2001

"Parabola and parable" in the zone of Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow

Brian D. Zindel

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1441

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  

No, I do not grant permission  

Author's Signature:  

Date: 4/8/2001

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
"PARABOLA AND PARABLE" IN THE ZONE OF
THOMAS PYNCHON'S GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

by

Brian D. Zindel

B.A. University of Washington, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2001

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
To highlight different stylistic practices in modernism and postmodernism, I analyze some of each period's dominant representations of space and subjectivity. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* explores the relation between spatial organization and state and economic frameworks of control. Exploring changing expressions of space, I counterpoint T. S. Eliot's representations of the city with Pynchon's shift to Zone topography. Examining changing experiences of subjectivity, I pursue distinctions in modernist and postmodernist representations of identity; I trace Pynchon's reversals of the traditional quest as an example of postmodern constructions of subjectivity.

As *Gravity's Rainbow* describes, a global economic system emerged during World War II that took advantage of dispersal of the traces of human production to insert a new organization of space that enacts strategies for social control amenable to late capitalist multinationalism. The Zone represents a turning point in spatial reconfiguration with the dissolution of industrialism and the emergence of globalization in late capitalism. Thematically, Pynchon synthesizes this shift with the tensions between modernist modes of narrative order and postmodern aleatory realities.

The technologically based alterations to spatial orientation challenge methods for characters, such as Tyrone Slothrop, to situate themselves in the world. Pynchon's quester assembles meaning with the result of his dissolution and subsequent absence from the narrative. Pynchon radicalizes the traditional quester's obsessiveness by making Slothrop a comic portrait of his grail, the Rocketman. The narrative produces the effect wherein boundaries of self or identity construction are confused with external, represented space. Slothrop becomes another component of the Zone, lost in the interstices of schizophrenic dispersion. Pynchon's novel displays a shift from modernist to postmodernist representations as an emerging difference in the subjective experience of space.
Michel Foucault’s conception that space is fundamental to any exercise of power brings to light the widespread project of maintaining control over humanity throughout Western Europe and America in the modern and postmodern eras. Edward Soja states that our very notions of being are inevitably intertwined with these repressive effects of space: “the spatial order of human existence arises from the (social) production of space, the construction of human geographies that both reflect and configure being in the world” (Soja 25). The shock of city planners after the first half of the twentieth century at the undermining effects of expansion in urban centers demanded changes to incorporate a new spatial reckoning throughout metropolitan and provincial areas. In a study of space that focuses on this kind of capitalist reorganization of urban environments, Foucault looks at spatiality as a complication of oppositions:

'It may be, in fact, that our lives are still ruled by a certain number of unrelenting opposites, which institution and practice have not dared to erode. I refer here to opposites that we take for granted, such as the contrast between public and private space, family and social space, cultural and utilitarian space, the space of pleasure and the space of work.' (Foucault 350)

Space does not operate as a homogenous unity but, rather, subsumes us in its heterogeneous elements; the designed minimalization of contrasts between different buildings and urban areas lends the appearance of unity to a cityspace. Henri Lefebvre argues that we should conceive of space not as formed of physical elements but as produced by human practices and the economic divisions of the social order. He points to architecture as a location of economic power:
The section of space assigned to the architect - perhaps by 'developers,' perhaps by government agencies - is affected by calculations that he may have some intimation of but with which he is certainly not well acquainted. This space has nothing innocent about it: it answers to particular tactics and strategies; it is, quite simply, the space of the dominant mode of production, and hence the space of capitalism, governed by the bourgeoisie. (Lefebvre 144)

Local governments set off "public spaces" to encourage collective faith in privileged concepts of unimpeded movement and freedom. Yet the opposition between public and private is untenable if thought of in the larger context of social control. A city's most public spaces - parks, for instance - limit the supposed freedoms of its patrons through the enforcement of laws that guide behavior. The perpetually changing mode of production in different periods of capitalism demands continuing spatial rearrangement and reconstruction to suit changing needs.

Many similar spatial issues arise as thematic interests in postmodern texts. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is such a postmodern text that explores the relation between spatial organization and state and economic structures of control. I will argue that the Zone in this novel exemplifies the emerging methods for spatial and population control during World War II through state and economic interests in technological developments, in particular the V-2 rocket. *Gravity's Rainbow* expresses such changes in its representations of space through emerging postmodern narrational strategies.

This essay explores how *Gravity's Rainbow* highlights some of the stylistic shifts from modernist to postmodernist texts. I have attempted to use terminology that does not imply one-dimensional, definitive modernist or postmodernist projects but, rather, indicates some of the predominant qualities or issues at stake in these periods. The
diverse field of discourses that have been given the postmodern label is too broad and
multifaceted to establish any univocal set of rules and characteristics. The “post” of the
term suggests not transcendence of so much as indebtedness to modernism.
Postmodernism, as I use it, indicates neither a rupture with modernism nor an
abandonment of the sorts of questions posed by modernists. Further, there are many
kinds of postmodernism; I will promote one generalized strain and look at ways in which
Pynchon’s novel exemplifies it. Likewise, modernism covers a broad range of
movements that occurred in many countries. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane
characterize modernism as a “movement of movements” (191, italics in the original). I
limit my study to the Anglo-American modernism of the post World War I period by
using T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as emblematic of this current in modernism and
representative of the dominant movement in modernist circles. I will look at how
Pynchon’s postmodern narrative differs from Eliot’s modernist work and focuses on
problems of “how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate”
(Harvey 41). *Gravity’s Rainbow* presents an encyclopedic view of many such varied lives
and realities in collision, temporary collusion, and constant provisionality. A novel in
which the main protagonist eventually dissolves into the landscape and vanishes for the
last one hundred and thirty-five pages of narrative certainly presents a sensibility different
from that of a standard modernist totality. However, I do not claim that there is a binary
opposition between modernism and postmodernism but, rather, look at the different ways
Pynchon represents changing experiences of space and subjectivity.

Pynchon’s expression of the lived experience of space registers a division or, at
least, the tensions between modern and postmodern representations. Pynchon plays with
the conceptual framework of the traditional modernist work and explodes its boundaries such that any totalized reading of the novel is tenuous. In regard to the blending of stylistic practices and the persistent tensions between modernism and postmodernism, I agree with Michael Bérubé's take on *Gravity's Rainbow* as a postmodern text insofar as it stages postmodernism "not as period or theme but as a cultural practice that exists alongside residual practices (modernism among them) and, as well, emergent practices we cannot yet describe" (Bérubé 209). However, I focus on how certain narratological elements in Pynchon's text mark a transformation of former modes of representation and subject construction. Most Pynchon criticism studying the postmodern transformation of modernist themes has limited the scope of inquiry to narratology or poetics in the tradition of the epic or encyclopedic novel. However, no critic has sustained a comparative analysis of how space is textually represented with regard to modernist and postmodernist concerns and how spatial characterizations are linked to different portrayals of subjectivity. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has been neglected in Pynchon studies even though the thematic contents of both the poem and *Gravity's Rainbow* concern responses to war. By sticking close to Pynchon's themes of the V-2 rocket and its effect on the European theater of war as well as studying his parodic explorations of the quest motif, I highlight how *Gravity's Rainbow* orchestrates representations of space and subjectivity indicative of postmodern sensibilities.

This essay covers a great deal of terrain. One of my primary concerns is to counterpoint Eliot's city with Pynchon's Zone.1 In the first section, exploring the

---

1 I recognize that the poem and the novel come from different genres and follow different organizational modes; I am sensitive to these distinctions. I use these texts only with regard to their thematic treatments of space and subjectivity and as emblematic texts of modernism and postmodernism.
changing representation of space, I analyze Eliot’s representations of the city and then explore Pynchon’s shift away from cityspace to a massive Zone topography. Then, in the next section, highlighting a changing experience of subjectivity, I trace a distinction in the modernist and postmodernist representations of lived experience; I do this in part by constrasting Eliot’s quest with Pynchon’s reversals of the traditional quest. I ground my periodizing scheme in the differences between these two reflections on societies recovering from military involvements and war economies: Eliot’s poem registers the unreality of modern life after the First World War while Pynchon’s novel points to the Second World War as the force-field of a developing postmodern world concurrent with the shift into multinational capitalism. Pynchon shows us that postmodernism is not just a realm of hyper-media information is but also founded in the paradoxical interlinking of hyper-organization and chaos exemplified by ballistic technology in World War II. My concern is to elucidate the shift from modernism to postmodernism as an emerging difference in the subjective experience of space.

In many modernist works, space is bound within a city’s borders and through it one experiences reality. But in Pynchon’s postmodern realm of the Zone that site-specificity is lost, the differentiation of cityspace is shot, and an open horizon supercedes it. Although many commentators tend to focus on the term “zone” as indicative of a postmodern shift into the undifferentiated realm of surfaces, the term is also used in modernist literary productions to indicate an external portrait of a broken, confused subjectivity. This zone, however, is generally restricted to a limited urban space. These reflections derive from the great changes industrial capitalism made on urban fabric and
design. Bradbury explains that modernism is a particularly urban art “partly because the modern artist, like his fellow-men, has been caught up in the spirit of the modern city, which is itself the spirit of a modern technological society” (97). He also stresses that “When we think of Modernism, we cannot avoid thinking of these urban climates, and the ideas and campaigns, the new philosophies and politics, that ran through them” (96). In *The Waste Land* Eliot presents London as a desolate realm that limits and isolates humanity primarily because the city establishes heightened spatial divisions that replicate social stratifications of class and race. These divisions are woven into the very surfaces and architectural structure of the modernist city.

As a spiritual, social, and cultural center in *The Waste Land*, the city has become the prime location of social fragmentation. “The Burial of the Dead” section presents a depressed, vacant humanity wandering across a bridge:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (I, lines 60-65)

The scene alludes to Dante’s Limbo and Ante-Hell. In Dante’s work, these hopeless souls fruitlessly and persistently clamor for passage out of hell’s waiting room while in Eliot’s London, the citizens have access to the supposed spiritual center, yet they resemble a procession of the living dead, or the un-dead, embodying the dead soul of the

---

2 I am particularly indebted to Cleanth Brooks’ analysis of these lines (pp. 12-13). The line “I had not thought death had undone so many” refers to Limbo; Dante describes how those who “lived without praise or blame” wracked by their lack of “hope of death; and their blind life is so debased, that they are envious of every other lot.” The “Sighs, short and infrequent” refers to Dante’s Ante-Hell populated by wretched souls who are the unbaptized. In the *Inferno* these dead souls, unfortunate to have lived prior to the salvation of Christ and the declaration of the Gospels, bide their time in misery until Doomsday. For the interim they receive no substantial place in the divine structure of hell, purgatory, or heaven.
city. They remain in torment due to a secular position without any true knowledge of spiritual faith. Death has undone the modern landscape and its despairing denizens. In Eliot’s London, urban culture frustrates sexual desire and, in fact, the city seems to map out the stifling effect of desire and social interaction.

Voices emerge throughout the poem in disconnected fashion, paralleling the erotic dislocation and spiritual isolation of the speakers; interpersonal relationships only produce hellish torment. The dialogue of the couple in the poem’s second section highlights their separation and disconnection, their failed attempts at communication:

“Do
“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
“Nothing?”
I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
“Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (II, 121-126)

The withdrawn despair of the living dead seen in the city is duplicated with similar disjunction and futility at home. The gossip of the pub only reinforces this alienation in what ought to be a lively environment. The fragmented voices in “The Fire Sermon” echo this supreme isolation and lack of fecund love: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (III, 301-302). These lines also register the literal inability to connect disparate ideas to one another and, additionally, they become a meta-poetic reflection that folds back onto the poetic form of collage and the texture rich with allusions. Eliot’s preoccupation with poetic method is enacted in the form of his poem as a central issue of the modernist crisis of meaning and cultural identity.

The Unreal City of the first and third sections decays into ruin and broken remnants of former structural integrity in the fifth section:
What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (V, 370-377)

London emerges as the last and most recent in a series of vacant, imperial cultural thrones. The former spiritual centers rot and crumble such that they flatten out into a broken heap lacking specificity that can only be understood as markers of unreality. The city erodes into a general state of waste, collapsing spatial separation and the difference between these “falling towers.” Through Eliot’s catalogue and conflation of former spiritual and economic centers, a transhistorical theme of decay and ruin with a vertical orientation of origin pervades this representation of the modern city. The speaker in “What the Thunder Said” moves through these arid ruins to discover a greater degree of violent destruction and decay. The city becomes a location of generalized unreality, the hollowed-out resemblance of site-specific value. The ruined position of the urban structure ushers in the collapse of mobility between distinct urban subdivisions: “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (V, 427). This crossing for urban society has now been effectively stifled.

\[\text{\footnotesize^{3}}\] I use the terms “vertical” and “horizontal” as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define them by the metaphorical association between the vertical orientation of the tree and genealogical, semiotic, and teleological determinants of meaning. This method provides a system that often falsely determines direct inheritance to preceding causes as when, say, one follows a tree down to its root. In its place, they prescribe the anti-genealogy of the rhizome: “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states” (Deleuze 21).
But broken or not, the city still remains as the centralized site for social activity, culture, and spirituality. The voices that indicate disintegrated culture emerge out of London’s social space. The references to other European urban experiences are filtered through the specific environment of this English cultural capital. What emerges in this modernist concentration on cityspace is a principle of totality of the urban experience, and London represents this through the widespread desolation of its inhabitants. The cultural decay of London provides the impetus for the search to recover lost mythic or religious origins and their ethical force. While Eliot alludes to former imperial centers in connection to London, the key cultural and economic effects of fragmentation remain fixed within the mapped-out borders of this urban center. While it true that Eliot makes references to locations throughout Europe, all is nonetheless focalized through London; the borders of the poem make it clear that the wasteland is an urban reality. For Eliot, the city orients the experience of space. This limit to the boundaries of a city like London, this last hold on a crumbling ground, vanishes in Pynchon.

Space receives similar representation in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, yet the sense of disjunction or widespread repression operates without the specificity of a cityscape. *Gravity’s Rainbow* flattens out the vertical orientation of city space into the dispersion of site locality across the horizon. For Pynchon, London Bridge does not fall down so much as become dispersed across the landscape. The region becomes radically extended in horizontal fashion to encompass and parcel out entire European nations. The emergence of a highly controlled technocratic Nazi German state, *Gravity’s Rainbow* indicates, led to a war zone in which Axis and Allied powers divided the continent into large-scale theaters of military operation.
Pynchon focuses on the V-2 rocket as the primary military technology of the Second World War. After Franklin Roosevelt's declaration of total war at the conclusion of the Casablanca Conference, the Allied forces initiated the “new strategy of zone bombing, whose aim was to obliterate not just military targets but entire regions” (Virilio 56). Germany responded by revealing the threat of its Vergeltungswaffe or “Vengeance” weapons, commonly known as the V-series weapons (King and Kutta 2). With the ability to cross nearly four hundred kilometers (Neufeld 241), the V-series ballistic rockets effectively collapse the distance between cities and, essentially, countries. The points of launch and impact become any two potential points in the Axis and Allied zones. Through the accelerated ballistic range, the V-2 rocket collapses distance such that, in effect, the Germans could “be in” London (or any selected target in the region) without “being there.” The novel describes German engineers and military personnel who “talked continents, encirclements—seeing years before the General Staff the need for a weapon to break ententes, to leap like a chess knight over Panzers, infantry, even the Luftwaffe” (Gravity’s Rainbow 401). 4 Contrary to earlier historical military engagements, ballistic rocketry in the Second World War ushered in a revolutionary understanding of spatial compression. Nations no longer needed to deploy armies to remote battlefields for the instrumental operations of war strategy as ballistic technology enabled the facile reduction of distance. The city, as a location of high population density, became a logical target for crushing an opponent’s fighting spirit. Once Adolf Hitler was convinced of the dimension of terror effected by the innovative technology in 1941, he increased

4 Citations from the novel will henceforth be followed with the abbreviation GR.
allocations to the exorbitant expenditure of rocket research for this deliberate purpose.\(^5\)

Nazi Germany embraced ballistic technology for its psychological damage potential and produced the V-2 rocket as a weapon of sheer terror. In addition to this psychological impact, the Germans bombed London because of advantages gained through the relative accuracy of the missile, the incapacity for enemy defense, and the ability to launch at all hours regardless of weather conditions (Neufeld 137).

The fact that the V-2 rocket lacks any proper warning became one of its most terrifying aspects. Civilians “won’t hear the thing come in. It travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you’re still around, you hear the sound of it coming in” (\(GR\ 7\)). This phenomenon produces an inability to establish direct causal connection. The roar of typical projectiles could once be linked to approaching destruction and allow at least a minimal amount of time to seek shelter.\(^6\) But the V-2 rocket closes down any attempt for evacuation. This psychological terror is manifested in the complication of normal sign interpretation: “Imagine a missile one hears approaching only \textit{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 \textit{out of it} the roar of its own fall, catching up to what’s already death and burning...a ghost in the sky...” (\(GR\ 48\)).\(^7\) So, one is dead before any logical mental operations can be undertaken. Because the rocket frustrates any attempt for detection,

\(^5\) King and Kutta state the production cost per rocket was 62,500 RM, which does not take into account the millions spent on research and development nor the human cost in deaths of slave laborers (73).

\(^6\) As King and Kutta point out, the V-2 rocket traveled “at roughly four times the speed of sound – a velocity unknown for contemporary aircraft and approached by very few artillery projectiles” (49).

\(^7\) Unless bracketed, all ellipses are in the original text; likewise, all italicized phrases are in the original text.
one is always at a possible impact point. This leads Pirate Prentice to view the evacuation as “all theatre.” Cause and effect have become so confused that evacuation can only occur after the impact and its destruction. This disruption of rational explanation, not to mention the overwhelming confusion that a systematized order cannot supercede, thematically pervades the novel:

Only the nearer faces are visible at all, and at that only as half-silvered images in a view finder [...] They have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city. Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into… (GR 3)

The V-2 rocket erases the degree of safety and, consequently, the city resembles a labyrinthine structure where haven cannot be found. More importantly, the very notion of a labyrinth with an escape path dissolves as, clearly, there is not a way out. Thus, all parts of London begin to look the same and resemble a doomed target awaiting destruction. By attempting escape, one does not become more lost but, rather, becomes interwoven into the fabric of this new form of war that determines that all areas are perpetual targets and that escape is impossible. As Vaska Tumir points out in his analysis of Pynchon’s portrait of London, “there are no distinctions among the victims of the rocket” (138).

The desire for Pynchon’s characters to establish an ordering principle to the chaos brought about by the V-series bombings becomes obsessive. The novel’s first section introduces a loosely assembled London collective of scientists, mathematicians, and psychologists called “The White Visitation” who are obsessed with Pavlovian behavioral theory, statistical analysis, and causality. Lacking any early warning system of rocket
strikes, they scramble to discover watertight methods for impact prediction within the urban topography. In a discussion with Pointsman, the influential head of one of the organization’s branches, Gwenhidwy describes his theory of absolute city control that dictates how the personified city itself guides its own construction: “Here is the City Paranoiac. All these long centuries, growing over the country-side? like an intelligent creature. An actor, a fantastic *mimic*, Pointsman! Count-erfeiting all the correct forces? the eco-nomic, the demographic? oh yes even the ran-dom…” (GR 172). He goes on to outline a paranoid theory of urban design that delineates the city’s layout according to its own greatest fears. Thus, the London rocket bombings bear a sadistic angle with the city deliberately attracting decimation in the lower-class urban districts. This ridiculous theory is one in a series of paranoid attempts to give reason to the terror and trauma of the war. The V-2 rocket has disturbed scientific rationality and traditional military logistics to the extent that such paranoid intellectual gestures begin to make sense. Pynchon establishes a parallel equation between paranoia and the modernist Eliotic project of assembling meaning from the broken fragments of a denigrated world, and Gwenhidwy becomes the radical and parodic extension of this paranoid line of reasoning. He assembles his fragments of meaning into an absurd explanation of a godlike City Paranoiac that pulls the strings of its citizens like marionettes in a macabre death dance independent of humanly determined governmental control. As an alternative to such a paranoid reckoning of space, the Zone offers the incipiently postmodernist realm of schizophrenic disorientation, which is not necessarily easier to reckon with.8

8 My use of the term “schizophrenia” relates directly to Jameson’s theorization of postmodernity. Taking cues from Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the ideal schizophrenic in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Jameson
The reversal of causality or, at least, the disruption of standard causal relations dominates the novel’s thematic concerns with rocket technology. The novel’s title refers to the parabolic bend of the ballistic section of the rocket’s path; the V-2 rocket itself becomes Pynchon’s guiding metaphor for the psychological terror, atavism, and technocratic obsessions of World War II and the emerging postmodern world. Molly Hite notes how the novel plays with ideas of order in its narrative structure. She cites the parabolic arc of the V-2 rocket that “shapes the novel” (97); it is a shape that begins with the opening sentence - “A screaming comes across the sky” - and finishes at the novel’s conclusion with the last launched missile approaching a Los Angeles movie house. Hite argues that this overall shape of the novel traces an introductory rising and concluding fall or dénouement. Yet this enticing narrative form ultimately complicates the attempt to delineate order; the logistics of the rocket’s ballistic path problematizes the overarching narrative parabolic shape. Since cause and effect have been reversed, the screaming actually suggests a conclusion (or explosion) prior to the first words of the novel; and the final scene of the book is vague enough to indicate that perhaps the rocket has already landed on “us” in the theater. In all, the arc is something that persists outside of the narrative frame. Throughout the novel, the narrator will only begrudgingly maintain adherence to causality: “You will want cause and effect. All right” (GR 663).

But even following that promise, the narrative flows through numerous stories without any clear structure to order causal relations. It seems that Pynchon toys with our

---

declares that the postmodern schizophrenic “marks the impossible effort to imagine something like a pure experience of a spatial present beyond past history and future destiny or project. Yet the ideal schizophrenic’s experience is still one of time, albeit of the eternal Nietzschean present. What one means by evoking its spatialization is rather the will to use and to subject time to the service of space” (Jameson, 1991, 154).
deterministic ambitions to provide an ordered shape to the novel; he continually presents clues for a potential modernist order and then pulls them away. Pynchon deliberately resists the lure of a modernist totalizing structure, but the novel still effectively expresses tensions between modernist and postmodernist narrational strategies.

Mapped on a grid with the launch site as zero and the impact point as one, the rocket’s arc represents the points between as a zone that embodies the entirety of urban centers and the countryside proper. In short, Pynchon’s Zone is the horizon of destruction and social chaos that extends beyond the borders of city centers. But more than that, the one to zero range of the Zone lacks any internal divisions that separate space into controllable compartments. The term “zone” itself may be understood as the synthesis of “zero” and “one” in a single word. As such, the Zone becomes a vast region of undifferentiated space comprised of the wreckage of a crumbled Europe. The Zone emerges in contradistinction to the specificity of urban centers or provincial subdivisions and, rather, becomes a realization of principles of global orientation (and disorientation) instead of local management. In this case of ballistic technology, spatial management starts with destruction that opens up the region for a new organization of state control.

In his anarchic admiration of the Zone’s openness, Squalidozzi draws a parallel between the Zone and the cowboy dream of land untroubled by considerations of private ownership:

In the days of the gauchos, my country was a blank piece of paper. The pampas stretched as far as men could imagine, inexhaustible, fenceless. Wherever the gaucho could ride, that place belonged to him. But Buenos Aires sought hegemony over the provinces. All the neuroses about property gathered strength, and began to infect the countryside. Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain
and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that openness: it is terror to us. Look at Borges. Look at the suburbs of Buenos Aires. The tyrant Rosas has been dead a century, but his cult flourishes. Beneath the city streets, the warrens of rooms and corridors, the fences and the networks of steel track, the Argentine heart, in its perversity and guilt, longs for a return to that first unscribbled serenity…that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky… (GR 264)

Squalidozzi makes the distinction between the labyrinth and this anarchic liberation an example of the repressive impulse of state control and the attendant systematic construction of borders. While he lends a pastoral and edenic quality to this landscape of pampas and sky, the war-torn European Zone parallels his desired spatial arrangement. His loose organization of anarchists wishes to maintain a decentralized freedom of space and to forestall the repressive subdivisions intrinsic to governmental hegemony:

“Decentralizing, back toward anarchism, needs extraordinary times…this War—this incredible War—just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. Opened it” (GR 265).

Hearing this statement, Tyrone Slothrop wonders how Squalidozzi and his crew will succeed in maintaining this openness: “Yeah but—what’re you gonna do, take over land and try to hold it? They’ll run you right off, podner” (GR 265). Having been raised from infancy under the direct corporate sponsorship of Laszlo Jamf’s chemical company, in an America built on an idealization of continual expansion and the fencing off of geographical boundaries, Slothrop can only imagine the reinstatement of a totalized system with deliberate state control. Squalidozzi provides a significantly anarchic response that resonates throughout postmodern discourse: “‘Taking land is building more fences. We want to leave it open. We want it to grow, to change. In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless.’ Then, as if struck on the forehead, a sudden
fast glance, not at the door, but up at the ceiling—‘So is our danger’” (GR 265). It seems that Squalidozzi most greatly fears the imminent repressive organization of space. In this logic, two possibilities remain for locating one’s spatial position; the body must “either submit to authority (through, for example, incarceration or surveillance in an organized space) or carve out particular spaces of resistance and freedom – ‘heterotopias’ – from an otherwise repressive world” (Harvey 213). Squalidozzi’s desires the latter of these options. For him, the Zone presents the possibility of a heterotopia, but he incorrectly believes in the absence of state oppression and control in this spatial configuration. But for all his ebullience, he hopes for a system that, as Slothrop points out, will not be greeted happily by the military-industrial complex. Squalidozzi struggles against imminent state reappropriation and the inevitability of urban spatialization that institutionalizes power with the traces of state ideology evident in building codes, zoning laws, city ordinances, and local politics. Ultimately, all methods of social organization in spatial division and architecture are always political and the rocket symbolizes this technologically based infrastructure.

The openness of Squalidozzi’s dreamland was historically achieved - only in a perverted way, however. The collapse of boundaries throughout Europe during the Second World War led to a widespread restructuring based on emerging dynamics of multinational capitalism. The openness of the Zone was utilized to coordinate a more global rather than city-specific space of production. Indeed, the novel’s narrator explains that the war is just a “cover-up” or “diversion” from the “true war” of economic policy:

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. Best of all, mass death's a stimulus to just ordinary folks, little fellows, to try 'n' grab a piece of that Pie while they're still here to gobble it up. The true war is a celebration of markets. (GR 105)

Rather than being merely emblematic of postmodernism, Pynchon has some genuine claims to make about a historical reorientation of capitalist world economies taking place during WWII. Late capitalism's radical extension of a system that effaces its traces of production such that one cannot determine where products have been made actualizes Squalidozzi's fears of the danger that the Zone poses. Harvey recalls the Marxist commonplace that the myriad people incorporated into the creation of products evaporate under the late capitalist mode: "All traces of exploitation are obliterated in the object [...] We cannot tell from contemplation of any object in the supermarket what conditions of labour lay behind its production" (101). With its radical expansion of sites of production all over the planet, late capitalism exacerbates this loss of the traces of human production initiated through industrial capitalism. A global economic system emerged from the Second World War that took advantage of this dispersal to insert a "new organization of space dedicated to the techniques of social control, surveillance, and repression of the self and the world of desire" (Harvey 213). In terms of his periodizing scheme for the emergence of a postmodern capitalist economy, I agree with Harvey's delineation of a postwar boom built on technological reliance, reconfigurations of political and economic systems of control, and the shift in marketed consumption behaviors. Harvey defines this period of a developing postmodernism with the slow actualization of systems of late capitalism as the "Fordist-Keynesian era." Of course, the
Zone did not immediately provide the postmodern spatial orientation that, Harvey claims, solidified after the 1973 move off of the gold standard to a global electronic financial system. Rather, the post-war boom of the 1950’s and 1960’s in America as well as the aggressive development of capitalization throughout Europe from industrialism to multinationalism took advantage of WWII’s widespread decimation of cities and countryside with an inseparable connection between technology and economics. The Zone enabled “openness” that replicates late capitalist organization but – contrary to Squalidozzi’s dreams of gaucho anarchy – comes replete with methods for state and economic control. The war persists with the paradoxically conjoined dynamics of hyper-control and chaotic destruction, and the dropping of the bomb emblematizes this new politic. Wiping out the “proliferation of little states” opened up space for the proliferation of new systems and structures. Greatly involved in the dynamics of the war, the initiation of new systems meant not just reconstruction but, significantly, the de-legitimization of the monarchal “little states” that had to accept late capitalism.

The exchange between Slothrop and Squalidozzi typifies some of the greater themes of spatialization in the novel. As subject positions, Slothrop and Squalidozzi present the tensions between the dialectic of one and zero that dominate Gravity’s Rainbow. In this sense, they provide coordinates for different understandings of spatialization that echo Pointsman and Mexico’s debate on causal mechanics and rationality. Pointsman believes in a firm epistemological system wherein all data can be aligned with Pavlovian reflex response to a given stimulus in a “clear train of linkages.” For Pointsman, all aspects of emotional and psychological life can be hemmed into thoroughly explained patterns of conditioned routines. On the other side of the argument,
Mexico adheres to statistical analysis and an aleatory understanding of information grounded in randomness and contingency. In an exchange between the two, Mexico believes that "there's a feeling about that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, less... sterile set of assumptions. The next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle" (GR 89). This "other angle" seems to be, in part, the openness of the Zone and its inherent absence of any totalizing organizational structure. By radically extending their positions, a paradoxical intertwining of hyper-organization and hyper-chaos develops. The anarchy or hyper-chaos of the war and its ruined Zone is a product of collective hyper-organizational strategies of pre-WWII nation states.

Pynchon stresses the inseparability of highly ordered systems and technologically based destruction. The tightly regimented military hierarchy of the war effort throughout Europe, together with the bureaucratic state apparatus and technology-based economy, strained to achieve an extreme order. Technological innovation outstripped the capacity for direct control of humanly constructed organizing practices. Historically, that compulsion for order resulted in the eventual destruction of Europe, leaving a ruined landscape to emerge in its wake. The narrator explains how the attempt to catalogue and order through "paper specialties, paper routines" is a move to compartmentalize and enable control:

The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide this way, and to subdivide, though its propaganda will always stress unity, alliance, pulling together. The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not even of the sort the Germans have
engineered, ein Volk ein Führer—it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity... (GR 130-1)

These dividing practices are inseparable from principles of hyper-organization. As Pynchon teaches us, this war machine creates a complexity that devolves into mass destruction and chaos, a process symbolized by the highly organized production of highly destructive military technology.

This machine-like organization of human activity parallels one type of modernist aesthetic that strives to achieve an integrated culture through ordered linguistic mechanics. Explaining Ezra Pound’s proposal that language ought to manifest the efficiency of a machine, Harvey outlines how this line of modernist thought “appealed to the image of rationality incorporated in the machine, the factory, the power of contemporary technology, or the city as a ‘living machine’ ” (31). Pynchon plays with this theory and provides numerous components of plot and character development that could potentially constitute an ordered, comprehensive, and complete narrative. However, these units of the machine rarely provide a clear chain of linkage and often frustrate any attempts for coherent thematic recovery. A great number of events and characters suddenly appear in the novel, allow some possible cohesion to plot structure, and then, just as quickly, disappear into the wild fabric of the narrative. With extreme looseness, Pynchon strings together diverse character stories, histories, and fabulations about the discourses of science, religion, industry and technology, popular film and music, and bizarre fantasies. His penchant for digression lends a paradoxically seamless,  

---

9 Once again, we see the modernist representation of the city as the source and very material from which art gains its creative impetus. Bradbury quotes one modernist’s need to reside in the urban sphere for the inspiration necessary for art production: “I am bound to be in London,” wrote George Gissing, “because I must work hard at gathering some new material” (99).
unscribbled randomness to what may appear as an impenetrable labyrinth. The attempt to
discern machine-like interrelatedness is largely fruitless; the pathways of interconnection
in narrative point toward radical openness and disruption of cohesive, easily apprehended
unity. The experience of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* bears many resemblances to the
troubled wandering through the undifferentiated space of the Zone itself. We perceive the
traces of organizing structures through the seemingly chaotic multiplicity of the Zone.
The Zone marks a turning point in spatial reconfiguration after the dismantling of
industrialism and the emergence of dispersal in late capitalism.

The Third Reich's restructuring of German cities devastated by the First World
War imposed a firmly structured, rational order in modernist urban-industrial growth.
Perry Anderson describes how architecture in Western modernist movements "vastly
overestimated its ability to re-shape the urban environment. [...] After the [First World
War], this strain of naiveté rendered it helpless before the pressures of capitalist
reconstruction, that led to the desolate cityscapes for which it later had to shoulder the blame" (41-42). The destruction of European cities (the rebuilt modernist centers of
culture and the "living machines" of state efficiency) during WWII exacerbated vertically
aligned reason that initially corralled the randomness of nature. Clearly, the destruction
of Berlin was not part of the master plan for the Fatherland:

Where's the city Slothrop used to see back in those newsreels and that National Geographic? Parabolas weren't all that New German
Architecture went in for—there were the spaces—the necropolism of blank alabaster in the staring sun, meant to be filled with human harvests
rippling out of sight, making no sense without them. If there is such a thing as the City Sacramental, the city as outward and visible sign of
inward and spiritual illness or health, then there may have been, even here, some continuity of sacrament, through the terrible surface of May. The emptiness of Berlin this morning is an inverse mapping of the white and
The Berlin “necropolis” designed by New German Architecture that necessitates human energies to grant life to the city has been “turned inside out” to allow its opposite, a vacant city paradoxically alive without inhabitants, to persist in the horizontal plane of the Zone. The recovery of desanctified urban centers with the renewal of the City Sacramental recalls Eliot’s longing for the rebirth of urban centers in *The Waste Land*.

The city at the end of the Second World War lacks the sense of purposeful geometry that privileges monumental design and re-enters the aleatory space of the Zone. With an aerial view over the European landscape en route to Berlin, the balloonist Schnorp perceives that “There are no zones […] No zones but the Zone” (*GR* 333). The Zone has become a region specific only to itself. However, this is not to claim that the Zone is a totalized entity with its own crystalline structure; rather, the Zone is a totality in the way that an abstraction like “chaos” might be understood. Schnorp’s perception of the Zone’s privileged horizontal orientation prefigures later theorizations of postmodern architectural design.

Harvey suggests that the distinction between modernist monumentalism and postmodernist openness in architecture signifies a break with the modernist idea that planning and development should focus on large-scale, metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans, backed by absolutely no-frills architecture (the austere ‘functionalist’ surfaces of ‘international style’ modernism). Postmodernism cultivates, instead, a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a ‘palimpsest’ of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a ‘collage’ of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. Since the metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces, urban *design* (and note that postmodernists design rather than
plan) simply aims to be sensitive to vernacular traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies, thus generating specialized, even highly customized architectural forms that may range from intimate, personalized spaces, through traditional monumentality, to the gaiety of spectacle. (66, italics in the original)

Fredric Jameson suggests that postmodern architecture in America inserts its seemingly innocuous and transparent physical presence into the urban surroundings instead of asserting the distinct elevated unity of modernist precursors. The idea is to achieve a horizontal effect through the seemingly endless deferral of the singularity of buildings by blurring their borders. Hence, commercial postmodern spaces attempt to efface the heterogeneity of neighboring architectural structures and endorse contiguous unity with adjacent buildings. Again, there are “no zones but the Zone.” Through the logic of such concepts, Jameson arrives at the conclusion that “this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson, 1991, 44). As flamboyant as this notion may appear, contemporary urban architecture oddly achieves invisibility despite the undeniably forceful presence of the repressive physical reality.

The postmodern architectural design that Harvey and Jameson describe highlights late twentieth century movements distinct from modernism. However, I believe that we ought not to focus solely on the consumer society of the last thirty years for the forces behind this shift. Rather, as Pynchon shows us, the destruction of the Second World War resulted in a ruined landscape that enabled reconstruction based on the emerging dynamics of dispersal and highly customized spatial design; Pynchon sets the V-2 rocket
era, the last nine months of WWII, as the origin of our current political and economic history. In the post-war era, battles of technology give way to the ideological confrontation of the Cold War between competing economic systems. As Khachig Tololyan describes, the Second World War brought about a different configuration because of changes in military technology and politics: "The conferences of Teheran and Yalta (involving Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt) had divided Central Europe into spheres of influence, and the map of Europe would look different for some generations to come; who would enforce adherence to these boundaries would depend in part on possession of the new rocket" (48). The ideological boundaries between countries are grounded in a geo-political realm of the superpowers’ influences inseparable from the technology that replaced pre-WWII nation states.¹⁰ The opacity of social space and the postmodern experience of invisibility described by Jameson began, Pynchon tells us, with the Zone’s aleatory space and its seemingly homogenous reality.

The Zone bears the traces of this emerging reconstruction of social and political space. As the war escalated and ballistic weaponry entered the conflict, the divisions that maintained separate European regions began to erode. As Pynchon depicts Europe, by the resolution of the Second World War, undifferentiation throughout the war-ravaged area rendered any unique quality obsolete. All things adopted the stamp of the Zone:

Separations are proceeding. Each alternative Zone speeds away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center. [...] Once it was necessary to know uniforms, insignia, airplane markings, to observe boundaries. But by now too many choices have been made. The single root lost, way back there in the May desolation. Each bird has his branch now, and each one is the Zone. (GR 519)

¹⁰ The nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile, one of the V-2 rocket’s children, reinforces such a paradigmatic spatial reorientation. In fact, the engineers at Peenemünde planned for a possible “America rocket,” the ICBM, while developing the V-2 (Neufeld 138).
All things within the desolation participate in the identity of the Zone; the singular unifying principle or root that assured relatedness through some centralized structure has morphed into rhizomatic relation where origin lies beyond discovery and dispersion flourishes. This logic informs the narrator’s claim that each bird with its branch “is the Zone” and that horizontal orientation has supplanted the urban center and vertical, origin-based culture. As a symbol of the covenant after destruction, the olive branch lacks individuation from all else – all is the Zone. This high-tech war has decentralized the Zone such that identity becomes at once dispersed and homogenous; all things in the region are the region itself. The power of the V-2 rocket and FDR’s systematic process of aerial zone bombing have established the fundamentality of space to these operations of power and control. Indeed, “The War has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image” (GR 257). If there were any overall spatial structure to assign to the novel, it would be the horizon of undifferentiated space of the Zone with loose interconnections taking form and continually eroding.

Up to this point of the essay, I have concentrated on late capitalist spatial designs coupled with the state apparatus of control. World War II provided the unique occasion for governments to resituate themselves on the global map and to reconfigure an infrastructure amenable to the movement of capitalism from urban industrialization to multinationalism. But, like most writers, Pynchon is not solely interested in ideology and the macro-politics of warring nations. *Gravity’s Rainbow* follows the paths of numerous creatures struggling within the realm of ruin and terror. For many characters, the

---

1. The terms “root” and “rhizome” and their usage here come from Deleuze and Guattari. The meanings here echo the metaphorical use of “vertical” and “horizontal” that I outlined in an earlier footnote.
technologically based alterations in spatial organization (and disorganization) challenge their usual ways of situating themselves in the world. With characters such as Slothrop, Pynchon brings the perplexing theoretical questions raised by ballistic weaponry to the subjective level. I would next like to analyze how Pynchon portrays subjectivity in the Zone and how he exemplifies his strategies in playing with the traditional quest pattern.

Pynchon teaches us to qualify dominant theorizations of the postmodern period as based solely in social changes occurring in the 1960’s and 1970’s. For his novel registers the chaos of the Second World War as the force-field prefiguring the emergence of postmodern dynamics of space and subjectivity. The changed representation of space emblematized by new rocket technology led to a change in subjective experience, and the parodic quest in *Gravity’s Rainbow* exemplifies this change. In order to bring out this change clearly, I will first briefly describe the way the quest unfolds in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

If we place *The Waste Land*’s “The Burial of the Dead” alongside “What the Thunder Said,” we may perceive a quest for cultural regeneration in the form of a journey for the fulfillment of water throughout a mythopoetic “urban” desert. The poem opens with the quester that voices “his” perception of cultural disintegration in the Dantean hell of London; “he” then reappears in the poem’s final section searching for water; the poem ends with this quester sitting on a riverbank. The middle three sections of the poem, then, really just register further representations of the shattered social order and broken relationships that dominate the wasteland of the modern city. As a quest poem, *The Waste Land* expresses impasse in the search for desired psychic coherence and potential
renewal through reassembling fragments of meaning. Recovery eludes the quest and remains just on the fringes of understanding. The divine thunder that promises a reorganization of culture stays on the horizon of the wasteland itself, somehow inside the text, but still effectively outside of its pervasive aridity. The pressing issue of the poem becomes whether or not redemption of the living dead can occur, or any regenerative potential can be found, in an arid modern landscape of fallen cities and violent relationships. G. M. Hyde points out that the poem’s “quest for the grail has more substance than the unredeemed urban multitudes, whom Eliot presses into service as specimens of degeneracy and sterility” (337). *The Waste Land* sustains a protracted polyvocal meditation on Anglo-American high modernism’s search for meaning in the social sphere and in the constitutive elements of a spiritually grounded selfhood. The poem clearly states that London, the modern European city, has failed.

The attempt to recover meaning in *The Waste Land* follows a high modernist project of restoration of a society firmly grounded in esteemed high cultural creations. The broken cultural identity of the modernist European landscape echoes the fragmentary, hollowed out identity of the ghostly presence that voices these views. The quester that speaks of “These fragments [he has] shored against [his] ruins” (V, 431) indicates the self-consciousness of a fragmented psychic life; this statement not only declares that these fragments establish the quester’s protective barrier against ruin, it also provides a self-referential reflection on poetic form. Eliot’s poetic method is animated by a concern to create new juxtapositions and new wholes out of a disintegrated industrial culture. The poem ranges across multiple cultures, stretches back into a collective European literary past, and moves across class delineations in a polyphonic meditation on desolation.
Eliot represents modern society as adrift in a living death, a potential redemption of this condition involves retrieval of cultural origins. One of the most coherent quests of the poem, then, is for recovery of some constitutive cultural identity found within both literary and religious traditions as well as the recognition of the artist as self-conscious craftsman.

Following a similar line for recovery, Slothrop's seeks discovery of selfhood and the constitutive elements of his identity. But rather than assembling cultural fragments of an arid Eliotic landscape into aesthetic unity, Pynchon's quester, though he desperately seeks to assemble meaning, dissolves both into the Zone and from the novel itself. How can one utilize modernist aesthetic theories of unification and cultural recovery in a quest where the quester disappears and the damage to the narrative structure is seemingly innocuous? Although one may argue that Eliot's quester becomes fragmented in the poem's final twelve lines, the coherent orchestrating voice retains the ability to articulate the pervading thematic concern with alienation and the guiding attempt to retrieve lost religious and cultural sources. The authorial orchestrator of *The Waste Land* maintains a kind of presence, however ghostly, throughout the poem. Pynchon, on the other hand, moves beyond the portrayal of fragmentation – his narrative continues with its nutty digressive pattern for one hundred and thirty-five pages after Slothrop's evaporation. The punctuated human presence of Eliot's quester is distinct from the absence portrayed in *Gravity's Rainbow*; Pynchon's work thus lacks the coherent thematic boundaries of Eliot's work. These complications in the quest motif, while obviously disrupting traditional modes of representation, also mark a distinction between modernist and postmodernist means of setting coordinates for narrative action.
In the constant battles of “The White Visitation” to predict the impact behaviors of the V-2 rocket, an odd and oddly plausible theory discerns a linkage between locations of Slothrop’s sexual conquests and subsequent V-2 impact points. Slothrop maintains a map of London with variously colored stars that represent his sexual experiences with women. According to common sense, Slothrop “scorings” with sexual partners ought to be as random as the explosions of V-2 rockets “scoring” the city. The narrator of the book attempts to explain the coincidence without reliance on a strict need for order:

But perhaps the colors are only random, uncoded. Perhaps the girls are not even real [...] Bloat’s only able to report that Slothrop began work on his map last autumn, about the time he started going out to look at rocket-bomb disasters for ACHTUNG—having evidently the time, in his travels among places of death, to devote to girl-chasing. (GR 19)

However, the causality-prone group of Pavlovians suspects a unifying theme behind this remarkable chance synchronicity. Struggling to make sense of Slothrop’s map of London, the scientists theorize about how Slothrop is, with the force of his mind, causing the rockets to drop where they do. He may not be physically highballing them about the sky: but maybe he is fooling with the electrical signals inside the rocket’s guidance system. However, he’s doing it, sex does come into Dr. Treacle’s theory. ‘He subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other, whom he symbolizes on his map, most significantly, as a star, that anal-sadistic emblem of classroom success which so permeates elementary education in America.’ (GR 85)

Hence, the textualized play with sex and military-industrial technocracies are conflated through Slothrop. With this comic association between sexual appetite and technology, the mystery of Slothrop’s connection to the ballistic marvel, as well as his quest for it, gain depth. Through Pointsman’s conspiratorial influence, he guides Slothrop to study the operations of the rocket and sends him into the Zone. Although Slothrop believes that
there is nothing especially erotic about scientific information on V-2 rocketry and operational manuals, he still gets an erection with each reading.\textsuperscript{12}

Duping himself into believing in his freedom, Slothrop follows his compulsion to understand the rocket. Throughout his wandering in the Zone, Slothrop feels the hidden presence of outside influences. He believes that the direct control of his actions is guided by Katje, who is herself one of Pointsman’s agents: “Well here he is skidded out onto the Zone like a planchette on a Ouija board, and what shows up inside the empty circle in his brain might string together into a message, might not, he’ll just have to see. But he can feel a sensitive’s fingers, resting lightly but sure on his days” (GR 283). Still, Slothrop believes that he has a limited degree of autonomy and attempts to free himself from his paranoid thoughts of an external guiding presence. However, he cannot escape suspicions that his automatic response of erections has its roots in malevolent external forces and, consequently, he draws some paranoid conclusions regarding his own bodily relation to the weapon: “His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost here in our raw and clamorous world, another office representing Their white Metropolis far away…” (GR 285). The spatial association between absolute, but remote, control and the Metropolis is telling. Slothrop’s ostensible autonomy seems just a deliberate blind for the real operations of imperial control indicative of the modern state. The passage conflates ideas of control, a city-specific locus of power, and the paranoia-styled obsession with order into a loaded statement that describes a sexuality controlled from the outside by

\textsuperscript{12} This is the most graphic element underlying all of the components of this protracted joke: as the ideal postmodern subject, Slothrop has a hard-on for technology. As such, he is doomed from the outset.
functionaries of state-sponsored research. At the same time, these paranoid suspicions
duplicate the very fabric of the novel and the inevitability of progressively knotting
oneself into the Zone: "Slothrop, though he doesn’t know it yet, is as properly constituted
a state as any other in the Zone these days. Not paranoia. Just how it is. Temporary
alliances, knit and undone" (GR 291). As this passage connotes, the overlap of characters
and different realities is provisionally established; this passage prefigures Harvey’s
definition of a postmodernity of diverse realities in simultaneous interdependence and
temporary autonomy. In this sense, Slothrop embodies in his own experience the novel’s
larger thematic tensions between a modernist pursuit of order and a postmodernist
alertness to random fluctuations of chaos in a wider frame of disorder. Likewise, the
reader’s identification with Slothrop involves similar modernist paranoid reactions to find
order in the chaotic narrative action, but Pynchon repeatedly complicates such desires
through his postmodernist play of oppositions.

In his search to articulate a sense of selfhood, Slothrop perceives that the V-2
rocket has ushered in a realm where polarity collapses. The formerly clear blacks and
whites of the chessboard have coalesced and erased distinction: "ideas of the opposite
have come together, and lost their oppositeness. (And is it really the rocket explosion
that Slothrop’s keying on, or is it exactly this depolarizing, this neurotic ‘confusion’ that
fills the wards tonight?)" (GR 50). Pynchon hints that the spatial complications
determined by technology collapse polar oppositions.13 By beginning to understand the
depolarizing effect of the rocket, one takes the "first step toward citizenship in the Zone”

---

13 Throughout the novel, the V-2 rocket is characterized as disrupting the divisions between black and
white, male and female principles, presence and absence, order and chaos, self and other, one and zero,
unity and void, and salvation and apocalypse, to name a few examples.
The rocket symbolizes the confusion of both intellectual and spatial boundaries and, hence, these new citizens of the Zone enter a spatialized subjective consciousness through the rocket itself. The novel plays with the paranoid logic that all plots are always ordered and collectively form the parabolic path of a Rainbow with each civilian life resembling a rocket’s flight profile:

But it is a curve each of them feels, unmistakably. It is the parabola. They must have guessed, once or twice—guessed and refused to believe—that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return. Yet they do move forever under it, reserved for its own black-and-white bad news certainly as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children...

The desire for simplified order leads to the assumption of totalization that such a rainbow covenant implies. But this paranoid faith relies on technology that has emerged outside human reckoning; perhaps out of desperation and confusion, those enduring the horror have latched on to the parabola for guidance.

Linked to his close thematic attention to the reversal of cause and effect is the way Pynchon problematizes the traditional quest by throwing the subject and object positions into direct collision. Slothrop bumbles around in the wilderness of the Zone seeking his Frankensteinian monster (information about the V-2 rocket, specifically the mysterious S-Gerät), but the paranoid impulse to discover order in the undifferentiated plain of the Zone falls apart as the roles begin to reverse: “he knows as well as he has to that it’s the S-Gerät after all that’s following him, it and the pale plastic ubiquity of Laszlo Jamf. That if he’s been seeker and sought, well, he’s also baited, and bait” (GR 490). In this quote, the quester and the object of the quest become demonically united; they are so thoroughly intertwined that the positions shift. Even before his quest becomes his
conscious directive, Slothrop begins to symbolically fuse with his desired object. Falling into sleep beside Katje, he begins to embody the flight patterns of V-2 machinery: "Like a rocket whose valves, under remote control, open and close at prearranged moments, Slothrop, at a certain level of his re-entry into sleep, stops breathing through his nose and commences breathing through his mouth" (GR 197). The irony here underlines that an object explicitly determined by human design from ballistic and plastics technology becomes synonymous with undetermined, subjective human experience. And, after all, what would happen if the V-2 rocket, the quest object, were attained? The answer displays how this reversal of the quest object with the quester indicates a dark, malevolent shift in the design to the traditional quest pattern. The quester becoming united with the rocket requires the explosion of the former. If Eliot’s grail, the renewal of the water of life and the recovery of the Fisher King, were to appear for his quester, then all would be resolved with beatific happiness. Pynchon’s attainment of unity with the messiah is brutal.

Pynchon’s city dwellers do not suffer the subterranean Dantean angst of Eliot’s wasteland but, rather, look to the rocket’s destructive power as a messianic message. This high-tech weapon adopts a mythological position as humanity’s savior: “a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul” (GR 566). Slothrop feels a similar messianic quality about the rocket. Anticipating a message behind the devastation, he looks for some codification or text within the crumbling cityscape and discovers “a sermon on vanity.” Although outside of any immediate apprehension, “London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he
can find himself inside a parable” (GR 25). Seeking meaning without a City Sacramental similar to Eliot’s missing mythic and religious center, Slothrop enacts his own form of exegesis in the secular cityscape of London. Through Slothrop’s search for a message in the mess of London, Slothrop echoes the search of Eliot’s questing orchestrator. But in his typical parodic fashion, Pynchon undermines the faith in “a parable” and unravels the potential for instruction in the chaotic ruins. In a self-reflexive moment, the narrator waxes philosophic on the paranoid supposition about the Zone as text: “...say we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that’s our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it’s all squeezed limp of its last drop...well we assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket” (GR 520). Poking fun at the scholars that Pynchon anticipates reducing Gravity’s Rainbow to a set of principles, he sets up Slothrop to enact the same paranoid impulse in the domain of the Zone. Along with a list of “Proverbs for Paranoids,” the Zone provides allegorical clues that Slothrop can “find himself inside.” Slothrop supplements Zone reality with textual qualities he believes he must decipher for guidance: “big globular raindrops, thick as honey, begin to splat into giant asterisks on the pavement, inviting him to look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all” (GR 204). The messages he receives feed his obsessions about the V-2 rocket.

Pynchon synthesizes the Zone effect to establish parables for meditation with Europe’s traditional messiah, Jesus Christ: “The crying of the infant reached you, perhaps, as bursts of energy from the invisible distance, nearly unsensed, often ignored. Your savoir, you see” (GR 174). Since the first section of the novel coincides with
Christmas in 1944, Pynchon toys with the images of the Nativity. Pynchon extends the metaphor to include the material composition of the rocket. The three desert kings bring components necessary for the construction of the rocket at his birth under the Nativity star. But in a clever reversal of the Nativity, Pynchon portrays the war itself as one of the kings delivering the essential gifts: “Will he show up under the Star, slyly genuflecting with the other kings as this winter solstice draws on us? Bring to the serai gifts of tungsten, cordite, high octane?” (GR 131). Although a twisted version of salvation, the Christ-like rocket seems to promise an inevitable apocalyptic release from the war in the near future. 14 As a symbol of messianic birth, the V-2 rocket acquires a New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament covenant that the rainbow arc suggests, but this spiritual dimension foregrounds the demonic angle of its destructive capacity. Pynchon pushes this dark pattern to its extreme limit to underline the hopelessness of willfully identifying with that which guarantees one’s destruction.

Ironically, in his search for selfhood, Slothrop rarely follows a logical, rocket-obsessed path in his meanderings and temporary distractions. He continually gets sidetracked from his objective and becomes entrenched in quasi-anarchist plots for subverting control of the Zone, a spy-thriller lampoon where he attempts to liberate a massive amount of hash from a military compound, and schemes that draw on comic book and movie fantasies. The most direct example of interconnection between quester and the object of the quest emerges when Slothrop comically links himself to the rocket

14 The war provides mock-angels that herald the descent of Christ from the astral plane (GR 131). In this sense, the Rocket/Christ becomes the Nativity star: “60 miles up the rockets hanging the measureless instant over the black North Sea before the fall, even faster, to orange heat, Christmas star, in helpless plunge to Earth” (GR 135).
by donning a faux-superhero costume and adopts the title “Rocketman.” While smoking dope with a crew of aimless Zone citizens in Berlin, Slothrop contemplates a Wagnerian helmet and realizes “that without those horns on it, why this helmet would look just like the nose assembly of the Rocket. And if he could find a few triangular scraps of leather, figure a way to sew them on to Tchitcherine’s boots...yeah, a-and on the back of the cape put a big, scarlet, capital R” (GR 366). The Rocketman persona emerges as an actualization of the German mythic terror of supernatural destructiveness in the comic human form of a pseudo-Valkyrie.¹⁵ Pynchon humorously establishes this change in Slothrop’s identity that resonates in two major ways with the novel’s thematic concerns: the horrific technocratic conjoining of the mechanized body with the destructive powers (here a bizarre portrait of a sky-god) as well as the goofy identification in pop cultural elements of science fiction film and comic book heroes. Pynchon radicalizes the obsessiveness of the traditional quester by making Slothrop a comic portrait of the grail he seeks. Space and the quest become compressed and imploded, as it were, into the rocket-subject and, as such, Slothrop’s Rocketman identity follows the logic of Zone citizenship.

Rocketman is the thorough reification of emerging technocracies with a selfhood constructed throughout space. The vast built environment that restricts autonomy subsumes the Rocketman. The mobility that one may achieve replicates the ballistic flight path, a parabolic arc between the binary poles. Hence, the Rocketman will always

¹⁵ This reference to Wagnerian myth recalls the modernist yearning for retrieval of lost cultural origins, in Wagner’s case the appropriation of Norse mythology. But Pynchon parodies such a unifying principle of mythic cultural sources by having Slothrop physically dismantle the symbolic helmet and reassemble it into a quasi-component of the V-2 rocket.
shift between spatial opposites of the public and private, the cultural and utilitarian, the
space of pleasure and space of work, as well as the zero and one. That parabolic span
encompasses a vast productive sphere organized around principles of a developing
multinational capitalism, a horizon without true autonomy or independent unity of
subjective experience.

This bouncing back and forth between polar opposites prefigures features of
subjectivity in late capitalist postmodern society. A system that effaces its traces of
production complicates the attempt to coherently locate an identity that is spread
throughout the products of human labor that are bought and sold. The personal
identification with an inanimate, deterministic object like the V-2 rocket establishes
Slothrop's absurd subjectivity as a Rocketman. The integration of this external world
emblem of destruction erases the borders between interior identities in conflict with
external lived experience. Slothrop dissolves not because he is alienated in the way
Eliot's quester is, but because he is annihilated and turned into another emblem of the
"organized dispersal" of the Zone. Although Slothrop's quest centers on the V-2 rocket,
he really discovers its material war effects; rather than the rocket causing Slothrop's
dissolution, the spatial force field of the Zone sucks him in and obliterates any potential
for secure, unified subjectivity.

Slothrop leads the reader into a complex realm of undifferentiated space. The
narrative evokes a region wherein boundaries of self or identity construction are confused
with external, represented space. Celeste Olalquiaga outlines the collapse of spatial
boundaries in identity construction as a feature of the postmodern landscape, a zone of
image supplementarity. She pushes the logic of postmodern ideology manifest in
electronic methods of state control to locate a vanishing subject that rides the late
capitalist technocratic tides of consumer culture. By complicit participation in
postmodern video culture, where computer monitors and television screens become the
collective windows on the world, space flattens into the realm of bandwidth capacity and
radically condenses onto a small frame of electronic reference. Pynchon describes in
similar terms the effect that an emerging electronic culture has on subjectivity:

Think of the ego, the self that suffers a personal history bound to time, as
the grid. The deeper and true Self is the flow between cathode and plate.
The constant, pure flow. Signals—sense-data, feelings, memories
relocating—are put onto the grid, and modulate the flow. We live lives
that are waveforms constantly changing with time, now positive, now
negative. (GR 404)

Olalquiaga likens the disturbance of boundaries between self and the surrounding
territory to the psychological state of psychasthenia that define how one’s body becomes
fused with represented space: “Incapable of demarcating the limits of its own body, lost
in the immense area that circumscribes it, the psychasthenic organism proceeds to
abandon its own identity to embrace the space beyond” (2). Surrounding artifacts of
ideology reify the contemporary capitalist subject. Jameson draws on that distinction to
describe the drift of postmodern subjectivity as a sensibility grounded in the space of
cultural, political, and economic reality. He reads the

spatial peculiarities of post-modernism as symptoms and expressions of a
new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as
individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous
realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois
life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capitalism itself.
Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the
older modernists, is capable of giving any adequate figuration to this
process, which in lived experience makes itself felt by the so-called death
of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic
decentering and dispersion of this last. (Jameson, 1988, 351)
If we apply these models of compressed space and externalized identities to the economic sphere, we see a realm amenable to late capitalist colonization of the consumer base.

*Gravity’s Rainbow* declares that the war plays out a conspiratorial need to test technological advances:

this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted...secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology...by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, ‘Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake,’ but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night’s blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more...* The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite... (GR 521 – brackets in original)

Hence, exercising geo-political power through the mechanisms of war becomes a blind for the containment that global economic structures perpetuate.¹⁶ In this diffuse space that incorporates a confused self-identity, the subject in consumer culture almost unconsciously flows into fetishisms of consumptive activity in a fantasy late capitalist system. Slothrop follows such a progression by adopting alternate personalities derived from his pop cultural base.

The most visible consumer activity within the Zone operates within the more immediate range of object for object trade on the black market; however, true exchange value in the Zone is gauged on the scale of information trade. As information constitutes the primary economic means of exchange in the Zone, the erasure of secure boundaries

¹⁶ The United States repeated such an interest in using military conflicts as test cases for technology during the Gulf War. Addressing requests from weapons manufacturers for further research on components such as the computerized, video enhanced guidance system in cruise missiles, the Pentagon responded that the military engagement in Iraq produced sufficient data and that the Gulf War itself was field research.
between self and the surrounding environment emerges. In his discussion with Semyavin, the Russian black marketer, Slothrop is told that the exchange on the black market is only distraction from the true exchange found in information. “What’s wrong with dope and women?” Semyavin questions. “Is it any wonder the world’s gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange? […] It’ll get easier. Someday it’ll all be done by machine. Information machines. You are the wave of the future” (GR 258). Slothrop becomes, then, a prototypical information machine embodying the principle of automation, one who is syncretically united with his surroundings. As “the wave of the future,” he embodies the shift from a modernist alienated monad to a postmodernist subjectivity dispersively integrated into his surrounding environment. As an information machine, Slothrop does not embody the efficiency of the idealized modernist totality, however. Rather, he enacts a principle of deferral and dispersion like Derridean play in a textualized stratum.

The relation between hyper-organization and chaos I described earlier is made most explicit in Slothrop’s character development. By making this connection between systems of information, we can again see the paradoxical unification of organization and dispersal. As an emblem of the subjective experience of WWII, he dissolves into a chaotic dismantling of selfhood the more he discovers and assembles rocket information. Indeed, Slothrop never seems to have a fixed identity or location within the narrative structure of the novel. The narrative focus continues to shift and bounce from one tale to the next and constructs an unraveling pastiche rather than a visionary totality. This shifty nature of our complex protagonist finalizes with his disappearance from the narrative action as he dissolves into the Zone’s landscape.
The Zone imbricates its quester into its emerging economic order such that Slothrop finally becomes another component of the zone, lost in the interstices of a schizophrenic dispersion. His disappearance is not terribly surprising if one reads some of the earlier clues in the novel properly. While tangling Slothrop in a red tablecloth symbolic of a magician’s prop, Katje states, “Watch closely, while I make one American lieutenant disappear” (GR 198). From this moment forward, Slothrop lacks any stable subjectivity and shifts from one alias to another, each with its own comic costume. However, all of his aliases connect to the primacy of the spiritual composition of Rocketman. As a subject, Slothrop’s chaotically shifty identity accelerates through its psychasthenic process and he eventually becomes integrated into the spatial organization of the Zone: “he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection” (GR 625).

The actualization of the quest disintegrates Slothrop as an individuated figure and incorporates him into the environment, spread-eagled across its horizon. Slothrop achieves more than just citizenship – he becomes a Zone-branded bird with its olive branch.

Slothrop’s disappearance works in concert with the forces of repression and dispersed identity that permeate Zone reality. The ontological consequences of a “disappearing space” toss the individual into a realm where, in Olalquiaga’s words, “Contemporary schizophrenia confronts heterogeneity with neutralization, confusion with repression, and referential absence with informational deadweight, legitimizing surveillance as the only mechanism that can provide both control and pleasure to a culture lost in its own specter” (17). The logistics of a projected self within an undifferentiated space necessitates a reciprocal vanishing body. As a Rocketman, Slothrop’s subjectivity
covers the span between the zero and one; he is dispersed and interconnected with all things in the Zone and is, thus, everywhere and nowhere at once. If Slothrop were to properly decipher any allegorical meaning within the Zone, it would be his imminent dissolution and simultaneous absorption into aleatory space. He necessarily loses his unified, singular identity as an actualization of the Zone logic that smashes the coordinates of the chessboard and asserts the collapse of distance: “he has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell—stripped. Scattered all over the Zone. It’s doubtful if he can ever be ‘found’ again, in the conventional sense of ‘positively identified and detained’ ” (GR 712). The method for discovering Slothrop’s dispersed identity after his disappearance requires the postmodern sensibility that would seek the ghostly traces of selfhood on the surfaces of all objects throughout the Zone of an emerging multinational capitalism.

In this essay, I have followed a “progressive knotting into” Pynchon’s representations of space and subjectivity. More than just about the Second World War in particular, Gravity’s Rainbow highlights the ways in which the Western world has been configured to match up with the spatial needs of post-industrial economic systems. In this way, I am not merely reporting on the theorizations of late capitalist methods of control in contemporary society, but I am also pointing out the larger historical perspective of changing experiences in space and subjectivity in the Second World War. I began this essay with an exploration of differences between Eliot’s and Pynchon’s representations of space. I argued that Pynchon uses the Zone to teach us about a turning point in spatial organization coupled with the late capitalist demands for globalization.
Then I analyzed Eliot’s and Pynchon’s methods for expressing subjectivity exemplified by their treatments of the quest for identity. Slothrop’s goofy quest underlines the harrowing confusion of self and external space that leads to his dispersal. These stylistic differences point to distinctions between modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism, as I define it, departs from modernist representations of space. Modernists such as Eliot privilege spatial constructions as the social space of urban environments. A postmodernist such as Pynchon, on the other hand, views space as a designed horizon of multiple elements and the collision of numerous realities subsumed under the state apparatus and its fixations on technology to achieve economic goals. In this sense, the modernist focus on the city as the limit for a planned construction of social, political, and economic ideologies differs from the postmodernist experience of global economic structures with unknown forces of production located all over the planet.

Postmodernism extends the understanding that space provides the geographies of social activity to include “metaphorical territories and spaces of power that become vital as organizing forces in the geopolitics of capitalism” (Harvey 355). These representations of economic territories invite the reflection on the subjective (or psychopolitical, as it were) experience of space. Unlike the Eliotic text that privileges the alienated artistic monad that operates in a baffling but not unrepresentable cityscape, the postmodern narrative resists site-specific location for artistic creation and personal reflection and, instead, explores subjectivities grounded in schizo-fragmentation and multiple subject positions. The logic of space compression and high-speed information technology advances a conception of blurred spatial barriers and late capitalist culture dispersed across the globe.
The shift in representations of space and subjectivity, further, indicates a preoccupation with the state of meaning in modern and postmodern social space. For Eliot, the fractured urban environment makes concrete the fragmentation and loss of meaning in the modern era with an elegiac longing for the recovery of the collective religious and cultural sources of Old World Europe. For Pynchon, however, postmodern society produces a world with meaning and information in excess. Unlike Eliot, Pynchon indicates that a sense of the depletion of meaning is not an issue and, rather, one must learn how to negotiate the disorienting reality of the widespread proliferation of information, lest we become annihilated as Rocketmen.


