

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN

Abteilung für Literatur

WORKING PAPER No. 51/1992

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Narrating Postmodern Spaces
in Thomas Pynchon's Novel(s)



NARRATING POSTMODERN SPACES IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S NOVELS(S)

'The War has been reconfiguring time and space into his own image.'

- Thomas Pynchon: Gravity's Rainbow

Because I don't know how many of you are familiar with Gravity's Rainbow, let me just give you some very general parameters: Gravity's Rainbow describes the adventures of Tyrone Slothrop during WW II and shortly after the war; actually, the time-frame of the novel is from December 1944 to August 45. The first two of its four parts are set during the war, while the last two are set after the capitulation, which comes to mark exactly the middle of the book. This temporal axis goes hand in hand with a spatial shift from an excentric to a concentric movement. In the first part, which is set in London, everyone flees from the destruction wrought by the V-2. In the third part, which is set in Germany, this excentric movement is reversed. Rather than trying to get away from it, the movement is now towards the V-2, or rather, towards the spoils of war, amongst which the parts of the V-2.

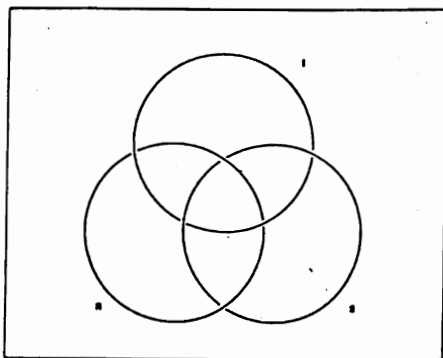
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The ambiguous character of the landscapes of Gravity's Rainbow is evoked when Slothrop -- at some point during his journey through post-war Germany, the 'Zone' into which he has been sent by 'forces unknown' in order to 'be present at his own assembly-perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his times assembly' (GR 738) -- dreams of Bianca, the girl with whom he has had a short but intense love-affair, and whom he will subsequently discover or not discover dead (-- there is some disagreement in Pynchon exegesis on this question --) in the machine room of the Anubis. In this dream 'Bianca comes to snuggle in under his blanket with him. "You're really in that Europe now," she grins, hugging him' (GR 492-93). This passage, and many other similar ones, shows that in his treatment of the historic scene as a psycho-pathological one, Pynchon understands Europa not so much as a mere grouping of geo-political units but

as a both real and mental territory, a 'state of mind' in which psychic and geographical space are conflated.

This conflation makes the theory of Jacques Lacan an especially fruitful reference -- at least in my view -- because it provides the most advanced psychoanalytic topography of human reality, and I'll propose that it is ultimately in terms of a new topography that the 'Zone' of post-war Germany has to be read.

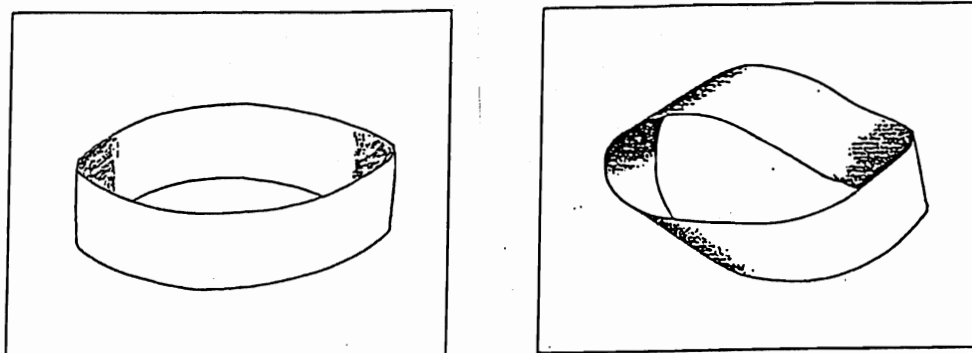
In his topography, Lacan differentiates between the realms of the imaginary (related to the ego, desire and the image), the symbolic (related to the subject, reason and language) and the real. His symbol for their interrelatedness is the Borromean knot.



While the conjunction of the semiotic systems of the imaginary and the symbolic make out human reality, the real is quite simply that which is 'neither imaginary nor symbolic'. As this 'negative element', it holds a privileged position. It is not connected to systems of representation such as the mind or consciousness but to the 'body' and the 'drives' (in semiotic terms the referent, in philosophical ones 'das-Ding-an-sich, in psychoanalytic ones, the unconscious). It is one of Lacan's central ideas that this unrepresentable, ultimately 'impossible' realm of the real, however, 'insists' within the other two.

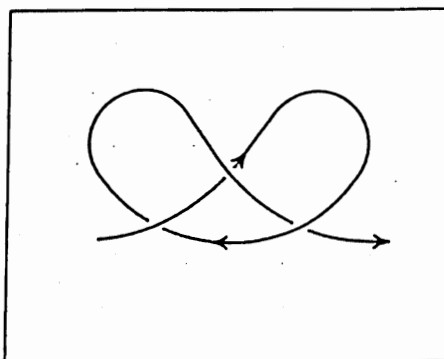
It is precisely when dealing with this insistence and intervention that one has to stop thinking in terms of classical space and the distinction between inside and outside -- the real

being the outside and the symbolic and the imaginary the inside. In Lacan's topography, this classical space, ruled over by the central perspective, is replaced by a space which is represented best by the Möbius-strip.



In this space, the cut is no longer between inside and outside; rather, the space itself is now in toto defined by a cut which is internal to the structure, so that inside and outside are inextricably aligned in a 'one-sided', convoluted space. Topographically, then, the real is the cut.

Not only space, however, is being re-defined in this topography: simultaneously with the spatial, the Möbius-strip symbolizes a temporal loop, in which past, present and future are no longer defined along a straight line, but constantly fold back onto each other.



As Jeanne Granon-Lafont states, with a Möbius-strip the dichotomy between the two terms front and back -- as well as, I would argue, inside and outside -- only appears through "the intervention of a new dimension: that of time".

Such temporal loops also define the concept of belatedness [Nachträglichkeit], which describes the fact that a real, unconscious and repressed trauma which 'resists symbolization completely' because it is 'experienced' when the perceptual apparatus is not yet developed, can only be dealt with belatedly in its symbolic and imaginary transcriptions.

sexuelle Erlebnisse ... entfalten ihre Wirkung ... nur zu geringem Maße zur Zeit, da sie vorfallen; weit bedeutsamer ist ihre nachträgliche Wirkung ... Diese nachträgliche Wirkung ... geht von den psychischen Spuren aus, welche die infantilen Sexualerlebnisse zurückgelassen haben. In dem Intervall zwischen dem Erleben dieser Eindrücke und deren Reproduktion ... hat nicht nur der somatische, sondern auch der psychische Apparat eine bedeutsame Ausgestaltung erfahren, und darum erfolgt auf die Einwirkung jener früheren sexuellen Erlebnisse nun eine abnorme psychische Reaktion, es entstehen psychopathologische Bildungen.¹

In psychoanalytic terms, these enigmatic experiences are 'of the real'. The important thing is that this unconscious real can never be apprehended directly, but is forever something which, belatedly, 'will be realized in the symbolic ... something which will have been'.²

Finally, the looping of these 'categorical' terms -- time and space -- also brings about a loop in the logical universe. The psychic landscape, I propose, is defined by these spatio-temporal and logical loops. What I will attempt in the following, then, is to read these two interrelated concepts-- that of belatedness and that of the Möbius-strip -- into -- or onto -- the structure of Gravity's Rainbow.

* * *

As partly psychic landscapes, the landscapes in Gravity's Rainbow are more than backgrounds to the story. Like dream-landscapes, they are belated representations of repressed mental territories. The wrecked, wasted landscapes of post-war Germany, however, represent not only a personal repressed but also a cultural one. Slothrop, alias Rocketman, is searching not only for his own past: 'Rocketman has just landed here to tour the ruins, the high-desert traces of an ancient European order....' (GR 436).

Already in the beginning of the book, the evacuation from the V-2-ravaged London deeper into the city is both a spatial and a psychic event, a movement towards the 'navel of the city' as well as towards the 'navel of the dream'. It is not an escape, but a journey towards a more atavistic center, 'not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into' (GR 3). Pynchon condenses the atmosphere of this ruinous, derelict world, its hopelessness and lovelessness, into -- often ironically undercut -- images in which destruction and death, thanatos, is inextricably amalgamated with love, eros: 'Back in the wreckage a brass bedpost winks; and twined there someone's brassiere, a white, prewar confection of lace and satin, simply left tangled ...' (GR 43).

Although especially Derridean critics (most recently McHoul/Wills in Writing Pynchon) have made much of the fact that the wealth of material and the glittering surface of the signifier makes of Gravity's Rainbow an endlessly disseminating -- and thus limitless and unframable -- text, one can -- hopefully -- create some provisional 'order' in the multiplicity of contending viewpoints and focalizations that define its narrative structure. As in Lot 49, in which Oedipa is confronted with the binary choice between one and zero 'either a transcendent meaning or only the earth', important positions on which the text of Gravity's Rainbow rotates are the binary positions of metaphysics and physics. Yet this dualism is supplemented and thus complicated by a third position, that of a physics turned metaphysics. Pynchon aligns these three positions in an intricate

rhetorical matrix. The physics turned metaphysics is represented by Pavlovian conditioning, the Pavlovian scientists Lazlo Jamf and Ned Pointsman, and the part of the plot that revolves around them.

At the beginning of the book, while he is still in London, Slothrop has a map on which he marks the sites of his sexual encounters, whereas the statistician Roger Mexico -- who represents the world of pure physics and is therefore the 'Antipointsman' (GR 55) and ultimately Pointsman's repressed-- keeps a map of the sites of the V-2 strikes in London. Mexico's map follows a statistical model: 'Each hit is independent of all the others. Bombs are not dogs. No link. No memory. No conditioning' (GR 56). The mysterious thing, however, is that '[t]he slides that Teddy Bloat's been taking of Slothrop's map have been projected onto Roger's, and the two images, girl-stars and rocket-strike circles, demonstrated to coincide' (GR 85-86).³



-- Those of you familiar with Gravity's Rainbow will know how important this 'sign' is in the book.

Throughout the book, Pointsman tries to account for this superimposition of eros and thanatos and to answer the implicit question, whether there is a mutual or reciprocal induction of these two forces -- in short, whether 'desire grow[s] directly or inversely as the real chance of sudden death' (GR 86). His main question is: 'what does make the little doxies do it for free? Are there fluctuations in the sexual market [...] that we clean-living lot know nothing about? Does news from the front affect the itch between their pretty thighs' (GR 86).

For Mexico, the physicist, these questions are irrelevant, because his map does not represent a structure based on the law of cause and effect. It is merely the belated representation of a universe of pure contingency, and re-constructs not a logical sequence but a mere series of random events. Pointsman, the

champion of cause and effect, is of course terrified by such a universe and wonders whether Postwar will also be a post-histoire, 'nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?' (GR 56). Yet he, like Mexico, cannot account for Slothrop's psycho-sexual connection to the V-2. Being a Pavlovian, he searches for the ominous 'Mystery Stimulus' (GR 84) which supposedly brings about Slothrop's 'hardon reflex' (GR 84), which in turn 'brings about' or 'accompanies' his meetings with his dates.

Finally, there is the realm of metaphysics, although with Pynchon, this is always a metaphysics 'under erasure'. It is evoked, for instance, after a passage in which Slothrop, in bed with Darlene, hears a rocket fall, and his 'penis [springs] erect, aching' (GR 120). This is followed by a 'hint of revelation' when an anonymous narrative voice asks: 'And who's that, through the crack in the orange shade, breathing carefully? Watching? And where, keepers of maps, specialists at surveillance, would you say the next one will fall?' (GR 120). These, then, are the three positions.

Interestingly, apart from introducing these positions, Pynchon also introduces a first time loop at this point: while the similarity of the maps 'proves' a connection between Slothrop and the V-2, his dates take place before the rocket strikes at the place of the rendez-vous. The stimulus, or cause, cannot therefore be simply 'auditory' (GR 52), such as the slowly growing noise of the V-1. Rather, it is related to the new era of the V-2, whose most terrifying characteristic is precisely that it travels faster than sound. Accordingly, 'Slothrop [...] gets erections when this sequence happens in reverse. Explosion first, then the sound of approach: the V-2" (GR 86). Thus, also 'the reversal is auditory' (GR 52). According to this new logic, the reason for his 'premature' erections must be something 'in the air' (GR 86) before the actual rocket strikes, but already connected to it, a 'precursor wraith' (GR 86) or a -- fantastic or phantasmatic -- 'double' (GR 86).

Already, here, the sequence of cause (stimulus) and effect (response) is looped, or reversed. In a second step, in which he 'accounts' for this loop, Pynchon links up the fields of conditioning and paranoia, which is itself -- through the theory of projection -- seriously questioning and disturbing the distinction between inside and outside. (Again, thus a question of space and time). This linking up happens through Slothrop, who is of course a model paranoiac. Again, this link is established along an instance of a reversal. According to Pavlov, the brain functions, like a computer, as a mosaic of neurons that are either on or off⁴, and mental illnesses, such as paranoia, are the result of a state in which brain-cells - through the 'Zusammenstoß eines Erregungs - und Hemmungsprozesses'⁵ - get so excited that the ideas of opposites get lost and the area around them becomes 'inhibited' (GR 90). In such a state, which Pavlov termed 'transmarginal' (GR 49), there is no more flux. (OED) All that is left is '[o]ne bright, burning point, surrounded by darkness' (GR 90), a 'point of pathological inertia' (GR 90).⁶ As Pointsman states: 'you weaken this idea of the opposite, and here all at once is the paranoid patient who would be master, yet now feels himself a slave ... who would be loved, but suffers his world's indifference [...] Our madmen, our paranoid, maniac, schizoid, morally imbecile--' (GR 48-49).⁷

These transmarginal states⁸ are brought about by 'reciprocal induction' (GR 90) - a term that -- through Pointsman, who sees his dogs as 'human victims' -- is also related to the dynamics between eros and thanatos: 'And how much of the pretty victim straining against her bonds does Ned Pointsman see in each dog that visits his test stands ... and aren't scalpel and probe as decorative, as fine extensions as whip and cane?' (GR 88).

Reciprocal induction itself is a term that is used in a number of frameworks, such as biology, philosophy and magnetism, denoting in all of them different shades of 'to lead to' or 'to bring about'; in Pavlovian conditioning it denotes the fact that 'der Effekt eines positiven bedingten Reizes größer wird, wenn

man diesen sofort oder bald nach einem konzentrierten Hemmungsreiz anwendet' (Pawlow, Werke III/2 540). (This also relates back to the relation between love/desire and the 'chance of sudden death'). This 'reciprocal induction' is in turn closely linked to the 'ultraparadoxical phase' (GR 49) of conditioning, the phase in which a stimulus operates precisely when it is absent, and the patient 'seek[s], in the silence, for the stimulus that is not there' (GR 90).⁹ (three stages. First metronome = food --> saliva, then, metronome = food --> little saliva (paradoxical phase) then no metronome = saliva -- or, no rocket = hardon).

Symptomatically, although Pynchon 'quotes' Pavlov over long stretches in his presentation of conditioning, he also modifies him in a crucial manner. Unlike Pavlov, who used food as a stimulus and salivation as a measure of the animal's response, thus allowing exact measurement of response level, Pointsman is after another sort of 'drooling': 'a hardon, that's either there, or it isn't. Binary, elegant' (GR 84). This is important because apart from transferring conditioning from real to sexual hunger, this replacement implies a shift from an analog to a purely binary, digital realm.

This, then, is one possible explanation of Slothrop's sexual encounters, which would have to be understood as frustrated searches for the 'silent' stimulus that links him to the rocket.

Some parts of Gravity's Rainbow seem to imply that this stimulus might actually be olfactory rather than auditory. In one passage, Slothrop himself wonders whether the 'Mystery Stimulus' might be Imipolex G, the infamous 'erectile plastic' that haunts Gravity's Rainbow: 'A smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom edge of his memory. [...] He knows what the smell has to be: though according to these papers it would have been too early for it [...] he knows that what's haunting him now will prove to be the smell of Imipolex G' (GR 286). Although it might well make sense within a concept of 'belatedness', this temporal problem (-- it wasn't invented yet when Slothrop got conditioned --) which is

never resolved logically in the text, actually prefigures the difficulties surrounding any attempt at a critical "Imipolectique" (GR 490).¹⁰ In fact, Imipolex G (G standing for [ottfried]) is only used once as the insulation device of the 00000, with the final marriage of man and machine -- Gottfried and the rocket -- taking place in a 'shroud' (GR 754) of Imipolex G.

Whether the stimulus is indeed Imipolex G or something else remains an open question, but it is certain that it cannot be the rocket itself. Yet, according to Pavlov, a trivial or vague 'precursor' can become the stimulus, sometimes merely the entry into the laboratory: 'some cue we might never pin down would be enough to send him [generally the dog -- in this case Slothrop] over, send him transmarginal' (GR 49).¹¹ This is why Pointsman begins to think of 'the war itself as a laboratory' (GR 49) and sends Slothrop into the 'Zone', hoping that he will lead them to the 'missing link' or cue. This 'laboratory', however, is defined as a Möbius-like, highly ambivalent space:

But how it haunts him, the symmetry of these two secret weapons, Outside ... the sounds of the V-1 and V-2, one the reverse of the other. Pavlov showed how mirror-images Inside could be confused. Ideas of the opposite. But what new pathology lies Outside now? What sickness to events - to History itself - can create symmetrical opposites like these robot weapons?
Sign and Symptoms. Was Spectro right? Could Outside and Inside be part of the same field? (GR 144 emphasis added)

Here, then, we have the complete structure of the Möbius-strip. Pointsman's objective is of course to find the experimental setup behind the war, and thus to prove the 'stone determinacy of everything, of every soul' (GR 86). To do this would be to realize Pavlov's dream, the proof for the 'true mechanical explanation ... [a] pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche' (GR 89). This is why Pointsman, like Slothrop himself, is constantly trying to read the 'Zone'.

Already the motto of part 3 -- 'In the Zone' -- of Gravity's

Rainbow: 'Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more....' (Taken from the book -- and the movie -- The Wizard of Oz with the famous song 'Somewhere, over the Rainbow') designates the Zone as a dream-space -- remember that the movie shows a dream-country -- while the statement that 'There are no zones [...] no zones but the Zone' (GR 333) shows that Pynchon thinks of it as ultimately identical to the space of 'human reality'. Its main characteristic is that, because of the war's destructions, 'categories have been blurred badly' (GR 303). There is 'never a clear sense of nationality anywhere, nor even of belligerent sides, only the War, a single damaged landscape' (GR 257). In this aspect, the destroyed landscape of Germany serves as a metaphor for a state of disorder. It is a landscape stripped of meanings, a purely material surface; the utopia of a tabula rasa, a free, unhierarchical, anarchic space without cultural -- that is symbolic and imaginary -- inscriptions, which is why Geli Tripping, a witch and another of Slothrop's part-time lovers can tell him to '[f]orget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions' (GR 294). As in Guattari's dynamics of de- and re-territorialization, the Zone is an 'interregnum' (294), the 'timeless' moment of the cut or pulse that separates destruction from construction and decentralization from centralization: 'In ordinary times [...] the center always wins. [...] Decentralizing, back towards anarchism, needs extraordinary times ... this War [...] has wiped out the proliferation of little states that's prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. Opened it' (GR 264-65). As such, it can become the utopia of an un-repressed, un-traumatized state.

Although he realizes that this open space, 'won't last' except 'for a few months [...] for a moment of spring, perhaps' (GR 265), maybe only for 'the warm romantic summer of '45' (GR 445) the Argentine anarchist Squallidozzi hopes for a change for the better: 'In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless' (GR 265). Yet, he also realizes, 'So is our danger' (GR 265). Similarly, Slothrop dreams about a possible new

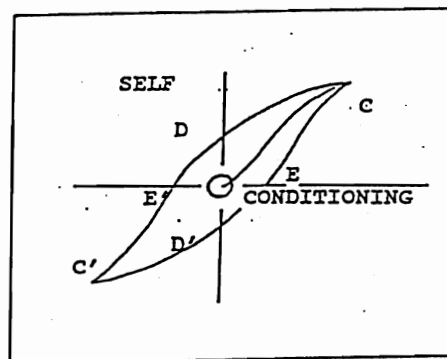
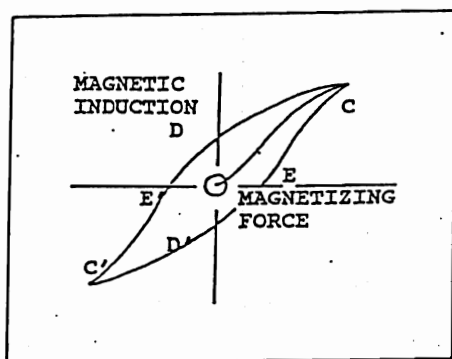
beginning:

It seems [...] that there might be a route back-maybe that anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down ... the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up...' (GR 556; emphasis added).

Pynchon uses one of his many scientific metaphors to define the dynamics of 'the Zone', especially its promise that '[t]he people will find the Center again, the Center without time' (GR 319). Pynchon describes such a logocentric, utopian journey towards the center as a 'journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place...' (GR 319). Such a journey, however, would have to exclude both the psychic, mental inertia (Trägheit) and the physical, material one, thus touching both sides - or actually the Möbius-like 'one side' - of subjectivity: mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness. (In this respect see also Freud's idea of the 'libidinöse Trägheit,' die 'Klebrigkeit der Libido', the unwillingness of the libido to give up an 'object of desire'). This duality of body-unconscious and mind-consciousness is also the ultimate 'psychoanalytic meaning' of the Möbius strip.

Pynchon hinges his argument precisely on these two kinds of 'inertia', which adds a new dimension to the name Slothrop and the 'Gravity' in the book's title.¹² While the pathological, psychic inertia is dealt with in terms of Pavlovian conditioning, the parallel problem of physical inertia is appropriately dealt with in physical terms through the concept of hysteresis, which denotes the tendency of inert, physical materials to lag in response to changing forces.¹³ A ferro-magnetic material, for example, which is put into a growing magnetic field up to the point of saturation (O-C), will not return by itself to its former state after the field has been removed, but will remain to

some degree magnetized (C-D) (a rest called remanence or 'residual induction'). This process can only be reversed through the application of a 'negative' magnetic field, with a complete de-magnetization reached at E'. The application of a negative field up to the point of saturation yields the curve D-C'. A decrease of the negative field yields the curve C'-D', the subsequent re-application of a positive field D'-C. The important thing is that this loop -- itself comparable in some aspects to a Möbius-strip -- will never bring the magnetized material back to the initial point O. Because of the inherent physical inertia of the material, the curves from C to C' and back to C take different paths and both differ from the initial curve O to C, which denotes a point of departure to which no return is possible.¹⁴



Pynchon uses this scientific fact to create a complex metaphor and allegory of the 'human condition'(ing) and of, as Lacan calls it 'life as a detour'.¹⁵ In this 'allegory', O - the state of complete chaos and entropy, in which, in physical terms, the electrons are randomly oriented - is seen as the moment of the 'birth of subjectivity' and the magnetic fields are seen as various (cultural) conditionings -- with complete saturation, the state in which the electrons are completely aligned in either direction, denoting the complete conditioning of the subject. What this allegory ultimately shows, then, is the impossibility

of a return to the origin, to a state of unconsciousness. The Zone is such an ambivalent space because, while it is on the one hand the utopia of such an origin (a point 0) -- which would imply logocentric innocence and presence -- Pynchon simultaneously uses it to stage the impossibility of such a return. Once innocence has been lost -- in electromagnetic terms the first curve, O-C, is appropriately called the 'virgin curve' -- it cannot be regained without completely de-magnetizing the metal, a process analogous in Pavlovian conditioning to a complete de-conditioning. As Pointsman notes, 'ordinarily [...] the little sucker would have been de-conditioned' (GR 84). Yet even with such a de-conditioning -- and parallel with a complete de-magnetization -- a return to a completely un-conditioned state might be impossible. Again, in this context, Pynchon quotes Pavlov directly: 'we must [...] realize that extinction can proceed beyond the point of reducing a reflex to zero [...] there can still be a silent extinction beyond the zero (GR 84-85). This silent extinction might be the ultimate reason for and clue to Slothrop's link to the V-2.

What generally links physics and hysteresis with conditioning is of course that Pavlov understands the human body as a purely physiological apparatus; a complicated cybernetic machine. In fact, Lacan singles out this very idea in his critique of Pavlovian conditioning. He develops this critique within a discussion of the difference between the purely biological function of need, which operates on the level of the real, and that of desire, which operates on that of the symbolic and the imaginary.

Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from their subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting.

According to Lacan, conditioned stimuli do not function as signifiers for the animal because in the conditioned reflex it is

merely a need that is broken down, not a desire or a demand. For the stimuli to become signifiers, what is needed is 'an internal apparatus which reflects not only the stimuli of the external world, but also, in a manner of speaking, its structure' (Lacan II 107). Unlike in the story of the mice which 'use' the experimenters to get food, Pavlov's dogs never enter the 'intersubjective' level of the signifier: 'The experiment may cause in him [the dog] all sorts of disorders, all sorts of disturbances, but, not yet being a speaking creature, he is not called to put in question the desire of the experimenter' (237). Thus, the conditioned reflex functions merely at the level of a purely biological perception. As a result, '[e]ven the supposed effects of neurosis that are obtained are not effects of neurosis, for one simple reason - they cannot be analysed by speech' (228). Interestingly, the level of the signifier adds a third kind of inertia to the discussion, the 'considerable inertia' (Lacan, XX 100) of language, whose entropic tendencies are also of such importance to Oedipa in Lot 49.

It is not surprising that during the course of his odyssey, Slothrop learns that he has indeed been conditioned from his birth onward: 'Once something was done to him, in a room, while he lay helpless...' (GR 285). In fact, his father has sold him to IG Farben 'like a side of beef' (GR 286).¹⁶ In return, they payed for his education at Harvard, so that Slothrop becomes a preterite version of Citizen Kane, (especially the first scene is important here, the break-up of the family) and important movie for Pynchon, also in regard to Lot 49. His main question -- and that of the book -- is thus how what he has always thought of as his subjectivity is implicated in the 'cultural' inscriptions and conditionings of a specifically 'Western' civilization, for which the scientist Jamf, the acronym of a 'black' insult to a 'white' person: 'Jive ass mother-fucker' and Pointsman are the 'personifications'.¹⁷ Ultimately, as Lot 49, the book opens up the question of the relation between the individual and culture, 'the coupling of "Jamf" and "I" in the primal dream' (GR 623).¹⁸

The realization: I am a jive-ass-motherfucker and the related question: Why? Yet again, the search for this connection is a belated one. (the inscription come before the development of the subject, or, more specifically the ego. See also Lacan's 'truism' that the ego is not a pre-reflexive unity but the result of a reflection). Accordingly, it is not Slothrop who is following the S-Gerät -- not the detective who is following the criminal, but the other way around: 'it's the S-Gerät after all that's following him, it and the plastic ubiquity of Laszlo Jamf. [...] Looks like there are sub-Slothrop needs They know about, and he doesn't: this is humiliating on the face of it, but now there's also the even more annoying question: What do I need that badly?' (GR 490).

It is important for the impact of this 'conceit' that Slothrop is thrown into the Zone like a child is thrown into the world, or 'skidded out onto the Zone like a planchette on an Ouija board' (329). In all of his works, in fact, Pynchon sees children as un-written 'wax slates', onto which, as in Kafka's 'Strafkolonie', words and conditionings are 'written' by the likes of Pointsman, who constantly fantasizes about these children, 'painless, egoless for one pulse of the Between ... tablet erased, new writing about to begin, hand and chalk poised ... over these poor human palimpsests' (57).

On an individual level, Pynchon deals with the impossibility of a return to a state of zero via Slothrop's conditioning. In fact, retrospectively, 'famous analyst' Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry states that 'Jamf [as a person/ification] was only a fiction, to help him explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky ... to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death (GR 738)'. Here, Slothrop's 'perverse' sexual trauma is directly equated with Pavlovian 'conditioning' by a culture which links sex and death in a perverse combination.¹⁹

So much for the personal psychic landscape. On a more

general cultural level -- and from the perspective of the material, real world rather than of the subject -- the Zone symbolizes the impossibility of a return to innocence, because from the beginning, its 'anarchy' -- and thus its real-ity -- is a utopia under erasure. Because of the numerous sub-stories to the war and its destructions, the state of zero it promises is always already encoded, belated, and never real: 'Perhaps it's theater, but they seem no longer to be Allies ... though the history they have invented for themselves conditions us to expect "postwar rivalries," when in fact it may all be a giant cartel including winners and losers both, in an aimable agreement to share what is there to be shared...' (GR 326). Also on this level, the point zero of total randomness is a 'conditional' one and the disorder only appears to be the true zero. Through the 'Zone', then, Pynchon re-states the question of Slothrop's conditioning on a cultural level: Like the subject, the 'history of the real' is always already a 'chronic experiment' (Pawlow XIX), and Slothrop's terrible realization that he 'has been under their observation - m-maybe since he was born?' (GR 286) is mirrored in the question whether 'the history of the real' is nothing more than the random events of a 'real history' or whether it is also controlled by a mysterious 'Them' or 'The Firm'. In this light, the 'Zone' is not a free space, but a similarly 'erogenous Zone', a merely 'synthetic wastefield' (GR 523) which is the result of an enigmatic, 'incalculable plot' (GR 521).

In this aspect, the Zone is treated not as a real landscape, but as a space of hidden cultural, ultimately also psycho-sexual, inscriptions, which one can read only if one finds their grammar. The search for these inscriptions is centered around the Schwarzkommando, an initially fictitious group of African soldiers, who were part of a hoax to scare the German troops by confronting them with images of their repressed. Now, however, everyone is perplexed that belatedly, and in another time-loop, 'a story made up to scare last year's enemy should prove to be

literally true' (320). On his quest to assemble the 00001 from the post-war spoils of the V-2, Enzian, the head of the Schwarzkommando, realizes that the main candidate for this grammar is the V-2: 'say we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here [...] the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated [...] well we assumed - natürlich! - that this holy Text had to be the Rocket' (GR 520).

Although the landscape seems real, in the Schwarzkommando's search for the 'True Text' (GR 525) -- the 'incalculable plot'-- it becomes a 'Real Text' (GR 520) an ambivalent, even paradoxical territory -- like the human body -- in which real and symbolic registers constantly oscillate. Again and again, Pynchon highlights this textual quality of the real. Again, however, Pynchon does not choose either side: the important thing is that the shift from real to symbolic/textual registers is not from one side to the other, but happens -- as on a Möbius-strip -- on the same 'field' and thus the same side.

In Cinema and War,²⁰ Paul Virilio has drawn attention to the link between simulation and war, yet while in Virilio's case, the simulations are conscious attempts to fool the enemy, in Gravity's Rainbow it never becomes clear who is behind the various encodings and simulations. It might be a 'conspiracy between human beings and techniques' (GR 521), it might also be the enigmatic 'Firm', the 'IG Raketen' (GR 566) or a combination of all these, which might also ultimately be identical. In any case, it is something intimately related to the V-2, 'a State that spans oceans and surface politics [...] and the Rocket is its soul' (GR 566). This is why in Gravity's Rainbow, one way or another, everyone tries to assemble the secret message spelled out by the landscape and everyone is forever 'decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text ...' (GR 520-21), a movement that parallels the 'assembly' of the 00001, the 'repressed' counter rocket to the 00000, the two together forming the book's most comprehensive binarism.

The direction of this attempt goes towards the center, and thus runs counter to 'centrifugal history' (GR 737). It is 'in a geographical way, a Diaspora running backwards, seeds of exile flying inward in a modest preview of gravitational collapse' (GR 737) which evokes a 'fearful' -- metaphysical -- implosion. Yet during this very attempt, things fall apart, a movement reminiscent of the loose ending of V. in which V. at the end is a 'remarkably scattered concept' (V. 389). In Gravity's Rainbow, similarly, Pointsman is 'abandoned', 'restricted to one small office [...] the rest of the space having been taken over by an agency studying options for nationalizing coal and steel' (GR 615) and Slothrop 'disintegrates'. Towards the end, in fact, the whole narration loses what surface coherence it had, fracturing into multiple fragments, and changing more and more from real, 'geographical' space to the mental space of 'comic books' (GR 379).

The text, then, like the landscape, can be read only as a belated effect, never as the true, real message -- the signal zero. Accordingly, the quotation from the beginning of the paper which states that Slothrop has been sent into the Zone to witness 'his time's assembly' continues '- and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered' (GR 738). Yet even this explanation is 'twice removed' from the truth, as it is only a 'story' (GR 738) both within the book as well as within the book's rhetorical matrix. Pynchon ultimately refuses to answer the questions he has raised. Rather, he knots them tighter into each other. By doing so, he shows three things: that the struggle between eros and thanatos is still going on; secondly, that it is possible only to show the 'state of the battle', not to predict a winner; and that thirdly, as long as the struggle goes on, these simulations and conditionings also inhabit writing itself, which is forever, and tragically, linked to the conditions of the culture out of which it emerges.²¹ As Lacan maintains, there is no metalanguage that can be spoken.²² Because there is no

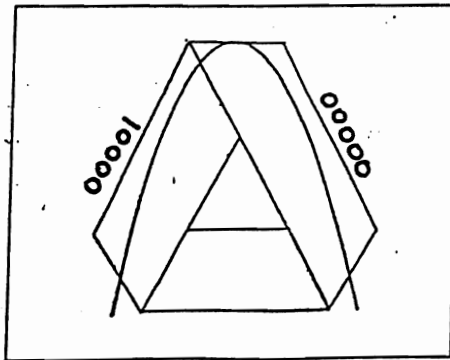
metaphysical position from which to write, the text must by necessity disintegrate, or self-destruct, something which, I might add, of course also applies to the process of interpretation. One cannot 'reach' the German soul any more than one can reach the real; 'the repressed'. In fact, Slothrop's quest becomes an allegory of reading as well as of the human condition in general: 'he keeps pushing aside gauze after wavy gauze but there's always still the one, the impenetrable...' (GR 359). Like Jamf, in fact, the V-2 turns out to be just another 'symbol', or 'promise', while the 'Real Text' is written on an impossible 'other scene' -- the unconscious: 'Its [the rocket's] symmetries, its latencies, the cuteness of it enchanted and seduced us while the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness' (GR 520).

As yet another distortion of the impossible unconscious text, the V-2 is inextricably linked to the Herero's 'ancient tragedy of lost messages' (GR 520). Rather than a 'real space', or a space of 'true, final meaning', the 'Zone' is a landscape of multiple mental projections in which dreams, fears, and images of the repressed create a kaleidoscopic space, as kaleidoscopic as the text itself. This is one reason why it is difficult to delineate a general poetics operative in Gravity's Rainbow, which, in its presentation of a multiplicity of points-of-view, voices and focalizations, is a true polylogue.²³ Still, I'd argue, and this is my final point, that Gravity's Rainbow -- like a lot of literature, which one might call 'literature of belatedness' -- is an attempt to 'write the real'. This opens up the question of a logocentric desire in spite of the realization that logocentrism is only a promise, and never real.

Because it is implicated by the fact that such a writing can only be a belated representation and that 'words are always an eyetwitch away from the things they stand for', it transforms classical space and chronological time into loops. In Gravity's Rainbow, the V-2 announces this new topography and temporality, and the structure of the book 'follows' in detail the logic of

this first 'belated' rocket, whose effects pre-date its perception and thus arrive before their cause can be made out. Semiotically, -- somewhat like the trauma -- it is the first 'real' referent which passes through semiotic space without bothering to become a sign.

The last part of Gravity's Rainbow ends with a flash-forward to the 1970s. Now, however, in the most obvious time loop in the novel, the 'screaming [which] comes across the sky' (3) which had opened the novel -- the famous first sentence -- is that of a rocket (actually the 00000) above a 'contemporary' 'movie theater' in Los Angeles -- contemporary at least at the time of publication. This is also the moment at which the parameters of the 00001 -- ascent (life, promise of metaphysical/logocentric revelation, zero gravity, zero inertia) -- and of the 00000--descent (death, physics, gravity, inertia)-- cancel each other out. (The last two sections are in fact headed Ascent and Descent). At the cusp of the parabola, the point and time of weightlessness, symptomatically, things are 'no clearer than usual, but certainly more present'.



This is -- topographically -- the moment of the 'cut', which, however, is here also aligned with the filmic cut, the 'film of Gottfried's life begins to 'stutter'.

Symptomatically, the song that ends the book gives one last image of the ambivalent, anthropomorphic Zone, which is neither fully real nor fully symbolic or imaginary, neither inside nor

outside: neither mind nor body, but both

There is a Hand to turn the time,	life
Though the Glass today be run,	death
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low	elect
Find the last poor Pret'rite one...	preterite
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,	waking
All through our crippl'd Zone	dream
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,	human
And a Soul in ev'ry stone.... (887 my emphasis).	world