concerns The White Visitation, the building that houses PISCES and Operation Black Wing. The White Visitation is a less than spectacular structure,

a disused hospital for the mad, [with] a few token lunatics, an enormous pack of stolen dogs, cliques of spiritualists, vaudeville entertainers, wireless technicians, Coueists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, Dale Carnegie zealots, all exiled by the outbreak of war from pet schemes and manias damned, had the peace prolonged itself, to differing degrees of failure. (77)

This profusion of characters and animals who roam around the White Visitation with no prospect of a viable future reflects a dismal atmosphere, of not only the structure and its inhabitants, but its entire operation. However, as bleak as the venture seems, Pynchon is careful to insert satiric relief. For instance, in the above

list, the hodgepodge of animals and characters, such as “enormous packs of stolen dogs,” “vaudeville entertainers,” “Ouspenskians,” and “Dale Carnegie zealots” conjure such a ridiculous image that the reader, despite knowing that *The White Visitation* is a colossal failure, cannot help but laugh at the scenario.

Pynchon’s elaborate and careful depictions of *The White Visitation*, *Operation Black Wing*, and *PISCES* prepare the reader not only for the lack of enlightenment these organizations provide concerning the Rocket but also for the modern, scientific systems of order and control. The administrators of these systems -- Edward W.A. Pointsman, Kevin Spectro, Brigadier General Ernest Pudding (an old war general assigned to maintain control and order within *PISCES*), and others -- diligently record their observations of the Rocket, Slothrop, and others involved with the A4 in a strictly scientific manner, relying heavily on maps, statistics, mathematical equations and conclusions, and traditional lab data and inquiry. While they hope that their records will lead to sudden, important revelations about the Rocket and its movements, often these same administrators find themselves in comical positions that satirize their efforts. Instead of providing clarity and understanding, their systems produce yet more paranoia as those studying the Rocket become increasingly entangled in its complicated, often nonscientific web.

The fear and paranoia the Rocket imparts in Pointsman, Spectro, Brigadier Pudding, Roger Mexico (a statistician working for PISCES), and others employed by or helping PISCES drive each character to further his own branch of Rocket and “Slothropian” studies, each based on scientific systems of order and control and employing basic Pavlovian principles. For the members of the Firm, Pavlov’s theories provide the most logical and systematic methodology with which to study Slothrop and the Rocket, in large part because Slothrop turns out to have been the subject of a Pavlovian study when he was young. Speculation arises that the rocket that “screams” before it hits the ground -- a phenomenon reminiscent of traditional Pavlovian theories on conditioned reflexes -- is in fact the infamous Rocket 00000. In a scene in which Pointsman and Spectro are discussing these systems and their relevance, Pynchon highlights the excitement and dedication each feels to the project:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out . . . a few feet of film run backwards...the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound--then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what’s already death and burning . . . a ghost in the sky . . . (48)

The theory of the Rocket and its power to explode without warning both excites and frightens the scientists. Not only can it bring mass destruction, but, if controlled, it could prove to be the deadliest weapon used in the war. Thus Pointsman, Spectro, and their colleagues grow obsessed with the Rocket and,

along with it, Slothrop, as he appears to possess inside information concerning the Rocket's operation.

Within larger structures like PISCES, The White Visitation, and Operation Black Wing, there exist specific tactical systems that govern the scientific exploration of and discoveries surrounding the Rocket. These systems analyze and track the Rocket, utilizing methods such as Pavlovian studies, statistics, mapping, calculus, physics, and other types of "rocket science." Much of the Pavlovian influence derives from the studies of the fictional Pavlovian scientist, Lazlo Jamf. Jamf has conducted Pavlovian stimulus-response tests on the young Slothrop, which the current scientific community suspects may explain Slothrop's connection to the Rocket 00000. *Gravity's Rainbow's* Pavlovian scientists are also determined to uncover the details of Jamf's tests on Slothrop and the manner in which these tests may influence Slothrop's current behavior. However, unearthing Slothrop's laboratory results is much more arduous than the scientists anticipate, and their ongoing ignorance engenders within them even greater paranoia. The little they can discover of Jamf and his work provides just enough information to incite an obsession with Jamf's studies without actually granting them peace of mind:

Back around 1920, Dr. Lazlo Jamf opined that if Watson and Raynor could successfully condition their "Infant Albert" into a reflex horror of everything furry, even of his own Mother in a fur

boa, then Jamf could certainly do the same thing for his Infant Tyrone, and the baby's sexual reflex. (84)

Nonetheless, the scientists' efforts remain greatly invested in stimulus-response and conditioned reflexes as the cornerstones of their investigation. It is as if a tacit agreement exists among the members of the community: discover what Pavlovian stimulus Dr. Jamf gave to Slothrop, discover how to control the Rocket.

As I mentioned above, each individual in the community employs a different type of scientific study and reasoning, though no one type actually provides any clarification concerning Slothrop or the Rocket. Pointsman and Spectro spend their time studying the Pavlovian branch of science; Brigadier Pudding oversees the general direction of inquiry and tries to bring some respectability to the operation in order to maintain funding; Mexico records statistics on seances and Rocket landing locations; Teddy Bloat, a minor employee for PISCES, gathers information on Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket to deliver to those at The White Visitation; Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice, another minor employee, gets "inside the fantasies of others" (12), in order to provide to The White Visitation information about these fantasists (often rival generals and military men), who then can then be studied and analyzed using mathematical formulas and methods -- the list of PISCES employees and informants goes on. The Rocket, due to its vast importance and terrifying omnipotence, easily inspires this mass interest. Those involved in the scientific

community fall prey to a superficial understanding of the A4 -- one that relies solely on scientific inquiry and discovery -- and because this methodology seems to be the easiest and most logical, almost every character in the book allies with PISCES and The White Visitation at some point.

What is most important to remember about these modern systems is that their scope is limited by the scientific approach of those in charge. Their reluctance (despite including seances and visionary fantasies in their research) to embrace the legitimacy of any spiritual or supernatural phenomena associated with the Rocket prevents them from fully understanding Slothrop, the Rocket, and the connection between the two. Pynchon suggests strongly that the Rocket, although outwardly scientific in nature, has an air of the numinous and cannot be wholly comprehended without attending to this supernaturalism. Thus, no strictly scientific approach can ever truly explain the actions of the Rocket or hope to control it.

The modern, scientific systems of order and control that attempt to explain and govern the Rocket<sup>8</sup> are ones that Pynchon approaches with a suspicious, satiric eye, which he uses to question and undermine their supposed authority. The scientific methods these systems employ document limited scientific data

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<sup>8</sup> And, by extension, Slothrop, whom the scientific community of *Gravity's Rainbow* is also greatly invested and interested in studying, as they believe him to be intimately connected to the Rocket and its landing sites.



concerning the Rocket but fail to anticipate its crucial point of impact. Each system or structure conforms to a regulated standard of scientific exploration and analysis that closely resembles Thomas S. Kuhn's theory of the standard and ultimately ineffective operation of normal science, examined in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn defines normal science as "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice" (10). In other words, normal science consists of inquiry, investigation, and the subsequent data that scientists generate when studying within a particular realm whose limitations and parameters have been previously agreed upon. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the scientific community's examination of the Rocket and its movements accord with Kuhn's account. Its research is executed under the assumption that the Rocket's inner workings can be revealed solely through the basis of scientific experimentation and analysis. Through the lens of Kuhn's theories on the shortcomings of normal science, Pynchon's satiric treatment of the modern systems of order and control becomes easier to navigate.

Normal science, Kuhn suggests, relies on the existence of paradigms, which are "accepted examples of actual scientific practice," that "provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research" (10). The discoveries and data produced by normal science thus conform to existing paradigms of research. As Kuhn states, "Men whose research is based on shared

paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific progress” (11). This kind of research does allow for concentrated, close analysis in specified fields and “is a highly cumulative enterprise, eminently successful in its aim, the steady extension of the scope and precision of scientific knowledge” (52). However, because of its concentrated focus, “Normal science does not aim at novelties of fact and theory, and when successful, finds none” (52). Therefore, while data can be accumulated through normal science, discoveries outside the paradigm cannot be made.

Normal science, while limiting the discoveries that can be made within a particular area of research, remains nevertheless appealing because it promises a steady, continuous accumulation of data. Once the paradigm is established, it is no longer necessary to come up with new methods of research, and as a result, even the paradigm itself “need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted” (18). Attention can therefore be focused on research and analysis, not on the attempt to discover basic but as yet unknown principles about the object or field in question. This entropic, closed system is what initially and repetitively causes those studying the Rocket to fail: because they are unwilling or unable to examine or consider alternative notions of the Rocket and seem only concerned with the accumulation of data within their scientific paradigm, they fail to comprehend the complexities of the A4. Therefore, their

knowledge of the 00000, while helpful and effective as standard scientific data, will not disclose the Rocket's deeper mysteries.

By virtue of its combination of the scientific and the supernatural in its essence and operation, a true understanding of the Rocket and its workings lies beyond the limitations of normal science, but because the standard scientific “paradigm implies a new and more rigid definition of the field ... [the scientist] need no longer, in his major works, attempt to build his field anew, starting from the first principles and justifying the use of each concept introduced” (19-20). The scientists of *Gravity's Rainbow's* The White Visitation use Pavlovian fundamentals and methodology as the primary paradigm in their examination of the Rocket and, as a result of operating under the assumption that the Rocket is an exclusively scientific construction, are not compelled to consider or study it in anything other than mechanistic terms. By excluding the possibility of supernatural involvement, The White Visitation's scientists exhibit a blindness to alternative possibilities that serves to reinforce the existing scientific paradigm.

The Rocket is, nonetheless, more than just a piece of metal. Consequently, normal science is not the optimum type of research to investigate its nature; instead, a more creative and flexible analysis of the A4 is necessary to fully understand its actions and possibly control it. However, because those concerned with the scientific comprehension of the Rocket do not subscribe to strong spiritual belief, they are quick to use their investigation of supernatural

discoveries to their own individual ends (hence their involvement in studying seances) and to subsequently disregard the legitimacy of any spiritual practices, such as the Herero Rocket raising or mass suicide, that hope to connect with and manage the Rocket. In this regard, it is important to “recognize how very limited in both scope and precision a paradigm can be” (23) and thus recognize how limited the analysis of the Rocket, when it is considered solely as a scientific mechanism, has the potential to be. Kuhn’s interpretation of normal science thus provides a foundation for understanding the limitations and character of the The White Visitation’s scientific systems of order and control.

Pynchon further mocks the use of standard scientific methods through his use of Menippean satire, combining the “high art” of standard, official science with variations of “low art” -- vulgar jokes, physically disgusting descriptions and situations, and informal, distasteful, and often indecent prose and verse. Through this satire, he reveals the scientific community’s fundamental lack of comprehension of the Rocket. Throughout Parts I and II of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as the modern systems become more and more conspicuous, it becomes increasingly clear that the scientists’ understanding of and control over the Rocket are only partial, a failure due at least in part to their insistence on rigidly following standard scientific methods in their study of the A4. Pynchon’s use of Menippean

satire is perfectly suited to this situation: the modern systems, oblivious that their failings are a product of their narrow approaches, are the ideal objects of satire.

Such is the case when Pointsman hopes to lure Slothrop into a trap in order to capture him for further study, and the bait supplied by The White Visitation is a cephalopod: “Yet for all his agonizing all Pointsman will score, presently, is an octopus -- yes, a gigantic, horror-movie devilfish name of Grigori: gray, slimy, never still, shivering slow motion in his makeshift pen down by the Ick Regis jetty” (Pynchon 51). Besides the obvious satiric nature of using an octopus for a scientific experiment that has little to do with aquatic life, naming this octopus after a group of fallen angels -- the Grigoris of Biblical apocrypha -- aligns the creature with beings of noncanonical religious significance and foreshadows the sinister character the experiment will assume. In addition, Pynchon names the octopus’s home Ick Regis, a pun on “egregious,” thus rendering the episode even more ludicrous. Moments such as these occur throughout the book and are especially prominent in Parts I and II, in which Pynchon focuses primarily on these modern systems and their experiments.

One of the most significant moments in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that highlights Pynchon’s satiric criticism of the limitations of the scientific community’s investigations occurs during a recounting of Jamf’s examination of Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket. The scientific community considers Slothrop’s connection to the Rocket to be of paramount importance because he “is able to

predict when a rocket will fall at a particular place” (85), and those within The White Visitation assume this ability to be the result of Jamf’s early conditioning. Therefore, the inquiry into Slothrop concentrates heavily not only on Pavlovian principles but on Jamf’s particular Pavlovian examinations and conclusions. The section begins with an account of Jamf’s conditioned reflex test on Infant Tyrone and then examines the aftereffects:

Now ordinarily, according to tradition in these matters, the little sucker would have been de-conditioned. Jamf would have, in Pavlovian terms, “extinguished” the hardon reflex he’d built up, before he let the baby go. Most likely he did. But as Ivan Petrovich himself said, “Not only must we speak of partial or of complete extinction of a conditioned reflex, but we must also realize that extinction can proceed *beyond* the point of reducing a reflex to zero. We cannot therefore judge the degree of extinction *only* by the magnitude of the reflex or its absence, since there can still be a *silent extinction beyond the zero*.” Italics are Mr. Pointsman’s.

Can a conditioned reflex survive in a man, dormant, over 20 or 30 years? Did Dr. Jamf extinguish only to zero--wait till the infant showed zero hardons in the presence of stimulus *x*, and then stop? Did he forget--or ignore--the “silent extinction beyond the zero”? (84-5)

“According to tradition,” of course, is exactly on what Pynchon hinges his entire satiric scrutiny of the modern systems of order and control. The deconditioning of Slothrop clearly did not work -- hence his anticipation of and connection to the Rocket -- and this is because the paradigm of tradition does not actually allow for

*practice* to move outside of tradition. The reference to extinguishing the reflex beyond the zero is a slippery theory to grasp, one that is logically implausible. A scientist can only decondition a subject to a zero frequency response, as it is impossible to predict whether or not the singular absence of a reflex designates the continuous and permanent absence of a reflex. Thus, the theory of extinguishing a reflex beyond the zero proves to be impossible because it exists outside the parameters of the scientific Pavlovian paradigm and cannot be effectuated.

Pynchon's critique of the Pavlovian paradigm is deeply invested in the recognition of this impossibility: because completely extinguishing a reflex exists outside the practice of a paradigm, referencing the idea neither excuses the limitations of the paradigm nor produces the complete extinction. Mexico recognizes this restriction and comments on the impossibility of extinction beyond the zero: "It implies moving past the tongue-stop--beyond the zero--and into the other realm. Of course you don't move past. But you do realize, intellectually, that's how you *ought* to be moving" (85). His realization that "you don't move past" and "into the other realm" touches upon the limitations the modern, scientific systems place upon inquiry and practice. Science, in this case, does not account for the existence of human complexity (as it does not account for the complexity of the Rocket) or the existence and legitimacy of the supernatural

(the “other realm”) and thus only guarantees the limitations of its experimentations.

Here, the modern systems’ failings -- their inability to completely extinguish Slothrop’s conditioned reflex -- could partially account for the connection between Slothrop and the Rocket, a problem those at PISCES are determined to manage and solve. In the context of satire, the scientists in *Gravity’s Rainbow* have created this problem for themselves by practicing a science that does not allow for experimentation and analysis outside the accepted paradigm. Even when, in this section, the scientific community moves toward a more flexible, creative analysis and understanding of Slothrop’s connection to the Rocket, their gesture is quickly satirized and replaced with a more “logical” explanation:

But Edwin Treacle, that most Freudian of psychical researchers, thinks Slothrop’s gift is psychokinesis. Slothrop is, with the force of his mind, *causing* the rockets to drop where they do. He may not be physically highballing them about the sky: but maybe he is fooling with the electrical signals inside the rocket’s guidance system. However he’s doing it, sex *does* come into Dr. Treacle’s theory. “He subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other, whom he symbolizes on his map, most significantly, as a *star*, that anal-sadistic emblem of classroom success which so permeates elementary education in America . . .” (85)

The mention of “psychokinesis” briefly restores hope for the scientific community: perhaps they will embrace the supernatural aspects of the Rocket and



begin approaching a more inclusive method of managing it. However, as quickly as the reference to the paranormal occurs, it is extinguished (much more thoroughly than Slothrop's conditioned reflex) and replaced with a theory of "fooling with the electrical signals inside the rocket's guidance system." The mysterious coincidence of the maps is explained as well, as nothing more than a Freudian instinct to "abolish all trace of the sexual Other," an interpretation colored by a conglomeration of psychological mumbo jumbo that comes no closer to explaining Slothrop than do Mexico's statistics on seances; even Pynchon's ellipsis at the end of the paragraph seems to represent his boredom with and dismissal of such preposterous analyses. The limitations of scientific practice are evident here as well: there can be no hypothesis of the supernatural concerning Slothrop or the Rocket because such speculation has no place within the paradigm.

Pointsman's theories, apparent especially in this section, of the connection between Slothrop and the Rocket speak to the limitations of the scientific community's exploration and hypotheses as well. Pointsman operates firmly within Kuhn's paradigm of normal science and therefore encounters several obstacles when attempting to decipher how Slothrop is able to predict the Rocket's impact. Although he correctly identifies Jamf's experiments as the source of Slothrop's reflex -- we learn later that Slothrop's anticipation of the Rocket is a result of his conditioning to have an erection in the presence of

Impolex G, a liquid plastic that the Rocket is coincidentally coated in --

Pointsman is unable to separate his thinking from Pavlov's theories: "Pointsman has been talking about paranoia and the 'idea of the opposite.' He has scribbled in The Book exclamation points and *how trues* all about the margins of Pavlov's open letter to Janet concerning the *sentiments d'emprise*, and of Chapter LV, 'An Attempt at a Physiological Interpretation of Obsessions and of Paranoia'" (87).

Several other moments in *Gravity's Rainbow* reveal Pointsman as paranoid and obsessed with antithetical conditioned reflexes, and these two preoccupations form a paradigm, based on Pavlov's concepts, that restricts him from discovering the true connection between Slothrop and the Rocket.

This limitation is particularly evident when Pynchon presents us with Pointsman's detailed explanation of how Jamf's conditioned reflex experiments on Slothrop could result in his connection to the Rocket. Even Pointsman at this stage begins to notice theoretical contradictions that suggest a solution outside the paradigm: "Suppose, Pointsman argues, that Jamf's stimulus *x* was some loud noise .... That points to the V-1: any doodle close enough to make him jump ought to be giving him an erection .... But oh, no. Slothrop instead only gets erections when this sequence happens *in reverse*. Explosion first, then the sound of the approach: the V-2" (86). However, because he is unable to consider an alternate form of stimulus still connected to the Rocket but perhaps not conforming to "ideas of the opposite," Pointsman revises his thinking and returns to his original

theory: “But the stimulus, somehow, *must* be the rocket, some precursor wraith, some rocket’s double present for Slothrop in the percentage of smiles on a bus, menstrual cycles being operated upon in some mysterious way” (86). Instead of considering a different form of response in Slothrop, Pointsman is so dedicated to Jamf’s original testing and Pavlov’s theoretical place within it that he is even willing to ponder a possible oppositional reflex that Slothrop’s girlfriends’ menstrual cycles may have as a response to the Rocket.

Pointsman’s commitment to thinking within the restrictive bounds of the paradigm again comes to light when Mexico challenges his thinking and The White Visitation’s exclusively scientific approach to the question of Slothrop and the Rocket:

“I don’t want to get into a religious argument with you,” absence of sleep has Mexico more cranky today than usual, “but I wonder if you people aren’t a bit too--well, strong, on the virtues of analysis. I mean, once you’ve taken it all apart, fine, I’ll be the first to applaud your industry. But other than a lot of bits and pieces lying about, what have you got?”

It isn’t the sort of argument Pointsman relishes either. But he glances sharply at this young anarchist in his red scarf. “Pavlov believed that the ideal, the end we all struggle toward in science, is the true mechanical explanation. He was realistic enough not to expect it in his lifetime. Or in several lifetimes more. But his hope was for a long chain of better and better approximations. His faith ultimately lay in a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche. No effect without cause, and a clear chain of linkages.”

“It’s not my forte, of course,” Mexico honestly wishing not to offend the man, but really, “but there’s a feeling about that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, a less... sterile set of assumptions. The next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely and strike off at some other angle.”

“No--not ‘strike off.’ Regress. You’re 30 years old, man. There are no ‘other angles.’ There is only forward--*into it*--or backward.” (89)

Pointsman’s militant, absolute defense of cause-and-effect -- which encompasses Pavlov and his theories -- firmly expresses his dedication to the paradigm. Words such as “religious” and “faith” confirm this passion, aligning Pointsman and The White Visitation, in its dedication to Pavlov, with religious fundamentalism and embodying their blind faith in these concepts. Here, Mexico unknowingly voices the concerns of those who recognize that the Rocket’s true nature may not be entirely scientific and that a more flexible and creative type of science must emerge if the scientific community ever hopes to entirely decipher its workings. His conviction that “for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, less... sterile set of assumptions” is, according to Pynchon’s text, accurate and speaks to the necessity for a more versatile and revolutionary type of analysis. However, Pointsman is unable to consider a science outside the paradigm and instead believes only in “the true mechanical explanation” and “a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche.” His suggestion that “there is only

forward--into” demonstrates that his notions exist only within -- and into -- the paradigm. Pointsman, and all those who engage in his orthodox type of analysis, imprisoned by their resistance to speculation outside the confining paradigm of authoritative science, will thus never be able to understand and appreciate the full, complex nature of the Rocket.

By the end of Part II, these limitations have begun to prove fatal to The White Visitation and its investigation of Slothrop and the Rocket. The Firm’s concentration has been primarily on Slothrop and his connection to the Rocket, and as a result its entire investigation has hinged solely on what Slothrop could provide for those in the scientific community. Additionally, the methods Pointsman and his colleagues have employed to study Slothrop, and by extension the A4, have not resulted in concrete, useful information on how to manage and control the Rocket. An air of failure and hopelessness, stronger than before, surrounds The White Visitation:

There’s been no word of Slothrop for nearly a month, since the fumbling asses in military intelligence lost him in Zurich. Pointsman is a bit browned-off with the Firm. His clever strategy appears to’ve failed. In first discussions with Clive Mossmoon and the others, it seemed foolproof: to let Slothrop escape from the Casino Hermann Goering, and then rely on Secret Service to keep him under surveillance instead of PISCES. An economy move. The surveillance bill is the most

excruciating thorn in the crown of funding problems he seems condemned to wear for the duration of this project. Damned funding is going to be his downfall, if Slothrop doesn't drive him insane first.

Pointsman has blundered. Hasn't even the Tennysonian comfort of saying "someone" has blundered. No, it was he and he alone who authorized the Anglo-American team of Harvey Speed and Floyd Perdoo to investigate a random sample of Slothropian sex adventures. Budget was available, and what harm could it do? (270)

Throughout the book, Pynchon has highlighted The White Visitation's lack of funding as a sign of the Firm's deficiency and as a satiric aspect of its organization: "At 'The White Visitation,' because of erratic funding, there is only one film projector" (113), and "There is evidence of a budgetary insecurity begun to filter in among the cherub-cruled halls and nooks of the PISCES facility" (227). Now, its economic crisis has caused its investigation to founder, adding more stress to its already weak strategies and exhausted workforce and resources. PISCES' limited scientific approach has not disclosed any of the necessary information The White Visitation hoped for, and as a result of this failure and its resistance to alternative forms of analysis, the operation is slowly going to waste.

The White Visitation and PISCES' failure only escalates as the book continues. By the end of Part III of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Firm and all its partner organizations are in shambles, unwilling to accept their obvious inability to understand and control the Rocket. Pointsman, the once celebrated brainchild of

PISCES and The White Visitation “has been officially in disgrace” (615), and those who control Operation Black Wing are discreetly discussing his removal from the corporation. However, despite the realization that the scientific community’s study of the Rocket has largely been in vain, those in charge are still unable to accept the complete darkness of their situation. Even though the Rocket remains entirely elusive, they maintain an inevitability of eventual success (which Pynchon treats, of course, satirically): “We’re all going to fail ... but the Operation won’t” (616).

## CHAPTER TWO INTO THE ZONE

“The innocence of the creatures is in inverse proportion  
to the immortality of the master.”

-Proverbs for Paranoids II, (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 241)

The Herero society, a Bantu group living in Namibia at the turn of the twentieth century, serves as one of the central forces in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon refers to the Hereros and their history throughout the text. This lends the work an air of documentary truth and gives it a basis in historical fact, focusing on details of Herero civilization and the genocide committed against it in 1904 by the colonizing Germans. However, I would argue that the historical references to Herero society are not the most critically significant.

Instead, I believe that one of Pynchon's primary aims in including the Herero culture in *Gravity's Rainbow* is to facilitate the creation of a composite of African beliefs and practices, alluding to a mysterious and mythological order underlying the entire narrative. The Herero religion has in fact been much overshadowed in the culture's history by the genocide. The Herero god, Ndjambi Karunga, is a hidden one. What is known about Ndjambi Karunga is limited to brief passages in larger, comprehensive African historiographies that give little insight into the nature of the god and the culture's relation to him, as, for example, the following:



The Hereros know a supreme being whom they call by two names: Ndjambi Karunga. The Karunga has an Ovambo derivation and is only known intimately to those Hereros, who have been in contact with the Ovambo in former times .... Ndjambi is the Heavenly God. (Vedder 164)

This elision lends an air of mystery to the spirituality represented in the text and allows Pynchon the space to create his own interpretation of the god and the manner in which his worshipers interact with him. Using this freedom, Pynchon creates a paradoxical god and religion marked by mysticism and mythology, whose followers exhibit both an undying respect and a fearful paranoia, a combination that generates a puzzling response to an omnipotent, frightening deity. Pynchon concentrates heavily in Part III of *Gravity's Rainbow* on this religion and its followers' response to their god, and as a result the entire section is distinguished by an air of mythological ambiguity and mystery. As Salman Rushdie confirms of Pynchon in his review of *Vineland* (1990): "one thing that has not changed about Mr. P. is his love of mystification" (Rushdie).

However, Pynchon does not succumb to what Chinua Achebe accuses Joseph Conrad of in his essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.'" According to Achebe, Conrad's postcolonial appropriation of Africa and African religion for his own literary ends brands him as a racist. Achebe condemns Conrad for using "Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor," and asks, "Can nobody see the preposterous and

perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind” (Achebe). Achebe’s argument against *Heart of Darkness* is valid: the exploitation of African society for English and American literature stereotypes those used as mere caricatures and reduces Africa to a piece of clay that white authors can mold to suit their literary pursuits.

I do not believe Pynchon is guilty of a similar transgression. Instead, he finely balances his use of Africa and its religions between expressions of curious playfulness and playful seriousness. He neither vandalizes nor exalts the Hereros and their religion, but rather employs their society more productively than other white “literary colonizers,” such as Conrad, Lafcadio Hearn, and D. H. Lawrence. Instead of reiterating the usual postcolonial appropriation, he navigates the nexus of postcolonial and postmodern primitivism. Pynchon is openly playful and inventive (with both the Hereros and all other cultures in the text) without claiming that his interpretation is historically or culturally relevant or correct. His objective and unbiased literary use of an African society neither criticizes nor praises the actual culture; in fact, he makes few pronouncements regarding the true nature of the Hereros. Through his historical references to the Hereros, Pynchon lends the book a degree of authenticity, but his candidly inventive passages undercut any historical accuracy the reader may mistakenly perceive. The Zone’s aura complements this use of the Hereros acting as providing a mythical setting that charges and transforms Pynchon’s primitivism into

something more complicated than simple postcolonial African appropriation. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Hereros function as a culture with history, not a culture whose history is being created.

Part III of *Gravity's Rainbow*, aptly named "In the Zone," begins with a confusing duality: a recognizable quote confronting an unrecognizable place. Pynchon quotes from *The Wizard of Oz*, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more . . ." (Pynchon 279), to mark the beginning of our journey into the Zone. Until now, the vast majority of the book has taken place in specific regions, well defined by easily imagined and mostly realistic backdrops and settings; the descent into the Zone's hellish, grotesque, and carnivalesque atmosphere is thus one that we, and Slothrop, will find bizarre and disturbing "as borders fall away and the Zone envelops him" (281). Slothrop, as he moves deeper into this fantastical dreamland, finds that "Signs will find him here in the Zone, and ancestors will reassert themselves. It's like going to Darkest Africa to study the natives there, and finding their quaint superstitions taking you over" (281). This sentiment is repeated later in Part III when Enzian defends some of these "quaint superstitions": "I may have gone a bit native out here, that's all. Stay in the Zone long enough and you'll start getting ideas about Destiny yourself" (362).

Pynchon's evocation on the first page of Part III of "going to Darkest Africa to study the natives" functions both to foreshadow the role the Herero society will play in this section and to create the impression of an uncharted and potentially dangerous land. Furthermore, his allusions to "quaint superstitions" prefigure the mythological responses to the paranoia surrounding the Rocket, which will become clearer as Part III progresses. And that these quaint superstitions will "[take] you over" suggests not only that the premodern systems of order and control, responses to the Rocket which I describe in fuller detail below, are legitimate to those who design and practice them but that there is also some underlying truth and sway to their power. This introduction to the Zone prepares us for the journey into a peculiar and primitive<sup>9</sup> region, one where old rituals and superstitions permeate the minds of those who live there and infiltrate the ones of those who visit.

The strange, premodern, mysterious nature of the Zone corresponds to the bizarre, worshiplike practices that surround the Rocket, practices that are most prominent in Part III but that reoccur throughout the book. These systems, which the Hereros primarily practice, maintain an almost entirely exclusively supernatural aura. These customs rely heavily on the influences of religion, astrology, mythology, the occult, rituals of life and death and other stereotypically

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<sup>9</sup> By primitive, I am referring to the atmosphere that the ancient, more mysterious characteristics of the premodern systems evoke, as opposed to the more modern, scientific ones. However, instead of the condescending tone that this term normally implies, I am merely using it to suggest a more mythological set of beliefs that are no more or less valid than any others in the text.

“primitive” ceremonial procedures, and attempt to understand and control the Rocket and its effect on those who practice them. Evidence of these premodern systems of order and control emerges in Parts I and II of *Gravity's Rainbow* as both an undercurrent and counterpart to the scientific actions of PISCES, The White Visitation, Edward W. A. Pointsman, Brigadier Pudding, and others within the “rocket science” community. However, it is in Part III that we are able to more closely track and observe this “Rocket worship.” The Rocket functions as a god in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the Zone acts as the altar at which its inhabitants may worship it. The Zone is the perfect setting for these primitive, mythological systems; Pynchon’s introduction to the region as comparable to Oz – greatly and dangerously magical, a place of both deception and fulfilled wishes – prepares us for a mysterious immersion into a religion that worships and celebrates the Rocket as both a bringer of life and an omen of death.

In order to understand both the paranoia connected to the Rocket and the various premodern systems at play in Part III, we must first explore how the Rocket functions as a complicated iconic religious figure to those who (often in complex and perverse ways) worship it. Endowed with the capacity for mass destruction, the Rocket can either destroy all or not, hence the tendency to perceive it as a god. To those who view it as such, the Rocket represents not merely a one-sided god but a force that transcends the popular Christian view of a loving or benevolent deity. It is, simultaneously, a figure to worship and revere,

and to fear and loathe, taking on characteristics of both god and devil but evading a precise, either-or definition. That the Rocket's motions elude understanding strengthens this distinction between it and the popular, loving god who can be measured and directly appeased.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the A4 may be better characterized as *sui generis*, existing within the confines of its own rules, and as a "creature" that can be both selective and careless in its range and in the effect of its power.

When Pynchon refers to the Rocket 00000's power and control in Episode ten of Part III, he mentions its impartiality in choosing victims: "yet they were all equally at the Rocket's mercy: not only danger from explosions or falling hardware, but also its dumbness, its dead weight, its obstinate and palpable mystery . . ." (402).<sup>11</sup> The explosions and falling hardware are obvious threats: the actual physical danger associated with proximity to the A4. However, the Rocket's "dumbness, its dead weight, its obstinate and palpable mystery" connote a more obscure meaning. These are odd characteristics to attribute to an inanimate object and convey both the Rocket's lack of concern and its decisiveness in "choosing" its victims, as in the case of Dr. Wahmke, one of the first "rocket scientists": "first blood, first sacrifice" (403). The recognition of the Rocket's intelligence determines the presence of a "Rocket-mind," which allows us to

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, there are no Ten Commandments to follow in order to please the Rocket and stay in its favor; instead, those who feel its power must devise their own bizarre systems to appeal to its favor or dissent from its power.

<sup>11</sup> The Rocket's ability to be both mindless and mindful suggests that it symbolically represents both science and mythology, an idea I explore in chapter three.

imagine the Rocket as more anthropomorphic than its metallic “dead weight” might indicate.

Just as the Rocket may be endowed with a mind, it also, via the phallic nature of its structure and actions, represents several aspects of the lower body, connoting worship of the lower stratum. In addition to its textual status as a complex deity, the Rocket in its plunges to Earth echoes the classic, primitive fertility myth, thereby invoking functions of the lower body. In his *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin explores this connection between worship and the lower stratum in the context of a carnivalesque reproduction of the underworld.<sup>12</sup> Proposing a combination of religion and a devotion to the lower stratum, akin to the lower world of hell, Bakhtin presents a system through which we can understand the connection between underworld worship and the resurrection of life: “All the symptoms of return to life are here described in succession from the top downward” (386). Bakhtin suggests, referring to Epistemon’s resurrection scene in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, “Thus we have a complete turnabout, the replacement of the higher by the lower level: it is not the breath of the mouth, but the flatus that appears as the symbol of life and the true sign of resurrection” (386).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Zone is also the perfect setting for this kind of worship: its correspondence to a place of dangerous uncertainty and to primitive, mythological beliefs allows it to function as a mysterious type of underworld.

<sup>13</sup> This “replacement of the higher by the lower” is inherent in Menippean satire, of which *Gravity’s Rainbow* is an excellent postmodern example, a subject I explore more fully in my introduction.

Given its various “birthings” from the earth and the ways in which it functions as a demonic figure to those who worship it, the Rocket serves as a powerful symbol of the underworld. However, it represents more than the traditional hellish underworld, characterized as a place of death and torture. In line with Bakhtin’s theories, it is also “the symbol of life,” strongly connected to fertility and birth. This affirmation is illustrated in scenes of Rocket raisings (literally watching the Rocket being born of nature) and Slothrop’s insatiable sexual drive in its proximity. The Rocket’s paradoxical embodiment of both hell and life underscores its function as a complicated religious figure to those who worship it as both a benevolent god and a malevolent devil. Those who worship the A4 alternatively celebrate it for its connection to life and fear it for its connection to death. Bakhtin provides us with the sphere in which to understand the Rocket as a contradictory religious emblem, a grotesque symbol of both life and the destruction of life.

Thus, we begin to see that the Rocket is not a simple object with a single “persona,” and the fear it imparts to those who surround it does not generate a two-dimensional relationship, in which the Rocket is a god and the characters in the book are worshipers at its altar. The Rocket is instead a fetish of the paranoids (as an object they can project their fear onto and subsequently obsess over) and the subject of their paranoia. They envision the A4 as an intricate deific figure because its complex existence prevents them from predicting its next move. The



premodern systems of order and control produced in response to this paranoia treat the Rocket as both a god to be worshipped and a notorious object to obsessively fear and hold onto, thus mirroring the knotted relationship the Rocket 00000 has to its “subjects.”

The most obvious instance of the Rocket functioning as a complex, omnipotent, godlike fetish is the role it plays in Herero society. The Hereros react to its vast, inescapable supremacy through ritual worship, Rocket raisings, ceremonial naming, and other occult practices, examples of the premodern systems of order and control. Their strange devotion to the Rocket is often grotesque and appears to be primarily motivated by fear but simultaneously embraces a sick adoration. The Hereros’ veneration of the A4, unlike the worship of a benevolent god, suggests rather a darker, more unpredictable and dangerous deity. Fear is at the root of their respect for the Rocket and thus drives their need to invent systems through which to understand and disarm its power.

Through Bakhtin’s theory of the body’s lower stratum and the underworld, we can further understand the manner in which the Hereros, and more specifically the Schwarzkommando group within the larger Herero society, attempt to manage the Rocket and its impact on their lives. The Rocket represents to them a duality of life and death, much like the combination of life and the underworld Bakhtin speaks of. The Hereros raise and worship the Rocket in the hopes of appeasing it and escaping its wrath, but they also, under the influence of the Rocket and in

direct reaction to their proximity to and fear of it, eventually succumb to a group suicide.

The Herero mass suicide acts as both a manner in which the Hereros can worship the Rocket, ultimately dying in its image, and an existential method by which they can protest and dissent from its power over them. Camus, in the opening of his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” affirms, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (3). When considered as an existentialist act, the problem of suicide illuminates the Herero self-extermination as a decision against a life characterized by the Rocket’s overwhelming control. Their action illustrates Pynchon’s version of a contradictory, postmodern religion, the type he explores in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The Hereros understand the Rocket as a primitive god endowed with postmodern characteristics that requires ultimate sacrifice -- a sacrifice they do not necessarily want to make. Thus, the contradiction embodied in the Hereros’ opposing reasons for suicide, which I examine below, is not illogical, but instead a reasonable action motivated by the paradoxical Rocket-god.

The Schwarzkommando movement towards mass extinction is an outgrowth of one of the most prominent premodern systems of order and control; as Pynchon states: “there was a tribal mind at work out here, and it had chosen to

commit suicide” (317). The “tribal mind” Pynchon refers to taps into the undercurrent of the mystical and primitive order, which the Hereros recognize and attempt to control, yet remain at the mercy of. Their choice manifests itself as a systematic “program [that] is racial suicide” (317), alluding to the deliberate, communal nature of the act. The decision to commit group suicide is a collective one, in which the entire Herero society and the Rocket share a major part. This move towards mass extinction is not just a one-sided issue, however; as the response to a paradoxical deity, it is both inspiration and fear of the Rocket that drive the Hereros to this event. It also represents a specific instance in which the Rocket has the power of both god and devil: the A4 frightens the Hereros to mass suicide, yet inspires them to take a step closer to “life” in the form of death.

Bakhtin’s theory of the lower stratum and its connection to the underworld as a potential source of life is especially helpful here. It underscores the duality of the Schwarzkommando’s reasons to choose death, as the group’s motivation stems from both fear and worship of the Rocket: fear of its omnipotent and dangerous nature, and worship of its potential to give life as well. Furthermore, it is possible for them to commit communal suicide as a result of the combination of their fear and worship: with this action, they fulfill both their need to escape and to submit to the Rocket’s power.

As Bakhtin comments, “Death is the necessary link in the process of the people’s growth and renewal. It is the ‘other side’ of birth” (407). When this

insight is applied to the Schwarzkommando mass suicide, it clarifies that the act is not necessarily just an insistent move towards death (though fear of the Rocket certainly does push the Schwarzkommando to take their destiny into their own hands), but additionally a link between life and death that the Rocket inspires in its followers. Death, as the “other side of birth,” is a finishing maneuver, one that typically brings an individual closer to God. The mass suicide is, in part, a step toward the Rocket and its power. However, since the Hereros do not characterize the Rocket as a typically benevolent god, their relation to it involves a complex entanglement, a kind of necessary dialectic between life and death.

To the Hereros, the Rocket does indeed govern all, and its frightening influence is enough to unconsciously drive them towards the ultimate sacrifice. When Pynchon writes, “The Rocket will have a final shape, but not its people” (316), he is commenting on the unconscious desire of the Zone Hereros to submit to the Rocket’s power and die in its honor. The Schwarzkommando feel compelled to slowly exterminate themselves in the shadow of the Rocket not for an explicable reason but for a tribal affiliation they feel among themselves, their death, and the Rocket:

It was a simple choice for the Hereros, between two kinds of death: tribal death, or Christian death. Tribal death made sense. Christian death made none at all. It seemed an exercise they did not need. ... Though they don’t admit it, the Empty ones now exiled in the Zone, Europeanized in language and thought, split off from the old tribal unity, have

found the why of it just as mysterious. But they've  
seized it, as a sick woman would seize a charm.  
(318)

Christian death, the extermination the Germans commenced in 1904, is genocide at the hands of an outside force and is therefore too far removed from their tribal beliefs for the Hereros to embrace. For the Hereros to submit to this type of death would exclude not only the Rocket as a source of their mass extinction, but their own will as well. Instead, they design their own version of extermination, although even the Schwarzkommando cannot comprehend its true root. This root, we as readers know, is the Rocket, and "they've seized it, as a sick woman would seize a charm." The idea of the A4 gives the Zone Hereros and their action greater purpose, as well as providing a foundation of both tribal affiliation and Rocket loyalty. In this light, the mass suicide is an attraction to, not a repulsion from, the 00000, and puts Herero society in the Rocket's favor.

In addition, this Hereros' gesture towards death in the hope of gaining spiritual access to the Rocket, however illogical, is the type of response the Rocket instigates in all its followers. The Zone Hereros are not choosing death in this regard so much as they are acting out the ritualistic intuition that manifests itself in those closely linked to the Rocket. Because the Rocket is always felt before it is heard, the immediate reactions it inspires are identical: a repudiation

of one of biology's principal instinctual imperatives.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the Rocket also acts as a catalyst for the mass suicide: the Schwarzkommando kill themselves both in the hope of approaching the Rocket on a religious level and as an unconscious counterintuitive response to the Rocket's omnipotent power.

However, even these irrational acts lie within the domain of systems of order and control and indeed constitute systems themselves. Each response possesses an order, regardless of how irrational, and it is directly correlative to the Rocket's influence. Proximity to the Rocket inspires a fetishism (as something to obsess over), a focus upon which to project paranoia and this fetishization stimulates a counterlogical course of action, a bizarre response to the impending arrival of death. From Pavlov's tests on the drooling dog, when the drooling comes before and, eventually, independently of, the treat, to Jamf's tests on baby Slothrop that condition his erection to precede the stimulus of Imipolex G, to the Schwarzkommando's move towards mass extinction, these reactions are antithetical to reason and thus follow the illogical pattern of a rocket that hits before it sounds.

It is from the Hereros' fear of the Rocket, a reaction of their mythological paranoia, that this illogical systematic death arises; the response is an obsession with death, as their paranoia is projected onto the Rocket, the ultimate harbinger

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<sup>14</sup> I am referring to the idea that the Rocket is heard after it detonates, not before as would be physically most likely. Thus, the reactions the Rocket provokes mirror this reversal of logic.

of death. Again, the paradoxical response occurs: instead of living and rising up against this god and reclaiming their freedom, the Hereros submit themselves to the mercy of death, allowing time to diminish their numbers. This reaction causes “the whites [to look] on anxiously .... to watch one’s subject population dwindling like this, year after year” (317), as the Hereros’ actions confuse the more scientifically minded characters in the text. As a result of the Hereros’ sheer numbers and almost silent organization, this mythological evocation of the occult connotes a mystery and mysticism that ordinary suicide does not. The Hereros allow their population to move towards extinction without formal, societal arrangements, as if one tribal mind occupies and directs them all. The observations of the Europeans, in their attempt to understand this mass movement towards death, hint again at this inexplicable, mythological phenomenon: “Something sinister was moving out in the veld” (317).

This premodern system of order and control – the movement toward an occultlike mass extinction – also functions as the Hereros’ inimical response to the Rocket, in direct opposition to the force it exerts on their community. In this interpretation, their suicide is existential, a reflection of a mass decision that life dominated by the Rocket is not worth living. In order to defeat the Rocket’s control over them, the Schwarzkommando, at least in part, consciously decide to commit mass suicide to enact their own system of order and control that dissents from the Rocket’s influence and power. Controlling their extinction allows the

Schwarzkommando to embrace their own organizational death, one that repudiates both the Germans and the Rocket. This effort, they hope, will remove them entirely from the Rocket's sphere of influence, thus enabling them to defeat the Rocket's "master plan." As much as the white Afrikaners, who attempt to control the Herero culture, try to rationalize the declining birth rate, "underneath all the reasonable talk, this scientific speculating, no white Afrikaner could quite put down the way it felt . . ." (317).<sup>15</sup> Thus, the nature of the Hereros' suicide is also cause for concern among the white Afrikaners, and curiosity in the reader: instead of the usual, cult like event, their suicide is a passive and patient progression over time: "They want a negative birth rate" (317). Instead of poison cocktails or leaps from cliffs, the Schwarzkommando settle on mere extinction as a way to "finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904" (317).

The Hereros' need for death, in the face of the Rocket's power to kill them, is a tactic necessary to reclaim control over their lives, a direct contradiction to their passivity, which demonstrates the ability of the Rocket to inspire counterlogical responses in those it affects. Ironically, the idea of the end of their civilization is a source of contentment to the Hereros: "The Empty Ones can guarantee a day when the last Zone-Herero will die, a final zero to a collective history fully lived. It has appeal" (318). This serenity, in the face of

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<sup>15</sup> This is also a reference to the strength of the mythological undercurrent of paranoia in the book: no matter how those invested in the scientific systems of order and control try to explain the more mystical systems, the persuasive power of the latter retains its force over them.



complete extinction, springs from their fear that the Rocket -- and, for that matter, the white Afrikaners -- may take control of their collective death. Their reaction is to reclaim this control in such a manner that nothing and no one, whether the Rocket or the European colonizers, will dictate the ultimate fate of their culture:

They 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 Otukungara<sup>16</sup> are prophets of masturbating, specialists in abortion and sterilization, pitchmen for acts oral and anal, pedal and digital, sodomistical and zoophilic—their approach and their game is pleasure. (318)

The “glamour” and eroticism of their extermination consolidate the Hereros’ control of and pleasure in their mass suicide. In an ironically nonprocreative way, vastly different from the death the Rocket would bring, this enactment enables them to actually enjoy their final extinction. The Rocket, no doubt, would produce a painful and rapid death (literally by landing on their heads); their purposeful suicide is precisely the opposite: slow and pleasurable. When discussing the nature of their chosen end, Enzian and Josef Ombindi, an Empty One from Hannover, comment on this characteristic:

“You know,” Ombindi’s eyes rolled the other way, looking up at a mirror-image of Enzian that only he could see, “there’s... well, something you ordinarily

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<sup>16</sup> “Otukungara” signifies “empty vessels,” as the Hereros designate themselves: “*Out-* is for the inanimate and the rising, and this is how they imagine themselves” (Pynchon 316-17). This refers to the terminal nature of Herero society.

wouldn't think of as erotic—but it's really the most erotic there is.”

“Really,” grins Enzian, flirting, “I can't think of what it would be. Give me a clue.”

“It's a non-repeatable act.”

“Firing a rocket?”

“No, because there's always another rocket. But there's nothing—well, never mind.” ...

“It embraces all the deviations in one single act. ... Homosexuality, for example. ... Sadism and masochism. Onanism? Necrophilia . . .”

“All those in the same act?”

All those and more. Both know by now that what's under discussion is the act of suicide. (319)

The reference here to suicide as erotic and nonrepeatable, directly contrasted to firing a Rocket (the other kind of death), foregrounds the difference between “Herero-death” and “Rocket-death.” Rocket-death would encompass none of these qualities and would instead be quick and painful. Here, in the Hereros' determination to construct a death as different as possible from that death brought about by the Rocket, we are offered further confirmation of their mass suicide as a rejection of the Rocket and its power.

However, we must note that the Hereros' relationship to the Rocket is not solely a negative one. In addition to enacting systematic rituals of death in response to their paranoia, they also practice ceremonies of life to celebrate its

vital energy and its powers of fertility. Bakhtin's theory of the link between the lower stratum and the return to life is especially important with regard to the Hereros' celebrations of life, in terms of their connection to the Rocket's phallic and fertility symbolism. The strongest example of this occurs in the Herero Rocket raising that Slothrop stumbles upon in Episode Six of Part III. When Slothrop first encounters this bizarre ceremony, he does not immediately recognize its significance and instead is overcome by its strange and mystical nature:

Unshaven, sweating, stinking Rocketman restlessly tripping out to the suburbs, among his people: there is haze over the sun, and a rotting swamp odor worse than Slothrop's own. Only two or three hours' sleep in the last couple of days. He stumbles on the Schwarzkommando, busy dredging for pieces of rocket. Formations of dark birds are cruising the sky. (360-1)

This scenario reinforces the impression of the Zone Pynchon has presented in the beginning of Part III as a hazy, confusing, often onerous region, saturated with the Rocket's presence. The image of Slothrop "restlessly tripping out to the suburbs" and "[stumbling] on the Schwarzkommando" imparts to the reader a vision of the mystery of the Rocket raising, one that correlates with our overall image of the Zone. Slothrop soon recognizes a part of the scenery he directly connects to the Rocket -- the uniforms the Schwarzkommando wear for the event:

The Africans have a partisan look: pieces here and there of old Wehrmacht and SS uniform, tattered civilian clothes, only one insigne in common, worn wherever it will show, a painted steel device in red, white and blue .... Adapted from insignia the German troopers wore in South-West Africa when they came in 1904 to crush the Herero Rebellion—it was used to pin up the brim of a wide-awake hat. For the Zone-Hereros it has become something deep, Slothrop gathers, maybe a little mystical. (361)

The Hereros' appropriation of the insignia worn by their colonizers and attempted exterminators speaks to their effort to own and control their own extermination. Using this symbol of colonization in the Rocket raising serves as a representation of the Hereros' replacement of the Germans by the Rocket. The Germans' previous attempts at genocide having failed, the Schwarzkommando have now found a new master to die for. Slothrop's observation of this symbol as "something deep ... maybe a little mystical" highlights both the book's mythological undercurrent and the mythological power of the Rocket. The actual letters on the emblem -- K, E, Z, V, and H -- correspond to "the five positions of the launching switch in the A4 control car" (361), embedding the Rocket in this insignia and establishing it as the method behind this paranoid madness.

The actual Rocket raising represents another structural element in the Hereros' attempt to appease and placate the Rocket. By raising it -- literally pulling its remains from the ground and then celebrating its rebirth, the Hereros

demonstrate their reverence for the Rocket, thus hoping to gain its approval. As they dig, the “Schwarzkommando struggle knee-deep in mud, engaged entirely with the salvage, with the moment” (361) and dedicate themselves to the unearthing of the A4 that may thus provide them with a momentary security from its power. However, aside from the aim of increasing their protection from the Rocket’s wrath, the Schwarzkommando’s participation in raising the Rocket reinforces their deep connection to the A4 itself.

Enzian attempts to explain to Slothrop the Hereros’ connection to the Rocket by comparing the Rocket and its impact on Herero life to the mass extermination attempted by the Germans in 1904:

Forty years ago, in the Sudwest, we were nearly exterminated. There was no reason. Can you understand that? No reason. We couldn’t even find comfort in the Will of God Theory. ... One reason we grew so close to the Rocket, I think, was this sharp awareness of how contingent, like ourselves, the Aggregat 4 could be—how at the mercy of small things . . . dust that gets in the timer and breaks electrical contact ... corrosion, a short, a signal grounded out, Brennschluss too soon, and what was alive is only an Aggregat again, an Aggregat of pieces of dead matter, no longer anything that can move, or that has a Destiny with a shape. (362)

Enzian’s explanation offers the reader further insight into the Rocket’s centrality in the Hereros’ lives. Unlike the German threat, the Rocket, owing to its “mortality,” is somehow more humane and thus easier to imagine as a caring god.

This realization reflects its inherent duality; as we have already seen, the Rocket can be both sympathetic and callous, and its envisioned sympathy is in part due to the possibility of its own death. That there is no “comfort in the Will of God Theory” illuminates the Hereros’ relationship to the Rocket as an angel of death. The Schwarzkommando cannot accept the Germans’ attempt at an extermination that opposes their tribal beliefs; in contrast, the Rocket itself is, to them, a “god,” and the “Will of God Theory” is redirected to the Schwarzkommando’s understanding of the Rocket and its place in their religious death. Thus the Rocket infiltrates Herero spirituality, and its raising becomes a system through which the Hereros can pay respect to their god—a god that might just kill them.

Although the Herero mass suicide and the Rocket raising constitute the two most prominent examples of the premodern systems of order and control that the Rocket engenders, a number of smaller, less immediately significant moments occur during which these systems are created and enacted. The Hereros integrate the Rocket into their mythology, history, language, and cultural narratives in a conscious attempt to appease it through incorporating its divine power into their society, and perhaps also as a result of some unconscious obligation they feel to its omnipotence. The Rocket permeates all dimensions of Herero life, and in these dimensions we can see the Rocket’s influence generating smaller systems of order and control within the Schwarzkommando community.

Pynchon introduces the Schwarzkommando and their belief systems surrounding the Rocket through an excerpt from “Tales of the Schwarzkommando,” a mock ethnography of Herero society, by a fictional anthropologist, Steve Edelman.<sup>17</sup> The force of the Rocket in Herero society and in their collective history is well illustrated here:

In the days when the white engineers were disputing the attributes of the feeder system that was to be, one of them came to Enzian of Bleicheröde and said, “We cannot agree on the chamber pressure. Our calculations show that a working pressure of 40 atü would be the most desirable. But all the data we know of are grouped around a value of only some 10 atü.”

“Then clearly,” replied the Nguarorerue,<sup>18</sup> “you must listen to the data.”

“But that would not be the most perfect or efficient value,” protested the German.

“Proud man,” said the Nguarorerue. “What are these data, if not direct revelation? Where have they come from, if not from the Rocket which is to be? How do you presume to compare a number you have only derived on paper with a number that is the Rocket’s own? Avoid pride, and design to some compromise value.” (314-15)

The wording of this passage foreshadows the power the Rocket will exert on the Hereros in Part III. Ostensibly a conversation concerning the Rocket and its related scientific data, the exchange is cloaked in mythological diction. Enzian’s

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<sup>17</sup> Edelman is also referred to as a “Kabbalist spokesman” (753) -- Kabbalist suggesting another system of order and control -- and “a Hollywood businessman” (755).

<sup>18</sup> The narrator defines Nguarorerue as “one who has been proven” (316).

title “Nguarorerue” alludes to an African tribal language, reinforcing similarities between the Zone and “Darkest Africa.” The nature of the advice Enzian gives the German engineer is also mystical and tribal; he refers to the German as “proud man” and directs his attention away from scientific analyses, instead instructing him to listen to the Rocket, much as one might watch for a sign from a god. The conjunction here of both the premodern and modern systems of order and control is also indicative of a third system of order and control (an outgrowth and combination of the first two), which I will explore fully in chapter three.

This excerpt, which begins Part III and serves as the reader’s introduction to the Hereros, thus clearly defines the Rocket as instrumental to that people’s understanding of themselves and their culture. The use of anthropology and history as a system of order and control – literally, a system used to order and control the story of a people, a system in which the Rocket is a figure of the highest importance -- transforms the Rocket from fiction into fact, further heightening its importance not only to the Hereros themselves but also to those studying them, such as the fictional anthropologist Edelman.

The Rocket’s omnipotence and omnipresence in the Hereros’ lives is further evidenced during a retelling of the Herero creation myth. By placing the Rocket in their mythological history, the Hereros change their folklore to accommodate and further understand and appease this strange deity. Because they cannot function without knowledge and recognition of the Rocket as vital to their



understanding of themselves and because it becomes such an important part of their daily rituals and life, they write it into their ancient mythology:

The history of the old Hereros is one of lost messages. It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the Moon's true messages. The true message has never come. Perhaps the Rocket is meant to take us there someday, and then Moon will tell us its truth at last. There are those down in Erdschweinhöhle, younger ones who've only known white autumn-prone Europe, who believe Moon is their destiny. But older ones can remember that Moon, like Ndjambi Karunga, is both the bringer of evil and its avenger . . . . (322)

Clearly, in this passage, the Moon represents a kind of god, and the fact that the Rocket may bring the Hereros to the Moon to learn its secrets (supposedly the secrets of life) renders the A4 pivotal to the comprehension of their existence and ultimately more important than the Moon itself. And again, the duality of life and death as Bakhtin theorizes presents itself: the Moon "is both the bringer of evil and its avenger," much like the Rocket, which now endows the Hereros with the realization of this duality and thus constitutes an important part of it. The reference to Ndjambi Karunga as a dualistic god, of both good and evil, correlates as well with the Hereros' understanding of the Rocket as a god with a double nature. Because Ndjambi Karunga, an actual Herero god who possesses these qualities, is linked here to the Rocket, the Rocket is woven even more significantly into the "real-life" Herero systems of order and control.

Perhaps the most conspicuous and significant display of the Rocket's power over those who enter its sphere of influence lies in the title of the book itself: *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's title can be interpreted in a number of ways, all of which fundamentally relate to the Rocket and speak to the power of the A4 and its importance in understanding the text.

*Gravity's Rainbow* literally refers to "Gravity ... That against which the Rocket must struggle" (639) and the shape this struggle takes: gravity, as a force that pulls the Rocket downwards, and rainbow, as the parabolic shape of the Rocket's ascent and descent. Additionally, the reference to a rainbow evokes the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, and the Irish mythology of the rainbow as the path to the elusive Pot of Gold. Both myths use the rainbow as a vehicle of promise and fulfillment — either via material wealth, gold, as in the Irish myth, or spiritual, as in the sign of god's covenant with Noah and all living creatures in the Bible. Because the Rocket's parabola is likened to the parabola of the rainbow, the Rocket is thus shaped as a source of possible, though not probable, happiness and redemption.

Pynchon's evocation of myth in the title and his subsequent insertion of the Rocket into the mythology of the text reveals not only an overarching, premodern system of order and control but the importance of this mythological undercurrent. The premodern systems of order and control that underlie every system in *Gravity's Rainbow* are implicated in the title as the first element of the

book we, the readers, become familiar with. The association between the book's title and its narrative is an intimate one owing to the power the Rocket wields over the entire text. Pynchon, before we even enter the Zone, casts us into this mythological setting, placing us there, inviting us to become characters ourselves, possibly even allowing these "quaint superstitions [to take us] over." As he figuratively bids us farewell upon our entrance to the mythological, mysterious, and mystifying Zone, and as he himself has written of his newest book, *Against the Day*, "Let the reader decide, let the reader beware. Good luck."

CHAPTER THREE  
INTO THE VELD

“*You* hide, they seek.”  
-Proverbs For Paranoids IV (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 262)

“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.”

-von Braun quoted in Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 1)

“Where chaos begins, classical science stops.” (Gleick 3)

For years, the existence of chaos baffled scientists. Several of nature's greatest scientific mysteries traditionally appeared chaotic and disorderly, impossible to understand via traditional science and the laws of nature. Due to its reliance on classical conventions and established theories, scientific inquiry “suffered a special ignorance about disorder” and thus “The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side ... have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities” (Gleick 3).

During the 1970s, scientists in the United States began to abandon the paradigms of normal science that hampered their research into chaos and its “patterns” in the past. As these scientists sought “connections between different kinds of irregularity,” they found that “The insights that emerged led directly into the natural world -- the shapes of clouds, the paths of lightning, the microscopic intertwining of blood vessels, the galactic clustering of stars” (3-4).

In *Chaos: Making a New Science*, James Gleick explores the science of chaos and its role in nature. Just prior to his book's publication in 1987, the field of theoretical and natural science was undergoing massive transformation. Its members were beginning to recognize that the accepted paradigms of normal science, such as those discussed in Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, were productive for focused, limited study but incapable of generating new systems of research that could effectively analyze and investigate alternative phenomena. Chaos was one such phenomenon, and its governing principles gave rise to one such system. As Gleick himself states, "chaos poses problems that defy accepted ways of working in science" (5), and thus a reworking of modern scientific theory was necessary to explore and explain the phenomenon. Gleick examines the aftereffects of this theoretical revolution on the scientific community, in particular the ways this development influenced scientists' entire approach to the problem of chaos. Chaos became "not just a theory but also a method, not just a canon of beliefs but a way of doing science" (38).

The ensuing epistemological revolution enabled scientists to understand better the role randomness plays in nature, and the deep connection between the worlds of nature and science. One of the primary reasons chaos remained an unexplained and largely unexplored phenomenon for so long was that orthodox scientific methods and equations shed little light on its patterns. What Gleick

proposes is that natural disorder or chaos actually conforms to its own highly structured patterns that normal science and standard equations simply could not account for. However, with the inclusion of chaos and its relationship to nature in traditional science, scientific study found itself “between disciplines” (38) and was forced to expand its research to include what appeared to be disorder in the natural world.

When applied to Part IV of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gleick's discussion of chaos mirrors and illuminates the patterns behind this section's chaotic nature. Unlike Parts I, II, and III, Part IV for the most part neither takes place in one localized setting nor deals with one set of characters. Instead, Part IV mirrors the confusion and anxiety prompted by the Rocket and felt on the part of almost every character in the book. It leaps from Berlin to Budapest, from the living Pirate Prentice to the recently deceased Brigadier Pudding -- who, as the reader discovers, “has even more of a mouth on him than he did alive” (Pynchon 715). Characters float in and out of the narrative, as if suspended on invisible strings Pynchon effortlessly tugs at seemingly random moments. The Zone's former identity dissolves into a single phrase, “the Rocket-capital” (680), as the entire region takes on an atmosphere of dark complexity: “To come into a northern Zone town is to enter a strange harbor, from the sea, on a foggy day” (693).

As a whole, Part IV is imbued with confusion and mystery. Pynchon's textual shrouding causes the reader to feel that all the pieces of the puzzle that compose *Gravity's Rainbow* are coming back, but not coming together, as if individual aspects of the book are illuminated without really illuminating anything. For example, Slothrop, in one of his last appearances in the text,<sup>19</sup> wanders through the vast remains of the Zone and stumbles across "the crusted terrain of an old, no longer identifiable casserole--*bananas!* who-who's been putting bananas--" (678). This casserole, from the first episode of the book, is one of Pirate Prentice's famous "Banana Breakfasts" (5), his reaction to a wartime shortage of bananas and his personal opposition to death: when he observes a rocket poised to shatter London, Pirate's only response is to "Pick bananas" (7). This moment is one of many when a small detail, character, or plot point from earlier in the text is re-presented and re-examined without revealing any new or helpful information. As Samuel Chase Coale observes in his essay *Thomas Pynchon: The Functions of Conspiracy and the Performance of Paranoia*,

The text never really connects the dots but creates trails, crumbs for the reader to follow in order to try and make sense of what is going on. It is the postmodern compact, the paranoid covenant to suggest all kinds and degrees of secret conspiracies and leave them unresolved, hovering on the brink of extinction, if in fact they ever really existed at all.  
(151)

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<sup>19</sup> Slothrop's appearance here is technically not as a tangible character; rather, he exists in another realm, the veld, as a result of his earlier *sparagmos*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Pynchon's careful crafting of Part IV's confusion-within-disorder causes the reader to lose ground and hover on the brink of the text's extinction, wondering if connections between characters and situations really exist at all. The disorder and chaos in Part IV highlights not only the characters' doubts about the Rocket but also the reader's doubts about the text -- about what is *really* going on.

However, this disorder, much like patterns of chaos in nature, is neither pointless nor random. Pynchon creates Part IV with the intention of using it to reflect both the true nature of the Rocket and the general state of all those affected by the A4. I will discuss the nature of the Rocket and its relationship to chaos theory later; first, I would like to investigate the purpose of grouping together so many seemingly arbitrary characters, settings, and situations.

Part IV, like chaos theory, theoretically embodies a rejection of established truths and methods of understanding science and nature. Just as chaos theory introduces the idea that traditional, accepted modes of scientific inquiry fall short of explaining randomness in nature, Part IV introduces the idea that traditional, accepted theories of the Rocket fall short of explaining its true nature: thus, the deliberate disorder and confusion of Part IV. In effect, the book's paranoia -- which has thus far been felt by every character concerning the Rocket -- becomes more visible and central.

Pynchon presents Part IV as a complex pastiche that focuses primarily on this paranoia and its manifestation to even greater degrees in each character as the



Rocket's power and mystery increases. This section, aptly named "The Counterforce" -- to evoke, among other uprisings, the counterforce of the Rocket against those, like the Hereros and PISCES, who previously attempted to understand and control it -- begins with a simple but fitting sentiment, spoken by Richard M. Nixon: "What?" (617). This reference, both to a vague question indicating confusion and to the infamous United States President best known for the Watergate scandal and his ensuing resignation, implies both uncertainty and paranoia, foreshadowing the importance of each.

Paranoia replaces Pynchon's earlier historical foundations, such as those centering on Pavlov or Herero society, as a method of grounding the text. Instead of the presence of historical figures motivating the manic occurrences of the book, the only unifying base to this section is the paranoia that such occurrences evoke. This less stable and more terrifying underpinning highlights the narrative nature of Part IV and of its characters' sensibility, which is chaotic, anxious, suspicious, and fearful. As if to reinforce the textual importance of paranoia, Pynchon offers us Prentice's explanation to Roger Mexico:

"You're a novice paranoid, Roger," first time Prentice has ever used his Christian name and it touches Roger enough to check his tirade. "Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary-- but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-System as a They-System--" (638)

Nor is this the only explicit mention of paranoia in the text: Jessica Swanlake, Mexico's former wartime lover, refers to "The paranoia, the danger, the tuneless whistling of busy Death next door" (628);<sup>20</sup> likewise, Tchitcherine, a Soviet intelligence officer, experiences a haunting when the hallucinogenic he is using produces a ghost, in whom he confides: "So it is coaxed out of him by the patient emissary, whining, desperate, too many words--paranoid suspicions, unappeasable fears, damn himself" (704). Most notably, Pynchon invents a pop song exclusively about his readers' and characters' familiarity with paranoia:

Pa--ra--noooooiia, Pa-ra-noia!  
 Ain't it grand ta see, that good-time face again!  
 Pa-ra-noi-ya, boy oh boy, yer  
 Just a bit of you-know-what  
 From way back when!  
 Even Goya, couldn't draw ya,  
 Not the way you looked, just kickin' in that door--  
 Call a lawyer, Paranoia  
 Lemme will my ass to you, for-ever-more! (657)

In addition to these and other overt references, numerous implicit references to paranoia exist as well to solidify its role as a grounding influence on almost every character's thought and action throughout Part IV. The Rocket's dual nature as both scientific and mythological further heightens this effect, since its duality renders the A4 even more difficult to examine and understand -- "It might

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<sup>20</sup> Even though Jessica is here remembering these things as aspects of the past, her reference to paranoia emphasizes its importance. Additionally, Jessica is not entirely trustworthy in her assessment of the effects of the war (she has been known to understate), and her unreliability as a narrator in turn incites feelings of mistrust and paranoia.

almost--if one were paranoid enough--seem to be a collaboration here, between both sides of the Wall, matter and spirit” (165).

Paranoia has served, in the book, as the driving force behind most of the characters’ quests to understand and control the Rocket. However, as I have demonstrated in chapters one and two, each of the two overarching systems of order and control, the scientific and the natural/mythological, ultimately fails in its attempt to achieve a complete comprehension of the Rocket and its actions. Pynchon himself appears more sympathetic to the mythological approach -- certain elements of Part IV suggest that this approach may be more textually validated than the scientific, and the Herero society does not fail as obviously or as satirically as the scientific community does -- but he nevertheless, does not fully subscribe to either exclusionary method. The failure of both the scientific and the natural/mythological approaches suggests that the Rocket is neither wholly mythological nor wholly scientific, but rather embodies components of both, much like the patterns of chaos themselves.

Tyrone Slothrop remains the only character in the text who is able to approach, assimilate to, and ultimately transcend the Rocket. Instead of limiting his investigation of the A4 to either the scientific or mythological method, he invests his efforts throughout the text in studying both the scientific and mythological aspects of the Rocket rather than discounting either one. As a result,

the information he is able to collect is both substantial and varied. By synthesizing and combining this information, he is able to apprehend the Rocket in its fullest and most authentic embodiment. His success in ultimately transcending the Rocket speaks to the accuracy of his comprehension of the Rocket's holistic nature.

Strong evidence of Slothrop's relationship to the Rocket occurs even before Part IV, in which his connection to the 00000 is most apparent. When Lieutenant Oliver "Tanvity" Mucker-Maffick, Slothrop's American college friend and army partner, finds Slothrop's map of sexual conquest in Part I, he comments on its oddity:

The map does puzzle Tanvity. It cannot be put down to the usual, loud-mouthed American ass-banditry, except as a fraternity-boy reflex in a vacuum, a reflex Slothrop can't help, barking on into an empty lab, into a wormholing of echoing hallways, long after the need has vanished and the brothers gone to WWII and their chances for death ...

Still Slothrop keeps his map up daily, boobishly conscientious. At its best, it does celebrate a flow, a passing from which--among the sudden demolitions from the sky, mysterious orders arriving out of the dark laborings of night that for himself are only idle--he can save a moment here or there, the days again growing colder, frost in the morning ... (23)

Even though Slothrop's map should be easily explicable as a typical consequence of simple testosterone surges, Tanvity remains bothered by its composition and cannot fully explain its existence. The realization that "It cannot be put down to

the usual, loud-mouthed American ass-banditry” and his immediate, though minor, connection of the map to “the sudden demolitions in the sky” indicates that Slothrop’s map somehow corresponds to the war and the V-2. Those in the scientific community speculate about this relationship as well: Pointsman, defending his desire to study Slothrop in a Pavlovian setting, declares: “It’s Slothrop. You know what he is. Even Mexico thinks . . . oh, the usual. Precognition. Psychokinesis. ... But suppose *you* had the chance to study a truly classical case” (48). Later, when we discover that the stars on Slothrop’s map “fall in a Poisson distribution, just like the rocket strikes on Roger Mexico’s map of the Rocket Blitz” (85), the correspondence becomes even clearer: Slothrop is somehow inherently connected to the Rocket and its detonations.

Slothrop himself does not entirely understand his connection to the Rocket, although he is certainly aware of it, owing to both his own recognition of the “coincidental” similarities between his erections and the Rocket’s detonation points and his consciousness of The White Visitation’s strange interest in him (as Tanvity, while ironically secretly studying him, once comments in an attempt to displace his fears and paranoia, “God, Slothrop, *I* don’t know. I’m your friend too, but there’s always, you know, an element of Slothropian paranoia to contend with” [192]). This awareness only serves to further fuel his search for the Rocket and any information surrounding it. It prompts the creation of his own system of order and control -- a “counterforce” -- with which to study the Rocket. Although

this system is “unstructured” compared to the modern and premodern systems of order and control, its unstructured nature in and of itself allows it to mirror the complexity and duality of the Rocket and its chaotic characteristics. Slothrop’s system is thus the only one able to approach totality and a “full” and “correct” understanding of the Rocket.

Unlike the other two systems of order and control, Slothrop’s does not possess an overarching order which would dictate when and how to study the Rocket. As opposed to limiting his exploration to one particular area or another, he gathers information about the Rocket from all sources. His investigation reflects the manner in which scientists began to study chaos in the 1970s, and the results are similar as well: “Because it is a science of the global nature of systems, it has brought together thinkers from fields that have been widely separated” (Gleick 5). Just as chaos is a science that includes both natural and scientific information, Slothrop’s examination and interpretation of the Rocket includes both natural and scientific aspects and methods of study. The reason, therefore, that Slothrop is able to understand and assimilate to the Rocket is that his approach to the Rocket most resembles the actual duality and complexity of the A4.

Slothrop conducts the majority of his investigation of the Rocket prior to Part IV, when he is most involved in gathering information about the 00000. His

multifaceted search is what causes his “Slothropian paranoia” -- because he subconsciously knows that, in order to comprehend the A4, he must embrace all aspects of it, he is subsequently driven to paranoia and near insanity by the sheer scope of his investigation.

When Slothrop questions the rocket fuel technician Captain Hilary Bounce about the process of creating rocket fuel and its connection to Imipolex G,<sup>21</sup> he reveals this paranoid and obsessive behavior before he even fully realizes the significance and gravity of his situation, an indication of how ingrained and important the search has become in his unconscious mind:

“I mean,” Slothrop now working himself into a fuss over something that only disturbs him, mildly, nothing to kick up a row over, is it? “doesn’t it strike you as just a bit odd, you Shell chaps working on *your* liquid engine *your* side of the Channel you know, and *their* chaps firing *their* bloody things at you with your own . . . blasted . . . Shell transmitter tower, you see.” ...

“You look--” Bounce aspirating what he means to be a little warm laugh, “worried.”

Worried, all right. By the jaws and teeth of some Creature, some Presence so large that nobody else can see it--there! that’s the monster I was telling you about. --That’s no monster, stupid, that’s *clouds!* --No, can’t you *see?* It’s his *feet*-- Well Slothrop can feel this beast in the sky: its visible claws and scales are being mistaken for clouds and other plausibilities . . . or else everyone has agreed

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<sup>21</sup> Imipolex G, as I briefly mentioned earlier, is “a new plastic, an aromatic heterocyclic polymer, developed in 1939, years before its time, by one L. Jamf for IG Farben” (249) and was the stimulus in the Pavlovian experiments conducted on Baby Tyrone.

to *call them other names* when Slothrop is  
listening . . . (Pynchon 241)

In his attempt to unravel the mystery of the Rocket and its firing techniques, Slothrop succumbs to the fear that everyone but himself understands the Rocket and its secrets, and that “They” have left him ignorant on purpose. The transition he makes from questioning Bounce about the peculiarities of the Rocket’s detonation points to imagining the Rocket as a monster in the sky whose claws and scales only he can see reveals the intricate nature of the Rocket and the complexity of Slothrop’s own search as one that encompasses both science and myth. Because Slothrop is the only character in the text who identifies the Rocket as a complex, dual “creature,” he is also therefore the only character who would refer to the Rocket as a monster in the sky,<sup>22</sup> endowing it with animalistic and supernatural characteristics. This portion of Slothrop’s quest culminates in his desperate rifling through Bounce’s papers on the Rocket and his discovery of “a master materials list for the A4 and all its support equipment, and sure there’s no Imipolex G in that either. Scales and claws, and footfalls no one else seems to hear . . .” (242).

In addition to his scientific inquiry, Slothrop also engages in several mythological practices to align himself with the Rocket. Shortly after the Rocket raising in Part III, at which he is present and discusses with Enzian the Hereros’

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<sup>22</sup> The Hereros might come close to this identification, but they view the Rocket as a god and regardless of how evil they perceive it at times to be, the Rocket would never morph into a monster in their minds.



and his own search for the Rocket 00000, Slothrop imagines himself as a simulacrum of the Rocket: “It occurs to Slothrop here that without those horns on it, why this helmet would look just like the nose assembly of the Rocket. And if he could find a few triangular scraps of leather, figure a way to sew them onto Tchitcherine’s boots... yeah, a-and on the back of the cape put a big, scarlet, capital R” (366). This costume would complete his identity as “Rocketman, as he is soon to be known” (359), thus rendering him the earthly representation of the Rocket, its human counterpart. In addition, his reference to the scarlet letter that Hester Prynne wears as a visible sign of her adultery -- “a big, scarlet, capital R” -- emphasizes the importance of his connection to the Rocket (even if this importance exists, at the moment, only in Slothrop’s own mind). This moment of Rocket assimilation is, like the Rocket and Slothrop’s investigation of it, dual in nature: it is caused in part by Slothrop’s inherent, deep connection to the Rocket and in part by his growing paranoia and insanity, produced by the Rocket and his fanatical search for it.

Slothrop’s complex investigation of the Rocket does not go unnoticed, and as *Gravity’s Rainbow* progresses, others involved with and interested in the A4 begin to note the bizarre and obsessive aspects of his search. Tchitcherine especially focuses on these abnormalities, perhaps because “in any normal period of history [he and Slothrop] could have easily been friends” (390), and they bother him:

Black runs all through the transcript: the recurring color black. Slothrop never mentioned Enzian by name, nor the Schwarzkommando. But he did talk about the Schwarzgerat. And he also coupled “schwarz-” with some strange nouns, in the German fragments that came through. Blackwoman, Blackrocket, Blackdream... The new coinages seem to be made unconsciously. Is there a single root, deeper than anyone has probed, from which Slothrop’s Blackwords only appear to flower separately? Or has he by way of language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words . . . (390-1)

Tchitcherine, though he does not realize it, identifies Slothrop’s specific system of order and control as one that combines aspects of both the modern and premodern systems but transcends such easy definition. The new vocabulary Slothrop creates to identify places and objects associated with the Zone functions as an premodern system of order and control: a more ancient linguistic deviation, much like “the act of naming” (322) the Hereros engage in<sup>23</sup> that enables them to dissent and define their civilization as separate from the pervasive ‘They’ and the Rocket. The “mathematics of combination” that Slothrop practices, on the other hand, is aligned with the scientific, mathematical processes of those engaged in “rocket science” at PISCES and The White Visitation: the literal piecing together and

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<sup>23</sup> This “act of naming” refers to the Hereros’ practice of naming and creating myths that intertwine the Rocket and their society, such as the myth of the Rocket and the Hare I discuss in chapter one.

construction of a theory of the Rocket. Thus, the fact that Slothrop here uses a premodern type of system—linguistics—and mathematically combines old words to create new ones in the style of a modern system enables him to create his own name for the A4 within his own system. The combinatorial essence of Slothrop’s system is akin to the chaotic “disorder” scientists noted in natural phenomena prior to their understanding of chaos. As evidenced here, Slothrop understands the “disorder” of the Rocket, while those who either conform to the rules of classical science or strictly adhere to mythological explanations do not.

Tchitcherine is troubled by Slothrop’s unorthodox practice of creating names for the Rocket and other aspects of the Zone and thus wonders if there is “a single root, deeper than anyone has probed, from which Slothrop’s Blackwords only appear to flower separately” (391). His identification of the “single root” connotes a premodern system: a deeper, more intricate, and mythological process that runs beneath all the surface systems and influences their actions. Slothrop’s “mathematics of combination” stems from the influence of the modern systems of order and control; as Tchitcherine speculates, “he [has] by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination” (391), invoking this time the “diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words” (391) and foregrounding for the reader the prominence of sciences and mathematics in to the modern system. The

fundamental quality of Slothrop's system is, like the method Gleick proposes to understand chaos in nature, a combination of both scientific and mythological/natural systems and embodies the dualism of the Rocket 00000 itself. Both Slothrop's system and the Rocket thus function as a touchstone of postmodern combination and synthesis, encompassing aspects of the premodern and modern systems, underlying both, and directing each kind's application.

Tchitcherine's observations do not end with a simple acknowledgment of Slothrop's strange naming techniques. He puzzles further over the fact that,

To date Slothrop has still not recorded, tagged, discovered, or liberated a single scrap of the A4 hardware of intelligence. He reports neither to SPOG, CIOS, BAFO, TI, nor any American counterpart--indeed, to no known Allied office. Yet he is one of the Faithful: the scavengers now following industriously the fallback routes of A4 batteries from the Hook of Holland all across Lower Saxony. Pilgrims along the roads of miracle, every bit and piece a sacred relic, every scrap of manual a verse of Scripture.

But ordinary hardware doesn't interest Slothrop. He is holding out, saving himself for something absolutely unique. Is it the Blackrocket? Is it the 00000? Enzian is looking for it, and for the mysterious Schwarzgerat. There is a good chance that Slothrop, driven by his Blackphenomenon, responding to its needs though they be hidden from him, will keep returning, cycle after cycle, to Enzian, until the mission is resolved, the parties secured, the hardware found. (391)

Slothrop's dedication to his search, despite his lack of direction and discovery, reflects his fanaticism and need to understand and connect to the A4.

Tchitcherine's reference to those who follow and study the Rocket -- at the moment a reference directed primarily at Slothrop -- as "Pilgrims along the roads of miracle" and to pieces of the Rocket and its manual as "a sacred relic" and "a verse of Scripture" again conjures the image of a mythological, religious system, one that Slothrop and his system are intimately connected to. This supernatural undertone foreshadows the later importance of the mythological system, when Slothrop does in fact assimilate to and ultimately transcend the Rocket in Part IV. Furthermore, the realization that "ordinary hardware doesn't interest Slothrop" and that his search will continue until he finds the mysterious and elusive 00000, demonstrates the important connection between Slothrop and *the* Rocket, not just any V-2.

Slothrop's relatively successful combination of aspects of both the modern and premodern systems of order and control suggests that his system is endorsed by the text's implied author. His own paranoia plays a large part in his search as well, since the very scope of his investigation often drives him close to insanity and a corresponding deeper need to comprehend and assimilate to the thing (the Rocket) at the root of the madness. Recognizing the similarities between Slothrop's system and Gleick's system of understanding chaos and disorder in nature can further help the reader understand the complex characteristics of the

Rocket, as the A4 itself can be seen as a form of chaos: a disorder in nature that does not exist within the limitations of classical or normal science.

Slothrop's search for the Rocket ends unexpectedly at the beginning of Part IV (thus my concentration on his search in other sections of the book), when he "gets it" and is subsumed by the Rocket. It is in Part IV that Slothrop is most integrated with the A4, and in that section we are able to see how his system of order and control has enabled him to, in a sense, transcend his body and become one with the Rocket.

In classical Greek mythology, Pentheus, the King of Thebes, is killed by his mother and aunts when he is mistaken for a wild animal during a Bacchic ritual celebrating the god Dionysus whose worship Pentheus had banned. Pentheus' death is often described as a *sparagmos*, which Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* defines as one of the "distinguishable aspects to the quest-myth ... the disappearance of the hero, a theme which often takes the form of *sparagmos* or tearing to pieces. ... sometimes [the hero's body] is distributed around the natural world" (192). He goes on to specify that *sparagmos*, as one of four aspects of a universal myth, is "the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world" (192).

Slothrop undergoes a dispersion that, like Pentheus', is a form of *sparagmos*. *Gravity's Rainbow* is, to some extent, a "quest-myth," in which every character is on a quest to discover ways to connect to and control the Rocket. In addition, Slothrop is figuratively torn to pieces and "Scattered all over the Zone" (Pynchon 712), a phrase which marks his bodily dispersal and subsequent disappearance from the text. This scattering is akin to Frye's identification in classical myth of the hero's body as "distributed around the natural world" post-*sparagmos*, and thus Slothrop's scattering takes on a mythological significance, much like that of the Rocket itself. However, unlike Pentheus, Slothrop's *sparagmos* is not at the hands of his mother or any outside force but is rather the result of both his own annexation to the Rocket and his subsequent entrance to the veld, which I will discuss in my conclusion. Slothrop's system of order and control, with its comprehensive investigation of all aspects of the Rocket, has enabled him to in a sense become one with the 00000. This fusion acts as the highest possible form of union with the Rocket: because he is able to reveal its "true" nature, Slothrop, much like the Rocket, achieves mythological status and transcends his body in order to disperse throughout the Zone.

In Part IV we witness not only this *sparagmos* but also its aftereffects and the manner in which Slothrop gains a reputation akin to the Rocket's own, as he metaphysically and metaphorically unites with it. After he dissipates into the Zone

and disappears into the veld,<sup>24</sup> Slothrop metamorphoses into a quasi-mythical figure, embodying the nickname he acquired during his journeys through the Zone while searching for the Rocket: Rocketman. To the other characters in the book, Slothrop literally becomes the Rocket-Man, embodying characteristics of both the Rocket and himself. Post-*sparagmos*, Slothrop is absent from the text as a tangible character and appears only in two abstract forms: mentioned by other characters as something close to a mythological figure (688, 698, 712, 738, 740-2); or observed as he currently “exists” and moves about on an entirely different spatial and temporal plane: the veld (674-83). Once Slothrop understands the Rocket and discovers that it cannot be controlled and instead must be allowed to exist within the confines of its own “rules” -- much like the discoveries of late twentieth century scientists regarding chaos and its particular “patterns” -- Slothrop is able to transcend simple mythological or scientific reasoning, embrace both as parts of a systemic whole, and enter the veld.

Slothrop’s scattering is a blessing, but also a curse that suggests, as Frye writes, the “sense that heroism and effective action are absent ... and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world” (192). His *sparagmos* saves Slothrop from the Rocket’s detonations, as he becomes one with the landscape and the veld and assumes a form that cannot be harmed by a V-2. However, his fate is a

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<sup>24</sup> Pynchon once characterized the veld as a place where “time and space on their side have no meaning, all is together” (153). Considering Slothrop’s shape after his *sparagmos*, this seems his most likely destination.



harbinger of the ultimate failure destined to be met by every other character searching for the Rocket. Despite Slothrop's heroic and theoretically "completed" quest for the A4, his absence at the end of the book precludes the others from successfully appropriating his system. *Gravity's Rainbow* ends on the cusp of an apocalypse: a satiric destruction (the V-2 is about to destroy everything and everyone in the book), which suggests that anarchy and confusion, motivated by paranoia, have subverted the possibility of discovery and comprehension of the Rocket. The "confusion and anarchy [that] reign over the world" mirrors the confusion and anarchy early scientists encountered in their first attempts to understand chaos and to contain it within classical scientific equations. Because the true nature of the Rocket, like Gleick's chaos theory, is impossible to decipher through unilateral means, those who study it exclusively through either the classical scientific or the mythological lens fall victim to the "confusion and anarchy [that] reign" at the end of the book.

The beginning of Part IV of *Gravity's Rainbow* finds Slothrop in a field in the Zone, wandering peacefully down to a nearby river to recover his harp,<sup>25</sup> which he has left soaking overnight. This moment signifies the onset of Slothrop's *sparagmos*, as "Slothrop, just suckin' on his harp, is closer to being a spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> Slothrop's harp is "the same one he lost in 1938 or -9 down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom" (623), a reference to an earlier section of the book, which adds another layer of intratextuality to this section.

medium than he's been yet, and he doesn't even know it" (Pynchon 622). The section is infused with references to the earth as mother and provider to all beings, and to the connectedness of all things, as if mirroring and foreshadowing Slothrop's connection to the Rocket:

There are harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers, wherever water moves. Like that Rilke prophesied:

And though Earthliness forget you,

To the stilled Earth say: I flow.

To the rushing water speak: I am.

It's still possible, even this far out, to find and make audible the spirits of lost harpmen. (622)

These interrelationships among Slothrop, his music -- in this scene representing his spiritual side -- the earth, and the spirit world, considering what is to come in this section, amplify the importance of the Rocket's mythological dimension and how Slothrop's relationship with the earth and the spiritual components of "the Wall" are necessary precursors to both his scattering and his absorption by the A4. In addition, the use of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* -- as much of Rilke's poetry, including the piece featured in this section, is concerned with natural communication in an age of alienation -- generates another layer of connection. The quoted portion of the poem, which Pynchon himself translated from the original, reflects Slothrop's communication with nature and with the natural/mythological aspects of the Rocket. Thus Slothrop's sense of and references to the

metaphysical in this episode, vague though they might be, help frame his growing relationship to the Rocket and foreshadow his *sparagmos*.

In unconscious anticipation of his scattering Slothrop is also becoming a part of the earth in a physical sense as well: “He’s letting his hair and beard grow ... he likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountain, getting to know shrikes and capercaillie, badgers and marmots” (623). Slothrop, whose relationship to the Rocket is the most profound in the text, recognizes the mythological aspects of the Rocket and their importance in understanding the A4. His gradual transition from the world of science to that of nature underscores that, while scientific knowledge of the Rocket is a necessary acquisition, its mythological and natural aspects carry greater weight.<sup>26</sup> He reflects on this comparison as he recalls his frenzied search across the Zone to discover more and more scientific facts about the Rocket: “Why does he have this obsession with getting papers? What th’ fuck are *papers* anyhow?” (623). Slothrop himself remarks on his transformation from society to nature: “He’s been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross<sup>27</sup> of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as

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<sup>26</sup> As I noted before, Pynchon renders this relative importance even more evident by the fact that while both the scientific and mythological systems fail in their individual attempts to understand and control the Rocket, the scientific systems fail visibly and satirically, while the mythological systems fail slowly and gracefully.

<sup>27</sup> The use of the albatross recalls Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which Coleridge uses the symbol of the albatross to represent a necessary if undesirable burden. Slothrop’s albatross is the burden of his last ties to the material world, namely “the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by ... America” (623).

picking his nose” (623), as if to make perfectly clear that he is becoming, albeit slowly, something different.

Slothrop himself, however, does not recognize the imminence of his own *sparagmos*, although he is aware of its eventual manifestation and actively attempts to predict its arrival. He realizes that, during the vigil he keeps for its approach,

Omens grow clearer, more specific. He watches flights of birds and patterns in the ashes of his fire, he reads the guts of trout he’s caught and cleaned, scraps of lost paper, graffiti on the broken walls where facing has been shot away to reveal brick underneath--broken in specific shapes that may also be read . . . (623)

Again, his preoccupation with elements of the occult -- omens, flights of birds, patterns in ashes, and the reading of trout innards -- reflects his recognition of the importance of the Rocket’s mythological component. However, until he discovers a certain graffiti mark, Slothrop does not realize the depth of his connection to the Rocket and his impending dispersal. One night, while wandering through the remains of a public bathroom and reading the graffiti written on the walls, he finds several references to the V-2. These initially disturb him, but soon “The brimming voices recede, the joke clarifies” (624), and he returns to his new state of quiet introspection. Nonetheless, just as “He felt brave and in control ... another message caught his eye” (624):

ROCKETMAN WAS HERE

His first thought was that he'd written it himself and forgot. Odd that that should've been his first thought, but it was. Might be he was starting to implicate himself, some yesterday version of himself, in the Combination against who he was right then. In its sluggish coma, the albatross stirred.

Past Slothrop[s], say averaging one a day, ten thousand of them, some more powerful than others, had been going over every sundown to the furious host. They were the fifth-columnists,<sup>28</sup> well inside his head, waiting for the moment to deliver him to the four other divisions outside, closing in . . . (624)

Slothrop's discovery of "ROCKETMAN WAS HERE" is the departure point of his journey into *sparagmos*. His "albatross stir[ring]" illustrates that his burden, the material world and America, is slowly lifting from his shoulders, and that soon he will be able to dissipate. As he breaks from this encumbrance, Slothrop establishes an even stronger connection with the mythical world through the realization that there are "Past Slothrop[s] ... well inside his head, waiting for the moment to deliver him to the four other divisions outside, closing in," a passage in which Pynchon again evokes a powerful metaphysical presence. The idea that he is only one of many "Slothrop[s]" -- all of whom, save himself, it seems, have already been delivered to "the four other dimensions outside" -- suggests a deep affiliation between the Rocket and the paranormal. There may be only one Rocketman in the book's current day and age; however, the idea of a Rocket and

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<sup>28</sup> Pynchon references fifth-columnists here, I believe, to introduce and reinforce the paranoia that occurs in Part IV, as fifth-columnists are usually those who attempt to undermine a larger, often governmental, organization they are expected to remain loyal to.

of a Rocketman is not merely a novelty but rather evinces the atmosphere of an ancient and powerful myth.

In response to his discovery, Slothrop begins repetitively drawing a symbol on the walls, and “Only after he’d left it half a dozen more places did it dawn on him that *what he was really drawing was the A4 rocket*, seen from below” (624). This action underscores his profound, inherent involvement with the Rocket. Obsessively drawing the A4, without even realizing the image’s significance, demonstrates Slothrop’s intrinsic relationship to the Rocket, and his *sparagmos* commences soon after:

The sand-colored churchtops rear up on Slothrop’s horizons, apses out to four sides like rocket fins guiding the streamlined spires... chiseled in the sandstone he finds waiting the mark of consecration, a cross in a circle. At last, lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, at the edge of one of the ancient Plague towns he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection .... (624-25)

Slothrop’s imagery of churches as Rockets compares his bond to the Rocket to religious devotion. His transformation into “a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection” likens him both to a sacrificial Christ-figure -- sacrificed to the earth and the Rocket -- and to the Rocket physically, as now he resembles the drawing of the A4 he previously sketched on the walls. His becoming an intersection (as a place where ideas meet) also mirrors the combinatorial nature of the Rocket as both scientific and mythological. Furthermore, that Slothrop takes on the features

of “a living intersection” places him in the mysterious veld: not quite human, but rather a living representation of the Rocket.

Slothrop completes his *sparagmos* later that day, in the last passage in which he tangibly appears. This section includes several mythological components: it refers to Slothrop as “becoming” something (presumably no longer fully human), reveals his connection to nature and thus the Rocket, and presents the classical father sky/mother earth myth to recall Slothrop’s Rocket-induced erections:

. . . and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became  
a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall,  
Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout  
rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into  
Earth, green wet valley Earth, and his chest fills and  
he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling  
natural . . . (626)

And thus he scatters into the veld.

CONCLUSION  
DESCENT INTO GRAVITY

“Paranoids are not paranoids because they’re paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations.”

-Proverbs for Paranoids V (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 292)

In this project, I have attempted to document and interpret three systems of order and control that I consider crucial for an analytical understanding of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the Rocket’s role in it. The response of the scientific community to the Rocket reveals the limitations of a dogmatic, enclosed system, while the adherents of the mythological system demonstrate how unquestioning devotion and compliance can dead-end in a dangerous and blind adoration. Only Tyrone Slothrop’s system -- one that lacks decisive order and those qualities normally associated with control -- approaches an understanding of the Rocket that, while not wholly comprehensive, allows for a multitude of the complexities and contradictions the Rocket embodies. Like Slothrop’s system, my method of studying the text does not attempt to achieve a full understanding of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Because of its postmodern and encyclopedic nature, the text defies comprehensive analysis; my study attempts only to offer one technique of explanation, without excluding or dominating others.

The first two systems I discuss reveal how a limited, narrow approach cannot lead to a true comprehension of the mystery of existence and the



relationships between objects and beings. Both the scientific and mythological systems Pynchon describes lack the ability to synthesize and integrate a wide array of information and techniques. As a result, both fail -- the scientific system by studying the Rocket through exclusively empirical methods, and the mythological system by relying solely on supernatural theories to explain the Rocket's existence. Slothrop's method, on the other hand, is a nondiscriminatory, imaginative and curious quest that aims at understanding the relationship between the Rocket and human experience and existence without confining its discoveries to preset borders. Inasmuch as these three systems are present in the text, their diversity also reflects the complexity and encyclopedic nature of postmodern writing, its endeavor to experiment with new techniques of verse and prose, and its incorporation of an expansive array of literary and nonliterary references. Slothrop's system, in particular, acts as a postmodern emblem that aims at an interdisciplinary understanding of larger theories and issues in the human experience.

I relied primarily on Kuhn, Bakhtin and Gleick in my research both to expand and complement my own understanding of these systems, and to mirror the encyclopedic, postmodern approach Pynchon takes to his own text. All three of these scholars argue, in some form, for the extensive and interdisciplinary study of some aspect of human existence. Kuhn's discussion of the failure of narrow scientific paradigms mirrors the argument I develop concerning the

scientific system's method of study; Bakhtin's integration of religion, the underworld and literature enabled me to situate the Hereros' worship of the Rocket in a larger context; and Gleick's theory on the unity of science and nature highlights Slothrop's process of analyzing the Rocket and the larger theories purported in the text. I believe that these arguments strengthen my position on Pynchon's writing and my documentation and interpretation of the three systems. Wernher von Braun's quote that Pynchon chose to open Part I seems to accent and support this hypothesis, in addition to the more specific theme in the text of the connection between science and nature: "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" (Pynchon 1).

Slothrop's relative success is, I believe, one of the most important aspects of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The implied author appears to shun simplified, dictatorial, and inflexible interpretation and understanding; thus, the failure of the mythological and scientific systems. Slothrop, however, is able to embrace a "system" that mirrors Gleick's system for understanding chaos: allowing theories of nature and science to intermix and, to some extent, fuse, in order to see their similarities and points of intersection. Again, we are reminded of Slothrop's transformation into a crossroad on the day of his *sparagmos*: a literal meeting place between myth and technology. Slothrop's enlightenment regarding his

existence and his relationship with the Rocket is the most all-encompassing, comprehensive illumination in the text. As a result, he is able to undergo his *sparagmos*, which not only allows him to escape the Rocket's destructive force, but delivers him into an area deeply involved with the interaction and connection between science and nature: the veld.

In order to fully understand Slothrop's *sparagmos* and its larger significance in the text, we must explore the literal definitions of the "veld" and Pynchon's appropriation of the term. Primarily, "veld," a word of Dutch and Afrikaner origin, refers to the large rural areas, particularly the grasslands, of South Africa. It also has a low Germanic meaning -- field -- and in that context connotes a place neglected by humans and currently overgrown or feral. In addition, the term also carries militaristic undertones in both English and Afrikaner, an association less prevalent in contemporary society, but appropriate to the role of World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

These denotations and connotations help explain Pynchon's use of the term in the text to refer to an unearthly realm of possible salvation. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the veld signifies a mythical or supernatural region. Pynchon's choice of a term with Afrikaner roots further suggests a connection to the Herero society and their mythological practices. The notion that the veld exists somewhere untouched by humanity lends an air of mystery to the region as well and suggests

an Eden like aura: an atmosphere of an unspoiled, or natural, paradise. Pynchon's characterizing the veld as an unmarked region, relatively untouched by humanity, implies that the Rocket and its associated dangers are absent from this area, and that Slothrop, safe from the threats of his former existence, will learn here how to achieve and maintain a type of peace.

The significance of Slothrop's transition into the veld partially hinges on our recognition of the veld as a place that offers the possibility of alternate outcomes: a place where science and mythology meet and converge to develop a fuller understanding of the Rocket and its place in society. The veld is directly referred to as somewhere where "time and space on their side have no meaning, all is together" (153), and is often eluded to as a place from which the dead come to speak to the living, and where nature and science not only coexist but intertwine. In this sense, the veld represents a world wholly different from the "real" world presented in the book, but one that is nevertheless intimately connected to the text's reality. The inclusion of what appears to be an alternate reality suggests the possibility for an alternate future; hence, Pynchon's designation of the veld as "a City of the Future" (674). Slothrop's arrival in the veld heralds its increasing significance and prominence in the text, as Pynchon presents Slothrop's encounters in and reactions to this alternative universe.

In the veld, Slothrop transcends his former reality and enters a region where he becomes an idea, a representation of the possibility of hope for human existence. The Rocket does not exist in the veld as it does in the rest of the text -- as a harbinger of doomsday -- and thus, Slothrop and those with him are safe from its danger. Slothrop's earlier exploration of the Rocket embodies this hope, demonstrated by his ability to remain open to alternative interpretations of the Rocket and his connection to it. The veld allows Slothrop the safety and space in which to examine a possible existence without the Rocket; through the veld and his interaction with it Pynchon explores the feasibility of reform. Slothrop, who has continually allowed himself to consider and analyze any and all information he discovers concerning the Rocket, regardless of how seemingly unimportant, embodies the most complete and open, and therefore hopeful, understanding of the Rocket in the book. Molly Hite, in her book *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, identifies this optimism as the presence of hope:

By yielding to the lure of totality and "passing over" recalcitrant elements that refuse to conform to the novel's parody of an overarching structural metaphor, such a reader unwittingly aligns himself with the Calvinist God, who damns the preterite aspects of his creation. But the text claims that preterition can be a kind of grace. As Slothrop's heretical ancestor William, suggested, the things that do not fit may be the most important because they bear witness to the inability of the providential schema to account for everything (p. 555). The Hereros express this inversion with what Enzian calls "a mantra for times that threaten to be

bad....Mba-kayere. It means ‘I am passed over’” (p. 362). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* to be passed over is a condition for survival and thus a basis for hope. (Hite 129)

Hite’s identification of the dangers of “passing over” the “recalcitrant elements that refuse to conform” mirrors the danger that the first two systems encounter in their disregard of aspects of the Rocket that do not conform to their respective systems. These abnormalities, much like the “preterite aspects of his creation” Hite refers to, are critical components of the Rocket because they reflect its ability to transcend any limited, narrow explanation. Slothrop not only recognizes and respects the importance of these eccentricities, he understands that cataloguing them under restrictive classifications is both impossible and dangerous -- in order to truly embrace the Rocket, he knows he must devise a system that can accept its multifaceted nature, including those elements he can neither explain nor understand. This acceptance of the Rocket in all its complexity allows him to undergo his *sparagmos*, which passes him over into the veld and provides “a basis for hope.”

Slothrop’s *sparagmos*, although an indication of the failure that may befall the rest of the characters in the book -- as I discussed in chapter three -- is a positive development for him as it ultimately removes him from the Rocket’s harm. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, describes four elements of the

quest-myth,<sup>29</sup> the fourth being “the reappearance and recognition of the hero.” He further expands on this rebirth as one of the “four aspects of a central unifying myth ... recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero” (192). The third aspect of the central unifying myth, as I explore in chapter three, is Slothrop’s act of *sparagmos*; the fourth, consequently, corresponds to his emergence in the veld. His “rebirth” within the veld gives him the opportunity to rescue society from its current descent into doom and therefore possibly “[rise] in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero.” In addition, Slothrop’s reappearance reminds us of the rebirth Bakhtin speaks of in *Rabelais and his World*: “Death is the necessary link in the process of the people’s growth and renewal. It is the ‘other side’ of birth” (407). In order for the larger society in the book to maintain hope for growth and renewal -- into a society released from threat of the Rocket -- Slothrop must “die” on earth and be “reborn” in the veld.

Our and Slothrop’s first encounter with the mysterious veld is not a wholly negative one: “Unexpectedly, this country is pleasant, yes, once inside it, quite pleasant after all” (Pynchon 674).<sup>30</sup> Moments such as these, where Pynchon

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<sup>29</sup> In chapter three, I briefly explain how *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be seen as a quest-myth since every character is, to some extent, searching for the Rocket and how to control it.

<sup>30</sup> While in the veld, Slothrop contends with certain personal issues -- such as “a villain here, serious as death” (674). While the veld offers him a chance to help redeem humanity, it is not an perfect Eden wherein he can abandon his quest.

comments on the atmosphere and setting of the region, emphasize that Slothrop has arrived in an area separate from and more peaceful than earth but still connected to it. While the veld offers an escape from the Rocket and impending doom, however, it does not offer lazy freedom; rather, it suggests the possibility of an alternate future. Throughout the struggle Slothrop undertakes to reap the benefits of the veld, his most pressing quest is to “go and find the Radiant Hour” (674). This “Radiant Hour” occupies a space in the veld as well, and its name suggests the time that the characters in the book have lost: a time of brightness and great joy that, like the veld, offers the possibility of hope and escape from the Rocket. The text’s population, because it chose to develop and launch the Rocket and then analyze it into narrow paradigms, has initially missed the Radiant Hour, when the Rocket existed only as an idea and not a tangible danger. The Radiant Hour thus suggests a time when the Rocket can coexist peacefully with its entourage, and perhaps even a time when each character can understand and accept the Rocket’s complexity without having to control it as well.

Slothrop’s search for the Radiant Hour is surreal and abstract, as he literally dances around in unearthly regions:

Onward to rescue the Radiant Hour, which has been abstracted from the day’s 24 by colleagues of the



Father, for sinister reasons of their own.<sup>31</sup> Travel here gets complicated--a system of buildings that move, by right angles, along the grooves of the Raketten-Stadt's street grid. You can also raise or lower the building itself, a dozen floors per second, to desired heights or levels underground, like a submarine skipper with his periscope--although certain paths aren't available to you. They are available to others, but not to you. Chess. Your objective is not the King--there is no King--but momentary targets such as the Radiant Hour. (674)

Categorizing the Radiant Hour as “abstracted from the day’s 24” separates it from reality and places it in a more intangible arena. In addition, the descriptions of travel and exploration within this area confirm the veld as an unearthly place where fantastical things can happen. More specifically, while he is in the veld Slothrop is able to distort the traditional laws of science and physics and indulge in a more creative, intuitive method of study and questioning. Through this type of investigation, he can escape the boundaries of classical science, demonstrating again how the limits of its paradigms do not allow for a complete understanding of the Rocket -- or, in this case, the veld itself.

While the first few sentences of this extract provide some details of the physics of this region and a partial explanation of the Radiant Hour, the last section of this passage provides the most important information concerning the veld and crucial details are revealed regarding the scope of Slothrop’s

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<sup>31</sup> These colleagues of the Father remind the reader of a Big Brother figure, much like the Rocket itself, who controls the output and acquisition of information.

investigation within the veld and its corresponding role in his connection to the Rocket. Pynchon likens Slothrop's search to "Chess," and declares that "Your objective is not the King--there is no King--but momentary targets such as the Radiant Hour." If we believe that Slothrop's exploration of the veld is akin to a game of Chess, then the "King" would logically be the Rocket itself -- the "ruler" of the real world and the players within, and also the reason the veld exists in the first place.<sup>32</sup> Is Pynchon suggesting that there has been no Rocket all along, that the only goal has been to avoid the societal destruction that paranoia can bring -- the objective being the Radiant Hour, which offers an escape from annihilation -- and that each elaborate system has been completely in vain?

Not quite. The King, the Rocket, does exist, but only as a fantastical being of monstrous abstraction. Once again, we return to the failure of the first two systems. By treating the Rocket as a god that can be understood and ultimately managed, adherents of these systems fail to discern its complex nature and the true root of its power: their own fear and devotion. Slothrop -- whose fear of the Rocket does not extend to worship, and who eventually moves beyond his fear to return peacefully to nature -- sees past the Rocket's immediate influence and recognizes the importance instead of establishing inner and exterior peace.

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<sup>32</sup> If, for instance, the Rocket had not existed, no veld would have been necessary to offer a future separated from it.

Slothrop enters the veld with the charge of finding the Radiant Hour, not of stopping and destroying the Rocket. If he had been given the mission of eradicating the 00000, the possibility of another rocket rising to power would still very much exist. Although the Radiant Hour does not guarantee that humanity will never again create an implement of destruction, it suggests a positive state of existence, rather than the current negative state minus just one Rocket.

Slothrop's success in understanding the Rocket's complexity rests in his ability to see the Rocket as not a mythological or mechanical god figure, but as an object existing within the confines of its own rules, to be curious about, but not to fear. This realization allows him to transcend his human body and enter the veld, safe from the Rocket's harm, and from there begin his search for the Radiant Hour. The Radiant Hour represents hope for Slothrop and for the rest of humanity as well: in accordance with the fourth aspect of Frye's quest-myth, Slothrop now has the potential to incite a "newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero" (although, by the end of the text, he does not). *Gravity's Rainbow*, while apocalyptic in many ways, thus also offers hope for humanity in the form of a complex comprehension of existence that incorporates both scientific and metaphysical explorations.

Slothrop's search through the veld is not an easy one, however; nor does it guarantee success for the remaining characters in the book. In fact, the group of

quasi-superheroes he gathers about him in his quest for the Radiant Hour is only slightly comically dubbed “the Floundering Four,” each member of which “is, in fact, gifted while at the same time flawed by his gift--unfit by it for human living” (Pynchon 675). Their gifts, extraordinary and supernatural -- performing miracles, maintaining a natural sense of a larger cosmic rhythm, exquisite and unnaturally powerful 19th century brainwork -- alienate them from earthly existence: hence their unearthly existence in the veld. Furthermore, their approach to finding the Radiant Hour mirrors Slothrop’s own system, which lacks decisiveness and structure: “There’s no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really *made*--at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-around assholery” (676).

Despite all this, the presence of hope prevails, as “Slothrop now observes his coalition with hopes for success and hopes for disaster about equally high (and no, that *doesn't* cancel out to apathy--it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives)” (676). Here, Pynchon urges us to remember that success in the veld must be sought actively, as humanity cannot find salvation from the threat of the Rocket through chance or indolence. As was always the case with Slothrop’s system, the risk of remaining interdisciplinary and refusing to conform to standard practices and paradigms is the failure of finding peace; however, the definite failure that occurs when one does conform to standard practices and paradigms is well worth the uncertainty of a more unstructured

system. To dissuade his readers from falling prey to a limited and restrictive understanding of the Rocket, as most of *Gravity's Rainbow's* characters do, and from condemning the dangers of Slothrop's search as not worth the risk, Pynchon reminds us that

Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as “the glozing neuters of the world” have no easy road to haul down, Wear-The-Pantsers, just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When's the last time you felt *intensely lukewarm*? eh? Glozing neuters are just as human as heroes and villains. In many ways they have the most grief to put up with, don't they? (677)

While there is, in this passage, obvious overstatement and modest satire, there is also a good deal of truth. Throughout the entire text, the implied author has insinuated that the more receptive and analytically objective one can remain, the more accurately and thoroughly one will comprehend existence and the human experience. The idea that “Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows” strengthens the validity of Slothrop's system and the notion that, while it may not guarantee salvation, this more flexible approach presents a road that could lead there.

Are Slothrop and the Floundering Four able to follow this yellow brick road all the way to Emerald City and find the Radiant Hour? Myrtle Miraculous, one of the Four, does chastise at one moment, “That Radiant Hour's probably

light-years away by now” (678), suggesting that they, like the rest of humanity, have missed their chance. The text itself, after briefly recounting Slothrop’s adventures in the veld, does shatter and disintegrate as its form structurally thins and fractures, dividing into more and more confusing, vignette-like episodes. The scientific community even refers to Slothrop’s future as containing “no clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm” (738), as if to demean his entire existence and highlight their perception of his failure. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, moreover, ends with the Rocket descending onto our heads -- as the audience in the Orpheus Theatre -- with the apocalyptic last line, “Now, everybody--” (760), moments before our supposed total annihilation.

However, Slothrop’s curious absence from the theatre provokes the thought that hope may still exist. If the end of the book indeed signifies humanity’s doom, Slothrop, as a member of humanity, would need to be included in the group in and around the Theatre. Instead, unlike the rest of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s characters, whom Pynchon has deliberately brought together to have the Rocket detonate on their heads, Slothrop remains absent. His survival is not definite -- even Pynchon admits that “Slothrop’s fate is not so clear” (688) -- but he is not numbered among the soon-to-be-dead at the book’s conclusion.

Slothrop, instead, survives -- in one form or another. One of his last utterances champions the possibility of a relatively calm, Rocket-free world: “*We* can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld--” (699). This somewhat

loopy exaggeration nonetheless demonstrates his persistent belief in and search for this world. Unlike the scientific community, which dismisses his entire existence on page 738, Slothrop is not willing to interpret chaos as failure; instead he embraces chaos as just another pattern he cannot understand. By doing so, he is able not only to survive, but become an essence of chaos himself, a transformation which saves him from the Rocket and allows Pynchon to comment how others “gave up long ago on trying to hold him together, even as a concept” (740) as they submit themselves in defeat beneath the chaotic nature of the Rocket, relinquishing their own hope for survival.

Pynchon never offers a definite indication of whether or not Slothrop’s survival is wholly successful. I believe this reflects his refusal to endorse complete, enclosed answers of any kind -- hence, the failings of the mythological and scientific systems. Slothrop’s relative success hinges on his ability to remain open to all interpretations and embrace the “recalcitrant elements” of existence. Suggesting that Slothrop’s quest is complete, and that he may now live in peace would directly oppose the interdisciplinary, limitless methods of investigation that Pynchon has endorsed throughout. The idea that existence itself is chaotic and fluid suggests the existence of a myriad of possibilities and endings for Slothrop, with no one outcome as definite. The strongest impression of hope Pynchon leaves us with is that Slothrop simply survives, and that while the rest may have perished, somewhere in the Zone, one soul still remains:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
Though thy Glass today be run,  
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
Find the last poor Pret'rite one...  
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,  
All through our cripl'd Zone,  
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,  
And a Soul in ev'ry Stone.... (760)



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