CHAPTER SEVEN

Where’re They At, Where’re They Going?
Thomas Pynchon and the American Novel in Motion

It may be a mark of overdeveloped sensibility, professional dysfunction, or sheer perversity; but it is common to hear from postmodernist critics that Thomas Pynchon is, after all, quite conventional—even in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In one sense this is true, and if I were not developing my argument more or less historically, I might put him before Joyce. For—despite the changes in point of view—Pynchon does not engage us in the movement of the narrative eye, nor does his narrator enter the frame of the story. In Pynchon’s novel we focus on the story. We are engaged by the plot—by the sequence of events, what happens next, the movement of his characters—as well as the pervasive plotting of characters, organizations, and incalculable forces. Indeed, Pynchon develops, or overdevelops, his plots to the point where they become almost unbearable. That is, we feel the strain of their palpable movement. In this sense Pynchon is modern or postmodern, for he engages us in a dynamic dimension of his medium.

In this chapter I will distinguish between two kinds of plot development. The first, which I call *movement*, is traditionally logical, purposeful, and clear. The second, which I call *motion*, is alogical, unpurposeful, and confusing, for it develops through a series of unpredictable transformations. But the transformations are still sequential. Indeed, the power of Pynchon’s novel in motion derives from their absolute succession, from one transformation completely succeeding another—from our being led forward from event to unpredictable event, place to unexpected place, the known to the unknown.

Walt Whitman, sounding his “barbaric yawp over the roots of the world,” invokes his persona, his subject, and the form of his
poem as: "Nature without check with original energy." Thomas Pynchon, whose *Gravity's Rainbow* opens with "a screaming" that "comes across the sky," sounds a yawp that now makes Walt Whitman seem like the corresponding secretary of a 4-H club. He invokes the world of his novel with an epigraph by Werner von Braun: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." In the century between "Song of Myself" and *Gravity's Rainbow*, a signal feature of American literature has been "Nature without check with original energy"—in works that strain at the seams, that defy critical description and judgment, that succeed out of their sheer bravado and power. The barbaric yawp issues from such brilliant failures as Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and William Carlos William's *Paterson*, from the monumental exuberance of Thomas Wolfe, from the kaleidoscope of Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, from the page-long sentences of Faulkner's narrators as they try to grasp the ungraspable, from Henderson the Rain King's "grun tu molani," from the lyric obscenity of Norman Mailer's "disk jockey" evoking the myths and misdirected energy that brought us to Vietnam. The barbaric yawp gets louder and more dissonant. The unchecked energy becomes more potent and more destructive. And the writers deal with this energy in a much more ambivalent fashion. But our experience of this energy, or its very dynamic, also undergoes a change that is reflected in the difference between Whitman's view of "Nature without check" and Pynchon's view of nature that only knows transformation. I will try to describe this change and develop an approach to *Gravity's Rainbow*, first, by distinguishing two forms that have given expression to America's unchecked energy—the novel of movement and the novel in motion—and, then, by describing Pynchon's encounters with unchecked energy in his three novels.

ENERGY, MOVEMENT, AND MOTION

Let me begin by trying to define my key terms. *Energy* is the power to move a work along; that is, to move language, character, action through the stanzas, chapters, or acts. It is also the power to produce effects, to move the audience to laughter, tears, pity, fear. All good literature, of course, is endowed with energy. But it is interesting that we become aware of the energy, or speak of the energy, when the power of a literary work begins to exceed its form. Doesn't the fastidious critic commend the energy just before deriding the style of, say, Dreiser's *American Tragedy* or O'Neill's...
Long Day's Journey into Night? To return to Whitman for a moment, we begin to sense the energy of “Song of Myself” in the gaps between its discontinuous sections, stanzas, lines, or phrases, and in the discontinuities of its very grammar. On the opening page, for instance, we encounter a stanza that begins:

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,

And that ends:

The feeling of health, the full-moon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Though there is a recognizable associative if not logical movement from one line to the next in most of the stanza, following from the image of breathing, and though most of the lines are contained by some unifying pattern, there is no recognizable link between the first two lines. And the elements of the second line—“echoes,” “ripples,” “buzz’d whispers,” “love-root,” “silk-thread,” “crotch and vine”—seem unrelated. More important: the stanza is an incomplete sentence—a series of subjects with no predicate, noun phrases with no verb. We may even describe it as a series of substantives with the potency of verbs, where, as the substantives accumulate, the potency increases. It is in this sense that we recognize a work’s energy as it exceeds its form, and it is in this sense that the poem is “Nature without check with original energy.”

When we speak of movement in a literary work, we can be more precise, for movement is the continuous going from point to point. We can focus on what is going as well as on the direction and pattern of its progress. Although we can describe the movement in “Song of Myself” as the associative pattern of the poet’s thoughts, the notion of movement, for reasons I shall come to, does not help us much with this poem. Therefore, let us turn to the novel, where we can more easily describe—or plot—the movement of characters through time and space. Let me illustrate this concept of movement and illuminate an important development in American literature that takes us in the direction of the novel in motion and Gravity’s Rainbow.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and Nathanael West’s The Day of the Locust both deal with the energy that Whitman glorified and that, undirected or misdirected, has become destruc-
tive. Both writers show the destructive energy just barely sup­pressed and masked by the shimmering surfaces and tasteless facades. Both writers connect this energy with their particular visions of the American wasteland. Nevertheless, their visions are different in ways that go beyond the details of locale or history. We can describe this difference in terms of movement—or, specifically, in terms of goals, vehicles, motive power, and ends.

The goal in *The Great Gatsby* is "the green light at the end of Daisy's dock," which Fitzgerald compares to "the green breast of the new world" that "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes." The goal of West's characters is Hollywood, with its "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these that lined the slopes of the canyon"—and, of course, Faye Greener. The vehicle for Fitzgerald is Gatsby, with his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (2), as seen through the eyes of Nick Carraway, a sensitive outsider, rooted in the topsoil of American society. West's novel contains a similar observer in Tod Hackett, but it is important to note that there is no sharply defined vehicle upon which he is focusing. The motive power for Gatsby, and for Nick, is a Romantic striving; the motive power for West's characters is a vague but powerful momentum, sometimes described as the need to escape, sometimes as the drive to succeed. The end of *The Great Gatsby* is the destruction of the vehicle, the Romantic protagonist, and the recognition of lost values—but the world remains intact. The end of *The Day of the Locust* is apocalypse, the destruction of the characters and the world of the novel.

Fitzgerald, whose vision of life conformed to the conventions of historical evolution and the mechanics of cause-effect, makes the dynamics of movement in the traditional novel graphically clear, for he so clearly defines the goal, the vehicle, the motive power, and the end. Fitzgerald's twenties may be symbolized in Gatsby's yellow roadster speeding toward Daisy's home under the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg. The vehicle progresses and accelerates along a straight line until it goes out of control and causes destruction.

West's thirties may be symbolized in the riot that concludes *The Day of the Locust*—the characters swirling irrationally with increasing violence. West has experienced the loss of control and the destruction evoked by Fitzgerald, and has at least sensed that history does not progress and that effect does not so simply follow from cause. As a result, he creates a pattern of movement that is
less easy to define. There is no vehicle. And though the novel is ostensibly linear (in that we follow the development of Tod Hackett from day to day), there is no direction, no meaningful pattern from point to point in the novel's space and time. To put it another way, the apocalyptic ending is not caused by any choice or event in the novel.

*The Day of the Locust* focuses on the motive energy rather than on a vehicle and its pattern of movement toward a goal; to describe the novel, therefore, we should speak not of movement but of motion. *Motion* is the process of movement without regard to what is moving. Its dynamic structure cannot be plotted in a purposeful or causal pattern; it can only be described as a field of forces or a process of transformations. When the transformations are irrational, when linking gives way to discontinuity and direction to aimlessness, we encounter the experience of "Nature without check with original energy."

"Song of Myself" is designed to give the illusion of motion rather than movement, and at some points, like the one I described, what we experience is actually motion. But if the movement of the poem lacks any apparent direction, the poem does have a coherence—indeed, it is about relationship; it does have a center—the mind of the poet; and it does have an associative if not logical pattern of motion. Whitman could glorify "Nature without check with original energy" because he was incapable of imagining nature without check, because he believed in an ultimate coherence. Fitzgerald could see and even plot the effects of nature without check or misdirected energy, but he could not focus on the energy itself. West could focus on the energy lyrically or symbolically but knew of no other way to handle it than within the framework of a traditionally linear novel. As Pynchon approaches *Gravity's Rainbow*, he realizes all the implications of "the original energy" that early writers could either not accept or not reflect in a literary form. He finally evolves a novel of motion rather than movement—a novel that abrogates direction, that focuses on the field of forces that governs contemporary life.

V.

"'Where we going,' Profane said, 'The way we're heading,' said Pig. 'Move your ass.'" Benny Profane, Pig Bodine, Happy Hod, Herbert Stencil, Sidney Stencil, Evan Godolphin, Hugh Godolphin, Paola Maijstral, Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica
Manganese move their asses all over the place in Pynchon's first novel—continually going, or seeming to go, in no other direction than the way they're heading. Indeed, V. is about three kinds of movement that, when interconnected—or intercut—come together as unfocused, undirected, and ungovernable motion.

Benny Profane—a schlemiel but not a coward, capable of feeling but not of attachment, disturbed by the inanimate but not prepared to militate against it—rejects modern society by becoming a yo-yo. He rides the shuttle back and forth, accepting whatever comes his way—a job, a drink, a woman, a fight, a trip to Malta—but he is always ready to cut loose when the connection becomes too secure. In a threatening world, he maintains his equilibrium and a minimal identity by being constantly and aimlessly on the move. That the pattern of his movement is like a yo-yo suggests its psychological if not its geographical limits.

Opposed to Benny is Herbert Stencil, whose movement since 1945 has been constant but purposeful. "His random movements before the war had given way to a great single movement from inertness to—if not vitality, then at least activity. Work, the chase—for it was V. he hunted . . . for no other reason than that V. was there to track down" (44). The chase after V., with its ever changing direction and elusive goal, allows Herbert Stencil to maintain his equilibrium in a world of space and time that reaches far beyond Benny’s, and to maintain a minimal identity—as a stencil.

The third kind of movement V. is manifest in the elder generation. Hugh Godolphin is an explorer. Sidney Stencil is a foreign agent, who goes wherever Whitehall tells him, and who “with no element to be out of” is “at home everywhere”—except, finally, in Malta (453). Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese—or V.—ends up as an agent for Mussolini. Even more than Stencil, she has no element to be out of and is at home everywhere. Her movement comes to be defined as “tourism”:

V. at the age of thirty-three (Stencil’s calculation) has found love at last in her peregrinations through (let us be honest) a world if not created then at least described to its fullest by Karl Baedeker of Leipzig. This is a curious country, populated only by a breed called “tourists.” Its landscape is one of inanimate monuments and buildings; near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides. . . . More than this it is two-dimensional, as is the Street, as are the pages and maps of those little red handbooks. As long as the Cook’s, Travellers’ Clubs and banks are open, the Distribution of Time section followed scrupulously . . . the tourist may wander anywhere in this coordinate system without fear. . . . Tourism thus is supranational, like the
Catholic Church, and perhaps the most absolute communion we know on earth: for be its members American, German, Italian, whatever, the Tour Eiffel, Pyramids, and Campanile all evoke identical responses from them; their Bible is clearly written and does not admit of private interpretation; they share the same landscapes, suffer the same inconveniences; live by the same pellucid time-scale. They are the Street’s own. (384)

"Tourism," as we find it implicitly amplified in V., is a constant movement with constantly changing direction. But it differs from Profane’s yo-yoism and from young Stencil’s chase or search for V. in that it is not volitional, in that the motive energy does not come from within. Tourism is not a choice to escape or to pursue but to abdicate choice. It is an acknowledged or unacknowledged obedience—or the following of some authoritative and unquestionable set of directions. Such obedience may be judged harmless, if mindless, when the tourist follows a Baedeker. It may be judged benign if the agent as tourist follows the instructions of a "friendly" government. It becomes suspect when we begin to recognize the colonialist objectives of the "friendly" government, and it becomes fully malign when the agent’s instructions come from Mussolini. The destructive potential—indeed, proclivity—of tourism is implied by the identification of Karl Baedeker with his fellow Leipziger, Kurt Mondaugen (212). For Mondaugen, who obediently travels to South West Africa in pursuit of atmospheric radio disturbances, is associated with the most explicit colonialism and the most frightening impulses of fascism.

Abdication of choice and of control leads to the loss of direction: we don’t know where the characters are going, we can’t tell the past from the present, we can’t judge the political right from the political left, good from bad, comic from tragic. How are we indeed to judge the novel’s climax: where Sidney Stencil (serving a government that would soon become an ally in the fight for freedom) and his former lover Veronica Manganese (serving an Italian faction not yet prepared to open a second front in the fight for total control) are both plotting to keep Malta free? And where they join forces to compel the double agent Fausto Maistral to leave their respective services and rejoin his pregnant wife? And how are we to judge the novel’s ending: where Fausto’s daughter Paola decides to rejoin her husband, Pappy Hod? We can never understand the motivation of V., or of Paola, who gives V.’s ivory comb to Pappy Hod. That is, we can never understand what moves them or where they are moving.
By the end of *V.*, there is a total confusion, or merging, of all moral directions, and we come to sense that the three different kinds of movement are one motion: the motion of unchecked energy. There is no difference among the choice of escape, the choice of pursuit, and the choice of giving up choices. To become a human yo-yo is as mindless as to pursue an elusive goal, or to become a tourist, or to become an agent. Each choice is as mechanical or aimless or menacing as that of SHROUD OR SHOCK, or Esther as she submits to a nose job, or *V.* as she displays her glass eye with the clock iris—or the children who leave their games to undress the wounded priest, dig the star sapphire from her bleeding navel with a rusty bayonet, and run off with the clock iris.

*V.* follows the capricious string of Benny’s yo-yo and the trail of a woman whose name and shape are constantly transformed. We never know where we’re going except that it’s the way we’re heading, and we’re heading from place to place and time to time in ways that are often bewildering. Nonetheless, the novel is not without check, and in the end we know where we’ve been. For *V.* is governed by an omniscient narrator, who tells the story by intercutting one strand of the complex plot with another, but all along holds the story together in his mind and can tie up the loose ends in an epilogue. The first intercutting, of Rachel Owlglass and her MG into the story of Benny and Paola, is soon recognized to be a simple, associative flashback—“the sinister vision of Pig and that Harley Davidson alone in an alley at three in the morning” reminds Benny of Rachel and her MG (13). By the epilogue we discover that all the disturbing jumps in the multi-stranded narratives have been simple flashbacks—or intercutting or crosscutting from one plot line to another. The intercutting has been the narrator’s way of reinforcing the enigma of *V.* and the confusion of moral direction. It has also been a technique designed to maintain suspense throughout the chase, or to keep the story moving.

It is important to recognize that the narrative crosscutting employed by Pynchon in *V.* creates the illusion of discontinuity while holding the novel in check or together. Indeed, it is like the crosscutting employed in the kind of chase scenes that influenced Pynchon: those that dominate or culminate the early movies. Crosscutting, as I have pointed out, is what effected the experience of the chase. Suspense is created as Griffith cuts back and forth between the helpless victim and her rescuer, but in the scene of the last-minute rescue, the two lines of action are drawn together. And while planning the crosscutting of four very different stories
in *Intolerance*, each of which culminates in a last-minute rescue, he declared: the "stories will begin like four currents looked at from a hilltop. At first the four currents will flow apart, slowly and quietly. But as they flow, they grow nearer and nearer together, and faster and faster, until in the end . . . they mingle in one mighty river of expressed emotion."

Narrative crosscutting, therefore, derives from a sense of purpose, a goal, and, in the novel, from the stable perspective of the narrator. At the end of Pynchon's first novel, *V.* remains an enigma: but what happens in the life of Herbert Stencil as he pursues her becomes clear, and the pattern of his movement secures the pattern of Benny Profane's. Moreover, the goal—where the crosscut plot lines are drawn together—and the sense of purpose implied in the narrator's design give coherence to the purposeless motion of the novel's characters and constrain the run-away energy. The main characters have been going in no other direction than the way they've been heading, but their paths culminate in a pattern that the reader can finally plot.

**THE CRYING OF LOT 49**

In Pynchon's second novel he abandons the stable omniscient perspective to focus on Oedipa Maas's developing consciousness; the narrator only knows what Oedipa knows at each step in her quest. The narrative proceeds not by the intercutting of plotlines but by the addition—indeed, overloading—of information into a simple linear plotline. Oedipa's quest, her movement and goal throughout the novel, is purposeful, as she tries to piece together and comprehend the limits of Pierce Inverarity's estate. But as the information accumulates, it undermines the purposeful movement of the plot line and evokes an experience closer to the dynamic of motion that Pynchon will achieve in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The steps in Oedipa's quest can be laid out in a chronological sequence and geographically continuous pattern. One day she receives a letter naming her executor of Pierce Inverarity's estate. She drives from her home to the Echo Courts in San Narciso for a surprise meeting with Pierce's lawyer. Then she goes to the Scope, a bar near Yoyodyne (Pierce's aerospace empire), where she learns about the Tristero; to the Fangoso Lagoons, where she learns about Pierce's investment in bone charcoal; to a performance of *The Courier's Tragedy*, where she discovers the fictional or historical connections or parallels with the Tristero and the uses of bone charcoal; to Yoyodyne, where she learns about the
Tristero's current operations; through the city to discover a large but inconspicuous community that communicates through the Tristero's system of W.A.S.T.E. containers; to the home of Emory Bortz to learn about the Tristero's ancient struggle against the Thurn and Taxis; and finally to Ghengis Cohen's stamp auction to await the crying of lot 49—and what she hopes will be the ultimate piece in the wild jigsaw puzzle of Pierce's estate, Western civilization, and her own identity.

More important than the linearity of action is the linear development of Oedipa Maas from a flat caricature to a sympathetic and heroic character, and of her mechanical responses to a series of choices involving deep feeling and thought. She begins as a stereotype housewife returning from a Tupperware party where the hostess had put too much kirsch in the fondue, develops into a businesswoman bent on executing Pierce's estate, then into a woman driven by the need to know and finally by the need to connect. At the climax of her search, having discovered countless pieces of information, she comes upon a derelict sailor and is "overcome all at once by the need to touch him. . . . Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning." The crying she awaits at the end of the novel, as critics have noted, reflects her compassion as well as her need to understand.

But the linear development of the plot—of the novel's action and of the protagonist—is only one dimension of *The Crying of Lot 49*; for as Oedipa discovers more information in her quest, she encounters kinds of plotting that are neither continuous nor progressive, and that defy the plotting of epistemological, ideological, or moral direction. After arriving in San Narciso and choosing a motel at random, she is surprised by the entrance of Pierce's lawyer, Metzger, who claims to have found her by scouring the motels all day. Her motel's TV is showing *Baby Igor*, an old film that Metzger claims to have starred in as a child. "Either he made up the whole thing, Oedipa thought suddenly, or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot" (18). And the commercials involve a plot with far wider scope than Metzger's seduction of Oedipa. Fangoso Lagoons and Beaconsfield Cigarettes are two of Pierce's interests. Beaconsfield Cigarettes use a filter made from bone charcoal. Much of the bone charcoal, we later learn, came through the Cosa Nostra from a lake in Italy, where a company of Ameri-
can troops had lost a battle to the Nazis in 1943. We also learn that a group of Wells Fargo riders had been massacred at one of the Fangoso lakes; the charcoal from their bones was used to blacken the faces of the killers in subsequent raids. Moreover, the bones of the ambushed battalion in *The Courier's Tragedy* had been fished up and turned into charcoal, which the Duke used for his perfidious correspondence.

At this point we might reflect on two kinds of plotting that are ingeniously confused in *The Crying of Lot 49*. First is the simple plotting of the novel's action and the protagonist's development—the rational plan, chronological sequence, progressive development of Oedipa's quest—to which is added the more rational but incredibly complicated plot of *The Courier's Tragedy*. Second is the plotting for salacious, commercial, and political ends—the rational planning and steps calculated to seduce Oedipa, sell products, secure markets, and establish empires. To these we might add a third kind of plotting, which is historical. As Oedipa picks up fragments of information that lead from her present to the past, she is driven by a stronger and stronger compulsion to connect the fragments into a rational order—to plot a causal sequence of events that would explain the present in terms of the past. But the more Oedipa learns, the more difficult it is for her, and for us, to make connections. The main reasons for this difficulty are the increasing amount of data and their increasing similarity. If we could only discriminate and define the opposing forces, we could discover what led to what. But the central problem for Oedipa, and for the reader who is limited to her perspective, is in defining—or plotting direction. We come to discover that historical or causal direction depends upon our ability to define values—or to plot ideological direction.

Throughout Western history, Oedipa learns, consolidation and system have given rise to individualistic rebellion, but we can never determine whether the rebellion is to the right or left. The Peter Pinguid Society, which is so conservative that it considers the John Birch Society left-wing, was founded by a man who opposed industrial capitalism—because it led to Marxism and was, therefore, part of the same "creeping horror" (33). Moreover, the struggle for freedom requires consolidation and system, but we can never tell whether the ultimate goal is liberty or tyranny. The novel focuses on what is central to both liberty and tyranny, the history of communication, or courier systems. The Tristero was a rebellious underground courier system that opposed the Thurn
and Taxis (the established European mail service from 1300 to 1867); even when it appeared in America, it fought the established Pony Express and Wells Fargo disguised as blackfaced outlaws or Indians. But in the middle of the seventeenth century, during a period of Thurn and Taxis instability, the Tristero faced a major decision. The conservatives wanted to keep the Tristero radical, as the opposition to the established central mail service. The militant radicals wanted to join the Thurn and Taxis to make all of Europe dependent on them: “We, who have so long been disinherited, could be the heirs of Europe” (123). From this point on we cannot tell who is plotting against whom. Nor can we plot the ideological direction of the plotters. As a result, we can make no causal links—or fix the fragments of information into a graspable pattern.

When Oedipa encounters the community of silent dropouts, who communicate secretly and independently by subverting the inter-office delivery system of Yoyodyne, we are led to wonder if this is a comic triumph of the underground, or if W.A.S.T.E. is not finally the product of the giant aerospace corporation itself. One view leads us to a utopia of political, psychological, and sexual anarchism, and the other leads us to a frighteningly successful totalitarianism. When we remember that the unpredictable Pierce Inverarity held a large block of shares in Yoyodyne, we are led to see the whole affair as a hoax on the part of a man rich enough to buy a cast of thousands—and the threat becomes diabolic.

Pierce Inverarity is like V. in Pynchon’s first novel, except that he is not the goal of the chase, nor do we ever see him, even. All we know of him is the disembodied voice that Oedipa recalls having awakened her at three in the morning a year before the action begins: “a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have any relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he’d talked in all the way down to Mazatlán” (2-3). Lamont Cranston is radio’s famous “Shadow,” an invisible agent capable of appearing anywhere, anytime. Pierce Inverarity is introduced as a shadow undergoing continual transformation. Throughout the rest of the novel, he is identified only with San Narciso—the place to which Oedipa drives to begin her quest. San Narciso “had been Pierce’s domicile, and headquarters: the place he’d begun his land speculating in ten years
ago, and so put down the plinth course of capital on which every­
thing afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, to­
ward the sky” (12-13). It was “less an identifiable city than a

grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue
districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own
freeway” (12). As the novel develops, Oedipa learns that San Narc­
ciso has “no boundaries” in space or time (134).

Pierce Inverarity is shadowy and gratuitously protean; San
Narciso is abstract and limitless. Identified with Pierce Inver­
arity, San Narciso is not only the locus of the novel’s action, it is
the bewildering field of its plotless plotting. It is also the shifting
ground of the novel’s developing figure—the simple linear plotline
that identifies Oedipa Maas. As Oedipa pursues her quest—to
comprehend San Narciso—and gathers more information, an
agon develops between the novel’s figure and ground. The figure
is continually threatened by the ground: the plot line is continu­
ally in danger of being absorbed by the plotless plotting. Oedipa
herself is in continual danger of giving in. If she could only give
in: “she had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing
happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something
for her shrink to fix” (80). But if she did give in and drift at
random—like Mucho with his drugs, Hilarius with his paranoia,
Metzger with his opportunism, Jesús Arrabal with his political
persistence, or the dropouts who rebel against the system that
may be co-opting them—if she did give up her purposeful pursuit,
she would become part of the cast of aimless caricatures that form
the novel’s ground.

Oedipa continues her pursuit: her mechanical response has de­
volved into curiosity, and then into the humanistic need to know
and to connect; we follow the evolution of a self, or a self­
consciousness, that ultimately needs others to find the limits of its
identity. In the end Oedipa’s purposeful movement remains dis­tin­
guished from society’s and history’s senseless motion. The fig­
ure of the novel’s plot stands out against the plotless plotting of its
ground. But the overall experience is not so simple or hopeful.

Stanley Koteks has introduced Oedipa to the concept of Max­
well’s Demon, who by sorting molecules was supposed to sustain
order and maintain the system’s purposeful movement. The De­
mon, that is, was supposed to counteract entropy, the inevitable
development of disorder and exhaustion of energy. But Maxwell’s
successors discovered that the new energy added to the system,
the mental energy required for sorting—gathering and piecing
together information—would only contribute to the mounting disorder, and thus to the entropy. And, as Anne Mangel points out in her instructive discussion of Maxwell's Demon in the novel, Oedipa in pursuing information and order only contributes to the disorder and entropy of her world. By the end of the novel, Mucho has turned from her disk jockey husband into a solipsistic drug addict, Dr. Hilarius from her psychoanalyst into a madman, and Oedipa herself from a suburban housewife into an isolated fanatic driven by her vision of disconnection. In the end, that is, Oedipa stands out clearly against Pierce's formless San Narciso as does the path of her movement from the senseless motion that threatens to absorb it. But as the figure stands out against the ground, it is also disconnected from it. And the system as a whole is composed of disconnected fragments moving at different speeds in different directions—like the "anarchist miracle" of the deaf mutes dancing (97).

**GRAVITY'S RAINBOW**

"A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now."

"No light anywhere."

"He's afraid of the way the glass will fall—soon—it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace." (3)

The experience that generates *Gravity's Rainbow* is of not only the terror that pervaded England toward the end of World War II. It is of the acceleration of unprecedented events that have been occurring since then: the explosion of the atomic bomb, a "cold war" that created worldwide tension and paranoia, a Korean War that few people understood and the Vietnam War—which showed us how America's "original energy" had in fact been channeled into forms of exploitation and imperialism; which challenged America's image as the world's greatest power; which gave rise to riots in the ghettos, factionalism in our major institutions, and a revolution in taste and manners. This acceleration has also gathered impetus from computerization, space exploration, Watergate, the Arab oil takeover. On the one hand, we are living with the results of unchecked energy (and the metaphor has become frighteningly literal). On the other hand, we are living with the results of a galloping rationalism, which has sped up communication, made information as speedily available as it has opened up
whole new areas of experience, and subjected us to an accelerated if undefinable control.

*Gravity's Rainbow* focuses on the V-2 rocket: “He won't hear the thing come in. It travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you're still around, you hear the sound of it coming in.” “You couldn't adjust to the bastards. No way” (6, 21). Worse than the helplessness in an air raid is anticipating the new rocket—which travels with unprecedented speed, which abrogates direction through time and space, which denies logic, experience, and common sense. It explodes virtually before it arrives. How do you adjust to that? Indeed, it signals the fall of the crystal palace. And Pynchon evokes the spectacle in the very form and texture of his novel.

Let us begin where we should with a novel in motion, with general impressions; for it is these impressions that are memorable and that however difficult to grasp are the novel's subject matter. The story line of *Gravity's Rainbow*, unlike that of *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, is unplottable. It lacks a central subject (vehicle), or even a hierarchy of subjects, and it moves from place to place without any apparent reason or purpose. First we center on Pirate Prentice, then shift to Roger Mexico, then to Tyrone Slothrop, whose love affairs take place in a pattern identical to that of the V-2 explosions. Now we think we have the novel's protagonist, and we watch him being pursued by the agents of Dr. Pointsman in the name of the war effort. But, as Slothrop's pursuers multiply and he escapes them (or thinks he does) in a white zoot suit, our frame of reference begins to shift. It shifts completely when he changes to a Wagnerian costume—a helmet with horns, a pair of buckskin trousers, a green cape emblazoned with a red R—to become Rocketman; and when he later disguises himself as a pig in a folk festival costume. Rocketman—pursued by agents of the right and of the left, and pursuing not only what will become the ultimate rocket of the future but the genesis of his own past—becomes the center of our attention for most of the novel. Then he disappears from sight, and our attention is centered now on the Russian Tchitcherine; now on the Nazi Captain Blicero (code name for Lieutenant Weissmann), who controls the ultimate rocket; now on the African Enzian, half-brother of Tchitcherine and former lover of Weissmann. And, as if this is not sufficiently confusing, we attend at one time or another to a cast of characters that takes up four double-columned pages in Scott Simon's useful index.\(^8\)

Moreover, we are taken suddenly and erratically from London
to Holland, back to London, over to France, to Switzerland, and to "the Zone" of Occupied Germany—which, despite the enormous number and authenticity of details, loses its geographical locus and becomes as abstract as its designation. Now we are in the German sites, then back to London, and suddenly we end up in a California movie house. This does not take into account the innumerable dislocations, as we are shuttled into the past of hundreds of characters—or over to Africa, where black history seems to be developing to mirror the white history of Northern Europe. Nor does it take into account the dislocations in style—which shifts without signal, reason, or pattern, from involved to detached, from scientific to slang, from suspenseful narrative to popular song, from scrupulous realism to antic cartooning. What characterizes our large impressions of the plot, characterization, and style is dislocation, discontinuity, confusion; but it is also speed, directionless motion, and transformation. Let me develop this point by focusing on the novel's deceptively simple opening.

*Gravity's Rainbow* begins with a serious, realistic description of an evacuation. The "he," who has been afraid of the way the glass will fall, is absorbed into a "they," who travel by train through a dark countryside and stop at an unnamed city. They are taken up in a building filled with "thousands of . . . hushed rooms without light" (4). There is nothing to do but lie and wait, listening to the screaming of missles that have already exploded, wondering whether one of them will come in the darkness or bring its own light. Soon the "he" is again in focus and given a name, Captain Geoffrey ("Pirate") Prentice. We witness a scene where Teddy Bloat, hooked onto an ebony baluster by an empty champagne split in his hip pocket, begins to fall; and where Pirate "leaps off of the cot and kicks it rolling on its casters" so that "Bloat, plummeting, hits square amidships with a great strum of bedsprings" (5).

Before we follow Pirate to his rooftop banana garden, we may turn back to see how we got from "they" to "he" and from the hushed room, waiting in terror, to Pirate's antic maisonette. We must have missed something. But there's the link; it is italicized for us. The anonymous "they" are wondering and waiting for the light. And the next paragraph begins: "*But it is already light*" (4). As we sit looking at the italicized link, though, we discover that the transition is only syntactical—that the daylight came offstage, or offpage, that without our realizing it we have been transported in time and space. That indeed we have made what the physicist might call a quantum jump.
A quantum jump is the discontinuous movement of an electron from one ring of an atom to another, or the discontinuous transformation of an electron from one level of energy to another. The model of the quantum jump illuminates three important features of the opening pages, which Pynchon elaborates with even more imagination and daring in the course of his novel. First is the discontinuity: a quantum jump is a discontinuous motion or a discontinuous development. The novel, as we have seen, is discontinuous in terms of character focus, plot movement, and stylistic development. Second is the abrogation of direction: just as the rocket explodes before it seems to arrive, defying the directions of time and space, the novel moves from one place to another and from one time to another in all possible directions. Third, and perhaps most important, is transformation. Whether we describe the electron as circling on a new ring at a new speed or endowed with a new amount of energy, the electron—which is nothing but speed and energy—has been transformed. Our primary experience in the novel is of subjects and subject matter, which can be defined only in terms of speed and energy, undergoing constant and inexplicable transformation.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is about speed and energy, which Pynchon, like the modern physicist, sees as the basic reality. Like the modern physicist, Pynchon also forces us to discard those categories of thought that have mentally secured us, and accept a world where there are no links, no directions, but only continual transformation. Where Pynchon differs from the physicist is that he brings into his world the reality of politics and human values. He denies us the security of traditional forms, categories, directions, links—but forces us to sympathize, judge, and choose.

There seems to be no direction, no links, just random events. As Roger Mexico would have it, the world obeys only the law of probability. But, following the most disturbing transformation, lines come together, everything seems to be interconnected and to follow Pointsman's laws of cause and effect.

Slothrop swings the long keychain of his zoot, in some agitation. A few things are immediately obvious. There is even more being zeroed in on him from out there than he'd thought, even in his most paranoid spells. Imipolex G shows up on a mysterious "insulation device" on a rocket being fired with the help of a transmitter on the roof of the headquarters of Dutch Shell, who is co-licensee for marketing the Imipolex—a rocket whose propulsion system bears an uncanny resemblance to one developed by British Shell at around the same time . . . and oh, oh boy, it just occurs to Slothrop now where all the rocket intelligence is being gathered—into the office of who but Mr. Duncan
Sandys, Churchill’s own son-in-law, who works out of the Ministry of Supply located where but at Shell Mex House, for Christ’s sake. . . .” (251)

But if so much is being zeroed in, who is zeroing in on whom? What is the ultimate source? Where does it all come together? Who’s on what side? What’s the ultimate goal? Where’re they at, where’re they going?

Escaping, perhaps, in Switzerland, Slothrop asks, “Why are all you folks helping me like this? For free and all?” “Who knows?” comes the answer. “We have to play the patterns. There must be a pattern you’re in, right now” (257). Gravity’s Rainbow draws us into a world of symmetrical, repetitive, but undefinable or unpicturable and unnavigable dynamic patterns. There is always a pattern that we are in, but the patterns are transformed, even when they seem to repeat themselves, and we never know how to evaluate the pattern we are in or how we have gotten from one to the other. The major pattern, of course, is the V-2 rocket, which, when it reaches its apex goes “pure ballistic” and becomes that “purified shape latent in the sky” (209). The shape is like the distribution curve of the explosions, and throughout the novel we sense the threat of death and ultimate destruction, of inevitability, but also of random distribution or pure chance. On the other hand, the dominant pattern is also the shape of the rainbow, the shape of the Rocketman’s helmet and horns, of Slothrop’s erection; and we also sense throughout the novel the promise of sexual potency. The promise is sometimes perverted; most of the sexual force is associated with sadism, masochism, and destructive escalation. But the perverted sex is countered by the love of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, however ephemeral that may be. It is also countered by the vitality of Tyrone Slothrop, not only in the joys and frustrations of his sexual encounters but in his pursuit of freedom and justice—just as the novel’s darkness and despair are countered by its fecundity and comic spirit.

We have become accustomed to ambiguity in literature. Why, then, are we so disoriented by the ambiguity of Gravity’s Rainbow? Perhaps because the novel is not ambiguous, or because we must reexamine the experience of ambiguity. Ambiguous derives from ambi, meaning “both,” and agere, meaning “to drive.” The root meaning forms an illuminating metaphor: to drive in both directions. Gatsby is ambiguous because his energy has been misdirected; in that sense we see him driving in both directions. Ambiguity, then, belongs to the novel of movement, where the
choices, actions, and destinies of characters can be plotted, where the subject, or vehicle, is clearly delineated, and where it moves from point to point in a continuous direction. But in the novel in motion there is no fixed subject, continuity, or direction. The patterns are all there are: undefinable, unmeasurable, repetitive, symmetrical, overlapping, discontinuous, and unnavigable. And we have to learn to play the patterns.

The subject of *Gravity's Rainbow*, like that of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Day of the Locust* is the “original energy”—unchecked, directionless, and accelerating. Fitzgerald plots the effects of this energy in terms of classical movement. West evokes an experience of motion, but he contains the novel’s energy in the form of the traditional novel of movement. With Pynchon we can say the energy exceeds the form, that is, if we consider form as a container. But Pynchon has finally developed a form the characteristic of which is not to contain. In *V.* he generated the experience of unchecked energy in the mindless movement of his characters. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, he thwarted the purposeful movement of his developing heroine by overloading information onto a simple plot line, or by undermining the plot line with a senselessly shifting ground. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* he has composed a novel in terms of energy and motion and patterns undergoing constant, alogical transformation.

Slothrop learns that “the War has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image. The track runs in different networks now. What appears to be destruction is really the shaping of railroad spaces to other purposes, intentions he can only, riding through it for the first time, begin to feel the leading edges of. . . .” (257). In the past decade we have learned the same lesson. We may have also learned that our conventional ways of grasping history are inadequate and false because history cannot be grasped or contained as it moves forward from the known to the unknown. The experience of reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* is like riding through modern history without the maps and seatbelts that have given us a false sense of security. And we can begin to feel the leading edges.