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"Zonal" Ethics: Gravity's Rainbow, Dislodged Subjects, and Infernal Technology

Gnostics who have been taken in a rush of wind and fire to chambers of the Rocket-throne ... Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter — rivets, burner cup and brass rose, its text is theirs to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding ... Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil ... a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 727)

The frontier is more undecidable than ever, as it is between the good and evil of all nuclear technology. (Derrida 1984, 22)

At present the exploitation of a man for the purpose of science is accepted everywhere without the slightest scruple. Who still ventures to ask, What may be the value of a science which consumes its minions in this vampire fashion? (Nietzsche 40)

In his interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, "Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject," Jacques Derrida points at the problematic¹ relation between ethics and

- 1 Campolo is among the critics who have insisted that "the relationship between deconstruction and ethics is necessarily uneasy. Ethics, as conventionally understood, is a matter of how we 'ought' to conduct ourselves in the world. Ethical thought entails the development of normative strategies directed toward the achievement or approximation of a moral ideal. This moral ideal usually presupposes the ultimate propriety of a pure human essence. It thus marks ethics as fundamentally humanistic, in the sense of being concerned that we realize our worth in our human essence and that we not step outside this essence and become 'inhuman.' Humanistic values, however, are grounded in what Derrida called the framework of

the deconstructive notion of subjectivity. To be sure, his gesture sheds light on the intensely disputed ethical dimension of post-structuralism and postmodernism in general. Indeed, this dimension has struck many critics as rather hypothetical insofar as some of Derrida's main precursors, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger,² do question the possibility of an "actual" ethical discourse. Granted, it is exactly the anatomy of ethical values (Nietzsche) and "supplementarity" (Heidegger) that undergirds Derrida's "deconstructive approach to the logocentric structure of moral dualism" (Kearney 32).

Fully aware of post-structuralism's and postmodern theory's controversial ways of grappling with ethical issues,³ my essay nonetheless employs Derrida's analytic of the subject to explore the ethics of technology in Thomas Pynchon's "meganovel" *Gravity's Rainbow* (hereafter *GR*). In fact, as we shall note, Derrida's view of subjectivity entails specific ethical considerations. Furthermore, his "apocalyptic" meditations rigorously correlate the subject and the technological. Far from celebrating the "demise of the ethical" and the advent of a "post-deontic" epoch" (Bauman 2), Derrida lays bare through this correlation a concrete facet of "postmodern ethics": the "technological disassembly of the moral self" (Bauman 195). It is precisely this disintegration, as articulated in Derrida and allegorized in Pynchon, that interests me here.

As McHoul and Wills have shown by "bookmatching" *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Post Card* as well as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Les Fins de l'homme: à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, reading Pynchon with Derrida is not only perfectly legitimate, but also somewhat unavoidable. Admittedly, Pynchon's fiction foregrounds a series of "deconstructive" features. It sets out to dismantle "logocentric" oppositions like cause/effect, stimulus/response, real/fictive, immanent/transcendent, textual/contextual, and so forth. Now, in principle, this may "amount to annulling the ethical qualification and to thinking of writing beyond good and evil" — as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology* (1976, 314). Nevertheless, such a radical option does not necessarily result in Pynchon's becoming opaque to, or uninterested in, ethical matters. On the contrary, I would contend. There is, to recall de Man's terminology, an "ethical tonality" of the

logocentric metaphysics, which deconstruction insistently calls into question" (429).

- 2 In the famous "Letter on Humanism" written in reply to Jean Baufret's request that he determine the relation of ontology to ethics, Heidegger talks about morals as a discourse already embedded in the ontological analysis he developed in *Being and Time*. Therefore, as Bernasconi points out "supplementing" ontology (*a sui generis* "original ethics" in Heidegger) with an explicit, "derivative" ethics is neither ethically necessary nor logically feasible (123).
- 3 Reacting to a "wrong" understanding of deconstruction, Norris argues that an "ethical dimension" lies at the core of Derrida's work inasmuch as this work "press[es] ... the aporias to the limits of conceptual explanation" (1987, 194). The conclusion meets the intricate argument Hillis Miller makes in his analysis of the "ethics of reading" when responding to those denouncing deconstruction's "immorality" (9).

interplay of the subject and technology in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a tonality which I believe to be worth recording. Derrida's interview, "Eating Well," and his conference on "nuclear criticism," "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," will set up the basic theoretical framework of my analysis. This will be supplemented by Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology" as the technological impacts upon categories such as agency and responsibility. Finally, fairly recent moral critiques of technology will segue us into Pynchon's "postmodern ethics" (Bauman). As Campolo maintains, "both the relation between Derrida and Heidegger and their questioning of the system of humanistic ethics can be effectively explored by considering their respective critiques of technology" (435). Employing the ethical models suggested by these approaches, I will attempt to sketch out *Gravity Rainbow's* ethical profile. Drawing on an exemplary postmodern narrative, my article aims at showing how human agency collapses as "modern humans [become] technological objects" (Bauman 195), how the subject's "errant" destiny is being reduced to ensuring technology's "destination" (to recall the Weberian observations Bauman makes (193)).

Pynchon's novel is a truly "encyclopedic" work, a paradise for critics in general and comparatists in particular. It has absorbed a variety of philosophical and scientific references, allusions, ideas, principles and models from biochemistry, thermodynamics, ballistics, and mathematics to Hegelian metaphysics, anthropology, or Kabbala. However, as "deconstructive," ludic and parodic components are also built into *Gravity's Rainbow's* intertextual machine together with other, more or less theoretical "texts," the novel challenges, displaces, and finally "encircles" in its turn its supposedly external, preexistent theoretical frames. Accordingly, *Gravity's Rainbow* does not "illustrate" anything, despite critics' efforts to define — and thereby confine — it as dramatizing, say, the theory of entropy or the second law of thermodynamics. Pynchon's text simply engages the themes of our ("postmodern") time. It is circumscribed by them and simultaneously traces their contours, delineates them fictionally.

Technology and ethics as well as their dialogue rank among Pynchon's crucial themes. Technological proliferation affects categories such as the subject and its agency especially through particular representations of the body. Much like the dislocation Derrida's analysis performs,⁴ Pynchon's prose acts out a "post-humanist" displacement of the traditional subject. This is not tantamount to

- 4 As Edmundson maintains, "the self ... which has been conventionally conceived of as potentially stable and potentially unified, is here called into doubt. For, if the activity of reading, or of being in the world, is constituted by the play of differences, then what is called the self is similarly in flux. To assume that the self can become sufficiently composed and coherent to make absolute, binding pronouncements on things as they are is again to falsify the radically temporal and uncertain experience of being" (628).

"repressing the ethical" (Segal 89) out of hand. Pynchon's luxuriant imagination brings to the fore the structure of the subject, laying bare the peculiar morphology of what philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger and Derrida have designated as *hypokeimenon*. It is the tragic-comic "dehiscence" (Derrida 1992, 103) of the subject, its playful, frenzied "dissipation" as *substratum* that Derrida conceptualizes and Pynchon offsets through the symbolic assault of technology. Now, in light of Derrida's view of a subject *deprived of substratum*, the main questions my essay moots *à propos* Pynchon's novel are: What kind of moral agency may the characters still claim as their minds and bodies become a site for technological intervention? What is the ethical stance of a literary text which thematizes this intervention as reification, dehumanization? What type of "ethical choice" (Booth 8) makes the novel in focusing on "vampiric" *tekhne*? And, of course, what is the ethics of a reading — my reading — that would in its turn focus on Pynchon's theme?

As I suggested, in *Gravity's Rainbow* the technological ties in with the ethical through the former's symbolically bearing upon human bodies, which leads to a whole phenomenology of corporeal disruption and manipulative reincorporation. It seems to me that it is much more than one's body that various machines disassemble and reassembly in Pynchon's text: it is the body's metaphysical and ethical horizon, the realm of the "spirit" (*Geist*), that technology obliterates, severs the subject from. Essentially, the "interfac[e] between bodies and technologies" (Hayles 165), is, I would argue, the novel's ethical keystone. Inspiring an "elaborate terror" (GR 230), technology takes on demonic forms, menaces the constitution of the subject, setting up a corporate conspiracy to "dismantle the Man" (712). In the "Zone," the part of northern Germany where Nazi scientists have produced the famous V-2 rocket, American soldiers sing bacchic, erotic "Rocket Limericks" (305) portraying the relations between humans and technical devices as destructive sexual ties. Human beings and various machines, tools and weapons — mainly missiles and missile parts — form strange conglomerates. Men turn into "Raketemenschen[en]," Rocketmen (GR 366). They worship the mystic bomb, "becom[e] one" with it (403), "both aggressor and victim, rocket and parabolic path," "extension of the Rocket" (402). They even enter the missile's fuselage, allowing to be symbolically ingested by the postmodern Leviathan. As in the erotic songs Pynchon concocts, men carry bizarre "affairs," the outcomes of which are castration, alteration, amputation, violence done to, or utter immolation of, the body: "There was a young fellow named Hector, / Who was fond of a launcher-erector. / But the squishes and pops / Of acute pressure drops / Wrecked Hector's hydraulic connector" (306); "There once was a fellow named Ritter, / Who slept with a guidance transmitter. / It shriveled his cock, / Which fell off in his sock, / And made him exceedingly bitter" (334); "There was a young man from Decatur, /

Who slept with a LOX generator. / His balls and his prick / Froze solid real quick, / And his asshole a little bit later" (335), etc.

Technology — especially weaponry and related devices — is highly sexualized. Its sexuality captures and finally replaces the human one. *Tekhnē*, in Pynchon's sense, is self-sufficient potency that renders men "impotent." It ironically steals their power and "maleness," "disarm[ing]," "de-penis[ing]," and, again, "dismant[ing]" them (712). The phallic Rocket embodies a supreme model of "erection," again, in all senses. It may be worth mentioning here that Enzian, a member of the African Schwarzkommando,⁵ discovers that

love, among these men [doing scientific research], once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing. Demanded, in his own case, that he enter the service of the Rocket.... Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature.... He was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood.⁶ (GR 324)

Pynchon's imagination articulates the subject as a site wherein the binary structures of inert and alive, static and dynamic, spiritual and material, physical and nonphysical, natural and artificial, biological, and nonbiological⁷ no longer hold. It brings forward an exceptional combinatory capability that plays on what Donna Haraway has named in her famed "Manifesto for Cyborgs" "leaky distinctions." As she has maintained, whereas the modern age was obsessed with the "specter of the ghost in the machine" (Haraway 193), in postmodern culture the machines take over the realm of the spirit, determining the spiritual as mechanism, scheme, artifact. Even though, properly speaking, Pynchon's characters are not cyborgs — like Philip K. Dick's (whom a certain critic calls "a poor-man Pynchon") or William Gibson's —, they feature a similar constitution. Mechanical parts and diverse instruments inhabit their brains,

5 Europe is the locus of the technological *par excellence*. Moreover, technology reveals its profound colonizing essence in Africa, whence the Schwarzkommando comes. In more general terms though, technology colonizes the human body regardless of its racial origin. Europeans are also subjects of this violent colonization.

6 Pynchon's insights into the sexual bearings of technological embodiment are spectacularly confirmed by gender studies. Doane, for example, has pointed out that "when technology intersects with the body in the realm of representation, the question of sexual difference is inevitably involved" (163). It is also noteworthy that, as a sign of "manhood," the technological engages in Pynchon the modernist texts' tendency to "equate machines with women" (Springer 305, on Huyssen's interpretation of Lang's *Metropolis*).

7 See Moravec for a daring analysis of the concept of "postbiological world."

undermining their organicity. The "spirit" now hosts an inventory of devices that query our common views of reason, thought, individual autonomy, and agency:

Inside their brains they shared an old, old electro-decor — variable capacitors of glass, kerosene for a dielectric, brass plates and ebonite covers, Zeiss galvanometers with thousands of fine-threaded adjusting screws, Siemens milliammeters set on slate surfaces, terminals designated by Roman numerals, Standard Ohms of magnese wire in oil, the old Gültcher Thermosäule that operated on heating gas, put out 4 volts, nickel and antimony, asbestos funnels on top, mica tubing.... (518)

Gravity's Rainbow unearths a precarious, "impure" structure of the subject, of a fragmented subject that, simply put, has been replaced, as such, by malefic technology. While the human body is being relegated to the status of "hardware,"⁸ *tekhne*, in the modern, "perverted" sense Heidegger incriminates, stands for the actual subject. Able to turn everything into mere instruments of its progress, it enjoys an autotelic "vitality" of its own (401), hard to grasp by the managers and plutocrats who nourish the illusion of controlling "[t]echnologique" (401), to use Pynchon's own ironic term.

Also ironically, it is an inanimate object like "Byron the bulb" that boasts of having a "soul." (Pynchon plays here with the complex meaning of the German *Seele*,⁹ the Hegelian counterpart of *Geist*.) Likewise, manipulating cultural references and blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman, Pynchon refers to a quasi-Proustian

metal-ebonite-and-plastic young Marcel ... a mechanical chess-player dating back to the Second Empire, actually built a century ago for the great conjuror Robert-Houdin, very serious-looking French refugee kid, funny haircut with the ears perfectly outlined in hair that starts abruptly a quarter-inch strip of bare plastic skin away, black patent-shiny hair, horrim glasses, a rather remote manner, unfortunately much too literal with humans ... no fakery inside to give him any touch of humanity at all. (GR 675)

Human subjects are in *Gravity's Rainbow* fraught with nonhuman, artificial alterity, whereas machines, appliances, and parts enjoy a compensatory *sui generis* identity. The Zone, a realm of omnipotent Technology, performs a symptomatic transfer of subjectivity, structure, autonomy, and coherence from "real" subjects to mechanisms — to the Great Mechanism subordinating everything to its purposes. Literally and metaphorically, people are "transmitters" indeed, components of a larger, all-comprehensive apparatus. Pynchon's text

simply turns the modern view of technology as "extension of the human body" upside down: it is man who now functions as a "prosthetic device."¹⁰ To recall one of *Walden's* sad observations, "men have become the tools of their tools" (Thoreau 29). They have gotten entangled in the gigantic web of destructive, thanatic Technology, serve its irrational ends as fragments of a system the dimensions of which they are unable to figure out. They represent the humble pieces of the big technological puzzle, cast contours on a map impossible to read and are simultaneously traversed, decentered, as subjects, by this map. Subject to a superior power, they have lost the status of subjects and hence that of moral agents.

Interlocked in the great text of Technology — as we shall see, Pynchon draws a clear parallel between the technical and the textual —, drifting along radio waves and sliding on the "network", the ego appears as a "grid." It "flows" following the rules of modern religion, electricity.¹¹

He thought of himself, there and here, as a radio transmitter of some kind, and believed that whatever he was broadcasting at the time was at least no threat to them. In his electro-mysticism, the triode was as basic as the cross in Christianity. Think of the ego, the self that suffers a personal history bound to time, as the grid. The deeper and true self is the flow between cathode and plate. The constant, pure flow. Signals — sense-data, feelings, memories relocating — are put onto the grid, and modulate the flow. (GR 404)

The subject as a "grid" and "flow" between electric poles, technologically "deterritorialized" through war, colonization, deportation, discrimination — all this participates in the same scenario of dislodged subjectivity undergirding post-structuralist thought. Ostensibly, Pynchon also plays out the tropes of a disrupted and erratic subject, a groundless — shall I say *Grund*-less — subject no longer capable of exerting ethical agency. He dramatizes an agonal ego simultaneously "parasitized" and "digested" by technology, showing the latter's devastating impact upon the former's metaphysical and moral foundations. Consequently, much like in Derrida, in Pynchon "once certain predicates" of subjectivity are being "deconstructed"; among these,

the sub-jjective structure as the being-thrown — or underlying — of the substance or of the *substratum*, of the *hypokeimenon*, with its qualities of stance or stability, of permanent presence, of sustained relation to self, everything that links the "subject" to conscience, to humanity, to history ... and above all the law, as subject subjected to the law, subject

10 See Doane (166 and *passim*) for a discussion of similar aspects regarding technophilia and the representation of the feminine in film.

11 "Science tells us," Charles Kinbote ironically pinpoints in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, "that the Earth would not merely fall apart, but vanish like a ghost, if Electricity were suddenly removed from the world" (193).

8 According to Lyotard, the body as "hardware" is another symptom of the "inhuman" (or "posthuman") age (13).

9 See Bloom's "Introduction" for a compelling reading of "The Story of Byron the Bulb" (GR 647-55).

to the law in its very autonomy, to ethical or juridical law, to political law or power, to order (symbolic or not).... (Derrida 1992, 99).

Subjected to devouring, objectifying technology, cut off from its own ontological roots, the subject also loses in *Gravity's Rainbow* its ethical identity. It is stripped of the moral, "sub-jective" infrastructure that brings subjectivity "before the law," of that Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* (from *werfen*, "to throw") which "throws" the subject into the realm of responsibility. It is true, there is an identity Derrida sees still liable to preserve the Levinasian capacity to face the Other, that is, to assume an ethical-ontological obligation. This "post-deconstructive" subjectivity marks out, Derrida insists, a "singularity that dislocates and divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other" (Derrida 1992, 100). Importantly, it is the "experience of deconstruction" that, by "re-found[ing] a discourse on the 'subject,' on that which will hold the place (or replace the place) of the subject (of law, of morality, of politics)" (107), prepares a nontranscendent, "nonsubjectile" "reinvention" of the subject's ethical structure. This reinvention lays down a specific "duty" of deconstruction (108), a necessary validation of responsibility since, Derrida writes, "there is no responsibility, no ethical-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable" (108). The subject's definition as "affirmation without closure, trace, *différance* from self" should be then viewed as prolegomena to a new, "post-metaphysical" ethics.

It is by no means clear, however, how one could effect the reinstitution of an ethical subject "that would not be predeconstructive" (103), how one could develop a "post-deconstructive" ethics which refuses to ground itself in the metaphysical transcendence and coherence of the subject. Indeed, Derrida is not explicit at this point. Here as in so many other places in his works the deliberate postponing of a "solution" (discursive "closure") may simply indicate the latter's inexistence. Answering to Nancy (103), Derrida gestures, rather vaguely, toward the Other as a possible source of ethical (re)legitimation for the subject. He does not specify, though, what makes the Other — a subject in its own right, after all — survive the "intrinsic dislocation" affecting subjectivity at large. Therefore, in Derrida, Foucault, and in post-structuralist thought in general the ethical subject discloses its profound frailty.

Now, from the standpoint of such a problematic reconstruction of ethics ensuing a deconstruction of the subject *Gravity's Rainbow* dovetails neatly with the initial sequence of Derrida's dialectic of ethical subjectivity. More to the point, Pynchon both thematizes Derrida's deconstruction of the subject and the moral impasse of the deconstructed subject, its ethical "deactivation" under the impact of technology. It is very suggestive, in this regard, that the ego appears in the novel as a mere "electric" phenomenon. This mode of appearance is the ultimate outcome of *Différance* as aggressive alterity colonizing and fragmenting the subject's place. This alterity injects human beings with artificiality,

substitutes machine parts for organs, turns the self into a grid, part of a larger, transsubjective network. Therefore it troubles the traditional dichotomies that have so far engraved the subject and determined its cohesion and status of moral agent. Yet this radical intervention resists partaking in any larger dialectic that would eventually complete/compensate by an explicit "ethics" the crisis of subjectivity. Not only has technology rendered the subject an undecidable "multiplicity" (Nietzsche) unable to gather itself in the ethical act of decision, but it has also become a sort of monstrous subject itself. This is not to say that the omnipotent technological has somewhat "reinvented" the subject, reconstituting the lost "unity" of that *je unaire* Kristeva talks about. It has simply replaced the ethical, human subject with itself — with an *amoral* subject, as Pynchon suggests. As objects divested of personal agency, humans are basically lacking ethical responsibility. At the same time, having "de-ethicized" the only ethical subjects, technology cannot take over any truly ethical prerogative.

In this view, one could argue that Pynchon's narrative does harbor an important, albeit not manifest, ethical discourse. This discourse spells out an unethical logic of contemporary technology. It highlights the aggressive "instrumentalization" of the human subject the technological surreptitiously brings about, the moral annihilation of the sole instance endowed with agency and responsibility.¹² Pynchon's text teems with images of a humanity (geopolitics, economic infrastructures, etc.) woven into a transcontinental plot meant to insure the supremacy of technology. The author simply reverses the relation between ends and means, showing how history is being "staged" for technological purposes:

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

It is true, as certain members of the "Schwarzkommando" put it, "Technology [is made to] respon[d]." People may ultimately be held responsible for technological development, especially that involving warfare. "Go ahead," replies one African, "capitalize the T on Technology, deify it if it'll make you feel less *responsible* — but it puts you in with the neutered, brother, in with the eunuchs

¹² See Derrida's remarks on the privileged ethical place humans enjoy as hypostases of the Heideggerian *Dasein* (1992, 105).

keeping the harem of our stolen Earth for the numb and joyless hardons of human sultans, human elite with no right at all to be where they are" (521). However, this argument remains too abstract, too general-anthropocentric, so to speak, and is actually isolated amid *Gravity's Rainbow's* numerous scenes and metaphors hinting at technological self-sufficiency beyond any human control. Besides, as Gabriele Schwab has shown in her essay on Pynchon from *Subjects without Selves*, the "impact of technology on the formation of the egos, the bodies, and the unconscious of historical subjects" (178) bears especially on "peripheral" selves in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The Hereros belong to these marginal and repressed groups, which also include, according to Schwab, the woman, the primitive, the Jew, the revolutionary. These are types that technology subdues, modifies, and "vampirizes" most, the first to be deprived of agency. It is primarily they who epitomize the disintegration of the subject, the latter's entering into a post-Enlightenment stage when the rational concept of responsibility no longer stands.

In fact, the desire of "younger Schwartzkommando" to locate human responsibility behind the paranoid spectacle of technology is bound to remain purely theoretical. Like other labyrinthic texts by Pynchon such as *V* or *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow* plays exactly on the utopian, necessarily failed quest. Despite the Hereros' noble intention, there is no ultimate ethical center or instance to be exposed or "held responsible" as a result of this "detective" pursuit. On the contrary, as Pynchon's fiction proves, the seeker gets "decentered," deluded by so many Ariadne's threads in the very act of seeking. If Pynchon does take a moral stance in this respect, it aligns here, I would contend, with the ethical spirit characterizing Derrida, de Man (188-220), or Hillis Miller (41-60), post-structuralism in general. He thus seems to suggest that any ethical "referentialization" that would aim at "reinventing" the traditional, "pre-deconstructive" (Derrida) subject as a source of responsibility is simply illusory.

Especially for de Man and Hillis Miller, this temptation — as well as its unavoidable, necessary failure — marks a specific ritual of reading. *Gravity's Rainbow* takes up this ritual by imagining the technology of the "Zone"¹³ as a text plotting its own encoding, addressing an invitation to be decoded at the same

time that it sets up its own "unreadability." Technology expands as a gigantic text that writes itself across private, ethical subjects, "a structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it" (*GR* 566; italics mine). Companies from two continents and apparently different military alliances, public and secret organizations, governments, states, various ethnic groups and armies take part in the writing of the "Zonal," postmodern Kabbala of technology. Certain characters of Pynchon's novel attempt to decipher this sacred, obscure Text. They suspect that the ruins of "Jamf Ölfabriken Werke AG," for example, shape into a secret — and sacred — technological discourse. Through his "English interlocks," Director Krupp employs the "8th AF bombers" as "special tools," "bombing [being] the exact industrial process of conversion, each release of energy placed exactly in space and time, each shockwave plotted in advance to bring *precisely tonight's wreck* into being thus decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, rereading the holy Text" (*GR* 520-21). Writing, reading, rewriting, and rereading spell out the infinite cycle of a technology subsuming everything to the preservation of its all-inclusive textuality. At their best, humans of the Zone

are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholars-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated ... this holy text had to be the Rocket ... our Torah. What else? Its symmetries, its latencies, the *cuteness* of it enchanted and seduced us while the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness.... (*GR* 520)

Transnational corporations, technocratic groups promoting "National Socialist chemistry" (578) — plastic is "fascist" for Pynchon¹⁴ —, masons and twentieth-century alchemists, Harvard scholars, Argentinean anarchists and Russian intelligence officers are involved in the production of an absolute form(ula). This is the Zone's (chemical) text, the new Kabbalist synthesis (590). Germans and the Allies unconsciously cooperate, beneath the "superficial," manifest text of history, in the weaving of the technological plot, the "real" text that employs its more visible strata as pre-texts, camouflage. Pynchon's ambiguous, multilayered narrative develops a perfect analogon of the "Zonal" palimpsest, and conversely. The Zone unfolds as a network of plots (603), an urban, geo-graphic writing of delusive "paraphrases" (625), perpetually modified, rewritten, "edited" by "Them" (694), the invisible "writers."¹⁵ Most remarkably, these engineer a geopolitics (727) that places the ethical option under erasure, so

13 Caviola has carefully mapped out Pynchon's "Zone" in his study on perception and presentation of space in German and American postmodernism. He challenges McHale's view of the Zone as "tropological" (McHale 140), "deconstructive geography" (Caviola 110), emphasizing its "(re)constructive" dimension. In other words, Caviola brings to the fore the pragmatics of reading in *Gravity's Rainbow*. He specifies, "Unlike McHale, I perceive the postmodernist Zone as a textual vacuum which makes the reader's interpretative activity a function of the text's meaning" (110). As for my own approach, it should be clear by now that I am interested in the Zone's "(r)opology," in its simultaneous functioning as an ethical trope and a textual *topos*.

14 Fowler has observed in his *Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow* that, as a symbol of an absolute alteration of Nature, plastic and "plasticity [are] linked to Nazism" (149).

15 The corporate subject — Pynchon's "aggregate They" (Hume 58-59) — is another "technological" upshot. The ego dissolves into a transsubjective apparatus consisting of humans and machines subordinated to Technology's interests.

to speak. Although the Rocket seems to stand promisingly as a morally ambiguous sign, impossible to be "decided" as *either* good *or* evil, the novel shows — and this is also part of its *ethical* purport — that the unethical prevails. Definitely, the Rocket does *not* "take us to the stars." One cannot regain access to transcendency, to the Kantian "starry sky" designating an obvious correlative of the "moral law." On the contrary, the V-2, the central "paragraph" of the Zonal discourse, *prescribes* the "World's suicide" (727). Technology plots the war as a means to revise, edit, restructure the "format" of its own text. Its teleology entails the lethal, dehumanizing rhetoric of warfare.

The missile — the technological paragon of the novel — usurps the place of the subject, informs the topology of the ego in its most personal manifestations. Symbolically, the map tacked to the wall of Slothrop's office in London covers both his love affairs and the spots hit by the V-2 missiles. The Rocket thus gradually moves to the core of a strange technom mythology. The soldiers and technicians working on, or firing, it become the new "gnostics" (Eddins). Their bodies are literally and metaphorically "enclosed" by the Rocket's fuselage (Gottfried). There is a violent transfer of subjectivity in *Gravity's Rainbow* from humans to the mystic missile. The latter fakes a transcendent subjectivity by "vampirizing" actual subjects, as we have seen above, by turning them into its fuel, blood, instruments. The Rocket is Pynchon's "fallen angel," *evil messenger* of an absent "above" ("the medium is the message"). It quotes, parodies, and predates Rilke's angels¹⁶ as symbols of a supernatural world that supplies mortals, as Kant put it, with the "ontotheological" justification of the law. The "pro-jectile" reveals itself as a sort of *absolute* sub-ject besieged, Derrida says, by "the problematic of the *je [c]l* (above all subject, object, project)" (1992, 100). Perfectly autotelic, covering a circular trajectory, as Pynchon's anti-Pavlovian ironies suggest, the Rocket has no other target (finality, transcendence) than itself, like the technology it epitomizes. The missile is self-sub-missive, as Derrida would formulate it, a self-reflexive text referring to itself, textualizing and thereby fictionalizing the human "context" in this process. It is the (only) great narrative available — "the subject is a fable," Derrida reminds us (102) —, a narrative whose demonic coherence draws on the "real" subjects' being reduced to "surface effects," "fallout" (103).

Pynchon's people wander through the Zone, condemned to an endless postmodern-picaresque "destinerrance," (sub-)missives without destination and destiny or whose destiny comes down to eternally rewriting the Zonal text. Unlike them, the Great Missile is self-centered, a self-addressed "missive," throwing itself toward itself. It simulates the Heideggerian "*Geworfenheit* (thrownness) of *Dasein*" (110), mimics the ethical-metaphysical re-centering of the "responsible" subject as an *erected* missile, a "phallogocentric" symbol *par*

excellence. The missile has displaced, sub-mitted the sub-je[c]t by "throwing [it] beneath," by ingesting it and taking up or, better put, acting its structure out. Technology has replaced — as Textology — the topology of *Dasein*, its text substituting for the map of existence: Being has been "enframed" and become "Zone."

In his 1984 conference, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Derrida works out an analysis that brings into play the couple missile-missive and by implication the technological "liquidation" (1992, 96) of the subject in *Gravity's Rainbow*. He dwells on several features of apocalyptic (nuclear) technology that Pynchon's novel sets off too. The philosopher maintains that atomic weaponry¹⁷ is "fabulously textual"¹⁸ through and through" (Derrida 1984, 23). It exerts a rhetoric, persuasive function, the famous "deterrence" translatable into textual, "diplomatic power." This power, Derrida insists, "would not exist without the structure of a text. Of the text in the unlimited sense I give the word, and of a text in the most strictly traditional sense of the term" (26). The stockpiled missiles are both reality and figment, fable, discourse, "to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it" (23). Much like the Zonal air strikes in Pynchon, the technological text erases, dislocates the previous textuality of the world in order to write itself. The nuclear attack brings about a "remainderless [sans reste] destruction of the archive" (27), of extant referentiality. Therefore, apocalyptic¹⁹ technology reveals²⁰ itself as the "only possible referent of any discourse and experience that would share their condition with that of literature" (28). Both real and textual, it is its own ("absolute") referent, the only thing one can talk about, or, in Derrida's words, "la seule trace ineffaçable" (1987a, 379). The missile stands for the sole, self-representing missive/message (en-voi).²¹ It wages a war "in the name of [au nom de]" what is "worth more than life," the "name itself" — one cannot name the "apocalyptic" referent of the name. Again like in Pynchon, the self-referentiality

17 The difference between V-2 and Enola Gay in Pynchon is rather insignificant.

18 See Schwenger for a survey of fairly recent "nuclear criticism" works that play out the analogy between textual dynamics and atomic *dynamis*. See also Siebers's conclusions on "the ethics of nuclear criticism" (220-40).

19 See, among other essays on the topic, Zamora's comparative analysis.

20 As Derrida reminds us (1993, 118), apocalypse etymologically points to disclosure, unveiling. Apocalyptic technology is, in this view, a somewhat tautological phrase since apocalypse represents the technological moment *per se*. If apocalypse brings forth a supreme revelation, this is technology's, its self-disclosure through "Zonal" writing. In a more usual sense, the tautology resides in technology's inherently lethal, destructive effects.

21 Derrida discusses the relation between representation and this notion in "En-voi" (1987a, 109-43). Also see Bass's "Glossary" to his translation of *Carte Postale* for useful explanations of the complex meaning of *en-voi* and *désin* (*désinée*) (Derrida 1987b, xix-xxi).

16 For an erudite study of Rilke's influence in *Gravity's Rainbow*, see Hohmann.

of lethal, "unnatural," and anti-natural technology alters the relations between *socii* (Derrida 1984, 23), between subjects constituting — as subjects — a society, a *socius* (ethical body). Both Derrida and Pynchon see self-referential, self-addressed technology as turning human subjects and nature into its own instruments.

It is this process of instrumentalization that Heidegger takes issue with in his critique of *Ge-stell*, technological "enframing." As David Farrell Krell writes in his introduction to Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology," the "supreme danger" *die Technik* engenders consists in "enclosing all beings in a particular claim — utter availability and sheer manipulability ... reduc[ing] man and beings to a sort of 'standing reserve' or stockpile in service to, and on call for, technological purposes" (Krell, qtd. in Heidegger 1977, 285). Heidegger basically argues that both the "instrumental" and "anthropological" determinations of technology are incomplete. Technology is neither solely "a means to an end," nor just "human activity" (1977, 288) — which comes down to the same invalidation of technology as *human instrument*. These definitions might be "correct," yet not necessarily "true" (289), especially if one takes into account the modern tendency of *tekhne* "to slip from human control" (289). Similar to Pynchon's, Heidegger's intricate argument sets forth the "monstrousness" (297) of contemporary *tekhne*,²² its unethical character. In this view, it is important to note Heidegger's linking up responsibility and instrumentality. The former goes along with the subject while the latter has been traditionally an attribute of technology. However, modern technology, as opposed to its pre-modern forms, mounts a deadly "challenging setting-upon" ("das herausfordemde Stellen" — Heidegger 1988, 16) through which "what we call real is revealed as standing-reserve" (Heidegger 1977, 299). As "no mere human doing" (300), it instrumentalizes people and therefore wipes them out as subjects, beings endowed with responsibility. In its perverted sense that has obliterated the original connotations of *poiesis*, *tekhne* constitutes the subject as *Bestand* (298), "standing-reserve" (308). Nature, history, humanity have become, as *Gravity's Rainbow* shows, technology's storehouse, an instrumental reserve (Heidegger 1977, 299) displayed and "ordered" by *tekhne*.

The prevalent logic of our time is techno-logical — and this may very well be the supreme "danger" (309) we humans have to face. Ostensibly, this is no easy task as we are deeply involved in "driving technology forward" (300). Again, this is all the more "perverse," "un-ethical," the more "[un]human doing" (300) technology appears to be. While for Heidegger technology as such is not necessarily "demonic" (309), its essence represents a real danger insofar as it "has already afflicted man in his essence" (309). Our "radical responsibility" (Campolo

433), in light of the Heideggerian analysis, is a revaluation of *tekhne* as *poiesis*.²³ Such a reassessment may be liable to prevent the alienating "objectification" (Thomas 161) technology creates.

It seems to me that *Gravity's Rainbow* also underscores such a responsibility. Bringing to the fore the collapse of the ethical subject in the deadly clasp of "vampiric technology," Pynchon's novel participates in the contemporary effort to rethink the site of the ego, the displaced place of its responsibility. To be sure, this does not regain the lost, metaphysical coherence of the subject. The "ethical model" Pynchon might eventually suggest is based, as Derrida's, "on difference and not identity" (Siebers 97). As Norris comments on Deleuze's reading of *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, this "decentered" subjectivity breaks with the traditional constitution of the ethical subject (Norris 1986, 14). The moral signification of Pynchon's view of the subject exposes the "infernal," "vampiric" character of the new, delusive transcendence, the "subjectile" subjectivity that turns man into an object and traces its "mission" as perpetual "dehiscence," "destinerrance,"²⁴ and lack of destiny.

Opposing the "enframing" technology has in store for us, *poiesis* may enrich, Heidegger hopes, our destiny through art. In the latter's realm one can "decisively" confront technology and scoop its essence up — an essence which, most importantly, "is nothing technological" (Heidegger 317). It is through art that one can pursue this essence, bring it into the open and therefore overcome the blindness of technology-as-technology, its dehumanizing drive. It would be all too simplistic, though, either to merely exult at Pynchon's indicting technology or, conversely, to condemn his "disempowering habit of demonizing technology as a satanic mill of domination" (Penley and Ross xii). What I find particularly illuminating, in this view, is the novel's offsetting the unethical possibilities the technological assault opens up. In other words, *Gravity's Rainbow* lays down its own moral essence by focusing on infernal technology at the same time that it refuses to gesture toward an Arcadian, pre-technological universe of subjectivity. Technology is a datum, encoded in the structure of the

23 Analyzing the ethics of technology in Derrida and Heidegger, Campolo points to Heidegger's proposal to redefine technicians as poets and thinkers. They are "guardians of Truth" (*α-ληθεια*), that is, "technicians in an original and unheard-of sense, who must question, wait, and care" (447). As *poiesis*, *tekhne* belongs to the ethical realm of care, losing its malefic "nihilism." For the relation between technology and nihilism, see Fandozzi, especially 71-129. See Bernstein for an interpretation of the *ethos* in Heidegger's conference on technology.

24 My conclusion differs from that of critics like Siegel (123), insofar as my essay underscores technology's aggressiveness and "vampiric" domination of the human. The logic of this domination is rooted in the "autopoietic nexus of the machine" (Guattari 15). According to this logic, man turns into a tool of technological "autopoiesis," self-generation.

22 As Schreiber has pointed out, Heidegger's interpretation of technology "provides a rich resource" for comprehending the "negativity" of contemporary technology (116).

ego. As an object of technology,²⁵ man takes this in, so to speak. Thus technology somewhat gets "naturalized," turns into a "corporeal" practice. The distinction between human bodies and body parts is no longer effective once the mechanical, the artificial, etc. have been embodied — corporealized — and function as such. They have decentered the self, and this typically "postmodern" decentering generates an ethically problematic situation that Pynchon's narrative insightfully sketches out. As Bauman explains in his book on *Postmodern Ethics*, the "technological disassembly of the moral self" (195) defines the age of "pervasive technology,"²⁶ our age. Positioning us and the whole world as "environment" (186) — as "storehouse," Heidegger wrote — technology heralds the "sovereignty of means over ends" (188) and ultimately of tools over the subjects supposed to operate them. Whether the planet as a whole or the "human self" (195), former "totalities" get fragmented by technology since

the sole totality [it] systematically constructs, reproduces and renders invulnerable is the totality of technology itself — technology as a *closed system*, which tolerates no alien bodies inside and zealously devours and assimilates everything that comes within its grazing ground. Technology is the sole genuine individual. Its sovereignty can be only indivisible and exceptionless. Humans, most certainly, are not excepted.

Like anything else, modern humans are technological objects. Like anything else, they have been analysed (split into fragments) and then synthesized in novel ways (as arrangements, or just collections, of fragments). (195)

Unable to "survive" fragmentation, the moral self stands as "the most evident and the most prominent among technology's victims" (198). It is precisely this victimization that Pynchon's text enacts, and it is this spectacular, fascinating enactment that subtly illuminates the ethical spirit of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

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