

War and Festivity in *Gravity's Rainbow*

by Christopher Ames

Any reader of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* will be struck by the bifurcated world view the novel presents. The universe of *Gravity's Rainbow* is split into Elect and Preterite, Force and Counterforce, Them and Us. What Paul Fussell calls "gross dichotomizing" or the "versus habit" grows out of a wartime mentality in which the presence of a palpable enemy structures the exigencies of everyday experience (75, 79). Pynchon's war novel participates in this modern mode of "paranoid melodrama" (Fussell 76), but Pynchon makes two crucial distinctions: the opposite sides of the war do not represent the true antagonists, and the gross dichotomies do not disappear in the peacetime following the Second World War. Pynchon's polarized world is underwritten by a more fundamental cultural polarity implicit in the carnival notion of two worlds: an "official" world of everyday routine, laws, and hierarchy, and a festive *monde invers* of excess and celebration. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the war and the technologies and philosophies it embodies oppose festivity, the carnival force which is manifested in the modern world in carnival survivals and contemporary parties. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* is full of such celebrations, they are often furtive or endangered, for the *Weltanschauung* out of which they spring is threatened by extinction. The world of the war and its post-war ideological equivalents challenge the human desire for subversive celebration.

Pynchon treats the Second World War as a complex of ideologies including, but also extending outward from, the actual combat. The extensive effect of World War II on a variety of civilian populations lends credence to Pynchon's characterization of war as a controlling world view. That characterization is heightened by Pynchon's insistent dichotomizing which opposes control with the folk perspective of a carnival world. Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of folk life in the Middle Ages reads as if it were a description of Pynchon's world as well:

A person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives*: one was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was *the life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 129-30).

We see a similar contrast particularly clearly in one scene in which Roger Mexico identifies the War itself with his rival, Jessica's

“official” fiancé:

Damned Beaver/Jeremy is the War, he is every assertion the fucking War has ever made — that we are meant for work and government, for austerity: and these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses and the other second-class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day. . . . (177)

There’s no doubt about which side of this dichotomy Pynchon values, yet *Gravity’s Rainbow* depicts not a static struggle or coexistence between official and carnival worlds, but rather the aggressive conquest of a diminishing festive and comic world. The War will wreak a permanent change that peacetime cannot undo. Pynchon shows how the war mentality corrupts the spirit of play — how it corrupts children, sexuality, and festivity.

Gravity’s Rainbow explores the possibilities and limitations of human celebration in the world following the Second World War, just as it limns the possibilities and limitations of all human action in the age of the rocket. But festivity receives special prominence, as we see immediately in the novel’s opening scene. The first few pages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* occur inside a dream of Captain Pirate Prentice, British Special Operations Officer. Prentice wakes from his Kafkaesque nightmare of a paralyzed bomb evacuation to encounter his colleagues and drinking companions strewn about the “maisonette” officers’ quarters, asleep on cots and chairs. Prentice shakes himself from his dream to prepare another of his famed Banana Breakfasts. Before anyone else is awake, he climbs to the rooftop where tropical bananas thrive in a glass greenhouse in the midst of war-torn winter London. The tropical foliage and heat of the greenhouse initiate the series of tropical images in *Gravity’s Rainbow* which act as affirmations of life against the overwhelming imagery of the arctic whiteness associated with the North and with death (Fowler, 19-21). The bananas become comic organic phallic symbols in contrast to the grimmer mechanical phallus of the rocket, which dominates the book.

The bananas grow in soil with a revealing history. The pre-Raphaelite builder of the house had “cultivated pharmaceutical plants” on the roof, a later tenant had kept pigs (which will also function through the novel as affirmative icons), and the remnants of these past tenants have combined with dead leaves and other forms of waste to create a fertile mulch: “all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the seasons, to an impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow, not the least being bananas” (5). Fertile waste is a crucial, recurrent symbol for Pynchon, who is fascinated with the creative powers of whatever the official culture designates as waste (as in the W.A.S.T.E. conspiracy

in *The Crying of Lot 49* and the junkyard subculture in “Low Lands”). As in Joyce’s image of the litter and the letter, the text uncovered in the middenheap, Pynchon creates a literature embodying the all-encompassing trash-heap of culture. Compost creates: “the soil’s stringing of rings and chains in nets only God can tell the meshes of, [allowing] the fruit [to] thrive often to lengths of a foot and half” (6).

Pirate harvests these giant bananas to transmute them in the kitchen below into myriad culinary delicacies, but not before his rooftop perch allows him the frightening glimpse of the new, horrible weapon that dominates Pynchon’s novel — the V-2 rocket. He spots the distant vapor trail in the sky — “a new star.” Aware of the physics behind the new rocket, Pirate can calculate the five-minute interval before the rocket should hit London. Nervous, Prentice can think of only one thing to do: “he steps into the wet heat of his bananery, sets about picking the ripest and the best . . . moving barelegged among the pendulous branches, among these yellow chandeliers” (7, my ellipsis). Helpless beneath the incoming rocket, Prentice uses the tropical bananas as a kind of charm against death. As it turns out, this rocket falls short — “Banana Breakfast is saved” (8). But the omnipresent threat from the sky is established to remain throughout the novel, and, as Pynchon implies, throughout all our lives in the age of the rocket.

At Pirate’s Banana Breakfast, we see the various officers and guests come to life as the banana dishes take form. People stage mock battles with bananas, search bleary-eyed for “hair of the dog” drinks, sing popular songs and obscene parodies. As Pirate slices, blends, purees, whisks, fries, bakes and flambes bananas, the atmosphere of the maisonette become transformed:

Now there grows among all the rooms, replacing the night’s old smoke, alcohol and sweat, the fragile, musaceous odor of Breakfast: flowery, permeating, surprising, more than the color of winter sunlight, taking over not so much through any brute pungency or volume as by the high intricacy to the weaving of its molecules, showing the conjuror’s secret by which — though it is not often Death is told so clearly to fuck off — the living genetic chains prove even labyrinthine enough to preserve some human face down ten or twenty generations . . . so the same assertion-through-structure allows this war morning’s banana fragrance to meander, repossess, prevail. Is there any reason not to open every window, and let the kind scent blanket all Chelsea? As a spell, against falling objects. . . . (10).

A beautiful passage — showing Pynchon’s talent for mixing lyricism with scientific metaphors. Again we see the banana invoked as a charm against the loosely clustered forces of death — the war, the

winter, the rockets that threaten extinction from the sky. But the threat here is different from the disintegration augured in "Entropy" or *V*. Here it is the malevolent *order* of war, the grouping of death forces. The war threatens festivity; the two are diametrically opposed.

For a moment, under the spell of the banana fragrance, the festive spirit of the party triumphs over the threat of falling objects. The richness of the feast expands to epic and comic proportions:

With a clattering of chairs, upended shell cases, benches and ottomans, Pirate's mob gather at the shores of the great refectory table . . . crowded now over the swirling dark grain of its walnut uplands with banana omelets, banana sandwiches, banana casseroles, mashed bananas molded in the shape of a British lion rampant, blended with eggs into batter for French toast, squeezed out of a pastry nozzle across the quivering creamy reaches of a banana blancmange to spell out the words *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre* (attributed to a French observer during the Charge of the Light Brigade) which Pirate has appropriated as his motto . . . full omelets of pale banana syrup to pour oozing over banana waffles, a giant glazed crock where diced bananas have been fermenting since the summer with wild honey and muscat raisins, up out of which, this winter morning, one now dips mugsfull of banana mead . . . banana croissants and banana kreplach, and banana oatmeal and banana jam and banana bread, bananas-flamed in ancient brandy Pirate brought back last year from a cellar in the Pyrenees. (10, first ellipsis mine)

Behind the comically omnipresent banana, Pynchon captures the richness of the feast, which here provides a moment of magnificence that, indeed, is *not* the war — it is something other, some life force opposed to those invisible forces that fill the air with death and destruction. Comic and festive worlds are not everlasting though, and the war asserts itself presently in the form of an official phone call for Prentice concerning the misfired rocket he had spotted earlier. Summoned to work, Pirate must leave the breakfast party behind. Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* we'll see the war interrupting or corrupting festivity, poisoning parties and driving the carnival world further into hiding. In this rich opening scene, we first see the liberating power of parties; then we see that power dwarfed by something greater and bleaker.

Just as the war appears as a rocket poised above the fraternity and feasting of the Banana Breakfast, so too does the end of hostilities manifest itself in the renewal of festive potential. " 'Now there's time again for holidays,' " thinks Pointsman as he spends his first post-War Whitsun by the sea (269). Similarly, Pynchon opens the third section of the novel, "In the Zone," with a carnivalistic invocation to

the Eis-Heiligen — ice saints of the North to whom winegrowers pray for early spring in a kind of ground-hog's day ritual. "In certain years, especially War years," Pynchon writes, the Eis-Heiligen are "short on charity, peevish, smug in their power" (281). But this year peace has come and "the saints have refrained" — winter sparing spring its wrath. This section of the novel, set in demilitarized Europe immediately after the war, begins with the fertile hopes of spring: "Already vines are beginning to grow back over dragon's teeth, fallen Stukas, burned tanks. The sun warms the hillsides, the rivers fall bright as wine" (281). Everything promises a festive blossoming into peacetime.

But the corruption continues to poison festivity even after the war. In an earlier scene, Pynchon applies the carnival metaphor to a telling parable of the war's indestructibility. At "The White Visitation," which houses mental patients as a cover for its intelligence operation, lives a schizophrenic who believes he *is* World War II. When the Allies invade Normandy his body temperature rises to 104 degrees; as the Axis troops retreat "he speaks of darkness invading his mind"; a late offensive in the war temporarily rejuvenates him, as does each rocket blast. "He's to die on V-E Day. If he's not in fact the War then he's its child surrogate" (131). But the parable is not that simple, for the reversal of the carnival world becomes reversed itself: "Come the ceremonial day, look out. The true king only dies a mock death. Remember. Any number of young men may be selected to die in his place while the real king, foxy old bastard, goes on" (131).

The true king is the war, and V-E day is nothing but a mocking jester's illusion. Somehow, Pynchon is telling us, the death-dealing spirit of the war survives, merely disguised in the rhetoric of peace. This parable augurs a complete corruption of festivity — it is as if winter were to survive its conquest by spring and slyly rule under May's guise. Festival celebrates a cyclical view of the world in which death feeds into regeneration. War insists on progress, a linear movement towards one great goal, in which all steps, affirmative or horrible, are irreversible. War challenges the reversibility from which the festive spirit gains its power:

Nothing can really stop the Abreaction of the Lord of the Night unless the blitz stops, rockets dismantle, the entire film runs backward: faired skin back to sheet steel back to pigs to white incandescence to ore, to Earth. But the reality is not reversible. (139).

The Blitz may stop, but the rocket will not be dismantled — in fact the infant technology of the War will grow into a vast proliferation of peacetime rockets, an inexorable part of the modern world.

We see the survival of wartime mentality in the post-hostilities festivals and parties which are interrupted by "the authorities" and

generally end in the desperate flight of Tyrone Slothrop, the novel's ever-pursued hero. As the book progresses, Slothrop becomes increasingly identified as the carnival king, at once monarch and fool, honored guest and sacrificial victim. At the Casino Hermann Goering, before V-E day but after the liberation of that part of France, Slothrop begins a bright holiday with a trek down the beach and amorous flirtations with French girls. The episode accelerates into a wild farce which contains many comic, carnival elements such as Slothrop's varied costumes — a garish Hawaiian shirt, his naked body covered with Seltzer water and feathers from a pillow fight, a purple bedsheet he wears after his clothes are stolen the next morning, and finally Major Bloat's British uniform. At one point, the rain even provides him a fool's motley as he appears, "speckled, pied with rain" (204). The amusing farce of Slothrop's disappearing clothes grows increasingly ominous, however, until his comic machinations appear no longer as liberating, but rather as his pre-ordained part in a game played with the forces in his pursuit: "Slothrop has been playing against the invisible House, perhaps after all for his soul, all day" (205). Through this kind of "play," Slothrop not only becomes more clearly aware of the plots against him, but he literally loses his identity — his uniform, his papers and identification. Bloat offers him a new uniform, with a stare having "nothing to it of holiday," and Slothrop accepts the ill-fitting garment, thinking "live wi' the way it feels mate, you'll be in for a while" (201). Slothrop accepts his future of changing uniforms and identities in the chaotic openness of the Zone. He becomes the fool in a world hell-bent on destroying festivity.

The openness of the Zone into which Slothrop "escapes" holds possibilities as falsely promising as the cessation of hostilities itself. Geli Tripping tells Slothrop to "forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. . . . It's all been suspended. Vaslav calls it an 'interregnum' " (294, my ellipsis). Like Victor Turner's liminality, the zone promises a creative state between systems of authority and enforcement (93-110). But as Slothrop discovers, that condition can also simply multiply the figures of authority and mystify their interconnections. In the Zone, authority manifests itself through repeated attacks on festivity.

The greatest of these encounters is the Schweinheldfest, a "pigherofestival" in a small German village Slothrop passes through en route to Cuxhaven. As Slothrop drifts off to sleep in a small park, local children approach him and describe the upcoming festival. *Gravity's Rainbow* has several scenes in which children emerge at dusk to encounter Slothrop: as the outcast, victim and fool he attracts these helpless children of the war. This night they tell him of Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero, sent by Thor to defend the town from a Viking invasion. Ever since the tenth century, the epic tale has been re-enacted on a Thursday (Thor's day) in late summer to commemorate the town's deliverance. Pynchon's description carefully points out the

festival's pagan origins and its uneasy coexistence with Christianity: the ceremony of the old gods is celebrated at the town's statue of Roland beside the Christian church. "This year, though, it's in jeopardy" (568). The festival's regular Plechazunga of thirty years' standing left for the war the preceding year and never returned. The children appeal to the portly Slothrop to play the pig. And, of course, as travelling fool of many guises, Slothrop accepts. In an earlier sequence he travelled in a rocketman outfit with a Valkyries helmet and cape; now he dons a plush, padded, pig costume — bright pink, blue and yellow.

Pigs have special significance in Pynchon. We've seen their excrement fertilize the soil where Pirate's bananas grow, and such positive, earthy associations continue throughout Pynchon's fiction. Pigs appear as the lowly charges of William Slothrop, Tyrone's heretical Puritan ancestor; in the form of a pig uterus nailed above the threshold of a party; and as Pig Bodine, character in *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pig Bodine is probably our best clue to Pynchon's view of pigs: a lusty, belching, obscene sailor, he is always good-hearted, loyal as a friend, and possessed of tremendous creative energy. Appropriately, he provides a choric voice urging "Party, party!" throughout *V.* We meet him again in *Gravity's Rainbow's* climactic banquet scene. Allon White in "Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression," claims that "Pigs in Pynchon all betoken a kind of frenzied, degenerate rejection of bourgeois order in the name of orgiastic revelry and crude appetite" (57). White calls the pig, "the carnival animal par excellence" and follows Bakhtin in viewing the pig as carnival victim and king — representing human appetite and, when eaten, satisfying it. In the Schweinhelfest the pig seems to stand for the outcast and downtrodden *and* for bodily indulgence and general license, that is, for both the festive population and their behavior, the lower social strata and the lower bodily strata. As defender of the meek, Plechazunga becomes the center of an occasion devoted to celebrative carnal indulgence. And Pynchon's description of the feast seems consistent with German folklore associating the pig with "storms and fertility" (Leach).

The initial ritual proceeds without a hitch, Slothrop delivering his one line and driving out the children who are dressed as tiny Vikings. The simple drama is surrounded by the accoutrements of festival excess — fireworks, drink (a horrible liquor distilled from oatmeal and flavored with dill), and sensuously-described food (beer and sausages and hot, dripping Kartoffelpuffer). But when the feasting gives way to a black market exchange, the police step in, viciously searching and beating women and children. Pynchon, through Slothrop, speculates that the civil police, overshadowed during the war, have burst upon the post-War scene with renewed savagery, transmuting the war's militarism into peacetime ferocity. Protected by his padded suit, Slothrop withstands the billy-club blows longer than

most of the villagers and wonders for a moment if he is expected "to repel *real* foreign invaders now" (570). Once the police open fire, such heroic thoughts vanish and Slothrop, aided by a nameless girl, joins the flight. Still in his pig suit, Slothrop spends a romantic afternoon hidden in bed with his protector. Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop's last minute escapes from parties and festivals stress the fleeting and abortive nature of all human contacts in the Zone.

The brief scenes that follow are among Pynchon's most evocative. In the combination of the girl's romantic longing and her practical advice for Slothrop's escape, Pynchon captures the mixture of naivete and grim realism the war has bred in the young. As Slothrop leaves the girl behind, he invokes what Bakhtin calls the carnival spirit of replaceability, a surrender of personal identity to communal role (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 125):

"Maybe I'll be back," [he says.] It's no drifter's lie, both of them are sure that someone will be, next year about this time, maybe next year's Schweinheld, someone close enough . . . and if the name, the dossier are not exactly the same, well, who believes in those? (573)

Slothrop leaves his protector nothing "but a last snapshot of a trudging pig in motley, merging with the stars and woodpiles." He has taken the identity of his carnival role, made love to her as Plechazunga. To survive he has gone one step closer to the complete dispersion of his identity. For the everyday world is so corrupted that it offers no stability to return to from the communal loss of identity associated with festivity's upside-down world. The healthy process of transformation and return is interrupted because of radical doubts about identity within the normal world. Indeed, Slothrop's next journey takes him even further from the familiar. He encounters a real pig who travels with him as "a jolly companion" and leads him to Franz Pökler, who is living in the ghostly abandoned carnival town Zwolfkinder, which is "perishing from an absence of children" (575). The image of the empty amusement park with its enormous rusted Ferris wheel culminates the novel's treatment of the war's destruction of childhood, a theme that parallels the corruption of festivity and is reinforced by this particular juxtaposition.

The pig festival, ripped apart by vicious cops, is but one of many parties and festivals from which Slothrop must flee. None offers him protection from those hunting him, none offers another world free of the aggression that Slothrop, like Heller's Yossarian, sees leveled against him specifically. The festival world seems to offer neither true liberation nor a temporary respite that enlivens the everyday world and renders it livable. Perhaps the grimmest, most succinct example of the war's poisoning of festivity occurs when Slothrop attends a Schwarzkommando party held in honor of rocket scavenging. This

affair usurps its form from older folk festivals in an awful, ominous way:

It's a Rocket-raising: a festival new to this country. Soon it will come to the folk-attention how close Wernher von Braun's birthday is to the Spring Equinox, and the same German impulse that once rolled flower-boats through the towns and staged mock battles between young Spring and deathwhite old Winter will be erecting strange floral towers out in the clearings and meadows, and the young scientist-surrogate will be going round and round with old Gravity or some such buffoon, and the children will be tickled, and laugh. . . . (361)

No longer the natural cycle of spring over winter, the new festival commemorates man's defeat of nature, a triumph over gravity, a festival illustrating what Pynchon deems elsewhere to be "Plasticity's central canon: that chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of Nature" (249). Pynchon ties the failure of festivity to specifically modern technological and social changes and suggests an inversion of the traditional festive relation with nature. Pynchon's vision of corrupted festivity never questions the importance of the rites depicted. The decline of festivity is identified not with a simplistic vision of the superficiality of modern life but with the aggression of anti-festive social forces.

Though *Gravity's Rainbow* is full of such scenes of interrupted or corrupted festivity, it is also framed by two scenes that exemplify the socially subversive and humanizing potential of celebration. The Banana Breakfast serves as a preterite talisman against senseless wartime death; later, the disruption of a high society banquet by Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine celebrates the limited yet powerful possibility of festive subversion. This latter scene is the capstone of the book's concluding section, "The Counterforce." Pynchon envisions the Counterforce as a loose, underground alliance of the dispossessed, who are possessed here of at least some power of responding to the capitalized "They." Mexico and Bodine are the two Counterforce representatives at "Their" banquet. In this scene, Pynchon engineers the collision between two worlds of festivity — one clearly endorsing the material order, the other clearly opposing it.

Pig Bodine epitomizes the subversive potential of festivity. Bodine wears a parrot-colored zoot suit with giant lapels supported by coat-hanger stays rising above a purple-on-purple satin shirt, and quintuple-vented "paint-blue" pants: "At gatherings it haunts the peripheral vision, making decent small-talk impossible. . . . A subversive garment, all right" (710, my ellipsis). Bodine is dressed as a walking distraction, a carnival figure in the colorful Slothrop tradition.

Everything else at the banquet is proper and formal. The guests

include corporate lions from ICI and GE, who epitomize Pynchon's They of the military-industrial complex. Printed music programs and menus complement the arranged seating in what Pynchon deems "the bosom of the Opposition" (713). Indeed it is the printed menus that first excite the suspicions of Bodine and Mexico as Bodine notices the *Uberschungsbraten* or "surprise roast." Turning from the menu to a huge stone barbecue with iron spits, Bodine and Mexico share a vision: simultaneously, they see themselves, horribly maimed, turning over the roaring fire. They realize they are to be the main course.

Here Pynchon presents the most potent of carnival ambivalences, the sacred ambivalence of the *pharmakos*. The sacrificial victim attains sacred status and thus must be killed, but cannot be killed; high and low meet in the outcast *pharmakos* raised to royal status by his selection. In this parody of that carnival ambivalence, the invited guest becomes the sacrificial victim; the party of the official world becomes a malevolent "surprise" for the emissaries from the carnival world. Perhaps it is worth recalling the Last Supper here, where betrayal transforms honored guest into sacrificial victim. Christ subverts the official plan by offering himself as food to unite his counter-community of followers against his persecutors. Mexico's and Bodine's strategy differs in technique for reversing the persecution of the official world, yet the setting is still explicitly sacral: "Going into dinner becomes a priestly procession, full of secret gestures and understandings" (713).

After their mutual vision, Mexico and Bodine share a secret gesture of their own, shouting loudly at the table about the absence of ketchup. Significantly they choose an indecorous behavior as the code that initiates their "repulsive stratagem" their disruption of the banquet through verbal obscenity. Mexico and Bodine calmly begin to announce dishes missing from the menu:

"I can't seem to find any *snot soup* on the menu ... "

"Yeah, I could've done with some of that *pus pudding*, myself. Think there'll be any of that?"

No, but there might be a scum soufflé!" cries Roger, "with a side of — *menstrual marmalade!*"

"Well, I've got eyes for some of that rich meaty smegma stew!" suggests Bodine. "Or how about a *clot casserole?*" (715)

The game continues, pairing body parts and excretion with culinary dishes in obscene, alliterative splendor. One cheerful guest joins in, banging her spoon with delight, and the "inner voices" of the string quartet offer suggestions during rests in the Haydn "Kazoo" Quartet in G-flat minor. The rest of the company, however, grows angry and nauseous. Guests begin to vomit and flee, while others ominously threaten the heroic pair.

The stratagem succeeds: "The flames in the pit have

dwindled. No fat to feed them tonight” (716). Roger and Pig escape before the oppressive forces at the banquet can reassemble themselves. As they flee, they receive an appropriate blessing from a servant:

The last black butler opens the last door to the outside, and escape. Escape tonight. “Pimple pie with filth frosting, gentlemen,” he nods. And just at the other side of dawning, you can see a smile. (717)

It is the most ecstatic, joyful and hopeful moment in the novel. And this entertaining comic scene, which exploits in its style the same tension between decorum and obscenity operating in the content, draws its power from traditional carnival roots. Not only the obscenity, per se, but the combination of human excretion and food lies deep in the festive tradition. In discussing the “Palaver of the Potulent” scene in Rabelais (Bk. 1, Chap. 5) in which the eating of tripe affects the devourer’s own intestine, Bakhtin demonstrates the symbolic importance of “the dividing line between man’s consuming body and the consumer animal’s body [being] erased” (*Rabelais* 225). We noted this same ambivalence in the pig as symbol of gluttony and object for satisfying the appetite. And indeed the pig functioned in carnival as both hero and main course. In this scene, not only is Pig Bodine present, but one of the members of the string quartet sports a Porky Pig tattoo. The genital and excremental obsession becomes a celebration of the aspects of the human which the official culture insists on repressing. And the success of Roger and Pig’s stratagem is directly proportional to the degree of repression which grants to obscenity its power to shock and disrupt. Discussing the episode in Rabelais, Bakhtin concludes that “the merry, abundant and victorious bodily element opposes the serious world of fear and oppression with all its intimidating and intimidated ideology” (226). Surely Pynchon celebrates the same spirit here, in a specifically modern context.

But a reader of *Gravity’s Rainbow* cannot help notice how rare these moments are in contrast to the bleak horrors of the post-war world and the rocket. Whatever hopes are offered by the Counterforce are clearly overshadowed by society’s evils. The apocalyptic ending in which the reader is destroyed by an onrushing rocket heightens this imbalance. And Pynchon even suggests that the Counterforce may ultimately be part of Their design: “They will use us. We will help legitimize Them” (713). Roger Mexico sees death as the only alternative to serving the ominously capitalized Them: “Which is worse: living on as Their pet, or death? . . . He has to choose between his life and his death. Letting it sit for awhile is no compromise, but a decision to live, on Their terms. . . .” (713, first ellipsis mine). The classic ambivalence concerning the festive world’s

ultimate function — subversive or conservatively cathartic — cannot be overcome. Pynchon does capture the liberating energy of parties and the affinity between festivity and the powerless; but he does not view the networks of the counterculture as a panacea, nor does he lose sight of the ultimate implications of our powerlessness in the nuclear age. Pynchon shows no more than the *potential* for festive vision in his complex, encyclopedic interpretation of the workings of the wartime world.

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