CHAPTER V

DOOM'S DAZZLING PARABOLA

The decadence of western culture that reached terrifyingly alarming proportions in its manifold aspects is the major concern of Pynchon’s third novel, Gravity’s Rainbow, which established him as one of the unprecedented geniuses of the post war era. Pynchon’s reviewers have compared Gravity’s Rainbow with Moby Dick, Don Quixote and Ulysses, and located it within a tradition of encyclopedic narratives. Edward Mendelson, for example, suggests that Pynchon has felt “the need for an encyclopedic fictional survey of the new conditions” (5). Based on this categorization of the novel, David Seed offers a useful warning to the reader neither to expect organic unity, nor to be dismayed by “the discontinuities and startling shifts in its register” (157). In spite of these difficulties, in America, Gravity’s Rainbow is marked as “the most critically acclaimed novel of all time” (Schwarzbach 56).

In Gravity’s Rainbow, Pynchon generally uses the last years of World War II as the background for the wide-ranging examination of western culture. But specifically the novel covers a period of nine months from mid December 1944 to mid September of 1945. Part I of the novel entitled “Beyond the Zero,” spans only a period of nine days from 18th December through 26th December 1944, comprising both Advent and Christmas season. It was only a few months before that the first V-2 rocket fell on England.
And on Easter 1942 when the allied forces bombed the German city of Lübeck, Hitler warned of the coming “Vergeltungswaffe, or revenge weapons” (Weisenburger, GRC 16).

It is obvious that Pynchon in his magnum opus satirizes modern man’s craze for weapons and colossal destruction. Weisenburger finds a rare coincidence of Easter Sunday of 1945 and April Fool’s Day as per the western calendar. Similarly the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on Sunday, August 6, the feast of Transfiguration (1). Choosing this period of strange coincidences of the religious and the profane, Pynchon parodies effectively the contemporary society’s spiritual and cultural retrogression.

The novel opens with a nightmarish vision of an evacuation scene during the last months of World War II, consequent on a rocket’s roaring across the London sky:

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. […] No light anywhere. […] He’s afraid of the way the glass will fall […] the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing. […] They have begun to move. […] No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into- […] try
to bring events to Absolute Zero [...] the walls break down, the roofs get fewer [...] It is a judgment from which there is no appeal. [...] the smell is of old wood, of remote wings empty all this time just reopened to accommodate the rush of souls [...] only their ghosts [...] There is no way out. [...] How awful. How bloody awful. (3-5)

This description of evacuation has much significance in modern history, as one and a half million civilians were evacuated from London when the Germans began using V-1 and V-2 rockets against England from June 1944. The novel also closes with the description of a rocket descending to destroy the audience in a theatre: " [...] the pointed tip of the rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t" (760).

The rocket’s parabolic route looks like the curve of a rainbow. While the rainbow symbolizes God’s covenant with man for peace in the Bible (Gen.9:13), in Gravity’s Rainbow it is suggestive of the concept of God’s justice in a crazy World War II society that has created a hell on earth. The novel’s presentation of the rocket, a terrifying weapon of destruction, both at the beginning and at the end, as well as the figure of its parabolic path, imparts ironic reverberations for the various forms cultural decline. The rocket comes out from the death oriented western cultural context.
Gravity’s Rainbow, tracing along the portentous arc of the rocket, Pynchon depicts the hopelessly ruinous and derelict tendency of the modern world. He projects in deep colours and crude images, the different manifestations of cultural decline as colonialisit exploitation, imperialist cannibalism, moral and spiritual degeneration, deception, lovelessness and finally annihilation.

Pynchon’s portrayal of the turmoil of the contemporary world is closely in accordance with the Puritan Weltanschauung, which divides the society into “the elect” and “the preterite.” At the same time an absurdist’s yearning for an ordered universe is unequivocally perceptible in his works. He then compares the elect with their ironic counterparts in the twentieth century society, who eccentrically misused the system leading to World War II and the mass destruction.

Elaine B. Safer has aptly compared Pynchon’s depiction of the chaos of the contemporary world in Gravity’s Rainbow, with Milton’s portrayal of hell in Paradise Lost, the paradigm of a Puritan worldview (CETP 158). The recurring picture of the desolate land, torn apart by World War II, is powerfully evocative of hell, an agonizing symbol man’s fall from grace. The images and terminology delineating the horrors of World War II and the holocaust resemble Milton’s. The fallen in Gravity’s Rainbow experience problems similar to those of Milton’s fallen angels. But the coherence and rationale in Milton’s heaven and hell are truly absent in Pynchon’s absurdist vision of an irrational and disordered earthly hell. Though there are
allusions to a rationally ordered universe, he intentionally crumbles it up causing the reader to experience the absurd.

Through the very opening scene Pynchon effectively creates the feeling of hell on earth. Ruined by war, London is a darkened habitat, fit “to accommodate the rush of souls”. It is, in Miltonic terms, “darkness visible” (PL I. 63). The streets are filled with stench and smoke from current bombings. There is also the smell of burning wood. Constant emission of smoke from the rockets always acts as background for the fire imagery. Pynchon’s world thus reminds us, “A Universe of death...Where all life dies, death lives, and nature breeds, perverse” (PL II. 622-25).

Thus the early passages of Gravity’s Rainbow, like those of Paradise Lost, set the atmosphere for a “region of sorrow,” where hope and rest never dwell, where confused creatures roam “in wand’ring mazes lost” (PL II. 561). In Gravity’s Rainbow, the evacuees of darkened, bombed out London streets move along “blind curves,” down streets that get narrower and more broken, eventually finding that “there is no way out.” The movement “is not a disentanglement, but a progressive knotting into.” Their movement reiterates the futile roving of the fallen in Milton’s hell. Pynchon further elucidates the predicament of modern man: “You didn’t really believe you’d be saved. Come, we all know who we are now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save you. old fellow” (4).
The condition of the fallen in Milton and Pynchon is physical as well as spiritual. Satan’s original lustre fades as he declines from the angel Lucifer to the Archfiend. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this metamorphosis is more terribly felt among the evacuees who have been grotesquely distorted and disfigured by war. In contrast to Milton’s fallen angels, the World War II victims in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are helpless. Satan and his followers had the choice not to fall. It was pride and worse ambition that threw Satan down. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the reader is induced to search constantly for reasons for the atrocities perpetrated during World War II. The author does not give any direct answer nor does he make affirmations about man or God. He just portrays both the man-made-hell and the crazy misuse of technology in the context of cultural decline and moral depravity.

It is in this milieu that Pynchon’s American born Puritan protagonist, Lt. Tyrone Slothrop begins his quest. Slothrop’s investigation in a war-torn world of spies, counterspies and intelligence operations resembles that of his fictional predecessors in many respects. Like Stencil and Oedipa, Slothrop searches for his identity, which apparently is an attempt to discover the strange association of his libido to the V-2 rocket, in a fully cybernetic universe. But one of the important shifts form *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Gravity’s Rainbow* is Pynchon’s mode of characterization. Unlike *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* makes use of a more schematic and abstract characterization reminiscent of *V.*. Despite the shift, however,
Gravity's Rainbow takes up most of the themes treated in both the early novels, developing them, as the narrator remarks, into a complex "network of [...] plots" (GR 603). In parts I and II of the novel Slothrop travels through London, Nice, Zürich, Berlin, and other parts of the Zone searching for answers about the V-2 rocket, about Imipolex G, and about his forbidden past. Thus the positions of V. and the Tristero as "grail objects" are taken over by the V-2 and Imipolex G. in Gravity's Rainbow. Slothrop's rambling through the Zone as an easygoing and skeptical sexual opportunist epitomizes the disillusionment of modern man and degeneration of sexual morality. As John Hamill observes: "the novel examines the relationship between sexuality and power by dramatizing in microcosm particular power relationships in a sexualized context" (53).

The author employs dramatic irony in Slothrop's presentation, as he is ignorant of the fact that he has been peculiarly conditioned in matters of sexual responses. In his infancy Slothrop was used for behaviorist conditioning by one Dr. Laszlo Jamf, a Pavlovian scientist at Harvard (84). The conditioning makes Slothrop a peculiarly libidinous libertine who experiences erections at the sites of rocket fall in the Zone. Slothrop, who was famous as Infant Tyrone, was "discovered late in 1944 by the White Visitation" (85). In episode 3 of the novel, he is presented as working under ACHTUNG (Allied Clearing House, Technical Units Northern Germany), in collaboration with Lt. Oliver ("Tantivy") sharing an office with him in
London. His task is to go out and observe the rocket-bomb disasters for ACHTUNG. “He travels among places of death, to devote to girl chasing” (19). His conditioning was a deliberate attempt to use him as a puppet in the hands of warmongers. They designed the conditioning in such a way that he might fall in love with the rocket falls and consequently mankind’s death:

[…] to help him explain what he felt so terrible, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky … to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race’s death. (738)

He involves in sexual relationship with a Dutch double agent Katje Borgesius, hoping that it will bring physical and emotional relief and confirm his autonomy. His very lovemaking then turns into a brutal rape which transforms Katje into a frightening human being:

…lifts her in a fireman’s carry, throws against the bed and comes after her […] grabs by the hair and twists an arm behind her, pushing her face down, on the bed. […] Katje turns her head and sinks her teeth in his forearm. […] but the terrible Face That Is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable. (221-222)

Teddy Bloat, a friend of Tantivy, notices a map of London, tacked to the wall next to Slothrop’s desk. Names of girls and stars of different colours pasted on the map cover the entire spectrum.
[...] beginning with silver (labeled “Darlene”) sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katherine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys—mostly red and blue though here—a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent Garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and out to Wembly and up to Hampstead Heath—in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here—and there peeling firmament, Carolines. Marias, Annes, Susans, Elizabeths. (19)

Bloat photographs the map and reports that Slothrop has begun his work. His friend Tantivy comments: “He does lead rather a complicated social life” (19). Pointsman and Roger Mexico are the two scientists of British intelligence community, seeking to interpret Slothrop’s peculiar affinity for rockets. But they represent divergent trends in modern science. Pointsman is a behaviourist, a believer in cause and effect, who seeks to prove Pavlov’s theory of stimulus—response through his research on Slothrop. The statistician Roger Mexico who represents the world of pure physics, keeps a map of the sites of the V-2 strikes on London following a statistical model, the Poisson—distribution. “Each hit is independent of all the others. Bombs are not dogs. No link. No memory. No conditioning” (56). When the slides of Slothrop’s map have been projected onto Roger’s, the two images, “girl-stars, and rocket-strike circles” did coincide (85-86).
For Roger, the coincidence was irrelevant, because his map does not represent a structure based on the law of cause and effect. It merely represents pure contingencies and random events.

Pointsman, the Pavlovian scientist, however, cannot easily admit Slothrop’s psychosexual connection to the V-2. He wants to explain this phenomenon in terms of cause and effect relationship. Consequently, he engages in searching scrupulously for the menacing “Mystery Stimulus” that causes what he calls the “hardon reflex” (84), which in turn brings about Slothrop’s meeting with the women. The narrator’s comment on Pointsman delineates his perverted sense of professional ethics:

Nothing is beyond Pointsman, he’s worse than old Pudding was, no shame at all. He would use any one—Gloaming, Katje Borgesius, Pirate Prentice, no one is (Jessica) exempt from his (Jessica?) Machiavellian—. (631)

Even though Pynchon quotes Pavlov at some length in his presentation of conditioning, he also “deliberately modifies” him in a crucial manner (Berressem 122). While Pavlov uses food as stimulus and salivation as a measure of animal’s response, Pointsman uses “drooling” and “hardon” as responses (84). In section II of the novel Pynchon shifts emphasis from the psychological on to commerce and Pointsman virtually disappears from the novel at this point. Pointsman’s replacement of real hunger with sexual hunger is indicative of a terrible change in societal attitudes.
Gradually, the Schwarzgerät, the secret device of the Nazi rocket programme, becomes a kind of grail object for which the hero Slothrop and a number of other characters wander in quest. The narrator muses that “even as determinist a piece of hardware as the A-4 rocket will begin spontaneously generating items like the S-Gerät, Slothrop thinks he’s chasing like a grail” (275). The precise nature of the device remains a mystery just as the case of the identity of V., or the meaning of the Tristero system. Slothrop has undergone all sorts of high adventure in his search for the Schwarzgerät. Finally Slothrop meets Pökler, the designer himself who has become disillusioned and even disinterested in the programme. The highly obsessed Pökler evades him with very little explanation. “It is an aromatic polyimide” (576), is the only information that Slothrop gets from Pökler.

Unlike the quest objects of the earlier novels, the figure V., and the Tristero system, which are not truly historical realities, the V-2 rocket of Gravity’s Rainbow, is one of the most momentous projects of the history of modern warfare. And all the major characters of the novel respond to the project in some significant way. Slothrop, Franz Pökler, Roger Mexico, and many others have burned themselves out in the quest, yet the mystery remains intractable.

Slothrop travels from Zürich to the Harz Mountains of central Germany. Then he moves to Nordhausen pursuing information about the
rocket while simultaneously hunting details of his own childhood. In the meanwhile, perusing the documents handed over to him, he is shocked to learn about the tangle of ties binding him to Laszlo Jamf, Imipolex G, and the V-2 rocket. As one of Slothrop’s friends in the Zone puts it, “grails themselves come in plastics these years, a dime a dozen, penny a gross” (321). Later one of the minor characters tells Slothrop that the rocket “is no Grail Ace, that’s not what the G in Imipolex G stands for” (364). But the narrator tells him plainly about that chemical substance:

Imipolex G has proved to be nothing more—or less—sinister than a new plastic, an aromatic heterocyclic polymer, developed in 1939, years before its time, by one Jamf for IG Farben. It is stable at high temperatures, like up to 900°C., it combines good strength with low power loss factor (249).

The same chemical was used in rockets and in experiments conducted upon Infant Slothrop: “his erections were conditioned by the smell of plastics made from the chemical” (Smith Evans 517). Gradually Slothrop’s search jolts into self-exploration and he discovers the fact that in his infancy he has been betrayed and sold by his father for experimentation. His mounting panic reaches its climax. From that point (Part 3, Episode 1), onwards his already weak sense of purpose disappears and his quest turns into a picaresque series of adventures involving the Zone’s black market.
As Pynchon makes implicit references to the mythic character Orpheus throughout the text, Slothrop’s quest can also be imagined as Pynchon’s parody of the Orpheus myth. One of the subsections of Part 4, Episode 12, entitled, “Orpheus Puts Down Harp” (754), describes the film show at Orpheus theatre, Los Angeles, the final target to which the “bright angel of death” descends. Slothrop’s wanderings through theatre of war resemble Orpheus’ tasks in the underworld. As Orpheus the legendary musician keeps lyre or harp, Slothrop keeps his mouth organ: “Slothrop, just suckin’ on his harp, is closer to being a spiritual medium than he’s been yet, and he doesn’t even know it” (622). While Orpheus is deeply in love with Eurydice who dies, Slothrop consistently makes sexual relationship with any casual partner who either dies or is herself devoted to death. Orpheus descends into the underworld, and Slothrop into an underground factory. Slothrop’s ultimate failure and disintegration corresponds to Orpheus’s failure to liberate Eurydice from the underworld.

Resembling Stencil’s impersonations and V.’s disguises, Slothrop too changes his appearances during the course of his journey. Certainly the sequence of events confirms the gradual loss of his identity, which haunts most of the novel’s characters who manifest some sort of psychic perversion. Slothrop’s loss of identity is symbolically suggested in Episode 2, of Part 2, when Katje Borgesius literally performs magic, which makes him “disappear” (198). Then he assumes the role of a “war correspondent
Ian Scuffling” (256). As part 3 begins, he is still Ian Scuffling. Later he becomes Rocketman, then Max Schlepzig, a Russian soldier and finally Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero (568). As Plechazunga he narrowly escapes castration at the hands of Edward Pointsman’s agents (576). David Seed opines that “Slothrop’s roles and costumes carry rather more sinister implications” even though at times they foster an illusion of freedom (162). In his case the guises or roles take on such prominence that they smother identity: “The zoot suit suggests an analogy with Ralph Ellison’s invisible man and hints that Slothrop is heading for a similar limbo state” (Thomas Schaub, The Voice of Ambiguity 138). Besides, Slothrop is found to be fond of repeatedly imitating other characters like Tchitcherine, a Russian intelligence officer, as if it were part of his personality. As he is introduced into different situations, we identify different resemblances which weaken his individuality. In the last part of the novel, he watches a huge rainbow and remains numb: “a stout rainbow cock driven down out of a pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural…” (626). Then he accidentally finds a scrap of newspaper with the horrifying picture of the atomic blast at Hiroshima:

He doesn’t remember sitting on the curb for so long staring at the picture. But he did. At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east, head, shoulders, breasts, 17° 36′
down to her maidenhead at the horizon. A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity. She loomed in the eastern sky gazing down at the city about to be sacrificed. The sun was in the Leo. The fireburst came roaring and sovereign.... (694)

And finally he becomes “The Fool” of the Zone (724). More and more at the mercy of chance, Slothrop eventually fragments out of existence. Towards the end of his journey, this hero of the absurd undergoes total disintegration rather than achieving fulfilment as one of Pynchon’s several nameless narrators suggests:

Tyrone Slothrop who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly—perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time’s assembly—and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there wasn’t. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, scattered. (738)

Seaman Bodine observes that others have given up Slothrop long ago even as a concept—“It’s just got too remote’ ’s what they usually say” (740). Slothrop’s origins clearly he with the comic victims of sixties black humour. David Seed establishes his resemblance to Joseph Heller’s Yossarian as “both of them use strange inventiveness” to manoeuvre through situations of danger (162). It is evident that the protagonist represents the
fallen lot and the collapse of Puritan tradition: “Last of his line, and how far fallen” (569).

Slothrop being introduced from the very beginning as a character under observation, or a freak of nature, his helplessness in this regard is also suggested. “Is he drifting, or being led?” (556). The reader realizes Slothrop’s vulnerability and lack of autonomy from the grotesque connection between his sexuality and the V-2, resulting from his conditioning:

There are times when Slothrop actually can find a clutch mechanism between him and Their iron-cased engine far away up a power train whose shape and design he has to guess at […] his real helplessness. (207)

Whereas Pynchon in his early novels depicts the spiritual and moral decline as a ubiquitous phenomenon of western society, he exposes in Gravity’s Rainbow, the manifold forms of the same specifically in the harrowing background of war. The plight of Slothrop is not to be treated merely as an exceptional case of deception, dehumanisation and exploitation of an individual in connection with war. It has a universal application as the entire modern society is subjected to mass deception and exploitation. Pynchon highlights this reality by giving a detailed account of the big business transactions of a number of quasi-fictional companies.
The big business cartels like IG Farben, the Shell, and ICI, work on a scale beyond any society’s control and accountable to no authority, exploiting the situation of war for their advantage. It is interesting to note that IG Farben has sponsored the “surveillance” of Slothrop (587), and ICI has “cartel arrangements” with IG Farben (631). Pynchon refers also to a “rocket-cartel” (566) that has business ties all over the world including Russia. The weapon industries want to perpetuate war to maintain their business and profit at the cost of innocent human lives. Pynchon warns:

Don’t forget the real business of 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 a 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. (105)

Overtly exposing the military-industrial nexus and their hidden agenda, Pynchon spares no energy to condemn war and the malicious attitude of mass exploitation. In his early novel, The Crying of Lot 49 also
the author has associated the mysterious business magnate Pierce Inverarity
with the profit harvesting weapon industry, the Yoyodyne. David Seed aptly
remarks: “Pynchon proposes early in the novel that the received notion of
warfare is an illusion projected in order to distract attention from the
commercial dealings which go on behind the scenes” (192). By referring
repeatedly to the German based multinational IG Farben’s links with other
weapon manufacturing companies the world over, Pynchon tears open the
mask of the major weapon industries that support both the sides in
hostilities, supplying each with weapons to use against the opponents.

In Episode 3 of Part 4, Pynchon introduces “The Story of Byron the
Bulb” to comically expose and poke fun at the world wide conspiratorial
network of the exploitative economic system. Here Pynchon personifies the
bulb Byron. “Hi there Babies. I’m Byron the Bulb!” (648). Then the
narrator comments that the trouble with Byron is that he is an old soul
trapped inside the glass prison of a Baby Bulb. Then he asks whether Byron
is for a rude awakening. “There is already an organization, a human one,
known as ‘Phoebus,’ the international light-bulb cartel, headquarters in
Switzerland” (649). Byron the Bulb has illuminated the dark recesses of the
business world by shedding light for so many years. “Bulb can penetrate the
sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men” (653). The Bulb, like a
detective, keenly observes and evaluates the intrigues of business cartels as
well as the feelings of the common people: “When the War came, some
people thought it unpatriotic of GI to have given Germany an edge like that. But nobody with any power. Don’t worry” (654). Though he is conscious of every development taking place around him, he is not able to act at all as the system is menacingly powerful. He is aware also of his prophetic role. But he can only dream of a revolutionary change:

Someday he will know everything, and still be impotent as before. His youthful dream of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don’t last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer he will get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb enjoying it…. (655)

Byron the Bulb is a passive observer like Tiresias of Eliot’s The Waste Land (218-219). Pynchon, through Byron the Bulb, gives voice to the poor and powerless victims of exploitation who are incapable of changing the corrupt system. Patrick McHugh compares the role of the Bulb to that of the avant grade modernist artist:
...whose unique vision opens the possibility of a more profound cultural revolution; Byron pursues and articulates the possibilities for new identities, new ontological realms, and a new meaning of freedom, not limited to some rational utopia but heretofore unimagined planes of existence. (20)

Pynchon in his early novels *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* also employed man-made equipments like automatons to interact with characters both in speech and action. In all these instances the author uses these equipments to parody or criticize human actions.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* pervading atmosphere of war, the nazi warlord, Captain Blicero / Weissmann, is probably the most sensitively frightening creation of Pynchon. Even his very physical appearance is disgusting:

...his teeth, long, terrible, veined with bright brown rot as he speaks these words, the yellow teeth of Captain Blicero, the network of stained cracks, and back in his night-breath, in the dark oven of himself, always the coiled whispers of decay. (94)

He resembles Foppl and Von Trotha of *V.* who are meant to perpetrate atrocities. But surpassing them, like Satan, he seems relentlessly bent on destroying. Satan destroys because he wants revenge on God, but Blicero’s reasons for destroying are mysterious: “The man’s thirst for guilt was insatiable as the desert’s for water” (323). He can be called the devil
incarnate who feeds on his associates like Katje and Gottfried. He persuades Katje to dress like a man and engage in oral sex in the most exasperating manner: “[…] blades of stainless steel bristle from life like pink humidity, hundreds of them, against which Katje, kneeling, is obliged to cut her lips and tongue” (95).

Like lady V. who persuades Mélanie to dress like a boy, Blicero makes Gottfried dress in a woman’s garment and involves in sodomy with him (94). The more Blicero engages in activity, the less relief he finds for his despair. This commander of the V-2 base frolics shamelessly and publicly with his African lover Enzian. Even though Enzian who had been brought up in the Christian background of Africa, began uttering the name of God, Blicero committed sacrilege and sodomy with him brashly: “The peril of buggering the boy under the resonance of the sacred Name fills him insanely with lust, lust in the face…” (100). For Blicero, all these eccentricities were merely for the sake of fun. Despite the grotesque devil figure he actually is, one will be surprised to note at times, the deceptive normalcy of his features and appearance: “balding, scholarly, peering up at the African through eyeglass lenses thick as bottles” (404).

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator says that Blicero, an embodiment of everything truly evil and deadly in the German romance of rocketry, has gone on to the United States. The reader is advised to look for him “among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token
intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high not low” (749). By sending Blicero from Germany to the United States, Pynchon asserts the universality of evil and spiritual decline.

Though Pynchon does not condemn homosexuality per se, he presents it in World War II background as a kind of “extremely malicious and objectified form narcissism,” an all consuming love of self, that is sterile leading to fetishism and death (Hipkiss 26). Certainly it resembles the lesbian love of V. and Mélanie in V.. They would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Homosexuality and transvestism thus become impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish. The same happens in Blicero’s relationship to Gottfried. Just as Mélanie is impaled on a pole and raised, Gottfried too is wrapped in plastic and raised to his death in a rocket to nothingness.

Captain Blicero’s diabolic malignancy spreads like a contagious disease in Gravity’s Rainbow. His association with Katje Borgesius has made her a hardcore sadist. In fact Blicero dominates her whole self. She learns every form of sexual perversion and sadistic behaviour from Blicero. There is a hell burning within Katje. For her, all movement is toward death. She feels she is “corruption and ashes” (94). Like Satan, her dark soul seems to have bottomless depths that threaten to devour her. She, like Blicero, tries to evade her despair by several means. It could be by dancing
naked in groves and thickets or before sailors ashore, or by causing pain on
Brigadier Pudding or making love to Slothrop.

In Episode 4 of Part II, Katje appears in the guise of a Teutonic witch,
Domina Nocturna, and disciplines her accomplice Brigadier Pudding. “At
her command, he crawls forward to kiss her boots. He smells wax and
leather, and can feel her toes flexing beneath his tongue, through the black
skin” (233). Not only does she insult and inflict pain on the Brigadier who
kneels before her in acquiescence, but subjects him to her very whim of
coprophagia and urolagnia in the most despicable manner (235-36). He
subsequently dies from an overdose of E. coli. Whatever she does, Katje
always is plagued by the fact that she is a decayed creature, belonging to the
darkness of “the Oven… to Der Kinderofen” (94). For Katje, as for Satan
and his followers, life offers no rest.

Enzian, yet another accomplice of Blicero, represents the misery and
agony of African Herero community in exile at Nordhausen, Germany.
Hereros are slaves captured from Southwest Africa during German
colonization and brought to the Zone to be employed in rocket
manufacturing units. But the work at Nordhausen becomes a nightmare for
the people:

But we, Zone Hereros, under the earth, how long will we wait
in this north, this locus of death? North is death’s region. […]
Nordhausen means dwellings in the north. Rockets had to be produced out of a place called Nordhausen. (322)

As David Seed remarks, Pynchon skilfully relates the Herero to the major themes of the novel: “dispersal, spiritual absence and cultural breakdown” (179). Enzian was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood (324). Already in V. Pynchon had demonstrated that in a colony the restraints of civilization crumble away and fear of hatred of ‘the other’ can find direct expression. In V. Von Trotha and Foppl personify German atrocities whereas in Gravity’s Rainbow Blicero takes that role. Besides, the very name “Blicero” etymologically means death. “And Enzian’s found the name Bleicheröde close enough to ‘Blicker,’ the nickname the early Germans gave to Death” (322). Weissmann, enchanted by the Latinized form of that word, took “Blicero” as his code name.

The Hereros are actually cut off from their tribal past. Their geographical exile indicates their cultural dispossession. Yet their nostalgic adherence to traces of their tribal life dramatizes the fears of the group. The predicament of the Herero refugees in the Zone is akin to the quandary of the evacuees in the opening scene of Gravity’s Rainbow:

No return. Sixty percent of the Herero people had been exterminated. The rest was being used like animals. Enzian
grew up into a white-occupied world. Captivity, sudden death, one way departures were the ordinary things of every day. (323)

Two generations of Zonc Hereros who live in the mountains around Nordhausen and Bleicheröde are known now as the Schwarzkommmando (315). They could not be split off completely from the old tribal unity and thought, though they have become Europeanised in language. Christian Europe signified death and repression to them:

Cheap Labor and Overseas Markets...Oh, no. Colonies are much more. Colonies are outhouses of the European soul [...] Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels like, and guzzle her blood with open joy. (317)

In spite of the imponderable might of the oppressors, the Schwarzkommmando decided to resist. Inside the Schwarzkommmando there were forces who had opted for sterility and death. It was a simple choice for the Hereros, between two kinds of death: tribal death or Christian death. And tribal death made sense for them (318). They envisaged the suicide of the entire tribal community by deciding not to procreate at all, so that the tormenting yoke of serfdom would not be handed over to future generations of Hereros. Naturally, the decision for tribal suicide tempted them to deviate into all sorts of sexual perversions like homosexuality, onanism, sadism, masochism bestiality, paedophilia, lesbianism and fetishism (319). “The Empty Ones can guarantee a day when the last Zone-Herero will die, a final
zero to a collective history fully lived” (318). The disillusionment generated from a total breach with their tribal past, brutal colonialist exploitation, and severe spiritual degeneration in the wake of the looming threat of war and death prompted the entire Herero community in the Zone to sort out their own extinction. This phenomenon is palpable in other communities and interpersonal relationships of the novel as well.

The various facets of interpersonal relationship in the novel require scrutiny in order to have a glimpse of Pynchon’s vision of life. It is evident that all the major characters in the novel form relationships out of necessity. Different temporary forms of love affair offer transitory relief from the war but never eliminate the fear of loneliness. The love affair between Jessica Swanlake and Roger Mexico, a statistician, is one of the key relationships generated and crushed by war. “She saw his loneliness: in his face, between his red nail bitten hands…” (57). She approaches him and they become very intimate. “She loses the last of her lipstick across his shirt, and muscles, touching high blooded” (58). Using a map of England Roger tries to explain to her the V-bomb statistics, the possible difference in distribution, and their own chances of survival. And suddenly a rocket strikes near their residence with a terrific blast so as to rend their eardrums. Pynchon constantly reminds the reader of their vulnerability: “This house, town, crossed arcs of Roger and Jessica are so vulnerable, to German weapons and to British bylaws…” (53). Though Jessica dreams of withdrawing from the war for
the sake of their intimacy into a safer place, the war does not let them.

"Death has come in the pantry door: stands watching them. Iron and patient, with a look that says try to tickle me" (60). Their relationship continues to grow as long as there is threat to their lives.

But in part 4 of the novel, Pynchon presents Roger as a desperate man who knows that Jessica has permanently deserted him for Jeremy. Her love affair with Roger was only for convenience's sake. The armistice ends Jessica's relationship with Roger. "The war was the condition she needed for being with Roger. Peace allows her to leave him" (628). Roger doesn't escape from the terrific clutch of war as he involves deeply in technological refinement of armaments. He still carries with him "the strange version of war" (629). The narrator remarks that Rogers eccentricity is self destructive: "He is losing more than single Jessica: he's losing a full range of life, of being for the first time at ease in the Creation. Going back to winter now, drawing back into this single envelope" (629).

Pynchon has devoted the longest of the episodes of the novel, placed towards the centre, to treat the theme of incest. The episode begins with Franz Pökler's recollections of the scenes from the film Alpdrüicken which he has watched at Neubabelsberg movie studio. Pökler is a rocket technician working at the Nazi rocket-manufacturing unit. He was impressed by the enchanting beauty of the actress Margherita Erdmann. In the film, Erdmann conceives after having been whipped into a passion by Slothrop, another
actor. Pökler is himself a dreamer who prefers a good movie to reality.

Carrying the image of Erdman in his mind, Pökler goes home to his wife Leni, whom he doesn’t truthfully love, and enters into sadistic sexual relationship with her. Leni conceives Ilse, Pökler’s daughter.

The tendency of sadomasochism in Pökler further intensifies as he goes to work on the rocket project as a plastics expert. His wife Leni had realized that he was an extension of the rocket, long before it was built. By continuing with the work Pökler complies with the destruction of his wife and daughter, who are kept in a concentration camp near the project centre under the Hartz mountains. He has joined the rocket programme with a yearning to overcome the failure of his married life and to transcend human life. His broken family background leads to a total immersion in work which later turns into a nightmare: “...he would become aware of a drifting away ...some assumptions of Pökler into the calculations, drawings, graphs... he would panic...” (405). As Richard Poirier has noted, “the effect is like a sequence of cinematic stills which frame Ilse in every sense” (176).

He cried every day, some hour of the day, for a month and then moved to Kummersdorf near Berlin. During his solitary walks he brooded about Leni. He concocted scenarios in which they would meet again. “The vacuum of his life threatened to be broken in one strong inrush of love” (407).

Now he sits in a children’s amusement park called Zwölfkinder waiting for his “movie-child.” The detailed description of the place
expresses his loneliness and loss: “Twists of faded crepe paper blow along the ground, scuttling over his old shoes” (398). He obsessively loves his daughter who, he is told, is at the “re-education” camp (410). He thinks she will carry him back to childhood. “His heart shrugs in its scarlet net, elastic, full of expectation” (398).

He comes back to his cubicle to find Ilse sitting on his bed, with her skirt pulled over her knees, and eyes anxiously and fatally looking into his. Then the narrator hints at the probability of an incestuous union: “He must have picked her up, kissed her, drawn the curtain. Some reflex” (407).

Pökler remembered the face of his little child Ilse. He recognized his daughter, and was afraid even to hold her. He felt ashamed and cold, and thought his heart would burst. Then he tried to cover the resemblances with suspicion, and committed “hours of amazing incest” (420). It was Major Weissmann who had brought her there. He had thousands of children at the nearby concentration camp under his custody. By tactfully allowing Ilse to visit Pökler regularly, Weissmann undermines Pökler’s certainty that the visitor is his own daughter. And the incestuous relationship continued for several years. “The opponent knew that Pökler’s suspicion would always be stronger than any fears about real incest” (418). Finally he feels dejected and isolated, “shuddering terribly and crying” (431). He then decides to quit the project, but at that point Blicero/Weissmann informs him that he is to work on the final project, Rocket 00000, and he again submits. He is to
design “a plastic faring, of a certain size, with certain insulating properties, for the propulsion section of the rocket” (431). Pökler works on the device, “nicknamed the Schwarzgerät, because of the high secrecy surrounding it” (432).

Pynchon directs our attention as to how Weissmann manipulates Pökler’s emotional needs in order to keep up his productivity. David Seed analyses Pökler’s fate as a study in bureaucratic exploitation, not technical expertise (193). But the moral failure of Pökler and the pathos of his fate are not merely the results of bureaucratic exploitation of an individual. It has a collective dimension and relevance in the post war socio-cultural ambience as an index of cankerous corruption and spiritual decadence.

Connected to the rocket programme Pynchon presents Pökler as an epicurean technocrat, wallowing in the mire of incest. But that is not all. In Episode 11 of Part 3, Pökler undergoes a thorough conversion as a penitent atoning for his sins with acts of mercy. He quits the Schwarzgerät project and goes to the concentration camp Dora. He finds there the horrible spectacle of naked corpses being carried out to be stacked in front of the crematoriums. Then he watches also a few living victims who are stacked on a straw mattress: “the weakly crying, coughing, losers…” (432). Now, Pökler realizes fully the implications of his cooperation in the fantasy of technocratic power. He is moved with pity, sorrow and repentance:
Pokler vomited. He cried some. The walls did not dissolve—no prison wall ever did, not from tears, not at this finding, [...] But what can he ever do about it? How can he ever keep them? Impotence, mirror-rotation of sorrow, works him terribly as runaway heartbeating, and with hardly any chances left him for good rage, or for turning... (433)

The unmediated experience of suffering demolishes his pride and reduces him to a mass of dejection. Immediately he finds the body of a woman lying in the darkest and worst stinking corner of the room. She was still breathing. Moved with sympathy, he approaches the anonymous woman and holds her bone hand for half an hour. As a token of penance, Pökler offers her generously something very valuable. Before leaving, he takes off his gold wedding ring and puts it on the woman’s thin finger, curling her hand to keep it from sliding off. The anonymous narrator adds: “If she lived, the ring would be good for a few meals, or a blanket, or a night indoors, or a ride home...” (433). The firmament of Gravity’s Rainbow, darkened with terror, sin, suffering and sorrow, finally finds a silver ray of goodness in Pökler. John Hamill calls it, “a Faustian narrative as it ends in tears like all Faustian narratives” (64).

At the end of the novel, Blicero launches the specially designed V-2 rocket from the Luneberg Heath with Gottfried as its payload dressed in white on or about Easter 1945. In the tail section of the 00000, “Gottfried...
has found his clear surface before him in fact, literal: the Imipolex shroud”
(754). Pynchon is specific about Imipolex G and the significance of plastics.
Pynchon ironically relates Gottfried’s murder to Abraham’s sacrifice: “His
smooth feet, bound side by side, are in white satin slippers with white bows.
[...] Isaac under the blade” (750). But the Biblical Isaac was saved. In
Gottfried’s case, “there is no return channel to the ground” (751). Here is no
question of a dialogue between a faithful Abraham and a just God.
Consequently there are no answers. The narrator comments that the
sacrifice has become a political act. David Seed envisions it as Blicero’s
“apotheosis of German romanticism,” an expression of colonization in
which he subjects his hapless subordinate to his cruel personal fantasies
(171). Gottfried holds the mystical belief that the suicide is a transcendent
experience as he carries out the will of his lover and master Blicero. Yet the
narrator makes explicit Gottfried’s personal agony: “Gottfried does not wish
to cry out…he knows they can’t hear him, but still prefers not to…” (759). In
presenting Gottfried’s sacrifice, the author finally explicates yet another
instance of using human beings as insignificant objects for experimentation.
Here death does not lead to rebirth but only damnation. Elaine B. Safer
views this movement as “the conflict between teleological implications and
a barren world” (164).

Describing the ascent of the rocket the narrator makes an ironic
remark that the deep cry of the rocket engine would promise an escape. But
the victim who rises on a promise of escape is bound to fall. The rocket is finally found descending as “a white angel of death” towards the Orpheus theatre at Los Angeles around 1970 (760). The rocket’s payload is magically transformed into a nuclear warhead. Jeffrey S Baker notes that the rocket travels across the span of twenty five years over the self satisfied American 1950s and their increasing ideological and technological proliferation of Cold War mentality “into the heart of Nixon’s America at the height of the anti-Vietnam war sentiment and the mass demonstrations that accompanied it” (330). Just as the rocket reaches the roof of the theatre, the spectators are asked to sing a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print. Smith and Toloyan explicate the hymn as a promise of optimism since it contains images like “the hand of God,” and “the apocalyptic horse men” which are typical to the jeremiad tradition (182). The Puritan past in Gravity’s Rainbow presents a sense of unity in contrast to the confusion of the present. Pynchon bids us to pray and remember God while waiting for the onrushing catastrophe of the earth and the cosmos.

Obviously, the theatre of war with its pervading gloom and pessimism serves as the backdrop of Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow. Besides being a colossal threat to human life, war leads to the degeneration of human life in all its aspects. Most often war leads to diabolic misuse of technology. In Gravity’s Rainbow, men like Blicero, Dr. Jamf, Pökler, and Pointsman who
are connected to war under different capacities do the same. The evil influence of war eats into the human psyche like a cancerous growth and putrefies the entire society. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, when Pynchon paints in crude colours the grotesque images of distorted human lives in a war torn world, he implicitly condemns war and the consequent degeneration of the society, with a terrific impact. Slothrop's conditioning refers to the moral and spiritual decline both in families and institutions of scientific research. As a child he was sold by his father for scientific research. It indicates the wreckage of family relations and the Shylockian avarice of his father. Human relations can become a myth in the context of war generated poverty and pessimism. By referring to the conditioning of Slothrop's sexual instincts in relation to bomb blasts, Pynchon should be alluding to instances of brutal experimentation on human beings in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. It is part of modern history that human beings are subjected to abominable torture both physical and mental and used like guinea pigs for experimentation. Pointsman's attempts to castrate Slothrop and the final sacrifice of Gottfried are similar instances in the novel.

Besides being a threat to human lives, war serves as the fertile land for all sorts of vices to thrive. Erosion of moral and spiritual values is a common phenomenon in an atmosphere of utter hopelessness, fear and gloom. Pynchon projects this reality by portraying devilish villains, moral dwarfs, spiritual bankrupts and characters manifesting various forms of
psychosexual perversion. Indeed, as Weisenburger remarks, Gravity's
Rainbow can be read as “a satire or a narrative that unmasks the terrible
dynamic of a culture huddling on the brink of nuclear winter” (3). In fact
Pynchon seems to ardently yearn for a war free world:

The real War is always there. The dying tapers off now and
then, but the War is still killing lots and lots of people. Only
right now it is killing them in more subtle ways. Often in ways
that are too complicated, even for us, at this level, to trace. [...]  
Wouldn't it be nice if we could eliminate them completely?
Then no one would have to be killed in the War. (645)

Though Pynchon has projected in Gravity’s Rainbow a dismal picture
of a world with an obsession for rocketry, death, cruelty, vices and
exploitation of all sorts, he is not absolutely pessimistic. After reporting the
devastation caused by the atomic explosion he adds: “But in each of these
streets, some vestige of humanity, of Earth has to remain. No matter what
has been done to it, no matter what it’s been used for ...” (693).

When Slothrop, the protagonist, speculates about his Puritan past, and
the wrong decision America has taken, he links personal history to national
history and to the world history, making it plain that the world has taken a
wrong decision: “she jumped the wrong way from” (556), and hungers for a
world where peace, fraternity and equality flourish:
Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back [...] may be for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized [...] without elect, without preterite, without even nationality. (556)

Fed up by the gloom and monotony of Pynchon’s universe, at least a few characters quit the game and feel impelled to some acts of kindness rather than treating someone else as a thing. Kathryn Hume writes: “In the world of hardships experienced at the end of the war, any kindness is a candle lit against the darkness” (251). Acts of compassion and benevolence that enoble human life, can be observed in certain characters like Roger and Pökler in Gravity’s Rainbow. One can also listen to the mild echoes of Maria Rilke’s Sonnets to Orpheus, throughout the text, which is a gentle invitation to pray. Slothrop chants the song using his harp (622). Thus, amidst Pynchon’s discordant tale “full of sound and fury,” one can also listen to notes of harmony.

1 Weisenburger remarks that Plechauinga belongs to a complex of Germanic words associated with Thor, the Norwegian legendary thunder god. The Pig-Hero business is Pynchon’s fiction (244).