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# Slothrop's Sublime: Perversion and Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow

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SLOTHROP'S SUBLIME: PERVERSION AND PARANOIA IN *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

by

CHRISTOPHER SIMONY

Under the Direction of Dr. Christopher Kocela

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the protagonist of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop, seeks subjective fixity in the historical and postmodern sublime. Using an approach that draws upon the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Žižek, the essay argues that while Slothrop indulges his own paranoia and commits acts of increasing perversion to assert self, these attempts actually blur the lines of identity instead of presenting an autonomous being.

INDEX WORDS: Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Paranoia, Perversion, Sublime

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CHRISTOPHER SIMONY

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May 2012

Dedication

*To Dayle Brown, who taught me to read.*

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past thirty years, critical theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard have put forth notions of the aesthetic sublime that build upon a tradition popularized by Kant and Burke and have antecedents in classical Greek philosophy. The Romantic sublime posits a relationship of failed perception in which the quantity, magnitude, or greatness of an object overwhelms the intellect of the observer. Recast by some theorists of postmodernism, the sublime becomes symptomatic of contemporary society, a medium to describe the centrifugal spin and fragmentation engendered by pop culture and capitalism. In such a schema, our society becomes more global and less personal, our governing bodies and financial institutions become more powerful and less accountable, and our sense of history – especially of our contextual place *in* it – becomes negligible.

Since the publication of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, critics have spent a wealth of words documenting how the postmodern sublime relates to Pynchon's work. In *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*, Deborah L. Madsen discusses Pynchon's work as representing a failed search for "ontological certainty," an endeavor stalled by Pynchon's portrayal of reality in "different irreconcilable directions" (24, 133). Similarly, in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, Andrew Gibson identifies the frequently flummoxing voice of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a narrative gadfly, intent on remaining elusive, rarely willing to allow the reader a sense of surety – even regarding the ethos of the narrator (149). In his article "Postmodern/Post-Secular," John A. McClure argues that in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon attempts to maintain a position

postmodern in its seeming untenability – to “explore certain non-secular constructions of reality while repudiating others as forms of repression and control [while] insisting on the inevitable partiality of all [constructions of reality]” (153).

These and other accounts of the ontological wobble present in Pynchon’s fiction evince the author’s tendency to couch his narratives amidst philosophically postmodern identifiers. Many of Pynchon’s critics have, however, too many times overlooked how the Romantic sublime applies to the same *oeuvre*. Similarly, when scholars demonstrate the applicability of the postmodern sublime to Pynchon’s work, they routinely fail to acknowledge the antecedents in the aesthetic theory of Burke and Kant. In this paper, I intend to demonstrate not only how the Romantic-era sublime figures into Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but also how the postmodern sublime analysis of the novel owes a significant debt to the philosophy of the Romantic sublime. By neglecting the sublime as a philosophical idea that has developed over centuries, critics of *Gravity’s Rainbow* have limited their readings of the novel.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon conjures multifarious images of the sublime: the awesome destructiveness of the V-2 rocket, the obscure and paranormal proceedings of the White Visitation, the infinite sprawl of the Zone. Nowhere in the text, however, does Pynchon better represent the sublime than through the (anti)hero, Tyrone Slothrop. This principal character experiences the sublime as solvent – a destabilizing force that compromises his subjectivity – and he spends the length of the novel fighting against its destabilizing effects. Slothrop’s gradual dissolution – his unspooling of self – occurs only as he (unsuccessfully) seeks fixity against the ambiguity of the sublime in paranoia and non-

normative sexual experiences. I will illustrate Slothrop's disintegration by plotting the connections between his escalating awareness of the sublime and his increasingly fragmented sense of self. While focusing on three crucial sequences in *Gravity's Rainbow* (Slothrop's adoption of the alias "*der Raketemensch*," his participation in the massive orgy upon the ferry *Anubis*, and his ultimate disappearance in "the Zone"), I will appeal to postmodern theories of the sublime via Jameson (who associates the concept with "impotence," "fragmentation," and "the unrepresentable") and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as the aesthetic theories of Kant and Burke.

Little conversation surrounding the sublime (of any variety) in *Gravity's Rainbow* occurred until over a decade after the publication of the novel. Many of the novel's earliest critics wrangled with its plot intricacies, hunted for the provenance of its myriad allusions, or studied it as the fulfillment of literary promises made in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. A number of critics observed that the main character of *Gravity's Rainbow* (if one can be identified), Tyrone Slothrop, has darkly Romantic qualities (*a la* Byron's Don Juan); however, few academics were willing to connect the novel to the Romantic sublime. Only after the first publications of Lyotard's and Jameson's theories on the postmodern sublime did the novel become the focus of this specialized discussion. The postmodern sublime has more to do with liminality and indeterminacy than with aesthetics and awe (of the Kantian and Burkean sublime).

Because of its relative novelty and its obvious relationship to contemporary culture, the postmodern sublime has been a popular lens through which to view Pynchon's work, but I will demonstrate that no single, historically-bound concept of the sublime is adequate

for a reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although a mountain of scholarship insightfully addresses the relationship of the sublime to this great novel, none explains how the novel's characters react to the destabilizing effects of the sublime. I will not only demonstrate the symptoms of the sublime (postmodern *and* Romantic) but also highlight the steps taken by which the novel's characters attempt to escape those symptoms. I will argue that the paranoia experienced by *Gravity's Rainbow's* characters is actually a reflection of the postmodern sublime. If postmodernism is, as Jameson claims, a "series of pure and unrelated presents" marked by "faulty representations of some immense [...] network" (27,37), then paranoia – as an attempt to establish connections – becomes a potentially powerful strategy to preserve oneself from the madness of postmodern fragmentation. Perversity and paranoia are the means by which these characters stake definite positions in a constantly unsettled system.

The first article that comments at length about paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow* appeared in 1975, just two years after the novel's publication. Scott Sanders' "Pynchon's Paranoid History" primarily attempts to account for Slothrop's paranoia, and the article provides a survey of Slothrop's anxieties without discussing their *purpose*. Sanders instead discusses the long shadow of Slothrop's Puritan heritage, the general fear associated with life during wartime, and the possibilities of actual conspiracies occurring around the characters. Sanders, ironically, claims that the greatest paranoia for Pynchon's characters is "not being trapped in a conspiracy at all," which suggests to me that paranoia provides the characters with a source of stability (187). In an article published three years later, Tony Tanner disagrees. In "Paranoia, Energy, and Displacement," he argues that the sense

of paranoia results in the “deterioration of meaning [and] an extreme dissolution of the individual” (145). Tanner doesn’t mention Sanders’ article directly, but his argument – that paranoia ultimately corrodes the self – stands in polar opposition to the idea of paranoia as a stabilizer.

Queer theorist/Freudian Leo Bersani weighs in on the paranoia debate in 1989 with his article “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature,” providing a tacit – and probably unintentional – connection between paranoia and the sublime. Like many critics, he notes that Slothrop is both the focus of the novel’s conspiratorial plots and the generator of empty conspiratorial suspicions. By allowing Slothrop to be both target and weapon, Bersani claims that Pynchon is providing a Freudian Oedipal model, one of lack of self-knowledge, of “unreadability” (118). Similarly, Molly Hite’s more recent article concerning “Herbert Marcuse, the Yippies, and the Value System of *Gravity’s Rainbow*” discusses the Oedipal subversion of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and how ambiguous morality at play in the novel contributes to the postmodern sublime – a liminality, an unnavigable grayness. In a similar spirit, George Levine’s essay “Risking the Moment” conjures Pynchon’s often-discussed theme, entropy: the movement away from order into chaos. This notion, too, contains the seeds of the postmodern sublime.

Mark Richard Siegel’s book *Creative Paranoia*, discusses all elements of paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, from the V-2 terror/paranoia of the novel’s first quarter to the wilder and more abstract suspicions held by Slothrop, Pirate Prentice, and Roger Mexico late in the novel. Siegel’s book stands out for examining paranoia on each opposing side of the novel, for in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, paranoia curses not only the “good guys.” Siegel’s book

demonstrates how operatives of Them are just as likely as the novel's heroes to experience the terror of the sublime. As such, Siegel shows how suspicion breeds in Slothrop and Pirate Prentice, but also illustrates the paranoid tendencies of Blicero and Pökler. Perhaps the most thorough reading of paranoia in the novel, however, comes from Thomas Moore in his 1987 book-length study of *Gravity's Rainbow, The Style of Connectedness*. Moore chronicles characters' disparate paranoias as distrustful reactions to technology, government, religion, human relationships, art, and history, ultimately revealing – he claims – the narrator's sympathetic humanism.

Philip Kuberski identified himself as an early proponent of the sublime in the novel in his 1986 essay "Gravity's Angel: The Ideology of Pynchon's Fiction." In this piece, Kuberski portrays Slothrop as an embodiment of the postmodern sublime and a "signal [of] ambivalence" (143) ignorant and innocent, fumbling through Europe unable to gain his bearings. Similarly, John A. McClure, in "Postmodern/Post-Secular," argues that all of Pynchon's fiction – not just *Gravity's Rainbow* – exhibits a tendency to decenter constructs or institutions that provide culture with stability: the church, the government, the family, the self. Though McClure does not make an explicit connection between his ideas and Lyotard's, this decentering has much in common with Lyotard's conception of the sublime – the state of being unmoored and unknowing.

The first examination of the Pynchonian sublime appears to have occurred in 1989 with the publication of Marc W. Redfield's "Pynchon's Postmodern Sublime," in which the author simply attempts to map Fredric Jameson's philosophy of the postmodern sublime

on to Pynchon's work. In this article, Redfield discusses Jameson's idea of the sublime as "misrepresentation," a theme that lends itself to the rampant paranoia of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Pynchon's greatest works persist in defining the unbalanced post-World War II *milieu*. Almost four decades have passed since the 1973 publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, an event that coincided with the primitive percolations of the Information Age. And although the novel portrays the era of the 1940s, the (inter)actions of Pynchon's characters anticipate our post-millennial world, which features the constitutive elements identified by Jameson, Lyotard, and other postmodern theorists: the untenability of an objective truth or ethics; the loss of personal identity in a global, capitalistic economy; the pervasive suspicion and fear of cryptocracies, not as possibility, but reality. Amidst these elements, Slothrop's unpredictable shifts – both those he suffers and those he foments – reveal the symptoms of postmodern culture. Instead of being envaginated by the wartime paranoia, Slothrop adopts the phallic identifier "*der Raketemensch*," as he plunges into the purgatorial "Zone"; once in the void, instead of sacrificing his identity – which in Slothrop's case depends upon libidinal expression – he asserts his sexual primacy in the Anubis ferry orgy. Still, none of his sexually-driven attempts to retain personhood can combat the monolithic, all-consuming sublime of World War II Europe. It is in Slothrop's failure that we recognize problems specifically determined by postmodern philosophy: how do individual people retain identity in the face of massive, interlocking political-corporate structures?

The work of scholars concerned with the postmodern sublime describes a Pynchonian world without referring directly to Pynchon's fiction; indeed, the fractured world diagnosed by Jamesonian and Lyotardian theories of the aesthetic and cultural

sublime neatly mirrors the setting of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Theorists and writers of fiction alike, the postmodernists remind us that we live in a period of almost apocalyptic uncertainty. In 1973, Pynchon prognosticated the same uncertainty by looking backwards into the terror of World War II. What he found there – the notion that “our history is the aggregate of last moments” (*Gravity's* 148) – continues to inform our culture, fraught with ambiguity, haunted by the Sublime.

## 2. The Sublime

When Burke and Kant set out to codify the sublime over two hundred years ago, their treatises extended far beyond the millennia-old ideas of Greek rhetorician Longinus, whose sole extant text, *Of the Sublime*, provides instructions for rhetorical greatness. Compared with this ancient and slim treatise on the literary sublime, the two eighteenth-century philosophers' works wrangled with a much wider set of questions, addressing the literary while speaking to the more generally ontological and epistemological. In the prime years of the Enlightenment, as religion became a target of increasing skepticism, the resurrection of the sublime as a Romantic construct was perhaps inevitable. In his study *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel frames the renewed concept as “an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation [...] was failing to be exercised or understood” (4). Whereas Longinus dealt only with beautiful oratory and sublime speech, Burke and Kant wished to explain the total human experience of the beautiful and the sublime.

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* begins with a claim that influences most future conceptions of the sublime. He argues that the sublime feeling emerges from a state of seeming paradox, and he adduces the emotion of grief as an example. Burke contends that the "passion" of grief occurs when something becomes "so totally lost that there is no chance of enjoying it again" (84). Curiously, the grieving sufferer seeks not to put the lost object out of mind, but instead to "keep its object perpetually in its eye" (84), and reap enjoyment from recalling an irretrievable loss. Burke builds upon his dissection of grief as the foundation of his entire system of the sublime, extending his theory to anything that "excites the ideas of pain, and danger" (86).

According to the *Philosophical Enquiry*, the sublime feeling summons ideas of danger and pain without actually endangering or injuring the experiencer, demonstrating the defining factor of the sublime – terror without the possibility of actual annihilation. The emotional response to the contradictory sense registers as a type of horrible pleasure, a pleasing pain, a thrill based in the recognition that one's being *could* indeed be cancelled, but *will* not be.

Burke envisions the horrible pleasure of the sublime as occurring when a subject confronts objects that challenge the subject's notions of obscurity, greatness, and infinity. Burke argues that much of our fear abates "when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it" (102); it is only when we lack a clear idea of what threatens us that we are truly touched by terror. (To this end, any hidden sight or muffled sound could generate the sublime feeling.) Burke's understanding of greatness and infinity as touching the sublime stands upon his argument on obscurity. Though infinity, he writes, "fill[s] the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and

truest test of the sublime” (115), any object of immeasurable magnitude produces a similar effect, by virtue of the human eye’s inability to distinguish the limits of what it observes. It follows, then, that while the darkened corridors, disembodied howls, and mist-cloaked castles of gothic novels, and the verdant vistas and cloud-wreathed mountain peaks of Romanic poetry, both conjure the sublime feeling, so does the pondering of ideas of truth and God – ideas either limitless or with unclear limits.

When Immanuel Kant wrote his “Analytic of the Sublime” several decades later, he drew upon many of Burke’s categories and descriptions of the sublime, but made one significant deviation. Whereas Burke claimed that the source of the sublime was external to perception, Kant contended that the true sublime existed within the perceivers themselves. Kant agrees with Burke that the sublime feeling occurs when “the mind is not just attracted by the [sublime] object but is alternately always repelled as well,” producing what he deems a “negative pleasure” (98); but this “negative pleasure” does not exist external to the mind. Kant insists that “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts [a] natural attunement” (113). Whether mathematical or dynamic, the Kantian sublime occurs when the mind apprehends without comprehending.

Kant posits two forces of understanding: imagination and reason. Kantian imagination is closely connected to the senses. We might define the term “imagination” as “the process of creating a sensory image.” Imagination fails, however, when the mind confronts an object, concept, or force that exists beyond our ability to conceive of that thing in its entirety. In such a case, Kant holds that a sublime feeling arises, precipitated by a

violence done to the imagination as it fails to grasp that which it beholds. Where the imagination can no longer operate – it apprehends without comprehending – then reason must take over, and in this supplanting of imagination by reason, the sublime feeling emerges. In Kant’s schema, the inherent inadequacies of the senses actually provide a boon of sorts by *forcing* a reliance on reason, and “prov[ing] that the mind” has a power surpassing any standard of sense” (106). In essence, the sublime feeling arises when we theorize something for which total representation is impossible. The sublime lies in the mind’s triumph in dealing with this seeming impasse.

As the vein of Burke’s and Kant’s ideas on the sublime continue into (what many theorists identify as) postmodernity, we watch the accompanying discussion and application expand, much like it did between the time of Longinus and the eighteenth century. Whereas the field was once limited to rhetoric and aesthetics, the topic of the sublime has now broadened to encompass ethics, politics, psychology, science, and innumerable other areas. In his seminal book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek explains that the sublime feeling is one of “pleasure procured by displeasure itself” (229), an event that he deems identical with *jouissance*, a crucial concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis (and a concept that I shall revisit in the following sections). Žižek goes on to explain the Kantian sublime as arising from that which is “unrepresentable” (230). Here, Žižek implicitly links the “unreadability” of Jameson’s sublime – a culture so fragmented that we cannot make meaningful connections with or within it – and Lacan’s Real – what Žižek calls the “insupportable [,] impossible kernel” of reality (45).

Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson have provided two of the most systematic and complete approaches to the contemporary sublime. Lyotard posits the idea of the *differend*, the point of mutual unintelligibility between two conflicting forces, as the “heart of sublime feeling” (*Lessons* 123). Relying on Kant’s reading of the sublime, Lyotard develops the sentiment to contain everything that frustrates the mind’s abilities to create knowledge out of experience. Lyotard’s sublime, no less a combination of pleasure and pain than is Kant’s, occupies the *differend* particularly in relation to language and knowledge (and because culture in the modern world becomes more fragmented and specialized, we have more frequent opportunities for miscommunication). The sublime of language manifests when we experience the stifling inability to translate thoughts into words, especially when some crucial expression must be made. The *differend* occurs because the subject reaches a wall (or a gap) between thought and expression that makes communication impossible. Sublimely pleasurable pain arises in these instances, as well, when the subject experiences the excruciation of aphasia combined with the deep (ethical) satisfaction that accompanies the possession of an idea burning to be expressed.

Lyotard allows for deeply political nuances of his *differend*, citing the disconnect between Holocaust-deniers and those who most closely documented the existence of the death camps. In *The Differend*, Lyotard explains the fundamental lacuna of understanding that sometimes prevents the most rudimentary communication from occurring between opposing factions. Lyotard uses the Holocaust as an example, imagining two sides, a Holocaust-denier and a death camp survivor. When the survivor asserts his survival of the death camp, the denier merely cites the definition of a “death camp.” To the Holocaust

denier, escaping a *death* camp with one's *life* is a *differend*, a contradiction, a "non-ontological proof" for the nonexistence of the camps (32-33). The *differend* arises when subjects cannot agree upon or refuse to recognize the most basic grounds for communication.

The full potential for a political sublime, however, is meticulously described in Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson's argument – if I may sketch his 400-page book in a couple of sentences – is that our current period of history, inextricably (and perhaps fatally) dependent upon global capitalism, is defined by two disturbing characteristics. First, we exist as a worldwide culture in which financial or political decisions made by a stranger in a foreign culture (who occupies no position of particular power) have the capacity to affect us more than the actions of the loved ones with whom we have regular contact. Second, we cannibalize our own culture, "condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which remains forever out of reach" (25). According to Jameson, these symptoms of postmodernism create a sublime feeling similar to that described by Burke and Kant, but whereas the Romantic sublime focuses on the grandeur of the natural world, the postmodern sublime arises from "the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism" (37).

Living in such a "whole world system," we find ourselves suffering from what Jameson deems "fragmentation." In a fragmented society, a subject possesses both an awareness that a monstrous network indeed exists, as well as the ability to *imagine* such a system. The subject fails, however, to truly comprehend either the system *in toto* or the

subject's place therein. Jameson likens the confusion that follows from our lack of connection to history, family, art, and culture in general, to schizophrenia. Pynchon himself seems to anticipate Jameson's argument when, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, he writes of the Counterforce's being "as schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us" (712).

Published in 1991, perhaps partially inspired by the collapse of the communist Soviet Union, *Postmodernism* places the inception of global capitalist economy some time after World War II. I intend to demonstrate that many of the elements that Jameson associates with post-World War II "fragmentation" were already present in the fictionalized militaristic-capitalist-cultural *milieu* of 1944 and 1945, the temporal setting of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

### 3. A Sketch of Slothrop's Sublime Paranoia, or "A Blob of Experience"

If *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel with an unwieldy plot and an encyclopedic cast of characters, can be said to feature a central protagonist, then Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop occupies that position. His involvement in the novel's action is not easy to adumbrate: Slothrop, an American officer stationed in London during the final months of World War II, is pursued by two opposing government agencies (the official Firm and the loosely organized Counterforce) because not only do they suspect that his mysterious erections anticipate the distribution of V-2 rocket impacts in the city, but they also fear that Slothrop's sexual activity is connected on an essential level to a Master-rocket that exists in the lawless Zone. The novel's narrator exposes this information teasingly, however,

spreading clues over hundreds of pages. Slothrop first appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* not as an active character, but as an inert thought-figure, emerging only through references made in a tertiary character's reverie. Before actually introducing Slothrop, Pynchon establishes Pirate Prentice as a "fantasist-surrogate" and an employee of the Firm (GR 12). This organization, one of the many quasi-government agencies of *Gravity's Rainbow*, exploits Prentice's ability to relieve others' anxieties telepathically, and allows the psychic "only tiny homeopathic doses of peace" from syphoning the military elites' most disturbing nightmares (GR 16). Because they both fear and wonder at Slothrop's possibly psychokinetic ability, the Firm wishes to study (and perhaps utilize the talents of) Slothrop as they do Prentice.

By revealing the forces that clandestinely investigate Slothrop before introducing the character Slothrop himself, Pynchon immediately establishes an atmosphere of paranoia *in extremis*. Pynchon further foregrounds the atmosphere of paranoia by revealing a mysterious artifact of Slothrop's. Teddy Bloat, a British officer and employee of the Firm, photographs the curious map hanging behind Slothrop's desk (which occasions the action of the novel). Bloat is, the narrator reveals, engaging in some interdepartmental espionage without knowledge of the provenance of and funding behind his mission, understanding only that he exists as part of a mammoth system. His part is to document Slothrop's environment while "a million bureaucrats are diligently plotting death" (17). Bloat *does* recognize that his surreptitious photography of Slothrop's effects relate to the map, which, with an array of colored stars, appears to illustrate the geographical record of Slothrop's sexual activity while stationed in London.

Slothrop's deskmate, Tantivy Mucker-Maffick, considers the American with sympathy, particularly on account of Slothrop's national estrangement. Tantivy recognizes Slothrop's utter isolation, the American's having "no one else in London, beyond a multitude of girls he seldom saw again, to talk to about *anything*" (23; Pynchon's italics). Ironically, Slothrop, as an investigator of V-2 rocket incident "aftermaths" and a witness to incredible destruction throughout the city, has plenty to talk about. Perhaps the unavailability of discourse precipitates Slothrop's first stirrings of paranoia: "He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it – if they're really set on getting him ('They' embracing possibilities far far beyond Nazi Germany) that's the surest way, doesn't cost them a thing to paint his name *on every one, right?*" (25; Pynchon's italics).

To assuage Slothrop's fears, Tantivy asserts the wartime usefulness of "operational paranoia" (25), a self-preservative, mostly self-deceiving strategy that soldiers might use as a spur to maintain heightened vigilance. Tantivy is, of course, discussing paranoia as a self-induced, *practical* delusion that, in accordance with intense suspicions, forces the paranoid to behave with circumspection. Though Tantivy insists that Slothrop's anxiety represents empty but life-preserving "operational paranoia," the novel's narrator soon confirms Slothrop's suspicion of the existence of "Them," a clandestine, malignant, and omnipotent force. As Mark Richard Siegel points out in his book-length study of paranoia in Pynchon's work, the narrator's willingness, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, to affirm the power of "Them" increases with the characters' suspicions (12), which in turn lends an air of authenticity to Slothrop's addled mental state. Early in the novel, however, Pynchon

illustrates the rabid degree of Slothrop's paranoia by portraying his uneasiness even *before* he has a reason to be fearful of a secretly manipulative hand. The image of a V-2 bearing down on him, having intentionally sought him out, rattles Slothrop to the point where he can scarcely mention the rockets without stuttering.

Patrick O'Donnell discusses just this sort of paranoiac Slothropian delusion in his book *Latent Destinies*. According to O'Donnell, paranoia lends the subject adherence to a set of identifiers while allowing the subject to make validations between hidden "identity, knowledge, and history" (16). In this case, paranoia is a tool. But in *Gravity's Rainbow*, there *is indeed* a conspiracy against Tyrone Slothrop – one that, in the novel's first section, he has no inkling of and no substantive reason to suspect. The narrative slowly reveals that a wide-reaching cabal, intent on identifying the coincidences of Slothrop's trysts and V-2 explosions, possesses information about Slothrop of which even he himself is unaware. The novel's first mention of Slothrop's mysterious erections in relation to the rockets appears within an ominous narrative admission: "There is in [Slothrop's] history, and likely, God help him, in his dossier, a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky. (But a *hardon?*)" (26; Pynchon's italics). Here, Pynchon confirms that the most remarkable aspect of Slothrop's sexual curiosity exists where Slothrop is reduced to paperwork. It is Slothrop's existence reduced to "a dossier," something traceable and administrative, that elicits "God help him" from the narrator. A subject with a corresponding file, Slothrop exists as part of the business/military matrix of World War II, and he is all the more locatable by "Them" for the decades-long trail of documentation he has unknowingly left in the wake of an otherwise unextraordinary existence.

This matrix, operated by Them, has two major characteristics: first, it is inescapable because it is all-encompassing, and second, it is efficient and seamless to a degree that few even suspect its existence. Pynchon reinforces evidence of this matrix – one similar to that which Jameson describes in *Postmodernism* – through Carroll Eventyr, a medium for The White Visitation, the paranormal research division of the Firm. Channeled during a staff séance, the departed spirit of Roland Feldspath discusses (through Eventyr) the systems of power at play during World War II:

A market needed no longer be run by the Invisible Hand, but now could *create itself* – its own logic, momentum, style, from inside. Putting the control inside was ratifying what de facto had happened – that you had dispensed with God. But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful illusion. The illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can *do*. Things only happen. (30; Pynchon's italics)

Perhaps evident only to a non-physical being whose existence transcends the world (this one), the social systems that we *believe* can be affected by our actions, demonstrating effects in response to our causes, are forever beyond the influence of the individual. More insidiously, Feldspath seems to indicate that this system operates in such a fashion that, although the individual lacks control in the most profound sense, the system perpetuates the myth of individual agency. Although individuals cling to the “illusion of control,” the ultimate reality is that “no one can do” anything to either change the existing power structure or, unlike Feldspath in his ethereal body, escape the system.

Some critics argue that Pynchon, like a reclusive literary Buddha, intends to convey the limitations of Their draconian system. This argument tends towards the simplistic in its reliance on the spiritual world's primacy in the novel. In his otherwise compelling essay "The New Consciousness and the Old System," Raymond M. Olderman argues that Pynchon's "straights" (those complicit with power structures) and "freaks" (those fighting societally imposed strictures) share the objective, if not the motivation, to escape the system in some non-physical sense. Olderman writes that the power matrix of *Gravity's Rainbow*, all varieties of oppressive "systems of science, art, religion, politics, and economics [...] are simply metaphoric descriptions that participate in reality but are not reality in its entirety" (Olderman 206). The elements of society that limit our autonomy, Olderman seems to say, are just components of an existence to which that existence cannot be reduced. There is freedom to be had, perhaps. The situation is not as propitious as the sanguine Olderman suggests, however; in order to bypass the system (a term interchangeable with "Them"), characters have either to cease to exist in the physical world or acknowledge the "realm [...] outside the visible and multiple worlds of maya" (206). A problem arises when we note that the only characters in the novel who experience any degree of freedom are those who persist only in spirit form. The physical characters of the novel who have to engage in the novel's physical (and, to use Olderman's term, "visible") world are still bound to the controlling systems that occupy it.

Olderman attempts to make the system more manageable by breaking it down into constitutive parts, but the sublimity of its pervasive enormousness persists. The system described by Roland Feldspath that, without God or individual agency, seemingly generates

and maintains itself, lies at the root of Slothrop's paranoia. In his study of paranoia in post-war pop culture, *Empire of Conspiracy*, Timothy Melley identifies the particular fear that torments Slothrop and several other characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*: that "your 'personality' [...] constitutes and is constituted by global control structures, and that as it moves in and out of your body, it marks certain lines of discursive production and regulation and moves information through immense but invisible networks" (106).

Although Melley discusses the implacable social systems of the West during the second world war, his description encapsulates much of the postmodern sublime, in that he posits a vast web that surpasses the limits of our imagination, with machinations at which we can only guess, with reaches that plumb unfathomably deep into our "personal" lives. Up against a system of such profound sublimity, Slothrop experiences the terror described by Burke and Kant, but he also recoils in Jameson's "fragmentation."

Though he himself is not the dedicated target of the V-2 rockets, Slothrop and others identify certain sublime elements of the projectile – specifically its capability to achieve supersonic speeds. That the missile itself seems to defy some previously held, unchallenged beliefs about cause and effect mirrors Slothrop's putative reaction to the rocket (or vice versa). Dr. Kevin Spectro, who later becomes a casualty of the rocket, imagines the war as a sort of laboratory experiment and imagines this scenario: "Slothrop. Conceivably. Out in the city...when the V-2 hits, you see first the blast, then the sound of the falling" (*GR* 49; ellipsis inserted). The perceived reversal of cause and effect – rocket explosion preceding rocket descent – is suggestive of the stimulus-effect reversal in Slothrop, who himself is a source of the sublime for those who seek to capture and study him. In addition to their

fragmentation in the cogs of the global network ostensibly set into motion by “Them,” characters like Roger Mexico and Pointsman spend the bulk of the novel confounded by the everything-we-know-is-wrong hypothesis concerning Slothrop’s erections. Slothrop’s case may very well be the first known example of effect *preceding* cause, a singularity heretofore undocumented in the annals of science.

As scientific method lies at the heart of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the importance of Pointsman must be recognized. Dr. Edward W. A. Pointsman, a Pavlovian researcher and Nobel Prize aspirant, leads the charge in the hunt for Slothrop, but in the meantime roams amongst the rubble of London in search of experimental subjects (mainly dogs, though orphans provide sufficient experimental material as well). In one of Pointsman’s first episodes, the narrative centers bizarrely on the scientist’s quarry, a stray mutt whom Pointsman glibly names Vladimir. The dog, before eluding Pointsman, recalls escaping from a vicious Irish setter and a group of inhumane children, noting the novelty of Pointsman’s danger: “Tonight’s threat is something new: not so violent, instead a systematic stealth [the dog] isn’t used to. Life out here is more direct” (42). The passage operates perfectly as a metaphor in miniature signifying what is to come. Slothrop, like the canine fugitive, functions on a level of basic needs: sex, food, shelter, and the like; occasionally unexceptional dangers arise (bellicose Irish setters, double-booking dates with girls), but nothing totally unforeseeable occurs. Enter Pointsman. Now, the once “direct” lives of his quarries are complicated by a “*systematic* stealth” that increases their anxiety while displacing them further from the natural world. But the surreptitious matrix that consumes subjects while forcing *their* consumption and that exploits “traitors, murderers, negros,

even women, to get what They want" (GR 33) cannot be reduced to any single organization affiliated with Pointsman: the conspiracy is not isolated to the White Visitation or the Firm or Operation Blackwing or PISCES. "They" do not appear to be in collusion with any particular nefarious secret society or even with the supreme officers of Nazi Germany. The novel's cabal, which operates partially through Pointsman without excluding him as a target of its machinations, is globally invisible, perhaps just detectable enough to contribute to what Roger Mexico identifies as the "great swamp of paranoia" (GR 33).

Pointsman himself struggles with the sublime while investigating the connection between Slothrop's penis and V-2 rocket "hits"; his mind reels trying to impose an order upon an inscrutable phenomenon. However briefly, Pointsman indulges his *own* paranoia and considers a conspiracy theory of sorts. He believes that

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 on in some mysterious way – what *does* make the little doxies do it for free? Are there fluctuations in the sexual market, in pornography or prostitutes, perhaps tying in to prices on the Stock Exchange itself, that we clean-living lot know nothing about? Does news from the front affect the itch between their pretty thighs, does desire grow directly or inversely as the real chance of sudden death – damn it, what cue, right in front of our eyes, that we haven't the subtlety of heart to see? (86; Pynchon's italics)

While Slothrop hypothesizes a sublime “Them” that holds the entire world in its clutches and imposes upon it an order too comprehensive to be understood, Pointsman envisions a conspiracy of natural design – one that, in the most nuanced way, connects disparate phenomena, a microscopic sublime. The two do not exclude each other, however.

To understand Slothrop and his relationship with the sublime, we must understand the brand of *postmodern* sublime that blooms darkly as the war slouches towards an end. Decrepit Brigadier Pudding, a reactivated octogenarian who works with the White Visitation, finds himself lost in the new administrative tangles of modern war operations. As a veteran of the first World War, Pudding is accustomed to a more direct experience, not the “amazing dissonance” of bewildering acronyms, departmental redundancies and disconnects that infect Allied forces – all botched elements that interfere in areas “where the enterprise is *systematic* death” (*GR* 76; italics mine). Pynchon seems to be asserting, once again, the web-like postmodern sublime, this time arguing that only thing worse than the inevitable destruction brought about by a global network is *inefficient* destruction brought about by a global network.

Elsewhere, Pointsman, in a things-aren’t-like-they-used-to-be moment, views the cold equations of Roger Mexico’s Poisson distribution as a violation of a tacit universal epistemology. After Mexico informs Pointsman that there is nothing to link one rocket strike to another, he accuses the statistician of “wreck[ing] the elegant rooms of history, threaten[ing] the idea of cause and effect itself” before pondering the greater significance of Mexico’s conclusions: “What if Mexico’s whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but ‘events,’ new created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the

end of history?" (56). Jameson robustly affirms Pointsman's fears, as the creation of events unmoored from a historical lineage partially comprises the fragmented quagmire of postmodern sublimity, "rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (*Postmodernism* 20). Yet, even long before the calamity of World War II, the narrator postulates the existence of "Them" involved in the murder of Julius Caesar; and after the war "They" will conspire to assassinate John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X. The voice of the novel claims that "when one speaks to the other...what passes is a truth so terrible that history – at best a conspiracy, not always among gentlemen, to defraud – will never admit it. The truth will be repressed or in ages of particular elegance be disguised as something else" (164).

As Slothrop progresses through the Zone, his cryptic "scattering" seems to be partially connected to his place in time, his "temporal bandwidth," or the degree to which he occupies "now" (509). In his study of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Grim Phoenix*, William M. Plater makes the case that Slothrop's subjective dissolution comes from losing his bearings in time, seeing himself "as only a series of past identities" (51). If, as Fredric Jameson postulates in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the new sublime operates in our confused view of history, the incorrectly imagined past that communicates "the feel of the real past better than any of the 'facts' themselves" (368), then Thomas Pynchon ensconces his characters deep within this postmodern sublime. Slothrop is able to escape this sublime eventually, but only through the "timelessness" achieved in total subjective scattering: "it is a high price, but he is no longer the victim of history and the time-control of others" (Plater 51).

But even before Slothrop goes on the lam, before the actual chase into the Zone begins, he faces quite a morass from which to escape. Our protagonist's greatest problem for extrication is that while physically escaping "Them," he just as importantly must escape the sublime sentiment that at once thrills him and threatens his selfhood. Psychologist Dr. Geza Rozsavolgyi of the White Visitation possesses Slothrop's dossier, files that date back to his undergraduate days at Harvard, and that, coincidentally, demonstrate "a diseased personality...tremendously lopsided, always in favor of the psychopathic, and, the unwholesome" (81; my ellipsis; text normalized). Rozsavolgyi plans to create an original test for Slothrop, perhaps suggestive of the missile, a Rorschach-like "projective" test to determine not just Slothrop's psychological predilections, but his very thoughts. Rozsavolgyi describes his hypothesis: "The basic theory, is, that when given an unstructured stimulus, some shapeless blob of experience, the subject, will seek to impose, structure on it. How he goes about structuring this blob will reflect his needs, his hopes – will provide, us with clues, to his dreams, fantasies, the deepest regions of his mind" (81). What excites Rozsavolgyi most is the reach of his techniques. Whereas a subject can misrepresent information during a structured personality test, with his methods "nothing [Slothrop] can do, conscious or otherwise, can prevent us, from finding what we wish, to know. We, are in control. He, cannot help, himself" (GR 82).

Rozsavolgyi's techniques, redolent of "Them," feed into the paradigms of institutional control that Pynchon limns throughout the novel's first quarter – the chronic reassertion that "no one can *do*," that in place of what appears to be genuine agency, the "illusion of control" keeps "Us" from questioning our power. As such, Slothrop must not

only elude the specific forces – and the Allied forces, no less: the good guys! – that seek to ransack his Self (and return him to his infantile state of Pavlovian phallic science experiment), but also the forces that guide culture and history into a position of schizoid fragmentation. The forces obfuscate the clarity of the past and replace it with the present “blob of experience.”

Late in the novel, the Counterforce that endeavors to locate and rescue Slothrop from the Zone discusses the ideal dialectic of the oppressive global system. After calling his co-worker a “novice paranoid,” Pirate Prentice argues for the practice of “creative paranoia,” a work ethic that resembles Tantivy Mucker-Maffick’s self-preservative “operation paranoia.” Prentice explains: “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). Prentice optimistically views “creative paranoia” as not a way out of the system, but at least another safeguard against Their forces; if he cannot escape, he can at least turn crippling paranoia into something beneficial. If, however, as Leo Bersani contends, in his essay “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature,” that no paranoia is positive, then Prentice and Tantivy are emptily justifying their suspicions. Bersani points out that essential to the mind of the paranoid is the idea of “doubling,” of the physical world’s existence as an ersatz copy of an ideal original from which the paranoid is barred access (108). He contends that because doubles “have no reason to appear or to exist except to prevent us from seeing the original [,] the self-protective suspicions of paranoia are [...] already a defeat” (108).

So we return to our original paranoid: Tyrone Slothrop. Lost in the wartime

technological sublime of destructive machinery and immeasurable bureaucracy, he affirms the existence of Them to explain (and perhaps justify) his station in society. Alone, shell-shocked, the idea of Them gives Slothrop something upon which to focus his attention, a distraction from the horrors of World War II London. Slothrop's self-deception – “operational paranoia,” “creative paranoia,” whatever we might call it – has the unintended result of generating even *more* sublime feeling. If we define Slothrop's paranoia as the compulsion to fabricate connections where no connections exist, or the unhinged desire to justify relations between the unrelated, then the indulgence of paranoia compounds the web from which he struggles to escape.

That the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* actually confirms a long-established conspiracy against Slothrop is ultimately beside the point. As the first proverb for paranoids states, “Paranoids are not paranoids [...] because they're paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, *deliberately* into paranoid situations” (GR 292; my italics). Paranoia is Slothrop's birthright, a trait passed down from his doom-mongering Calvinist forefathers. In *The Style of Connectedness*, Thomas Moore reminds us of Slothrop's Puritan relative William Slothrop, who, like many of his contemporaries, possessed “crack-brained, paranoid-apocalyptic visions of the American destiny” (52). While the narrator confirms that specific cabals conspire against Slothrop, the narrator also suggests that in the absence of a conspiracy, Slothrop would find one. In an attempt to make the world more understandable, Slothrop – right or wrong in his assumptions – has rendered the world unintelligible.

#### 4. Slothrop's Sexual (and Ineffective) Counterforce

I have suggested that the sublime wartime sentiment, which includes general geographic alienation as well as the specific terror of V-2 besiegement, threatens Slothrop's sense of self. As he learns of his importance to the war's endgame (and aftermath), Slothrop loses subjectivity, an experience tantamount to "being gently separated from the life he lived before" (*GR* 114). The plot of the novel (or *a* plot of the novel) then highlights Slothrop's efforts to increase his subjective fixity in the face of self-estrangement: his strategies include reckless feats of sexual agency, further declarations of paranoia, and assertions of re-identification. But these very actions meant to reestablish Slothrop's center (of subjectivity and epistemology) hasten his demise – his "scattering" – by accidentally reengaging *with* the sublime. The wartime sublime decenters Slothrop and creates a burgeoning absence that he attempts to fill through corrective action (sex, paranoia, renaming). These attempts, intended as defense *against* total subjective dissolution actually become the *replication* of that dissolution.

In *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, Will Slocombe makes the case for two opposing "types" of nihilism clashing in the novel: the first is represented by Pointsman, who wishes to "reduce everything to nothingness"; the second is represented by Slothrop, who "demonstrates being that desires a return to nothingness" (168). Slocombe goes on to identify Slothrop's desire itself – the pull towards subjective collapse – as sublime, relating Slothrop's nihilistic actions to the Lacanian Real (168-70). Slothrop's desire for self-cancellation is sublime (in the classical sense of the term) in that his consignment to subjective annihilation produces pleasurable feelings within him. Slothrop's paradoxical

desire for/terror of annihilation also suggests the Freudian death drive. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes the famous argument that “the aim of all life is death” (32) – that all organisms desire a return to their inanimate, insentient state. If, as Freud claims, all living beings are imbued with instincts that propel them unconsciously towards oblivion (32-39), then Slothrop’s self-punishing, self-abnegating actions are wholly consistent with those drives.

While working in London, Tyrone Slothrop never becomes accustomed to the presence of V-2 rockets. He fights his paranoia with “drinking heavier, sleeping less, chain-smoking, [and] feeling in some way he’d been taken for a sucker” (21), but his neurotic behavior truly begins once Pointsman’s men begin following him. Pynchon portrays Slothrop’s first suspicions as amorphous, unconfirmable, and steeped in paranoia:

He could almost swear he's being followed, or watched anyway. Some of the tails are pretty slick, but others he can spot, all right. Xmas shopping yesterday at that Woolworth's, he caught a certain pair of beady eyes in the toy section, past a heap of balsa-wood fighter planes and little-kid-size Enfields. A hint of constancy to what shows up in the rearview mirror of his Humber, no color or model he can pin down but something always present inside the tiny frame, has led him to start checking out other cars when he goes off on a morning's work. Things on his desk [...] seem not to be where they were. Girls have found excuses not to keep appointments. (114)

The narrator soon confirms that Slothrop is being surveilled during a sexual encounter, rhetorically inquiring, “Who’s that, through the crack in the orange shade, breathing

carefully? Watching?" (120). Before being spied upon, Slothrop combats his sense of instability with nondescript sex, the narrator providing little detail about Slothrop's encounters; however, after the pursuit of Slothrop begins, his sexual activity appears to become more frequent and less normative, almost as if his bouts of concupiscence are symptomatic of his paranoia. Abidingly, Slothrop, an increasingly paranoid foreigner (first in England, then France, and finally in the Zone), seeks stability in sexual encounters.

Slothrop's sexual experiences throughout the novel demonstrate an attempt at gaining freedom from the terror of war (in general) and the knowledge of his manipulated past (more specifically). As the novel begins, Slothrop's sexual exploits are fairly normative, marked by promiscuity perhaps, but exhibiting nothing more than garden-variety lust. These encounters demonstrate Slothrop's desire to lose himself in the sex act – to dissolve his individual subjectivity by entering an undifferentiated ecstatic state. As Slothrop travels deeper into continental Europe, however, his sexual experiences become increasingly non-normative. These acts of sadomasochism and pedophilia (amongst others) reveal Slothrop's attempts to reclaim control by inflicting pain and forceful dominance. "They" orchestrate a careful observation of Slothrop and escalate Slothrop's experience of paranoia and sexual non-normativity.

When, for reasons unknown to him, Slothrop's superiors send him to the French Riviera with Tantivy Mucker-Maffick and Teddy Bloat, Slothrop immediately suspects Bloat's participation in the surveilling cabal. Shortly afterwards, when Bloat helps Slothrop free Katje Borgesius from the grips of an octopus by distracting it with a too-conveniently found crab, Slothrop begins to feel "Them" closing in on him. His realization on the beach

comes as “a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia (189). Katje’s suggestion that “we were *meant to meet*” (189; my italics) further heightens his unease. And even though Slothrop senses that “They” are subjecting him to the closest, most insidious scrutiny yet, admitting, “either I’m coming down with a little psychosis here, or something funny is going on” (192), he does exactly what the White Visitation requires of him. His first sexual encounter with Katje (a component of the reconnaissance that Katje is running for the White Visitation) allows Slothrop a temporary reprieve from his obsession with manipulative forces, if only because he is able to assert personal agency – self – during the act of coitus. Katje notices Slothrop’s “face above her unmoved, full of careful technique [...] or wired into the Slothropian Runtogether they briefed her on” (196).

Katje’s observation that his face reveals the “Slothropian Runtogether” suggests that he is, ironically, “in the zone,” participating in the sexual experience on a level of consciousness which Katje does not then enter. The “Slothropian Runtogether” is a unique phrase in the novel that neither narrator nor character comments upon. The phrase implies a willed unity, perhaps a sexual mysticism that Slothrop is able to affect, but Katje is unable to determine whether Slothrop’s facial expression conveys a maintenance of control or an abandonment to an undifferentiated orgasmic state. The situation recalls Freud, who, at the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents*, discusses the source of religious feeling and attributes it to a “sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, ‘oceanic’” (11). Freud argues that though the awareness of self – the surety of one’s

own ego – is among the most fundamental of human sensations, this “oceanic” feeling suggests that the subject is “at one with the world as a whole” (12).

Slothrop, portrayed so frequently in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a meandering character, often literally the agency-less effect of some autonomous cause, here demonstrates his first deliberate, focused actions. Slothrop's forceful sexual engagement with Katje adumbrates the discovery that Pointsman and company desire him *for* his penis. Slothrop wields his sex with authority and severity: “Thinking she might be close to coming he reaches a hand into her hair, tries to still her head, needing to see her face: this is suddenly a struggle, vicious and real” (197). Does Slothrop arrest Katje's movement to prevent her from achieving orgasm before he wishes? Does he assert a rough physical presence to introduce a sadistic element (or perhaps mere kink) into the exchange?

Pynchon suggests an answer after Slothrop learns of Katje's mission from Sir Stephen, an inebriated member of her team. Slothrop, who has been “masturbatorily scared-elated” by the possibility of his role as a pawn, becomes terrified, irate in the wake of the conspirator's admission. When Slothrop confronts Katje, his body responds to the tension with a “terrific erection” (221), and the scene escalates into a full-on sexual agon:

Katje turns her head and sinks her teeth in his forearm ... he lets go the arm he's been twisting, pulls down underwear, takes her by one hip and penetrates her from behind, reaching under to pinch nipples, paw at her clitoris, rake his nails along inside her thighs, Mister Technique here, not that it matters, they're both ready to come—Katje first, screaming into the pillow, Slothrop a second or two later. He lies on top of her, sweating, taking great

breaths, watching her face turned 3/4 away, not even a profile, but the terrible Face That Is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable: the notch of eye socket, but never the labile eye, only the anonymous curve of cheek, convexity of mouth, a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being, of Katje's being—the lifeless nonface that is the only face of hers he really knows, or will ever remember. (222)

The sadomasochistic bent is perhaps obvious – the threat of violence inspiring sex and the promise of sex threatening violence – and many readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* have acknowledged this angle. What the novel's critics have failed to discuss, however, is how Slothrop transfers his attempts at subjective agency (through increasingly perverse encounters) to those with whom he engages in these actions. Katje thrashes, bites, kicks during their lovemaking; she commits acts of resistance that lend a nonconsensual atmosphere to the events and seem to excite Slothrop more. In her physical resistance (or reciprocal roughness), Slothrop revels. He is brought closer to orgasm for having to “still her head,” having to “pinch,” “paw,” and “rake.” But the “fatal orgasm” eliminates agency for both of them. Whatever invigorating force Katje has to lend Slothrop, perhaps communicable during the sex act, drains away upon the act's completion; hence, to Slothrop, Katje face loses not only passion, but life itself. She turns away from him, establishing that only during sex does Slothrop have the volition to confront her in her entirety. In the place of her raptured countenance and his erection, Slothrop has to content himself with Katje's “lifeless nonface” and his own flaccid member.

Pynchon associates sex acts with control throughout the book – Blicero's pederastic

dominance over Gottfried, Katje's enforcement of coprophagia on Brigadier Pudding – and he associates an inverse relationship with these relationships of power as well. When Slothrop draws out Sir Stephen's confession of espionage, he specifically asks if Stephen has been watching him have sex. Stephen replies: "What difference's it make? [...] I can't even masturbate half the time [...] just a neuter, just a recording eye" (216), indicating that even Stephen's covert gathering of information – an action that conveys power because of successful secrecy – loses potency because of the actor's sexual impotence. Instead of rage, Slothrop expresses confusion at the notion of sexual inagency, the threat of impotence harrowing him so that he enters a depressed fugue. The idea that he could suffer a sexual absence compounds Slothrop's already hastening decentering; accordingly, he leaves the Sir Stephen episode feeling indecisive and "empty" (216), profoundly unlike the swells of subjective confidence he feels when he identifies with his penis.

The Allies have won the war when the novel returns its attention to Slothrop, who now rambles through the Zone, a sprawling demilitarized space with indefinite and porous borders, both wasteland and Eden. Slothrop's steadily increasing paranoia is matched by what Patrick McHugh calls Slothrop's "libidinal frenzy"; McHugh explains that Slothrop's Caligula-like behavior demonstrates his "resistance to social authority by exploring the forbidden delights of the Zone outside 'Their' control" (8). Slothrop's reactions to the control imposed upon him tend dramatically towards the sexual: his response in the French casino to "an order whose presence among the ordinary debris of waking he has only lately begun to suspect" (202) is the muttered apostrophe, "'Fuck you' ...the only *spell* he knows" (203; my ellipsis). Slothrop's utterance (accompanied by his plan to paint those

selfsame two words in speech bubbles emanating from the mouths of the hotel's decorative rococo figurines) translates his contention for sexual dominance into a "spell," into magic-charged language. We see Slothrop's verbal version of sexual hostility at several other junctures in the novel, though nowhere more comically than after he adopts the identity of the "Raketemensch," or the "Rocketman." In a scene where Slothrop, as his alter ego, fights a henchman, the Rocketman kicks him in the testicles and bellows, "'Fickt nicht mit dem Raketemensch!' so they'll remember, a kind of hiyo Silver here" (435). Slothrop, in ceremonial garb, offers a variation on his spell here: "Don't fuck with the Rocketman," continuing the theme of sexualized, "charmed" language used for violent purposes.

As disparate episodes of the novel, the two instances fail to reveal much about Slothrop's psyche beyond his desperation and vulgarity; however, placed side by side, an interesting pattern becomes apparent. Slothrop, who throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* is identified with sex, in terms of his anatomical penis and his relation to the phallic rocket, asserts his sexual primacy even further. By issuing a "fuck you" or admonishing, "Don't fuck with the Rocketman," Slothrop declares his subjectivity: he is the one who fucks, not the one who receives the fucking. Slothrop's first inclination when he feels manipulated (or "fucked with") but has no immediate physical Other to address is to reestablish his phallic supremacy, if only symbolically. Hence, his words "fuck you," become a "spell," charged with sexual potency – a spell that the narrator notes is a "pretty good all-purpose one" (203). Slothrop still asserts his symbolic sexual dominance when there is a physical entity to fight. He attacks his assailant "in the balls" while asserting his own sexual superiority with a superhero's profane catchphrase. Dressed as the personification of the rocket,

Slothrop issues a spell that reiterates his unwillingness to be made a target for sexual penetration while warning against targeting him in the future.

The pattern harkens to Slothrop's hallucinatory interview at the novel's beginning, his cartoonish recollection of following his dropped harmonica down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom. The episode reveals Slothrop's remarkable ambivalence towards being a sexual object. Struggling to wrest his way down the commode, the only white man in a restroom packed with African-Americans, Slothrop is left in a precarious position of being prone from the waist down and leaving

his ass up in the air helpless [...] and that's just what a fella doesn't want, his face down in some fetid unknown darkness and brown fingers, strong and sure, all at once undoing his belt, unbuttoning his fly, strong hands holding his legs apart – and he feels the cold Lysol air on his thighs as down come the boxer shorts. (64)

Slothrop's agency completely removed, he finds himself occupying a state of total abjection, floundering in excrement while "a thick finger with a gob of very slippery jelly or cream comes sliding down the crack now towards his asshole" (64). Imagining himself as the youthful target of a homosexual gang rape causes Slothrop little consternation, however; he escapes the predicament "with his virgin asshole preserved," and, in a novel stuffed with episodes of pederasty, Slothrop ostensibly maintains this particular status of sexual *inexperience* throughout the novel. Never is Slothrop literally "fucked" by another person. What curiously remains though, is the narrator's comments about Slothrop's escape: "Now some folks might say whew, thank God for *that*, and others moaning a little, aw shucks, but Slothrop doesn't say much of anything because he didn't *feel* much of anything" (65). The

narrator insists that Slothrop's hallucination includes the actual forceful removal of his underpants, yet Slothrop issues not even a "whew" of relief after slipping from the grasp of his would-be rapists.

So if Slothrop's response to lack of power in the Zone and in the general sublime wartime atmosphere is an assertion of his subjectivity in the form of sex, where does this response come from? As Slothrop chases evidence of his own significance around Europe, he discovers clues that shatter his sense of self. He comes across paperwork documenting his family's involvement with Dr. Lazlo Jamf, a Pavlovian scientist with connections to the military-industrial structures in interbellum Europe, and he is seized with nausea, vertigo, and finally, the response of "getting a hardon for no particular reason" (285). Like déjà vu or the residue of already fragmented information, "the secret he cannot survive" occurs to Slothrop: "Once something was done to him, in a room, while he lay helpless..." (285; Pynchon's ellipsis). I see no evidence in the novel that infant Slothrop was the aim of a pedophiliac, pederastic conspiracy; he was never literally "fucked" by Jamf and the scientists responsible for the creation of the miracle erectile material, Impolex G. But the traumatic kernels of the sexual experimentation endured by Slothrop as a child still remain in his unconscious, appearing in his waking consciousness whenever the threat of being symbolically "fucked" arises. Whatever occurred to him in the laboratory was so traumatic to Slothrop's sense of self that his narrow avoidance of homosexual gang rape scarcely draws a comment.

Slothrop's initial desires for normative sex indicate his drive towards the "oceanic," but his regard for non-normative sex is another matter altogether. Early in the novel the

Herero character Enzian makes a case for the “nonrepeatable” action, listing a litany of non-reproductive sexual acts, and establishing the centrality of perversion and fetishising in the novel. Though other characters of *Gravity’s Rainbow* engage in non-normative sexual acts more frequently than does Slothrop (see Blicero’s pederasty, Pökler’s sadism, Pudding’s coprophagia), he nonetheless embraces these variations on his normative sexual experiences with tremendous gusto, most notably in the aggressive rape fantasy of Katje, the sadist beatings lavished upon Margherita, the orgiastic plunge on the *Anubis* ferry, and the pedophilic encounter with Bianca. All of these acts – instances of either strident dominance or conspicuous submission – further decenter Slothrop even as he seeks fixity.

Slothrop’s progression towards non-normative sexuality continues in four separate avenues: sadomasochism, pedophilia, group sex, and bestiality. Like many of the sex acts Slothrop participates in, episodes of sadomasochism take place between multiple characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but his sex with Margherita Erdmann takes on especially disturbing significance. A former actress who starred in “vaguely pornographic horror movies” (393), Margherita invites Slothrop to reenact a scene made with the Max Schlepzig, the father of her child, but first she asks Slothrop if he requires instructions to play his part. The answer is no:

Somebody has already educated him. Something . . . that dreams Prussian and wintering among the meadows, in whatever cursive lash-marks wait across the flesh of their sky so bleak, so incapable of any sheltering, wait to be summoned. . . . No. No – he still says “their,” but he knows better. His meadows now, his sky . . . his own cruelty. (396; Pynchon’s ellipsis)

The passage implies that a latent component of Slothrop's infantile conditioning exists as a sadistic event, and now, having had the stirrings of memory associated with "something [being] done to him [...] while he lay helpless," Slothrop can fully and authentically participate in Margherita's request. His tapping into a primal sadism constitutes a return to self, an apparent sloughing off of the strictures of "Their" power and a replacement with "his own cruelty."

Before the reenactment begins, Pynchon provides a portrait of sadomasochism as the embodiment of the sexual sublime, complete with analogs in technology:

All Margherita's chains and fetters are chiming, black skirt furled back to her waist, stockings pulled up tight in classic cusps by the suspenders of the boned black rig she's wearing underneath. How the penises of Western men have leapt, for a century, to the sight of this singular point at the top of a lady's stocking, this transition from silk to bare skin and suspender! It's easy for non fetishists to sneer about Pavlovian conditioning and let it go at that, but any underwear enthusiast worth his unwholesome giggle can tell you there is much more here – there is a cosmology: of nodes and cusps and points of osculation, mathematical kisses ... *singularities!* Consider cathedral spires, holy minarets, the crunch of trainwheels over the points as you watch peeling away the track you didn't take ... mountain peaks rising sharply to heaven, such as those to be noted at scenic Berchtesgaden the edges of steel razors, always holding potent mystery ... rose thorns that prick us by surprise ... even, according to the Russian mathematician Friedmann, the infinitely dense point from which the present Universe

expanded... In each case, the change from point to no point carries a luminosity and enigma at which something in us must leap and sing, or withdraw in fright. Watching the A4 pointed at the sky – just before the last firing switch closes – watching that singular point at the very top of the Rocket, where the fuze is... Do all these points imply, like the Rocket's, an annihilation? What is that, detonating in the sky above the cathedral? beneath the edge of the razor, under the rose?

(396)

I cite the passage in its entirety because here Pynchon makes manifest several slow-percolating elements: the sex drives and death drives of his subjects, the libidinal attraction to humans made less human and more architectural. In this environment where Slothrop can try his hand at sadomasochism – and where, curiously, he finds that the practice, though new to him, has been “taught” (396) to him in the past – the opportunity for him to reclaim subjectivity is bountiful. Yet Slothrop’s reaffirmation of self in the sexual fails once again, as the narrator discusses the origins of sadomasochism as analogous to the all-swallowing sublime. Slothrop’s struggle for power, his assays at one-upping Them, his sexual symbols all fall short as his individuality – his subjectivity – is lost amongst the technological sublime. The passage validates everything that Slothrop attempts to prove wrong: that science, in the form of technology and conditioning, possesses “the power to control human behavior, including something as ostensibly natural as sexuality” (McHugh 5). Consequently, in this act of sadomasochism, the technological sublime of Margherita’s kinky uniform trumps the sexual sublime itself, resulting in the unintentional compromise of Slothrop’s subjectivity, not the reassertion for which he maneuvers nor the “oceanic”

feeling that he is wont to experience during normative sexual acts.

Timothy Melley makes sense of Slothrop's reaction to Margherita in "Bodies Incorporated: Scenes of Agency Panic in *Gravity's Rainbow*" by discussing the sublime object. Slothrop, like those men whose penises "have leapt [...] for a century" at the fetishized stocking, is unaware of the mechanics of his own desires, of why he affords Margherita's clothing sublime characteristics. Melley claims that Slothrop's subjective failure occurs here because of his "absence from himself, his inability to understand his own uncontrollable response" (735). The terror of the sublime strikes Slothrop because, as a subject, his "imagination is inadequate to account for an apparent loss [...] autonomy" (735), with Slothrop assigning Margherita's physical presence special significance and detracting from his own. In *Pynchon's Poetics*, Hanjo Berressem contends that *Gravity's Rainbow* uses sadomasochism only as a way of balancing hierarchies, but the nonnormative act, with its potential for explosive *jouissance*, seems to operate in the novel as anything but equalizing. The sadomasochistic acts of *Gravity's Rainbow* are bound to power, but no particular act contains the promise for equal agency amongst participating parties.

In Pökler's cinematic experience of the Zone, Pynchon appears to suggest an intersection of the "oceanic feeling" of the orgasmic, the mathematical power assertions of sadomasochism, and the organizational, wartime sublime:

He found delight not unlike a razor sweeping his skin, scalp to soles, in ritual submissions to the Master of this night space and of himself, the male embodiment of a technologicque that embraced power not for its social uses but for just those chances of surrender, personal and dark surrender, to the Void, to

delicious and screaming collapse. (578)

Pökler's vision refocuses the sadism that he had previously dealt his wife. He allows the violence to return and mines the experience for *jouissance*, for the opportunity for "personal and dark surrender." Freud wrote at length about sadomasochism in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, reaching the conclusion that "masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned around on the subject's own self" (37). Here, then, is Pökler's opportunity to inflict pleasure-pain upon his own subjectivity, mirroring Slothrop's self-cancelling sexual exploits and identifying with Slothrop's drives toward subjective extinction.

Slothrop's sexual encounters with Geli Tripping in the Zone provide different problems of identification for critics. Joseph W. Slade claims in his essay "Religion, Psychology, Sex, and Love in *Gravity's Rainbow*" that Slothrop's carnal experiences with Geli are "delightful, merry, [and] healthily erotic – [...] Slothrop's finest" (193) but neglects the pedophilic undercurrents that lie beneath their exchanges. Pynchon describes her as "thin, a bit awkward, very young (290), and Slothrop observes (through free indirect discourse, I assume) her "*baby* fingers creeping down along his ribs" and the sun "reflected out of her *child's* eyes" (291; both my italics). Elsewhere, Slothrop is lured back to Geli's bed with a tearful look; he scolds himself: "Slothrop you sucker ... but she's just a little kid" (294; Pynchon's ellipsis) Upon Slothrop's return, Pynchon describes Geli as "four-year-old happy" (291). Though Pynchon never confirms Geli's age the way he does Bianca's (who is certainly pre-pubescent), the language he uses contains all the suggestions of a pedophilic relationship between Slothrop and Geli (and therefore, Tchichérine and Geli).

According to Joseph W. Slade, Pynchon refuses to affirm Slothrop and Geli's relationship because it is "flawed by Slothrop's ability to commit himself" (193). Further, Slade maintains that Pynchon's tacit condemnation occurs because Slothrop lacks the ability to love, "and sex without love does not render [the Zone] fruitful" (193). Here, I believe that Slade is overlooking the importance of the two characters in the context of Pynchon's *oeuvre*. First, Slade correctly suggests that when Slothrop and Geli commingle atop the Brocken at sunrise, casting enormous, godlike images on the world below, the episode alludes to the divine sexuality of Slothrop and Geli (the self-professed witch); however, Pynchon frames the entire episode by discussing the actions of the lovers' shadows that "danc[e] the floor of the whole visible sky" (330). While Slothrop and Geli engage in coitus on the mountaintop, a divine shadow-world unfolds only (ironically) *below* them on the ground, suggesting that while Slothrop and Geli, as human subjects, must reckon with the physical world, these "godlike" two-dimensional images exist on their own terms, subject neither to the laws nor customs of society. These shadows, godlike in proportion, enjoy the same immunity from subjectivity as the mythic figures of Zeus or Ganymede or Leda – figures who avoid societal judgment of their respective non-heteronormative encounters. Unlike their mythic penumbras, Geli and Slothrop must answer for their actions.

In *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*, Christopher Kocela writes at length about Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, particularly focusing on the lesbian relationship between the eponymous character and the ingénue ballerina, Mélanie. Kocela documents Mélanie as precocious in her "childlike perversity" (117), a fifteen-year-old

fetish and fetishizer, who suffers a horrific on-stage ganching for failure to wear prophylactic covering during an impalement stunt. *Fetishism and Its Discontents* debates the ethics of this episode: Does she die as a sort of sacrifice – killing the pervert *with* her perversion for the sake of preserving the child (120)? If this sort of sacrifice is indeed the case with Mélanie *vis-a-vis* her same-sex relationship with the adult V., then we must examine Slothrop's relationships with Geli and Bianca using similar criteria. After engaging in a sadomasochistic affair with her mother and taking part in the *Anubis* ferry orgy, Slothrop finally has a sexual encounter with Bianca. Slothrop's first contact with the child makes clear the potential for *jouissance*:

He knows he's vulnerable, more than he should be, to pretty little girls, so he reckons it's just as well, because Bianca's a knockout, all right: 11 or 12, dark and lovely, wearing a red chiffon gown, silk stockings and high-heeled slippers, her hair swept up elaborate and flawless and interwoven with a string of pearls to show pendant earrings of crystal twinkling from her tiny lobes...help, help. Why do these things have to keep coming down on him? He can see the obit now in *Time* magazine – Died, Rocketman, pushing 30, in the Zone, of lust. (463)

Pynchon highlights the sexual attraction Slothrop feels for young girls by escalating his desire for the nubile Geli to his lust for the pre-pubescent Bianca, and much like Pynchon directs attention to the fetishized clothing of Mélanie in *V.*, he foregrounds Bianca's wardrobe in the *Anubis* chapters. Whereas the fetishization of Mélanie's attire occurs only between V. and Mélanie, the special cathecting of Bianca's garments is open to everyone

aboard the *Anubis*, its passengers leering at Bianca's "little red frock halfway up her slender thigh, with black lace petticoats peeping from beneath the hem" (465). Bianca's subsequent spanking at her mother's hand sparks the massive orgy in which Slothrop gains the sense that "everybody came together, though how could that be?" (467).

Slothrop's feeling that "everybody came together" recenters his desire for the "oceanic feeling" – the "Slothropian Runtogether" here in its most radical form. But the orgy, in its extremity, does not prepare Slothrop for the sexual experience that most hastens his subjective dispersion. The Slothrop/Bianca episode contains little that is remarkable outside of its clarification of Bianca's age and appearance – "pre-subdeb breasts," "little feet," "baby rodent hands," "a slender child [with a] face round with baby fat" (469) -- until Slothrop finally penetrates her. Then, although the action occurs through Bianca's guidance and beneath her dominance, the episode unfolds in a manner strangely reminiscent of Mélanie's impalement in *V*. At this point, with Bianca commanding the action, Slothrop experiences the delusion that he is "*inside his own cock*" (470). The experience shatters Slothrop in a way that no previous sexual experience does, his orgasm "announcing the void," and making him tearfully pose the post-coital question, "What happened back there?" (470). In the child, he sees truth unprecedented to his eyes. When Bianca, who seems to intuit Slothrop's fugitive state, offers to exploit her own youth – the presumed guilelessness that adults afford her – to help hide him, Slothrop acknowledges: "She can. He knows. Right here, right now, under the fancy underwear, she *exists*, love, invisibility ... For Slothrop this is some discovery" (470; Pynchon's italics).

Bianca's death (either by suicide, drowning, or her mother's murderous hand)

appears necessary for the same reason that Mélanie's death is teleologically obligatory in *V. Slothrop*, in an attempt to stabilize his subjectivity against the threat of the wartime sublime, engages in pedophilic sex with Bianca, only to have his sexual assertion cancelled by her own, more forceful assertion. Slothrop's agency drains away as Bianca exhausts his subjectivity, much like Slothrop did to his countless promiscuous partners. The result is two-fold: Slothrop makes a "discovery" that suggests the possibility of love as an alternative to sexual marauding, and Bianca vouchsafes her own death. Just as Slothrop's ego cannot survive the rattling loss of subjectivity that drives him "to thin, to scatter [with] no good reason to hope for any turn, any surprise *I-see-it*" (509; Pynchon's italics), Bianca cannot, as a child, survive her fulfilled fetishization.

So, Pynchon does not tacitly condemn Slothrop and Geli's (or Slothrop and Bianca's) relationship because of the absence of love – just as he does not necessarily reward two honest lovers, like Jessica Swanlake and Roger Mexico, with lasting happiness. Pynchon argues for Slothrop's capacity to love on numerous occasions – particularly with the childlike Geli and Bianca. When Geli blows Slothrop a kiss upon his departure further into the Zone, he "feels his heart, out of control, inflate with *love* and rise quick as a balloon. It is taking him longer, the longer he's in the Zone, to remember to say aw quit being a sap. What is this place doing to his brain?" (333; first italics mine; second Pynchon's). These experiences, unlike the more quotidian encounters he has before entering the Zone, smack of superabundance, *jouissance*, a situation in which Slothrop finds himself "retreating from yet facing the Presence feared and wanted" (203). These relationships *cannot* endure because of the subjective volatility, the overload of sublime pleasure-pain, that each

promises.

## 5. Conclusion

Pynchon seems to present two alternative (and mutually exclusive) portraits of Slothrop's subjectivity. On one hand, he portrays Slothrop as a character who makes a heroic assay for autonomy, one willing to cross great geographical and psychological distances, to question the very nature of his existence, to assume new identities, to place himself in alien situations, in order to escape the presence of Them. Of course, Slothrop's efforts backfire, in a sense. His only escape from Them lies in his escape from subjectivity, and in his attempt to flee Their ubiquitous forces, he disintegrates into a form only visible to the usually-stoned Pig Bodine, one of the few who regards Slothrop as "any sort of integral creature" and for whom Slothrop exists as more than mere memory (740). Slothrop's gradual dissolution occurs as a result of his immersion into sex, paranoia of the non-"creative" and non-"occupational" variety, and falsified or fabricated reidentification. His emersion into sex works in two ways. First, Slothrop's indulgence in spontaneous episodes of sexual abandon demonstrates his desire to cast off the trappings of his identity and enter a state of undifferentiated bliss (what Freud would most likely identify as the "oceanic" feeling). His repeated return to a sexual state – with Katje, Geli, Bianca – demonstrates an unconscious impulse to dispense with all qualities that make Slothrop Slothrop and surrender instead to ecstatic sexual enjoyment. In doing so, he momentarily bypasses the martial/technological/societal sublime that registers as synonymous with Them. The sacrifice for this avoidance of the postmodern sublime is a paradoxical,

simultaneous loss and amplification of subjectivity. Slothrop becomes a part of the experience, losing himself in the orgasmic rapture of sex; to him, ecstatic abandon erases the charged anxieties of wartime life. The bizarre complication, however, is that this abandonment – Slothrop’s perceived, happy self-disgorgement – fulfills precisely the role that was assigned Slothrop *decades* before he could have dreamt of such a cabal. In his pursuit of a cocoon of safety, in his recognition of sex as a solace, Slothrop reestablishes anatomically the very situation for which Dr. Jamf conditioned him.

The most radical paradox of Slothrop’s subjective disintegration is that, even though time after time his attempts to establish subjectivity against the encroaching wartime sublime fail miserably, he ultimately conquers the Us/Them System that makes the wartime sublime possible. As Raymond M. Olderman argues in “The New Consciousness and the Old System”: “to get Out of the System, [the subject] must *get out of his or her own head*, or, more accurately, get out of the straight part of his or her consciousness” (213; Olderman’s italics). In *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, Molly Hite extrapolates even further, claiming that Pynchon wants nothing less than his readers to “get out of his or her own head”; Hite contends that because the novel’s narrator ultimately condemns no characters, even the most seemingly despicable – she proffers Pointsman and Blicero as examples – that the novel insists that “there is no They in the final analysis: only Us” (144).

Ultimately, like Feldspath and Pudding, Slothrop escapes all physical confines to exist solely as a spiritual entity. His loss of subjectivity culminates with his becoming “a crossroads, a living intersection” (625), a holistic being free from the machinations of all

manipulative, divisive systems. Whereas the embodiment of death, in the form of the V-2, still threatens in the novel's final pages, nothing can imperil Slothrop anymore; he appears to have found peace. The "Slothropian Runtogether" to which the narrator refers only once appears to be fully realized by the novel's closing. Throughout most of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop could only achieve an ecstatic "oceanic" feeling from the union of sex, but now, after his "scattering" through the Zone, Slothrop appears to be part of a grander, mystical unity, emblematic of his deterioration in subjectivity – his loss of ego. Like Emerson in "Circles," Slothrop becomes "part and parcel of the Universe," relinquishing his identity to gain freedom.

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