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GRAVITY'S RAINBOW AND MIKHAIL BAKHTIN'S POETICS OF THE NOVEL

Gravity's Rainbow is a challenging text. Since its publication in 1973, readers have been astounded – and occasionally perplexed – by the startling array of experience depicted in this work and, even more, by the innovative manner in which it is represented. The unusual narrative techniques and conventions employed in *Gravity's Rainbow* seem to call forth new *reading* strategies and in so doing have drawn many readers to questions of generic classification. In its very originality, *Gravity's Rainbow* appears to question the legitimacy of the designation “novel” both for this particular work and, more extremely, as a meaningful generic category. In this respect *Gravity's Rainbow* is an excellent literary work with which to illustrate the accuracy of the term novel for this text and, simultaneously, to assess the efficacy of Mikhail Bakhtin's poetics of the novel.

Although referred to as a novel above, *Gravity's Rainbow* is not universally recognized as belonging to this genre. Alfred MacAdam, for instance, finds that the word novel “seems devoid of meaning” and goes so far as to suggest that “for literary criticism... the term has become an embarrassment”¹. For MacAdam, *Gravity's Rainbow* is disqualified as a novel on the basis of its use of character and plot and argues for its generic designation as satire. Alternatively, Edward Mendelson identifies *Gravity's Rainbow* as a representative “encyclopedic narrative”: “the most important single genre in Western literature of the Renaissance and after [although] it has never been identified”². *Gravity's Rainbow*

¹ Alfred MacAdam, “Pynchon as Satirist”, *Yale Review*, 67 (1978): 555.

² Edward Mendelson, “Gravity's Encyclopedia”, in *Mindful Pleasures*, ed G. Levine and D. Leverenz, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976): 161.

thus takes its place with Dante's *Commedia*, Rabelais' books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Joyce's *Ulysses* as an "encyclopedic narrative" and not a novel, which Mendelson defines as "a narrative of individuals and their social and psychological relations" (161). These two formulations are but individual critical responses to something which is clear upon even though most cursory reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* - Pynchon's novel, in its formal and thematic diversity, resists facile attempts to classify it according to traditional generic categories³.

Precisely because of the seemingly *sui generis* character of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I would like in the following paper to argue for the conclusive designation of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a novel while demonstrating the particular strengths of Mikhail Bakhtin's poetics of the novel⁴. Bakhtin's approach to the novel form recommends itself to such a study for several reasons, not the least of which is its accommodation of a feature central to the difficulty of developing a poetics of the novel in general and witnessed in *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular - the difficulty of isolating defining characteristics of the novel due to the constant newness and incessant changeability of the narrative conventions available to the novel form. Bakhtin's study "Epic and Novel" begins with a statement which identifies this oft-stated difficulty of formulating a poetics of the novel:

The study of the novel as a genre is distinguished by peculiar difficulties. This is due to the unique nature of the object itself: the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as genre takes place in the

³ See also M. Keith Booker's discussion of the genre of *Gravity's Rainbow* in "Gravity's Novel: A Note on the Genre of Gravity's Rainbow", *Pynchon Notes* 20-21 (1978): 61-68.

⁴ Although I will not directly allude to them in the course of this paper, other relevant studies which provide an important context for Bakhtin's studies of the novel are: L. J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); J. P. Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, (New York: Norton, 1990); G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated A. Bostock, (London: Merlin Press, 1971); M. McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); W. L. Reed, *An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); I. Watt *The Rise of the Novel*, (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1985).

full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities⁵.

In identifying the novel as a genre still in the process of development, Bakhtin not only indicates the difficulties inherent in discussing the novel form, but also provides advanced indication of his own approach to the novel. Aware of the novel's continued development, Bakhtin does not attempt to encase the novel form within a single generic definition but rather to isolate those characteristics of novelness which ensure specific identification with the genre while allowing the novel form the possibility of continued development. Accordingly, rather than identify individual generic conventions unique to the novel form, Bakhtin concentrates on how conventions common to numerous forms of narrative are employed in ways amenable to the representational goals of the novel form. In this way, Bakhtin's poetics of the novel is purposefully one which seeks to identify "basic structural characteristics of this most fluid of genres":

I find three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: (1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary images; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness (Bakhtin, II).

In applying Bakhtin's poetics of the novel to *Gravity's Rainbow*, I will not explicitly follow the three characteristics indicated by Bakhtin above but rather expand them into the five categories of time, space, plot, character and language. The advantage of using these categories is primarily logistic. While Bakhtin's three characteristics allow the higher degree of abstraction required to discuss the novel form in general, the five categories I have enumerated allow for more direct application to textual examples from *Gravity's Rainbow* without upsetting the integrity of Bakhtin's poetics. If Bakhtin's principles of the novel may be shown to apply to Pynchon's text - as I believe they can - then much has been said both of their ability to describe the novel and the unusual representational qualities of Pynchon's novel.

⁵ Michail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 3. All references to Bakhtin will be taken from this edition.

Bakhtin's poetics of the novel places profound emphasis on the narrative representation of time. According to Bakhtin it is the depiction of time and space in a particular chronotope which distinguishes a narrative's approach to the representation of reality and, hence, its genre. Generic distinctions are, in this way, chronotopic⁶. Bakhtin most clearly saw the novel's relationship to time in the manner in which it differed from the epic's representation of time⁷. While the epic preserved time in a heroic past of ideal values and a sacrosanct tradition, the novel takes as its point of temporal departure the fluidity and inconclusiveness of the historical present, the sphere of perpetual development (Bakhtin 30). Apart from introducing historical consciousness to literature – through a representation of reality which shows it to develop out of the past and into the future – the novel's prioritization of time and the developing, inconclusive present ensures that the subject matter of the novel is ever new:

(The novel) is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality (Bakhtin, 39).

Like the novel form in general, *Gravity's Rainbow* employs a particular approach to the representation of time: one which accounts in part for this novel's formal plasticity while thematizing the breakdown of any rationale for temporal development or the conceptualization of time as history.

"A screaming comes across the sky"⁸. *Gravity's Rainbow* begins in time, in the present tense depiction of a rocket streaking across the sky to bring its payload of death and, in narrative terms, a conclusion, for the novel will end with the launching of another rocket. In its temporally

⁶ "...it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (Bakhtin, 85). See also Zofia Kolbuszewska, "Vineland: The Bakhtinian Chronotope of a Postmodernist Novel", in L. S. Kolek ed. *Approaches to Fiction* (Lublin: Folium, 1996): 99-124.

⁷ In this Bakhtin was in general agreement with George Lukács' description of the novel's use of time. See Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel*, tran. A Bostock, (London: Merlin Press, 1971): 122, *passim*.

⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, (New York: Bantam, 1973): 3. Hereafter, references to this edition will be made in the text.

ordained flight through the novel, approximately one year of time from September 1944 to early autumn 1945 is recounted with numerous analepses of various dates and a prolepsis to Nixon's America of approximately 1970⁹. The rocket, a central image throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, metaphorically informs the novel's radically new approach to time in a culture changed by war and rockets. *Gravity's Rainbow* represents reality in its inclusivity from an ever developing present moment. This progression of time, however, has no teleologically informed structure of progression and causal development. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the abandonment of time subjects reality, like the rocket, to chance and contingency:

One reason we grew so close to the Rocket, I think, was this sharp awareness of how contingent, like ourselves, the Aggregate 4 could be - how at the mercy of small things... (422).

Like the rocket, time in *Gravity's Rainbow* has a trajectory subject to the gravity of reality - death, in human terms - but one which is unknowable. No one knows exactly when and where it will hit. Indeed it is the rocket which has signaled the destruction of the previous conception of time with its supersonic reversal of temporal causality:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only after it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out... a few feet of film run backwards... the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound - then growing out of it the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning... a ghost in the sky (55).

Characters who contemplate and understand the implications of death's randomness and the rocket's intrusion into the temporal process, those who voice the urge to accept a new approach to time and "to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle" (103) are thus appropriately accused of destroying history for an entire generation in the wake of the V2 rocket:

How can Mexico play, so at his ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware - perhaps - that in this play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself.

⁹ Khachig Toloyan, "War as Background in *Gravity's Rainbow*" in C. Clerc ed., *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press): 31-68 has provided a detailed chronology and map of the central temporal and physical events of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

What if Mexico's whole *generation* has turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history? (64-65).

Before following the ramifications to history implicit in the treatment of time in *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, there remains another trait of this novel's narrative use of time which is of generic, familial relation to the novel form. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* narrates events located in the past, the narrative point of temporal departure is predominantly that of the present, as it unfolds and develops. This remains strikingly so in numerous instances of analepses where Pynchon's narrative shifts (im-perceptibly in temporal terms) from events unfolding in the present to those in the past. Events are recalled, personal and cultural histories are probed or recast in near temporal, narrative simultaneity. Accordingly, events of the past, narrated as unfolding, are never allowed to solidify into the role of explicit cause of a later effect. Past situations, as with those of the central narrative, are narrated in such a way as to accentuate their inconclusivity, their maximal contact to a contemporary reality developing in uncertainty.

The thematization of history in *Gravity's Rainbow*, perhaps more than any other single feature in the novel, foregrounds issues of profound ontological uncertainty in the wake of an altered perception of time. In Pynchon's novel, history, both transnational and personal, is shown to play a central role as an interpretive structure with which to understand the temporal and cultural development of reality. *Gravity's Rainbow* develops two strategies for historically interpreting the reality of Europe in 1945. The first strategy is based on the metaphoric use of paranoia, wherein all events are linked in a grand, unidentifiable though existent pattern or conspiracy. Tyrone Slothrop, in fostering his own paranoid vision of the malignant cabal directing his personal development within international history, isolates the catalytic force of an international cartel responsible for his "conditioning" in childhood experiments and ultimately for prompting the carnage of the second-world war. This paranoid vision of history as a rigid pattern of unidentified cause and horrific effect is commensurate with the teleology of western civilization's History which seems to be advancing through the ideology of capitalism to death:

Don't forget the real business of the War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as

diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. ... The true war is a celebration of markets (122).

While adoption of this mythology of history offers the consolation of understanding, a strategy for explaining, if not controlling history, it is fatalistic. Individuals such as Slothrop, Katje Borgesius, Tchitcherine and Enzian, as well as being irrevocably anchored in their personal and ancestral pasts, are bound to the destruction of their future as surely as a V2 rocket explodes at its programmed target. Thus, History, interpreted as a discernible, causal process – a rocket with a programmed trajectory – offers a strategy for understanding but assures the acceptance of the entire culture's self-destruction.

Gravity's Rainbow provides an alternate vision of history as well. Here, rather than viewing history as a grand paranoiac narrative, it is presented as antiparanoia, a series of contingently arranged events and personal texts unnarrated by any external authorial ideology or rationale. In this response to collective History, *Gravity's Rainbow* posits an understanding of history conceived plurally. These multiple histories offer representation to those cultural narratives which are unaccepted in official History. Thus, Pynchon's novel provides a voice and history to the preterit of History: the Hereros, Kirghiz, children, homosexuals, etc. of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Indeed, the majority of these preterit seeking respite in their personalized visions are victims of the dominant narrative of western civilization's historical development: "Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression" (369). Unfortunately, however, this strategy of finding history in localized histories can offer no synthesis of understanding or pattern for sustained future repetition and constitutes not simply the death of History but also cultural death. The Otukungurua of *Gravity's Rainbow* exemplify precisely this dilemma. These people of the Herero tribe, devastated by their encounter with European civilization, choose cultural suicide as their response to the determinism seemingly inherent in history:

It was a simple choice for the Hereros, between two kinds of death: tribal death, or Christian death. Tribal death made sense, Christian death made none at all. ... They calculate no cycles, no returns, they are in love with the glamour of a whole people's suicide - ... The Empty Ones can guarantee a day when the last Zone-Herero will die, a final zero to a collective history fully lived. It has appeal (369-70).

Gravity's Rainbow offers no resolution between these two competing conceptions of history, both of which are presented as defective forms of knowledge. True to the novel's representation of reality in its contemporary state of profound ontological doubt, *Gravity's Rainbow* refuses to prescribe a specific conception of history. The novel does, however, describe the conditions of life and the setting of dubious future historical development in the rubble of the bourgeois European order caused by the war and the V2 rocket. At best, given the pervasive distrust of history as it had unfolded and the discrediting of History and histories, *Gravity's Rainbow* recounts the potential for future historical development in a culture leveled of its physical and cultural edifices:

It seems to Tyrone Slothrop 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, one road as good as another, 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 preterit, without even nationality to fuck it up... (648).

In this most open-ended of historical moments, where spacial, political and national boundaries have been cleared, *Gravity's Rainbow* glimpses the potential for renewed historical growth. In affirmation of the novel form's unwillingness to transfix reality, however, the narrative never develops this potential in the representation of future reality. The profound contingency depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow* draws upon and requires the formal plasticity of the novel form.

In Bakhtin's discussion of the novel form, the setting of any novel is inextricably linked to its representation of time. Just as the use of time and history is reflective of temporal placement, so setting, as the element wherein characters interact affectively with their environment, reflects aspects of the novel's cultural place. Place and setting are used in the novel form as the means of physically manifesting time as a particular historical moment¹⁰. Likewise, the depiction and use of setting in *Gravity's Rainbow* is directly linked to the novel's generic representation of time and history. In relation to time and history, *Gravity's Rainbow*

¹⁰ "...the graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and everyday time are concentrated and condensed; at the same time they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch. The epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time]". (Bakhtin 247).

dramatized the implications of the V2 rocket upon the temporally constituted process of cause and effect and consequently for history. The V2 rocket is also shown to have a profoundly affective relationship with the setting of 1944-45 Europe and its post-war culture. Indeed given the cataclysmic qualities of the time and place depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel's use of place is similarly fractured and indeterminate.

As befits a novel of maximal openness to the representation of all levels of reality, *Gravity's Rainbow* begins not with the description of a physical setting, but with that of a dream. Captain Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice dreams of the evacuation of London in the wake of previous bombings and in anticipation of future ones. He sees "the fall of a crystal palace", the symbol of bourgeois England, even the cultural and ideological aspirations of the Enlightenment. Rather than a disentanglement from the effects of the bomb, however, the response of an evacuation seems a knotting into, a capitulation to, and intensification of, the chaos and uncertainty caused by the rocket. Prentice's dream and the ontological insecurity it presages for the radically modern representation of space and setting in *Gravity's Rainbow* is maintained and intensified throughout the novel.

"Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren't any" (342). The setting of *Gravity's Rainbow* ranges significantly, from London to Kazakstan geographically and historically from seventeenth-century Mauritius through early twentieth-century south-west Africa to Europe in 1945. In each instance, however, the events of the various depicted settings relate to war-torn Europe, if not in a physically causal relationship, then in western culture's preparation of an ethic acceptance of death. The central setting of the novel, however, is northern Europe and in particular the "Zone" of the recently capitulated German Third Reich. In its geographic and cultural formlessness, the "Zone" is the narrative space of the novel form par excellence. In the Zone, the metaphoric space of Western culture's historical development, all categories of boundary have been broken down. Morally and ethically there are no surviving imperatives in the destructive wake of, for instance, colonialism and the extermination of the Herero people whose "gods had gone away themselves, ... had left the people" (376) or in the shadow of the death camps. Politically and militarily, the Zone represents an affront to the victorious allies in the unconquerability of its formless autonomy:

'It's so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements. You'll find out.' Indeed he will - he'll find thousands of arrangements, for warmth, love, food, simple movement along roads, tracks and canals. Even G-5, living its fantasy of being the only government in Germany now, is just the arrangement for being victorious, is all. No more or less real than all these others so private, silent, and lost to History (338).

Socially, in terms of national cultural boundaries, the Zone is a sea of peoples displaced from their cultural homes by the war. The following is a portion of a virtuoso, single sentence, description of the profound dislocation represented in the Zone. Although long even in its truncated form, this passage merits extended citation:

The Nationalities are on the move. It is a great frontierless streaming out here. Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what's forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts and Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenburg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniols, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pyjamas, footsteps light as waterfowl's in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins failing, horses dying, families leaving the vehicles beside the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, ... (640).

Most importantly, the Zone is represented itself as an indeterminate spatial category for Tyrone Slothrop, not so much a place with an internal physical or even conceptual geography of its own but rather a spatial metaphor of formlessness and ontological uncertainty: "There are no zones, ... no zones but the Zone" (388). The setting in *Gravity's Rainbow*, then, supplies not the stability of a familiar environment, but the representation of a space and condition of indeterminacy with implications which extend into other categories of knowing. The zone of *Gravity's Rainbow*, like the novel form of Bakhtin's poetics, is a place of utterly unlimited possibility. In the Zone all distinctions have been leveled, anything may happen and hence be represented by the novel. The novel form's acceptance of any and all subject matter of representation is mirrored in the spatial setting of *Gravity's Rainbow* and embodied in the delineation of plot.

In Bakhtin's poetics of the novel, little is directly stated regarding plot. As indicated above, Bakhtin defines novelness and determines the novelistic quality of any narrative according to its chronotope, its representation of time and place. Novelness is determined not according to what is represented in a narrative – which is as open as the future – but in how it defines its spatial and temporal relationship to reality and in terms of the language used in representation. Given the novel's chronotope of maximum contact to contemporary reality in all of its inconclusiveness, the subject matter of novelistic plot is virtually limitless. The novel tends towards the representation of the new and the incomplete, that which has not been canonized into formulaic representations of reality. Literally all aspects of human experience are appropriate subject matter for the novel. And novelistic plot is particularly adept at bringing diverse forms of experience together in as complete a depiction of reality as possible.

It is exceedingly difficult to outline the central plot or even plot lines of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's is a novel which, as has already been noted, ranges across time and place, covering a panoply of topics ranging from the destruction of the Dodo in the seventeenth-century, through an account of the adventures of an adenoid and a light bulb and the imposition of a Latin alphabet on Kirghizian tribesmen, to a frantic search for rocket technology. Historical, religious, technological, political, ethnic, geographical, military, linguistic and cultural forms of knowledge, among others, are all employed in the representation of the plot in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Nonetheless, out of this maelstrom of plots the central plot motif of the quest may be isolated. The quest, a plot structure common to both romance and the novel is conducted on two primary levels in *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the level of individual humans, numerous characters are depicted as being engaged in quests of private, existential motivation. Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, for instance, attempts to unearth the secrets of his childhood conditioning along with the seemingly related composition of the V2 rocket. On the more encompassing level of mass, cultural groupings, communities of humans are presented as searching for a means of ensuring the continuation of their collective destiny. The interaction of these groups is ensured by the attempt by allied intelligence to discover the reasons why Slothrop's erections consistently precede V2 rocket attacks. In both, the representation of the quest carries profound implications. For western culture is shown in its social and historical development to advance inexorably to the V2 rocket, a symbol rich in

associations with technological advancement and random death. The plot structure of the quest in *Gravity's Rainbow* is also eminently adaptable to the chronotope of the road. Discussed as the chronotope particularly associated with the novel form, Bakhtin's description of the road seems as if directly based on *Gravity's Rainbow*:

The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road ("the high road"), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people - representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages - intersect at one spatial and temporal point. ... Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: "the course of life", "to set out on a new course", "the course of history" and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time. (Bakhtin, 243-44).

The bulk of the plot is enacted within the context of the closing months of World War II and the first months of the G-5's governance of the armistice. Placed firmly within the record of historical events, the fidelity of *Gravity's Rainbow* to detailed events of the war and period has been convincingly documented¹¹. This historical accuracy in *Gravity's Rainbow* is instrumental in facilitating the representation of contemporary culture. Prominent here is the cultural condition of uncertainty and radical contingency born of the omnipresent spectre of instant death and destruction represented in the V2 rocket. In exploring this condition, common both to Pynchon's culture and the universe of the novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* utilizes the complete range of styles and narrative techniques available to the novel besides that of historical narrative.

Accordingly, Pynchon's novel partakes of the narrative conventions associated with historical reportage, romance, comic books, film, scientific theorems, jokes, songs, drug induced dreams, etc. to assist in the fullest representation of the chaotic and multi-faceted reality of the plot. Employing the novel form's elasticity of representational styles, *Gravity's Rainbow* shifts, for instance, from the unspeakable, uncontainable gravity of a concentration camp:

While he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside... all this time... Pöckler vomited. He cried some. The walls

¹¹ See Steven Weisenburger, "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past", in *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed., Richard Pearce, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981): 140-56.

did not dissolve – no prison wall ever did, not from tears, not at this finding, on every pallet, in every cell, that the faces are ones he knows after all, and holds dear as himself, and cannot, then, let them return to that silence... But what can he ever do about it? How can he ever keep them? Impotence, mirror-rotation of sorrow, works him terribly as runaway heartbeating, and with hardly any chances left him for good rage, or for turning... (504-05).

to the comic seriousness of the simple maintenance of a garden where "Death is told so clearly to fuck off" (11). *Gravity's Rainbow* never solidifies in the use of a single narrative format but, rather, in utilizing the variability available to the novel form, represents in its very formless the extreme contingency and inconclusiveness of the world being depicted. The inherent malleability of the novel form allows and contains this mixing of narrative types and allows Pynchon the full representation of even the most extreme forms of experience.

In Bakhtin's poetics, the novel's use of character is an issue closely related to that of plot. Characters, placed in maximum contact with a developing, changing world, seek continually to interpret and understand the reality surrounding them. And just as there is no limit placed on the possible subject of novelistic representation, so the agents who play out the depiction are free from limitation. Characters from all walks of life, from "high" and "low" realms of experience, are allowed to mix in the arena of the novel to accentuate the diversity of reality.

As if to demonstrate the very multiplicity available to the representation of character in the novel form, *Gravity's Rainbow* includes over 400 figures, most of whom hover in a status only marginally that of a "character". They develop no identifiable individuality in any conventional manner. Instead they populate the novel's multi-planed reality and heighten its qualities of uncertainty with their ontological opacity. Those characters who do possess individuality are themselves of unconfirmed status – socially and existentially. Many are represented as seekers and as such they propel the novel's plot along the chronotope of the *road* in their quests for ontological certainty concerning their personal pasts and an understanding of the nature of the reality they tenuously inhabit.

Edward Pointsman is obsessed with tracing within reality the certainty of a causal process, the law of cause and effect, stimulus and response. Roger Mexico, conversely, is concerned with the nebulous places between prefixed categories of reality "between the zero and the one" (63). Brigadier Pudding is mired in the corruption and death of his formative experiences on the battlefields of World War I. Tchitcherine, the Soviet operative, whose "real mission in the Zone is private, obses-

sive" (392) is consumed by the desire to capture his Herero half-brother. Enzian, Tchitcherine's half-brother and leader of the *Schwarzkommando*, has doubly uncertain ontological underpinnings. As leader of the *Schwarzkommando*, a group initially concocted by Allied propaganda officials as a fictitious group of African soldiers but later discovered to exist as a bizarre legacy of German colonialism, Enzian's sense of understanding as an individual and as the representative of a colonized tribe is intimately, though as yet unclearly, related to the rocket: "He was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood" (377). His quest through the Zone is to collect, assemble and fire a final rocket in an apocalyptic escape from Western history. Katje Borgesius, after repeatedly sublimating her true personality into assigned roles as sex slave, dominatrix and lover, has so fractured her self as to destroy it. Ever the object of desire, she is introduced to the narrative through the voyeuristic, depersonalized lens of a hidden camera. Though conscious of her attractiveness, she is also aware of her own psychic corruption:

At the images she sees in the mirror Katje also feels a cameraman's pleasure, but knows what he cannot: that inside herself, enclosed in the *soigne* surface of dear fabric and dead cells, she is corruption and ashes, she belongs in a way none of them can guess cruelly to the Oven... to *Der Kinderofen*...(109).

Tyrone Slothrop, the central protagonist, occupies the very centre of the novel's thematic core – the search for death as the goal and closure of Slothrop's personal development and the culmination of his society's socio-historical trajectory. Via the characterization of Slothrop, *Gravity's Rainbow* outlines the conditions of existence in this most extreme of worlds according to the properties of representation made available by the novel. Tyrone Slothrop lives an "autonomous life of interiority", as per the generic conventions of the novel form, though it is a life profoundly conditioned by his circumambient world¹².

Slothrop's individuality is established by the unique and bizarre combination of personal experience and the effects of his family history – from Slothrop's first American ancestor to the machinations of his father who sold the infant Slothrop to Laszlo Jamf for psychological experimentation (333). This rootedness in his personal past and the causal

¹² See G. Lukács (66), for a description of character and the novel which informs this discussion of Bakhtin and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

effects it seems to have on his life's development correspond to Slothrop's feelings of paranoia, the belief that everything which transpires in his environment is the result of an elaborate programme of manipulation. Conversely, however, Slothrop is also subject to a kind of anti-paranoia, the extreme splintering of his identity in response to the radical contingency of life in the Zone. Accordingly, Slothrop on numerous occasions takes on the identity of various figures, themselves characters of differing ontological status. He is "Ian Scuffing" a British war correspondent (298), *Raketmensch*, a heroic, comic-book figure (426), and *Plechazunga*, a pig-hero played by Slothrop in the ritual re-enactment of a pig's tenth-century salvation of a village faced by a Viking invasion (661). With each of these identities, Slothrop functions with an efficacy which comes not as a result of any intrinsic integrity between self and identity but because his surrounding community accepts him in these identities. The de-centred nature of Slothrop's character is indicative of the multiplicity and contingency of the Zone and, in turn, representative of the cultural setting of Pynchon's novel.

The figure of Slothrop is indicative of the use of character in *Gravity's Rainbow* according to the representational capabilities of the novel and is representative of the depiction of other characters in Pynchon's novel. The novel employs character as a means of representing the conditions of life in its surrounding world. It sets individual characters in a point of maximal contact with their evolving reality and engages them in a search for totality and meaning. Tyrone Slothrop does precisely this in *Gravity's Rainbow*. He embarks upon a journey and quest which is simultaneously an investigation into the sources of his psychic nature and a search for knowledge concerning Western culture's most potent symbol of technological and social development. Slothrop is both unique and typical, as are his experiences of life in the Zone. In his experiences and in the changing qualities of his own identity, Slothrop is expressive of the extreme uncertainty of being in the environment represented in Pynchon's novel.

Character in the novel, besides being a vehicle for the physical and metaphoric representation of reality, is also a tool in the representation of language. Each character speaks the language of a socio-ideological position which, taken together, further represent the unity of positions which comprise the novel's cultural world. Language in the novel, of course, is much more than simply the depiction of an ideology; it is also, in its applications and usages, representative of the condition of life in the novel's setting. Given the apocalyptic setting of Pynchon's novel and

its thematic content of a culture at the verge of destruction, it is not surprising that language use in *Gravity's Rainbow* approximates that described by Bakhtin in "heteroglot eras":

It is precisely in the most sharply heteroglot eras, when the collision and interaction of languages is especially intense and powerful, when heteroglossia washes over literary language from all sides (that is, in precisely those eras that most conduce to the novel) that aspects of heteroglossia are canonized with great ease and rapidly pass from one language system to another: from everyday life into literary language, from literary language into the language of everyday, from professional jargon into more general use, from one genre to another and so forth. In this intense struggle, boundaries are drawn with new sharpness and simultaneously erased with new ease; it is sometimes impossible to establish precisely where they have been erased or where certain of the warring parties have already crossed over into alien territory (Bakhtin, 418).

In the above quote, Bakhtin describes cultural conditions not unlike that of the "Zone" of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In assessing the causal influence of language in this setting, Bakhtin pointedly asserts the appropriateness of the novel form. Precisely such conditions prevail in *Gravity's Rainbow* where Pynchon draws upon the novel's generic relationship with language to represent the widest array of experience possible. This is done in both the novel's narrative use of language(s) and in the particular thematization of language as an affective force in social life.

Gravity's Rainbow astounds with its sheer abundance of language. The narrative is a polyglot representation of the profusion of competing languages and ideologies which is the condition and witness of a culture and world constantly in flux. Apart from the presence of such national languages as Kirghiz, Japanese, German, Dutch, English, Herero, French and Russian among others, there are regional and ethnic variants of these languages - from Afro-American English through received pronunciation English to such versions as the English spoken by Hungarians or the "redneck", Major Harvey. There are, as well, the languages of various ethical systems, professions and scientific approaches. Thus, *Gravity's Rainbow* itself functions as a boundaryless zone wherein these languages speak the multitude of socio-ideological voices which represent the heteroglossia of the present era. Taken together these languages articulate a full cross-section of the socio-ideological positions available to Pynchon in depicting the reality of his culture via the novel form:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech

types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions (Bakhtin, 263).

Gravity's Rainbow, then, employs the languages of various belief systems in the representation of the novel's plot and its supporting, external reality. Pynchon's novel also consists of the language of differing forms and styles of aesthetic expression. This narrative use of language is, as well, a feature of the novel form and instrumental in the representation of his epoch. The vocabularies and languages of film, folk-tales, music, lyric poetry, pornography, limericks and songs augment the dominant prose of the narrative in the representation of the "Zone". This use of the language of differing aesthetic systems and styles is consistent with the novel's propensity to represent as full a range of styles and cultures as possible. Pynchon's use of the comic and comic language is ostensible in this fusion of high and low styles in *Gravity's Rainbow* and contributes to the novel form's full representation of all levels of human experience. The language of *Gravity's Rainbow* is replete with vocabulary literally of the gutter, for example, as Pointsman lodges his foot in a toilet bowl, or Slothrop, under the influence of sodium amytal imagines his descent into the sewer system of New York through the very toilet into which both John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X defecated. Later Slothrop will read the shit-stained rocket manuals discarded by the SS at the training site in Blizna¹³. Pig Bodine, in his disruption of a formal dinner, provides the example, *par excellence*, of the comic, alliterative use of language in the representation of low culture as an alternative to the hierarchical control of reality:

Seaman Bodine is an unexpected bonus. Going in to dinner becomes a priestly procession, full of secret gestures and understandings. It is a very elaborate meal, according to the menu, full of relevés, poissons, entremets. 'What's this "Überraschungbraten" here?' Seaman Bodine asks right-hand dinner companion Constance Flamp, loose-khaki'd newshound and toughtalkin' sweetheart of ev'ry GI from Iwo to Saint-Lô. ... 'No ketchup, no ketchup,' the hirsute bluejacket searching agitatedly among the cruets and salvers, 'seems to be no... what th'fuck kind of a place is this, *Rog*,' yelling down slantwise across seven enemy faces, 'hey, buddih you find any *ketchup* down there?' ... 'Well I've got eyes for some of that rich, meaty smegma stew!' suggests Bodine, 'Or howbout a

¹³ Such are the facts of history woven by Pynchon into his narrative. David Irving, *The Mare's Nest*, (London: Kimber and Co., 1964) recounts how a Polish underground officer, operating on behalf of British intelligence, found a rocket test sheet disposed in a latrine by SS soldiers retreating in the face of Soviet advances.

clotcasserole? ... 'We're doing the soup course, babe,' sez cool Seaman Bodine, 'so let me just suggest a canker consommé, or perhaps a barf bouillon' (832-34).

In moments such as this, comic language rescues the characters from formalized, paranoiac structures which constitute a form of death while utilizing the novel's ability to cross and mix categories of the representable.

The narrative use of language in *Gravity's Rainbow* thus stresses the variability of linguistic and stylistic codes and levels available to the novel. This facet of the novel is singularly relevant to *Gravity's Rainbow* and the representation of reality in the novel form. For while emphasizing the radical diversity of language forms prevalent in the heteroglossia of reality as it is now developing, *Gravity's Rainbow* draws upon the generic qualities of the novel. It is not simply in the narrative use of language that *Gravity's Rainbow* accentuates the novel's adaptation to, and representation of, fast-changing reality, however. For *Gravity's Rainbow* also thematizes the formative power of language in a manner concomitant with the ontological instability identifiable with a world which is in the very process of change.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, language is not depicted as the eternal and transcendent mediator between sign and signified, word and world. Instead language is depicted as a protean category dependent upon the varying use of humans to acquire meaning according to their communities and language games. Language is indeed influential, though never monolithic, and as such a factor in the ontological uncertainty of the "Zone" and the creation of reality as it develops. Slothrop, for instance, asserts his power as the Rocketman in the act of naming himself as such:

'Raketemenschl' screams Säure, grabbing the helmet and unscrewing the horns off of it. Names by themselves may be empty, but the *act of naming*... (426).

Similarly, European culture's will to death in the creation of rockets is enacted in its act of naming those places where rockets would be housed. Through systems of language and the act of naming, reality is not merely identified but actively, sometimes randomly, created:

There may be no gods, but there is a pattern: names by themselves may have no magic, but the *act of naming*, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern. Nordhausen means dwellings in the north. The Rocket had to be produced out of a

The ideological potential of language as a formative tool and the repository of culture is also emphasized in *Gravity's Rainbow*. For although randomly created, the meaning and power of language is awesome and, unfortunately, all too often conscripted into the dominant culture's will to power. Thus the Dodoes in seventeenth-century Mauritius are slaughtered because they have no language: "No language meant no chances of co-opting them in to ... Salvation" (128). Without language the Dodoes are bereft of reality and God to the logocentric colonizers. Similarly, Tchitcherine, who is entrusted to bring the latinized New Turkic Alphabet to Soviet Central Asia, implements the hegemonic force of language. Tchitcherine's mission is a success, though he comes to realize that the language of ideological power he has introduced will spell the end of a history encoded in a form of communication which "was purely speech, gesture, touch" (393):

On sidewalks and walls the very first printed slogans start to show up, the first Central Asian fuck you signs, the first kill-the-police-commissioner signs (and somebody does! this alphabet is really something!) and so the magic that the shamans, out in the wind, have always known, begins to operate now to a political way, and Dzaqyp Qulan hears the ghost in his own lynched father with a scratchy pen in the night, practising As and Bs... (414).

In each of these instance, the formative power of language to create the reality of ideological power is emphasized. Language so thematized as ontologically baseless, though ideologically affective, corresponds to modernity's emphasis on language as a category which has expanded into a creative, rather than simply identifying, function. Thus with the proliferation of languages, *Gravity's Rainbow* represents the potential for a proliferation of realities, all of which the novel form contains and represents.

Examination of the manipulation of time, space, setting, character and language in *Gravity's Rainbow* indicates that the categories delineated in Bakhtin's poetics of the novel are sufficient both for providing a tool for describing the novel as form while allowing the genre the flexibility to develop in still further representations of reality. *Gravity's Rainbow* harnesses the flexibility of the novel form to represent a changed socio-cultural stage in the development of Western culture's understanding of reality. That this understanding of reality is consistently identified with death, destruction and cultural self-immolation is a feature worthy of another form of analysis. The task of this essay has not been to evaluate the ideological or ethical qualities of what the novel is

capable of representing, but rather to demonstrate the applicability of Bakhtin's poetics of the novel and to show how this poetics is able to account for the radical, generic exceptionalism of *Gravity's Rainbow* while firmly illustrating its novelness. Indeed according to Bakhtin's poetics of the novel the two elements – novelness and generic change and development – are necessarily complementary. The representational function of the novel form, which requires proximity to a changing reality, ensures that as the world changes so must the novel form evolve:

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of unfolding ...it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it (Bakhtin, 7).

As a concluding statement, Bakhtin's above quoted comment regarding the novel form accords fully with the innovations introduced to the novel form by *Gravity's Rainbow* while affirming the status of this unique text as novel.

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TĘCZA GRAWITACJI I POETYKA MICHAŁA BACHTINA

(Streszczenie)

Wielu krytyków uważa *Tęczę grawitacji* Thomasa Pynchona za utwór specyficzny, nie będący powieścią. Celem autora artykułu jest wykazać przynależność książki Pynchona do gatunku powieściowego. By to uczynić, odwołuje się do najwszechstronniejszej, jego zdaniem, teorii powieści, a mianowicie teorii Michaiła Bachtina.

Autor omawia dokonane przez Pynchona w tekście *Tęczy grawitacji*, manipulacje czasem, przestrzenią, postaciami, tłem i językiem, argumentując, że kategorie, które wyodrębnił Bachtin w swojej poetyce powieści, pozwalają badać zarówno powieść tradycyjną, jak i skomplikowaną powieść współczesną, podlegającą ciągłemu rozwojowi i przybierającą formy, jakie nie istniały jeszcze w chwili formułowania teorii.

Konkluzja autora brzmi: powieść, jako gatunek mimetyczny, który musi dostosowywać się do zmieniającej się rzeczywistości, ewoluuje wraz ze światem, tylko wtedy bowiem jest w stanie adekwatnie go opisać.