

# Gravity's Rainbow and the Postmodern Crisis in Narrative

## Research Thesis

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## Introduction

When approaching a text like Gravity's Rainbow you're immediately intimidated by its size and when you begin reading you're intimidated by its scope. It covers vast territory over a range of countries and hundreds of characters all with their own complex variety of expression. It's not only the characters that are expressed differently, but also the narrative. There is plenty of omniscient narration, but also plenty of free-indirect discourse where the focal point of the narrative changes in-between, meditating on various topics both high and low. It just may be the most complex of narrative forms, even beyond its predecessors in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The problem posed is wading through it all. Not only is the narrative incredibly complex, but the amount of information that is thrown at you requires an encyclopedic knowledge on some of the most arcane of subjects. So, how do you put it all these pieces together to find the larger point that Pynchon is making?

That is the purpose of this paper: to take a theory of narrative and see how that makes sense of a small part of Pynchon's narrative as it pertains to history. What can we now say about history in light of what is called the Postmodern crisis of knowledge?

The first step is to understand a theory which approaches the problem of narrative in this way. J.-F. Lyotard is the most useful in understanding the novel in light of post-modernism. The second step is to understand how Lyotard's definition of narrative and meta-narrative develops in the novel, and to explore its implications for understanding history. And the last step is to see how the demotion of meta-narratives, which is one of the implications of Lyotard's theory, helps us to understand history as Pynchon sees it, grounded in the atmosphere of World War Two.

## Lyotard and Pynchon: A Theory about Narrative

When confronting a story the first thing that is noticed is how it's arranged. This arrangement in the telling of a story is called a narrative. The narrative is the structure. Maurie Laurie-Ryan's definition paraphrases Lyotard: it is a "type of knowledge, typical of ancient societies, where truth is guaranteed by the special status of the storyteller within the community, with a scientific type in which authors are supposed to provide proof of their claims." (Ryan, 344) The narrative in the novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is highly complicated. It has layers upon layers of meaning that aren't obvious upon the first reading. What you begin to find is that this novel is doing something very different the average popular 20<sup>th</sup> century novel would do. Rather than having one narrative it's attempting to combine several and have them all on equal footing. This particular view of narrative is similar to Lyotard's view on how narrative works. Lyotard and Pynchon are doing similar projects in attempting to keep multiple narratives on an equal basis and trusting them over and against over-arching narratives which attempt to explain everything, which are called meta-narratives.

The first place to start is the epistemological basis both Pynchon and Lyotard take to support this view on narrative.

But what is meant by knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of "know-how," "knowing how to live," "how to listen" [savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-ecouter], etc. Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/ or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color auditory and visual sensibility), etc. Understood in this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming "good" denotative utterances, but also "good" prescriptive and "good" evaluative utterances... It is not a competence relative to a particular class of statements (for example, cognitive ones) to the exclusion of all others. On the contrary, it makes "good" performances in relation to a variety of objects of discourse possible: objects to be known, decided on,

evaluated, transformed....From this derives one of the principal features of knowledge: it coincides with an extensive array of competence-building measures and is the only form embodied in a subject constituted by the various areas of competence composing it. (Lyotard 18-19)

The thing to take notice about knowledge is its varied uses. First is the “know how” to do something. Second is the use of knowing of “how to live”. Thirdly is what he calls “how to listen”, which is the way to apply knowledge to our senses. You take all these types of knowledge and then apply them to different criteria-truth, efficiency, ethics and aesthetics. You make these criteria and create a binary opposition of “good” and “bad”. These become different kinds of utterances, denotative, prescriptive, and evaluative, sifting through two types of values one “good” and the other “bad”. This knowledge comes to be created into a narrative. The problem as Lyotard sees it is that the narrative becomes its own source of legitimation.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* Thomas Pynchon uses Lyotard's line of thinking in the understanding of a Victorian-era hospital.

They are approaching now a lengthy brick improvisation, a Victorian paraphrase of what once, long ago, resulted in Gothic cathedrals—but which, in its own time, arose not from any need to climb through the fashioning of suitable confusions toward any apical God, but more in a derangement of aim, a doubt as to the God's actual locus ( or, in some, as to its very existence), out a of a cruel network of sensuous moments that could not be transcended and so bent the intentions of the builders not on any zenith, but back to fright, to simple escape, in whatever direction, from what the industrial smoke, street excrement, windowless warrens, shrugging leather forests of drive belts, flowing and patient shadow states of the rats and flies, were saying about the chances for mercy that year. (Pynchon, 47)

The pragmatic function of the cathedral has changed. The impulse that in an earlier time would have resulted in a house of worship to the Christian God has produced instead a place of care with the use of medicinal science. This is a dramatic turn for a foundation of knowledge. Where the locus of all knowledge was revelation from a supreme being, it's now located in what men can discover, arising “not from any need to climb through the fashioning of suitable confusions toward any apical God, but more

in a derangement of aim, a doubt as to the God's actual locus (or, in some, as to its very existence)," (Pynchon, 47) The cathedral represents this repurposing of religion as science. Pynchon here is implying that, where civilization had once assumed God in the cathedral, with the advent of science it doesn't know where God is. Man is looking but has a "derangement of aim" -- he doesn't know where God is and in this doubts his existence. This in some sense is the conflict of narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge. Where Christianity brings a very clear narrative. The narrative is contested by scientific knowledge, which undermines given narratives.

This is very important for Lyotard's use of scientific knowledge. This means the decision about the criteria of truth is based on man's whims rather than Gods. The value then is subject to pragmatism. That is the shifting knowledge that comes with scientific discovery, rather than dogmatic absolutes which keep a story stable. The values being uncertain is given to rapid if not sudden change.

Lyotard explains how a traditional narrative works.

First, the popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships (Bildungen): in other words the successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings. These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the function of myths), or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). Thus the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it. (Lyotard, 19-20)

Unless we assume some values as true all things are given to a process of observation and therefore change given the new information. Its uncertainty is a cause of concern when trying to evaluate an event in time or make some sort of value judgment based on uncertain information. Lyotard explains that science is a "subset of learning. It is also composed of denotative statements, but imposes two supplementary conditions on their acceptability: the objects to which they refer must be available for repeated access, in other words, they must be accessible in explicit conditions of observation; and it

must be possible to decide whether a given statement pertains to the language judged relevant by the experts.” (Lyotard, 18) This is when scientific knowledge clashes with narrative knowledge: when science revises what is already established by narrative. Lyotard speaks of the proving of the proof when, “it leaves behind the metaphysical search for a first proof or transcendental authority as a response to the question: ‘how do you prove the proof?’ or, more generally ‘Who decides the conditions of truth?’” (Lyotard, 29) Lyotard answers this question on the authority of science by them being “established within the bonds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts.” (Lyotard, 29) He answers the problem by means of agreement by a consensus of experts who know the rules of science. Yet there is a further problem posed. How then can this denotative statement of relevance be trusted if it’s based on the same epistemological uncertainty that all humanity stands on, when the rules of science change at intervals in history?

Pynchon encounters the consequences that follow from the legitimation of narrative. When a narrative is supported by itself, how do you make sense of a contradiction within the narrative? This problem is followed by Slothrop who finds out that everything that he knew was a lie.

Nice way to find out your father made a deal 20 years ago with someone to spring for your education. Come to think of it, Slothrop never could quite put the announcements, all through the depression, of imminent family ruin, together with the comfort he enjoyed at Harvard. Well, now, what was the deal between his father and Bland? I’ve been sold, Jesus Christ I’ve been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef. Surveillance? Stinnes, like every industrial emperor, had his own company spy system. So did the IG. Does this mean Slothrop has been under their observation---m-maybe since he was born? Yaahh...(Pynchon, 290-291)

Slothrop here encounters new information that changes his former narrative of life. He has found out that his “father made a deal 20 years ago with someone to spring for your education.” This has caused a lot of confusion as well as distrust as to what he has been told his life has been. He’s trying to reconcile the information with former aspects of his life such as how he “never could quite put the

announcements, all through the depression, of imminent family ruin, together with the comfort he enjoyed at Harvard.” (Pynchon, 290) It was because of the “deal between his father and Bland”. The crisis moment happens when taking in this information he concludes that he’s “been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef.” (Pynchon, 290) He’s been owned by someone else for a majority of his life without him knowing it. He’s unsure whether he’s been under surveillance: “every industrial emperor, had his own spy system...Does this mean Slothrop has been under surveillance since he was born?” (Pynchon, 290) Does this information create a new dynamic narrative? Or does its existence pose a threat to establishing a narrative at all? Considering the questioning of the ability to even trust any information given, how can a new narrative be created?

Slothrop’s internal state speaks of the result.

The fear balloons again inside his brain. It will not be kept down with a simple fuck you.... A smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom edge of this memory. He can’t see it, can’t make it out. Doesn’t want to. It is allied with the worst Thing. (291, Pynchon)

He’s stuck. Rather than a smooth synthesis it’s a painful arrested development stuck in place. The “fear balloons...inside his brain” can’t be overcome by anything simple; no amount of “fuck you[s]” can push away what he has just learned. What he is learning is coming from a “forbidden room, at the bottom edge of this memory.” It’s not something he wants to encounter. It’s “allied with the worst thing.” How can there be a progression forward if there is a fear of what may come next? Where can a trust in new information come from? This type of knowledge that used to support meta-narratives results in a trust in a different kind of knowledge in the accepting of limits in narrative. (Lyotard, 60). Even though Slothrop doesn’t accept them, both Lyotard and Pynchon come to a similar conclusion on the multiplicity of narratives.

Lyotard’s solution to the narrative problem is the acceptance of multiple narratives at the same time, rather than one absolute narrative domineering over everything giving a perfect account of reality.

He accepts the little stories, though it's not logically possible for all of them to be right at the same time without them severely contradicting each other considering their given mythologies. The only way according to Lyotard is to allow their accounts to exist side by side at least for the time being.

It suggests that the problems of internal communication experienced by the scientific community in the course of its work of dismantling and remounting its languages are comparable in nature to the problems experienced by the social collectivity when, deprived of its narrative culture, it must reexamine its own internal communication and in the process question the nature of the legitimacy of the decisions made in its name. (Lyotard, 62)

Given this problem multiple narratives must exist side by side in order to "re-examine its own internal communication" and the "legitimacy of the decisions made".



## The American Meta-Narrative: American Exceptionalism and Colonial Puritans

In *Gravity's Rainbow* there is a particular view of narrative that Pynchon is trying to take, given the circumstances that have arisen from the post-modern condition. That view is that, in light of the uncertainty of knowledge all narratives are suspect, except as a practical pragmatic assessment of how to access knowledge. A particular American view of history tries to claim that this problem doesn't exist because it exists to explain this problem away. This meta-narrative is an American Meta-narrative. Whenever Pynchon encounters something totalizing within the novel it usually has to do with this given narrative.

The American meta-narrative is a totalizing system like all meta-narratives under the Jean Francois Lyotard's definition: it is an attempt to give an account of the entirety of life through an American gaze. It couples faith in American ingenuity with modernist notions of progress, whereby the United State's advances in technology and culture are somehow superior to those of other nations. It centered on how America makes the world a better place by spreading its own agendas and enforcing upon the world by its own standards and practices.

The American meta-narrative is characterized by a view of history called American exceptionalism. American Exceptionalism was defined from as early as the era in the American Revolution in terms that historian Gordon S. Wood paraphrased this way,

our beliefs in liberty, equality, constitutionalism, and the well-being of ordinary people came out of the Revolutionary era. So too did our idea that we Americans are a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty and democracy." (Wood, 88)

This particular view of has given rise to many related ideas. One example is pointed out by literary historian Deborah L. Madsen in the ideas of Benjamin Franklin.

To be American and to be exemplary become the same thing, in Franklin's view. His life develops from poverty and obscurity to wealth and international fame; he starts life as a colonist but lives to become a citizen of an independent nation. And one of the most important aims of his autobiography is to teach readers how they, too, can become model Americans. (Madsen, 37)

This becomes really important to understanding the kind of characteristics that exemplify what it means to be American and how this distinguishes oneself from citizen of other countries. Madsen goes on to describe the view that Franklin holds about the model American. "Hard work, industry, thrift, common sense, altruism, moral integrity, and fair mindedness-these are the qualities that will guarantee success in America." (Madsen, 37) This view of being exceptional sets America apart from other nations and gives rise to a national pride.

Madsen even goes on to comment where you find these attitudes within Gravity's Rainbow. Pynchon takes up question of American exceptionalism, "in the European theatre, in the final days of World War Two. It is the threat of Fascism from which American troops must save the Old World. That 'cittie upon a hill', the model society that is so central to American exceptionalism, is now represented by the Capitol, the symbol of the democratic institutions perfected in America as a model for all the nations of the world." (Madsen, 154) This exceptionalism has particular malevolent roots in imperial ambitions. She explains how, "the manner in which the Old World is to be saved from itself is by a global expansion of American power and influence." This is the theme with which Pynchon is very concerned, the rising imperialist ambitions of America that he explores in the novel. According to Madsen, he "questions the origins of American cultural imperialism, and finds that imperialist assumptions are inscribed in the very ideology of mission that brought Puritan colonists to Massachusetts Bay." (Madsen, 154) This is the moment in which it seems that the exceptionalism becomes a meta-narrative.

Madsen concludes that American exceptionalism was destined to become a meta-narrative, in the sense that this particular exceptional point of view was bound to have universal implications. American exceptionalism becomes an American meta-narrative because universal notions are

embedded within imperialist ambitions. Lyotard makes a crucial connection between meta-narrative and imperialism within the context of Stalinism and its relationship with science. Here you can reasonably equate imperialism with Stalinism in that Stalin had historically wished to dominant large parts of Europe because of his own totalizing ideology. "Stalinism may be the result, with its specific relationship with the sciences: in Stalinism, the sciences only figure as citations from the metanarrative of the march towards socialism, which is the equivalent of the life of the spirit" (Lyotard, 37) If we apply the logic in Exceptionalism and the American meta-narrative in the same way as Lyotard talks about science as a footnote to Stalinism's meta-narrative of "the march of socialism" then we could say that the American meta-narrative uses science towards its own "march towards socialism" or in American terms march towards universal democratization and global control of the planet. Thus we can see how the characteristics of a narrative of history becomes assumed into a grander narrative of how the world should be run.

The American-meta narrative is a particular account of history. Its ethnographic and geographic consequences are extrapolated from the ideologies located in United States of America. These particular ideologies help to give form to the United States as the grand hero of the narrative. This is a totalizing type of narrative, which attempts to universalize all of history around the greatness of America. Its myopic view of history filters facts to emphasize the greatness of the United States, while at the same time downplaying or explaining away any facts that may contradict such a statement.

To understand the American Meta-Narrative you must understand the two grand ideologies that make it up. These two systems of thought are British Colonial Puritanism and the modernism that came from the European Enlightenment project.

The Puritans of this particular narrative has a Christian core. Christianity's universal view of history impacts the entirety of the world; everyone and everything will be effected. In their eschatological apocalyptic view of history all will be judged by Christ at his second coming,

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb, clothed white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10 NASB)

The point the writer of the book of *Revelation* is making is that all of world history culminates at the moment that Jesus Christ returns to judge all peoples and all peoples will acknowledge this. This has a particular absolutist and fixed view of history. God in heaven is guiding all of human events in this pre-ordained way to this particular event where this world will end, which entails a totalizing system of belief.

Pynchon engages the ideas that come through Puritanical Christianity primarily rhetorically. An example is the dodo bird, which poses a problem in God's creation. He shows this through the interactions that Dutch Calvinists have with this creature and the confusion it gives to their understanding of the world.

To some it made sense. They saw the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of Satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation. Was Mauritius some first poison trickle through the sheltering dikes of Earth? Christians must stem it here, or perish in a second Flood, loosed this time not by God but by the Enemy. The act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act, one whose symbolism they understood. (Pynchon, 112)

The first thing to note is how the "stumbling birds ill-made" is "the point of Satanic intervention". The first premise in an "argument against a Godly creation." This is important for an argument against this particular meta-narrative, the Christian meta-narrative. This whole paragraph works as an argument against Calvinist Christianity. Thinking that the dodoes pose a problem to the existence of God they kill them, thinking they are protecting the idea of God. The connection Pynchon is making between a type

of militarism and Christianity in that “the act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act”. The Dutch Calvinists’ acts of violence are in some related to their devotion to Christianity. This idea is further explored in Calvinist doctrine of election, when Franz van der Groov as the focal point considers them to be chosen by God to be doomed.

But if they were chosen to come to Mauritius, why had they been chosen to fail, and leave? Is that a choosing, or is it a passing over? Are they Elect, or are they Preterite, and doomed as dodoes? (Pynchon, 112)

Pynchon’s statement here is a comment on how this kind of thinking can turn violent and justify horrible atrocities. Where the doctrine of election here works as a way of justifying shooting these birds the wider implication of how this metaphor works is in the colonial massacres justified under manifest destiny. Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger point to the extermination of the dodoes as one example as Christianity working as an “Evil Ethos.” (Herman and Weisenburger, 187)

Another way Pynchon engages with this kind of American Puritanical Christianity is through the character Slothrop. As Pynchon writes, “there is in his history, and likely, God help him, in his dossier, a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky.” (Pynchon, 27) The “revealed in the sky” works with “God help him” to put context to “his history” as a sort of statement about Slothrop’s forebears who are buried in the “congregational churchyard back home in Minegbourough, Massachusetts” (Pynchon, 27). In context this is the Massachusetts Bay colony where the Calvinist Puritans aspired to set up their famous city on a hill, which Pynchon indicates by saying how “the hand of God emerges from a cloud” (Pynchon, 27). There is a shift however from the puritan back-ground to their economic downward mobility, according to Pynchon, the Slothrops “did not prosper...about all they did was persist” (Pynchon, 28) The Slothrop family persisted with:

Profits slackening, the family ever multiplying. Interest from various numbered trusts was still turned, by family banks down in Boston Every second or third generation, back into yet another trust, in a long rallentando, in infinite series

just perceptibly, term by term, dying ...but never quite to the zero. (Pynchon, 29)

This is the background of Slothrop who grew up “in a hilltop desolation of businesses going under, hedges around the estates of the vastly rich, half-mythical cottagers from New York lapsing back now to green wilderness or straw death.” (Pynchon, 29) This connection of failing businesses and American puritanism is elaborated by Madsen with respect to Tyrone Slothrop’s ancestor William Slothrop, who has a form of this puritanism but is ultimately fixed on a different object, Madsen explains that

The character of William Slothrop, first American ancestor of the hero Tyrone Slothrop, is a dissenter, heretic, fugitive from what Pynchon calls ‘the Winthrop machine’. He is the spokesman for the preterite, the unredeemed who define by opposition the class of the elect; they are ‘the “second Sheep” without whom there’d be no elect. William argues for the holiness of the pigs he escorts to slaughter, the preterite pigs that define by their mortality the election of those who may transcend death, the pigs who are ‘possessed .... By trust for men, which the men kept betraying .... Possessed by innocence they couldn’t lose .. by faith in William as another variety of pig, at home with the Earth, sharing the same gift life (Pynchon, 154-155)

Here we see in Madsen’s argument William’s break from Calvinism. Even though he breaks from it as a “heretic” the way he expresses his view is still with Calvinist terminology through words like “elect”, “Holiness”, “Second Sheep”, and “Preterite pigs”. The object of this heretical Calvinism is an attitude which Madsen calls “at home with the Earth, sharing the same gift”. She goes on to say that “This attitude of acceptance, of simply being at home in the world, represents in the narrative an alternative to the ‘grim rationalization of the World’ that is the means by which American imperialism spreads itself.” (Madsen, 155) The way in which Madsen says this American imperialism spreads itself is by what is referred to as “Them or ‘The Firm’, these neo-colonial interests seek to replace natural diversity and disorder with stable, rational and controllable systems of meaning.” (Madsen, 155) These systems of meaning implied by Madsen are the American colonial Calvinists, whose interest will inevitably feed into American imperialism. Herman and Weisenburger talk about this combination of the “Western business cartel, melded with Protestantism’s alienated and monadistic individual, and armed with an ideology of

technical rationality sufficiently commonsensical to keep people marching to its beat” (Herman and Weisenburger, 113). This is the ultimate point Pynchon is making against Christianity is its complicity with imperialism and what it makes in the military industrial complex.

## The American Meta-Narrative: Modernism, Science, and Progress

The other ideology supporting the American meta-narrative is called modernism. Modernism defined by Peter Wagner in his book *Modernity: Understanding the Present* has

Been associated with Progress. In everyday life, the belief and commitment that our children should have a better life than ourselves, expresses an idea progress across time. As historians of concepts have shown, our idea of progress emerges in the late eighteenth century, and it gives rise to the view of a coming—bright—future that dissociates itself from the—often miserable—present. (Wagner, 28)

This notion of progress towards a bright future is coupled with ideas of “revolution, which ....takes on the meaning of an abrupt and radical forward step in time.”(Wagner, 28) These revolutions measure their notions of progress in “principles of freedom and equality” (Wagner, 30) based on normative theories which have established these principles in their narrative (Wagner, 30). This idea that with just enough effort that we can make a better world with our technological might and scientific insight is ultimately rejected by Pynchon, and is undermined in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in its relation to the military industrial complex as its inevitable consequence.

-Thomas Pynchon engages with Modernism in the novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* through his portrayal of modern science, embodying this enlightenment ideal of progress and its principles. An example of this is the exchange between Pointsman and Rodger Mexico about Pavlov.

‘Pavlov believed that the ideal, the end we all struggle toward in science, is the true mechanical explanation. He was realistic enough not to expect it in his lifetime. Or in several lifetimes more. But his hope was for a long chain of better and better approximations. His faith ultimately lay in a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche. No effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages.’(Pynchon, 90)

Pointsman believes in the idea of progress in Pavlov’s project of the ideal in “the true mechanical explanation” and connects the modernist idea of progress with the advancement of science, which



entails the betterment of humanity. This idea of “better approximations” of scientific knowledge happens not in “one lifetime” but in “several lifetimes”. Pavlov’s “hope was for a long chain of better and better approximations”. This is Pointsman’s hope as well. His “faith ultimately lay in a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche.” (Pynchon, 90) Modern progress is linked with the cause and effect relationship; there is no “effect without cause” says Pointsman.

Roger Mexico pushes back against this idea.

‘but there’s a feeling about that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, a less... Sterile set of assumptions. The next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle.’ (Pynchon, 90-91)

Mexico questions the “sterile set of assumption” that Pointsman exposes in his idea of science. Mexico doesn’t reject science, but sees the assumptions as too narrow if it is “to carry on at all”. Science must in Mexico’s words “have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle”. Mexico questions science’s purpose of “true mechanical explanation” that Pointsman espouses.

Pointsman responds to Mexico’s criticism with “No—not ‘strike off.’ Regress. You’re 30 years old, man. There are no ‘other angles.’ There is only forward into it—or backward.”(Pynchon, 91). In Pointsman’s view there is no way around the notion of cause-and-effect as integral to progress; either we go “forward into [mechanical explanation]—or backward.” There is no other angle to strike off on.

What Pynchon thinks on this subject comes in Mexico’s reflections on Pointsman’s reaction.

Pointsman has turned now, and...Oh, God. He is smiling. There is something so ancient in its assumption of brotherhood that —not now, but a few months from now, with spring prevailing and the war in Europe ended—Roger will remember the smile —it will haunt him—as the most evil look he has ever had from a human face. (Pynchon, 91)

Why does Roger Mexico think this? Why does Pointsman have the “most evil look he has ever had from a human face”?

Part of the answer is in the preceding paragraph. Before Pointsman turns around Mexico looks at Pointsman and reflects.

Mexico watches the wind tugging at the skirts of Pointsman's coat. A gull goes screaming away sidewise along the frozen berm. The chalk cliffs rear up above, cold and serene as death. Early barbarians of Europe who ventured close enough to this coast saw these white barriers through the mist, and knew where their dead had been taken to.

This vision of the landscape ties into the ideas which Pointsman espouses on science's role in understanding the world, the "cause and effect" relationship and the "true mechanical explanation". The chalk cliffs that "rear up above, cold and serene as death" can't be mistaken for anything but a metaphor for the heights to which scientists aspire. The "chalk cliffs" can be seen as a sort of representation of a chalk board on which scientists write their equations. The height of the cliff can be seen as their aspirations for advancement, but always on the edge of death. The land here that the "barbarians" see is England, a land of the dead. The "early barbarians of Europe who ventured close enough to this coast [and] saw these white barriers through the mist, and knew where their dead had been taken to." The "white barriers" can be seen as the limits which science shouldn't cross. Crossing such a barrier would lead to certain death, a death that Pointsman has already crossed into. Where everyone would take this advice and keep it, Pointsman on the other hand seems to miss this.

Part of this of Pointsman's attitude can be seen in his experimentation on Slothrop. Pointsman begins by saying, "We both have Slothrop," to which Mexico responds "Pointsman—what are you expecting out of this? Besides Glory, I mean." (Pynchon, 91) Pointsman responds with

No more than Pavlov. A physiological basis for what seems very odd behavior. I don't care which of your P.R.S. [Philosophical Research Society] categories it may fit into -- oddly enough none of you's even suggested telepathy: perhaps he's tuned in to someone over there, someone who knows the German firing schedule ahead of time. Eh? And I don't care if it's some terrible Freudian revenge against his mother for trying to castrate him or something. I am not grandiose, Mexico. I am modest, methodical. (Pynchon, 91)

Earlier on in the chapter Pointsman is trying to figure out how Slothrop seems to know when and where the rockets are going to fall and whether he is in some way controlling them. According to Rollo Groast in this chapter, "Slothrop is able to predict when a rocket will fall at a particular place. His survival to date is evidence he's acted on advance information, and avoided the area at the time the rocket was supposed to fall" (Pynchon, 87). And there are plenty of theories regarding to why that is, from telekinesis to some psycho-sexual theory, as evidenced in Pointsman's rant about not caring "if it's some terrible Freudian revenge against his mother for trying to castrate him or something." (Pynchon, 91) The point here that Pynchon seems to be making is that all this effort to understand how Slothrop is controlling the rocket involves going beyond the "white barriers" of the cliff. The irony is that the process of controlling and understanding the rocket is the same process that created the rocket that put them in this situation in the first place.

The result of this thinking can be seen in paragraph about the bleak winter that Pointsman and Mexico are walking through. Here Pynchon delivers his point on modernism.

So, the two of them: trudging, hands in and out of pockets, their figures dwindling, fawn and gray and a lick of scarlet, very sharp-edged, their footprints behind them a long freezing progress of exhausted stars, the overcast reflecting from the glazed beach nearly white... We have lost them. No one listened to those early conversations—not even an idle snapshot survives. They walked till that winter hid them and it seemed the cruel channel itself would freeze over, and on one, none of us, could ever completely find them again. Their footprints filled with ice, and a little later were taken out to sea. (Pynchon, 94)

Here we see them both of them trudging through the hard winter, their footprints appearing behind them as "a long freezing progress of exhausted stars". A progress akin to modern progress is frozen in place, but has "exhausted" its resources. The individuals become lost, "none of us, could ever completely find them again". Whatever effect they had, their "footprints" will eventually be "filled with ice, and a little later were taken out to sea." There is this depersonalizing effect, which loses the

personality within the progress and then eventually loses the impact of the individuals that lead the progress.

This idea of modernism's destruction of the past to gain a new future is articulated by David Harvey in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, under the heading "creative destruction".

The image of 'creative destruction' is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world be created, after all without destroying much that had gone before? You simply cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs, as a whole line of modernist thinkers from Goethe to Mao have noted. (Harvey, 16)

The point of the winter and footprint metaphor is the representation of creative destruction that is inherently embedded in modernism's idea of progress. The question rhetorically posed by Harvey "how could a new world be created, after all without destroying much that had gone before?" is answered by "It can't." Whatever progress is made it is quickly destroyed by further progress; the "footprints" linger only so long before the snow covers them up.

The modernist meta-narrative as well as the Christian Calvinist and American meta-narratives all feed into the same militaristic outcomes. They all tie into the military industrial complex, also called the war cartel as Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger point out.

Cartelized war, hot or cold, affects everything and everyone in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In "its glutton, ever-nibbling intake," it literally incorporates the entirety of human experience; its inexorable logic of conditioning dominates all classes and kinds of people in the storyworld. Indeed, if one wanted an exemplary fictional treatment of the extent and means of structural or objective violence in modernity, it would be hard to do better than *Gravity's Rainbow*. And the wall-to-wall proliferation of structural domination in the narrative highlights even more sharply the near absence in it of conventional, subjective wartime violence. (Herman and Weisenburger, 108)

This kind of violence is intrinsically tied to meta-narratives in their own totalizing agendas. The War, with its "absolute rule of chance" forces people at the V-2 battery like Katje, Gottfried and even Blicero to

recognize “their own pitiable contingency here, in its midst.” (Herman and Weisenburger, 108).

Anything totalizing ultimately results in something violent.

An example of this happening within *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the chemist Kekulé, who dreams of these totalizing structures, meta-narratives and their inevitable consequence in violence all feeding into the military industrial complex.

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide . . . though he's amiable enough, keeps cracking jokes back through the loudspeaker (Pynchon, 419)

Meta-narratives acts as a “System” which surrounds the world. Its scope is global and universal. It controls everything with a “cynicism” that delivers the message that the “world is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning,” only to try and break it. There is an assertion by Pynchon that there is a way of doing things that is beyond the meta-narrative, which he calls in this passage the “Great Serpent,” a type of ouroborous, a symbol of infinite continuity. The “great serpent” keeps the world intact with a cyclical way of doing things. What Pynchon calls the “System” is the thing which tries to break away from the “Great Serpent” and to take its place. For Pynchon, though, this attempt is futile. The System “may or may not understand that it's only buying time,” since it is an imposed universal, which doesn’t have the infinite continuity that the “Great serpent” has. The “System” removes from the

rest of the World “these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process.” This is an unstable process with no stability; it only takes, in Pynchon’s estimation, and is destined to “crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply”. The System here is the aim and goal of the American Meta-Narrative -- the goal of global conquest and universal control.

## The Postmodern Crisis of Knowledge and Interpreting History

With the rejection of meta-narratives, we approach the crisis of knowledge that Lyotard called the post-modern condition, where meta-narrative, also called grand-narrative, “has lost its credibility” (Lyotard, 37). It’s not just grand narrative that has lost credibility; in fact, the reliability of narrative has also taken a hit. According to Lyotard this “decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War.” (Lyotard, 37) This uncertainty of knowledge has led to a sort of skepticism of all narratives, but the practical solution seems to be tolerance for narratives and careful analysis of their subjects. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is situated within the time in which Lyotard says narrative begins to be de-legitimized. Pynchon is trying to make the point that what these smaller narratives tell us is lost within the grander narratives.

An example in *Gravity’s Rainbow* of the dismantling of grand narratives to make way for plain narratives in interpreting history is this passage:

It’s been a prevalent notion. Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home—only the millions of last moments...no more. Our history is an aggregate of last moments. (Pynchon, 151)

What’s interesting in this passage is the way Pynchon calls attention to the illusion of the “message”.

This in context is understood as an expression of Kabbalist mythological concepts to communicate a failed hope. Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger explain

Kabbalah claims secret knowledge of the unwritten Torah (the divine revelation) that God communicated to Adam and to Moses. They and their heirs were given means for approaching, for hearing God directly (also a cornerstone of Puritan theology), not through rational exegesis but through mystical knowledge (for example, about the numerical values of Hebrew letters and words) that was passed on, through adepts who tease meaning from closely interpreted sacred

texts. ... Furthermore, even when the holy text is found it will require adepts to decipher the meaning. So it will have “to be picked to pieces,” as if shattered kabbalistically, in order to reveal, and be regathered around, its transcendent truth. (Herman and Weisenburger, 184)

The imagery works with the idea of narrating history and has implications for how meta-narrative and narrative can work in it. Within this passage is an explicit message of hope that can be seen as a grand-narrative or meta-narrative -- the “message” or “home” that will make sense of it all. He uses the pottery imagery as well as the sparks to show how these narratives may splinter off the One, because of its failure. The image is that of a broken pot as it were or an engine giving off sparks because it’s failing. This passage indicates a hopeful return of the “messenger from the kingdom” here implying the return of a “Kabbalistic Shekhinah” (Herman and Weisenburger, 171), which is a “messianic bride who gathers in all the shattered pieces of being in an eschatological climax” (Herman and Weisenburger, 171). The pieces brought together to make a whole vessel to “bring things back home” to a single narrative to understand history and the hope it can bring. Pynchon doesn’t leave that possibility open though, as “there is no message, no such home—only the millions of last moments and no more.” The possibility of some kind of salvation at the end is not possible for Pynchon, only the “millions of last moments”. The denial of the grand-narrative is implicit in this passage, which is the rejection of a Kabbalistic meta-narrative of the end of history as a grand unifier of the “millions of last moments”. History for Pynchon is “an aggregate of last moments”. What this entails is understanding the millions of last moments in the light of history, the many narratives that encompass an event but go overlooked by the grand-narratives often employed.

There are many small narratives in the novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* -- some might say hundreds. What they are there for however is not simply to be out-of-place or out-of-time, but for the specific purpose of making explicit and implicit points on the time period that they are set in the period during and after World War Two. There are many examples of this happening in the novel; for the sake of brevity two will be explored. The particular narratives that I am going to explore here for what they say



about World War Two are the ones pertaining to Gottfried the sex slave and the rocket attacks on London during the beginning of the novel.

Gottfried is the German boy who tends to the rockets. What makes him interesting is the efforts Pynchon takes to humanize him. He has dreams and aspirations. “Now he’s learning a trade, tending the rockets and when the war ends he’ll study to become an engineer.” (Pynchon, 105) He’s a victim for sure of sex slavery that he’s caught up in, but also in another way he’s a perpetrator of the crimes he’s victimized by. Though he is a sex slave he still tends to the rockets and even “aspires to be an engineer”, which can be read as implicit statement of continuing to create the rockets that he tends. He isn’t just a mindless machine taking orders, but a human caught up in a system he can’t seem to escape. This is very eloquently portrayed in his relationship with Captain Bilcero.

He understands that Bilcero will die or go away, and that he will leave the cage. But he connects this with the end of the War, not with the oven. He knows, like everyone, that captive children are always freed in the moment of maximum danger. The fucking, the salt length of the Captain’s weary, often impotent penis pushing into his meek mouth, the stinging chastisements, his face reflected in the act of kissing the captain’s boots, their shine mottled, corroded by bearing grease, oil alcohol, spilled in fueling, darkening his face to the one he can’t recognize—these are necessary, they make specific his captivity, which otherwise would hardly be different from army stifling, army repression. He’s ashamed that he enjoys them so much—the word bitch, spoken now in a certain tone of voice, will give him an erection he cannot will down—afraid that, if not actually judged and damned, he’s gone insane. (Pynchon, 105)

What’s interesting about this passage is the complex love-hate sexual relationship Gottfried has with the Captain. In the beginning of this passage he associates freedom of “captive children” with the moment of maximum danger. The maximum danger to him is the oven. The oven is a reference to the game that Katje and Gottfried play with Bilcero where they re-enact the Hansel and Gretel story. There seems though a worse danger that Pynchon is hinting at. Gottfried is forced to perform sexual acts with the captain, and begins to enjoy the abuse. Sado-masochistically, “he’s ashamed that he enjoys them so much”. This has had a physical effect where “the word bitch, spoken now in a certain tone of voice, will

give him an erection he cannot will down.” Even though he enjoys this, he certainly understands this is not the place to be, given that “if not actually judged and damned, he’s gone insane.” He’s come to in some respect to love the cage he’s been placed in. Pynchon seems to be implying a sort of psychological behaviorism, which can help to understand the predicament of German people as a whole in participating in the Third Reich. Even though what is done to Gottfried is obscene and horrific, “these are necessary, they make specific his captivity, which otherwise would hardly be different from army stifling, army repression”. Pynchon here is implying this type of behavior modification is similar to the repression that is found in the German army. The sexual stimuli that has caused Gottfried to have erections when being demeaned by the Captain is likened to army training practices where they’re getting demeaned and learn to love the psychological abuse, the ultimate humiliation for Gottfried though is when he is sacrificed by being shot in a V-2 at the enemy. A sort of love of the abuse given that you’re indoctrinated so deep into that you’d even die for. This gives an entirely different insight into the German army as a thing created through a type of conditioning to love the cage that it lives in.

Another interesting narrative that can be overlooked through meta-narrative reductiveness is the beginning scenes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when the V-2 rockets are coming down upon the people of England. The important thing to note is that this scene is a dream of the character Pirate Prentice. This is a look at the unconscious of the inhabitants of London.

A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The evacuation still proceeds, but it’s all theatre. There are no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere. Above him lift girders old as an iron queen, and glass somewhere far above that would let the light of day through. But it’s night. He’s afraid of the way the glass will fall—soon—it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing. (Pynchon, 3)

Spectacle dominates this passage. The famous beginning to the novel sets up within it a theme of pessimism. The spectacle is the “theatre” that occurs in the evacuation of the people who are trying to get away from the rocket. It’s too late to get away, but they try to do so anyway. But coming down in

total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing.” The focal point of this narration is Captain Geoffrey Prentice, “who sits in velveteen darkness” (Pynchon, 3) looking upon others in the carriage:

Feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time: drunks, old veterans still in shock from ordnance 20 years obsolete, hustlers in city clothes, derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone, stacked about among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation.  
(Pynchon, 3)

In this scene, London’s inhabitants are a people all too tired to keep on going with this exhausting routine of bombardment. The types of people Pynchon highlights -- “Feeble ones”, “Second Sheep”, “drunks”, “Hustlers”, “Derelicts” and “Exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone” -- are a different kind of citizen that doesn’t typically appear in newsreels. It’s not a normal group of Londoners or if it is then it’s a new normal created by the circumstances of the London bombings.

The point of this look at London is to get a picture of what happens to the inhabitants during war-time crisis. The war-time damage doesn’t just turn people into exhausted mothers and burned out veterans. The predicament of rocket bombing and the uncertainty that follows can also turn people into “hustlers”, “Drunks” and “derelicts”. It becomes a desperate situation for many people. The city is also portrayed in a state of ruin contributing to a psyche of desolation.

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 to ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into—they go in under archways, secret entrances of rotted concrete that only looked like loops of an underpass...certain trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead, and the smells begun of coal from days far to the past, smells of naphtha winters, of Sundays when no traffic came through, of the coral-like and mysteriously vital growth, around the blind curves and out the lonely spurs, a sour smell of rolling-stock absence, of maturing rust, developing through those emptying days brilliant and deep,

especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to absolute zero.. (Pynchon, 3-4)

The tour of this kind of London is one through “secret entrances of rotted concrete” past “certain trestles of blackened wood” that smells of “coal”, “naphtha winters” and “sour rolling-stock absence”. A place where “no traffic” comes to “lonely spurs” filled with “maturing rust” developing through “emptying days”. This is all approaching “absolute zero”. This is a decaying London that is being pummeled by time and war that is fast approaching doomsday. A sort of pessimism in the architecture of London reflects back into the psyches of the war-torn inhabitants. A narrative of impending doom of an uncertain future that seems bleak in light of the ever-present threat of rocket attack. This is a very different picture of London than the typically presented of the strong-willed Londoners marching through the enemies’ bombardment.

What we learn by applying Lyotard’s theory of narrative to the novel *Gavity’s Rainbow* is one small part of what Pynchon’s complex narrative is trying to accomplish. On one hand Pynchon is like Lyotard dismantling meta-narratives to make way for smaller narratives. These smaller-narratives bring a complexity that meta-narratives try to downplay and that possibly undermine the way meta-narratives work in giving an account of history. What we see in these particular smaller narratives associated with Gottfried and London bombings is a humanizing of the German people during World War Two as well as the tension that Londoners faced during the bombings. This is only one small way of understanding the vast and complex novel that Pynchon has created and assuredly there are hundreds of other ways to understand it.

**Conclusion:**

There are many things learned from *Gravity's Rainbow* when viewing it from this particular perspective on narrative. What is mainly gained is an understanding of the implications of his narrative form. Pynchon is undermining particular views of the world, the grand-narratives (also called meta-narratives) that claim complete dominion over the world. After these meta-narratives have been undermined, what surfaces are the littler stories or narratives that are overlooked by reductive meta-narrative thinking. What we learn from these narratives are the counterfactuals which complicate the way we view the world. The particular things we think are evil and are alien from are actually being inadvertently fed by our daily actions. Our sense of heroism, cast in a different narrative light, is no more justified than the Nazi Aryan ideal.

Ultimately, what we learn is a skepticism towards grander claims of any kind. These kinds of claims, according to Pynchon only perpetuates a big military-industrial system, which perpetuates war and continues violence.

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