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The Construction of Time and Space in Gargantua et Pantagruel and Gravity's Rainbow

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF TIME AND SPACE
IN *GARGANTUA ET PANTAGRUEL* AND *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

by

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Eklund, Craig (MA, Comparative Literature Graduate Program)

The Construction of Time and Space in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

Thesis directed by Professor Christopher Braider

François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* are works of literature separated by several centuries characterized at once by astounding resemblances and no less telling differences. This thesis proposes that both the similarities and disparities are grounded in a common conceptualization of time and space, specifically as they relate to human beings. It examines each work in its turn, drawing out the ontology that these conceptions entail, an ontology firmly situated within a vision of humanity's place in the world. It then turns in the final section to compare the two works, taking up the implications for several different histories that pass in the intervening centuries.

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1. Introduction

Imagine a history as a parabola. A rise, a peak, and a fall. Any two segments directly opposite each other across the axis of symmetry would be mirror images, $\Delta x/\Delta y$ perfectly inverted—that is to say, at once precisely similar and radically reversed. The shape of the parabolic whole, the range and gradient of that history, would fall like a shadow between these two segments, a simple inference between the end point of one and the beginning of the next. Imagine a history—any given history, for the time being—thus represented by two works of literature, works that stand at these inverted moments, works that trace these two symmetrical segments, works that propel—for our parabola, after all, cannot be static—the movement described by their particular piece of this historical arc. If we were to make this analogy more concrete, we might imagine these two forces as the utmost thrust of, let's say, a rocket at lift-off, and the utmost gravitational pull at the last possible second, the moment before impact. We are, of course, dealing with velocity, with distance and duration, with the quantities that define our axes x and y —with, in short, space and time. It is these very modalities that are in question, that so curiously align and so starkly diverge, and so it is that the quantitative reciprocity would be offset, no doubt, by an astounding qualitative divergence, when what began as an ascent to the heavens comes crashing back down to earth. I don't know what history I am about to trace, but it is a history of beginnings and endings, and the true shape will need be inferred between these points, the true meaning drawn to the vertex that links them if we are to understand something of the shape and momentum of the trajectory. At the launch, stands François Rabelais; at impact, Thomas Pynchon. At *Abschuss*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; at *Einschlag*, *Gravity's Rainbow*. It may be that more than one history rises and falls between these two markers. It may be the history of the novel as a genre. It may be the history of an idea of what it means to be human. It

may be the history of a certain vision of the world. In any case, matters of heavy consequence *may very well be* stretched across the centuries that lie between these two works, and so let's turn now to the question that so clearly demands to be posed.

2. *Si Alcofrybas chioit en la gorge de Pantagruel,
en la gorge de qui chioit Pantagruel?*

On the surface, the main action of both *Gargantua* and *Pantgruel* could not be more traditional: the birth and development of the hero and his testing in battle.¹ These paradigms, as old as story-telling itself, are grounded in particular conceptions of space and time that give shape and direction to the narrative movement. Such concepts, of course, vary from period to period, from work to work, but I think it could be agreed that, for example, when Spadassin and Capitaine Merdaille entice Picrochole, who's hardly indisposed, with a dream of megalomaniacal conquest, an archetypal vision of space, one that lies at the heart of war and defines the world of a great deal of literature, is being given voice:

...Par le corbieu, Hespaigne se rendra car ce ne sont que madourrez ! Vous passerez par l'estroict de Sibyle, et là erigerez deux colonnes, plus magnifiques que celle de Hercules, à perpetuelle memoire de vostre nom, et sera nommé cestuy destroict la mer Picrocholine. Passée la mer Picrocholine, voicy Barberousse, qui se rend vostre esclave...

– *Je (dist Picrochole) le prendray à mercy.*

– *Voyre (dirent ilz), pourveu qu'il se face baptizer. Et oppugnez les royaulmes de Tunic, de Hippines, Argiere, Bone, Corone...* (Rabelais 1962, 126)

The space of conquest is one of horizontal advance, a spreading of domain over a flat terrestrial surface. It's expansion across a level plane, a transgression of linear borders, an accumulation of two-dimensional territory. Any narrative concerned with war and conquest as such necessarily must partake in this form of spatiality, which, moreover, is undoubtedly the most familiar even beyond such concerns. The quotation alludes to mythological and historical models situated in this very same mode: the twelve labors of Hercules and the Crusades. As a hero who rids the world of primal dangers, securing it for mankind, Hercules's mission is to spread the province of

¹ It is this very coincidence with tradition that has Edwin Duval classify these works as epics, but as we will see (and as Duval eventually recognizes inasmuch as he ultimately must declare them "anti-epics") something else entirely is afoot behind this superficial resemblance.

human civilization across the surface of the earth; he vanquishes the monsters that have overrun the mythic centers and stakes out humanity's horizontal claim. If Picrochole's ambition is hardly so magnanimous, it is nonetheless invested in this same spatial dimension. Likewise in regard to the Crusades, behind which, of course, one finds the expansionist drive of Christendom, the drive to claim foreign terrain for the cross, and this too is brought to our attention here, if only as an afterthought: *pourveu qu'il se face baptizer*—it need not be mentioned that there won't be a choice. Picrochole's war—and, for that matter, Anarche's—transpire across a long-established horizontal plane whose coordinates are fixed and reinforced through these allusions.²

Yet it's neither of these mad would-be conquerors at the center of Rabelais's first two books, but rather the giants, and how involved is Gargantua, after all, in Picrochole's war? To what extent does the defeat of Anarche and the conquering of Dipsode actually serve as the culmination of Pantagruel's growth? As involved as needs be a giant off whom cannonballs ricochet like "*grain de raisins*" (Rabelais 1962, 138) and to the extent that it stands in doubt whether a giant who urinates "*si bien et copieusement*" (Rabelais 1962, 358) as to drown an entire army will, in the end, stand victorious. The true stakes are not to be found in the horizontal spatial mode of battle. Of course, this is not to say that the outcome of the Trojan War, for instance, is in question in the *Illiad*, or that suspense in the largest sense is or needs to be a factor in any similar exemplar, but the epic demonstrates nevertheless a resolute concern for the progression and execution of battle, a concern, that is to say, for this horizontal movement; the Trojan Horse, after all, is but the means to breach the walls of Troy. Rabelais's technical interest in combat, on the other hand, never passes beyond the parodic zeal of tremendous

² It is perhaps the occasion to remark that despite the relevance of all the matters soon to be taken up to the entirety of Rabelais's oeuvre, my discussion will unfortunately be limited to the first two books, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*; much as space and time are my topics, they are also, as always, formidable constraints. Also, note that unless the contrary is indicated, when I use the singular "novel" I am referring to the two works as a unity, inasmuch as they partake largely of the same fundamental qualities (and realizing the while that this is to ignore crucial differences).

casualty figures and anatomically precise accounts of carnage; war is just another stage on which to bring to the spotlight the virtues and vigor of his heroes; it's simply another set of languages and concepts thrown into play.³ And so vanquishing the enemies can be put on hold on a whim: “*Vrayment, dist Grandgousier, ce ne sera pas à ceste heure, car je veulx vous festoyer pour ce soir, et soyez les très bien venuz*” (Rabelais 1962, 141). And strategies need little partake in bellicosity: “[*Pantagruel*] *luy bailla une bœtte pleine de euphorge et de grains de coccognide confictz en eau ardente en forme de compouste, luy commandant la porter à son roy et luy dire, que s’il en pouvoit manger une once sans boire, qu’il pourroit à luy resister sans peur*” (Rabelais 1962, 354). To the extent that Pircrocholian space is evoked, it is only to be swallowed up by the true spatial structure of the novel.

And swallowed, of course, is the right word. But there is some ground to be covered before we arrive there, including a clearer articulation of the nature of the investigation at hand. I have here brought together two texts from distant and disparate times, two texts that are both remarkably alike and starkly different. We could spend some time enumerating and illustrating the similarities between these two books—their scope, their treatment of the grotesque, their humor, themes, polyvocality and general linguistic zeal—and we could fix precisely the exact degree by which they diverge. We could, in short, detail all the myriad ways in which they thematically and stylistically touch, split, and dovetail together again, and it wouldn't by any means be a waste of ink, but I have chosen instead to turn directly to a matter that seems to me

³ Duval, of course, makes much of Pantagruel's showdown with Loup Garou (Duval 1991, 34-35)—indeed, he sets it as the entelechial moment toward which everything else builds. We'll have occasion shortly to deal with the question of teleology, but as for Loup Garou and Rabelais's concern with battle, Duval's own overarching project sets the very terms under which this interpretation fades into the background, in that *caritas* rather than any traditional epic virtue is to win the day, and *caritas* itself defeats all epic pretensions. In so far as Rabelais is writing an anti-epic, such scenes can only be the satirical grounds across which can be trotted out virtues diametrically opposed to such epic set-pieces. The spatial mode of war thereby loses all significance. Despite these minor disagreements, my interpretation as a whole accommodates Duval's; it's his attempts to limit the field of meaning of Rabelais's work that I will contend with—his notion of *a* design, and a reading which, however strong it might be (and it is very strong) nonetheless tries to pin down a text whose greatest virtue is its freedom and elusiveness.

more fundamental, a matter that, I believe, we would eventually fall upon anyway as the ground on which all these similarities and differences rest: the deep ontological establishment of these fictional worlds. In this sense, Rabelais and Pynchon not only, as we will see, work outside traditional notions of space and time, but also demonstrate a painstaking and enduring concern for the way the narrative constructs a world situated within these ineluctable modalities. Thus, what is at stake for us now is the meaning of the spatial and temporal modes through which the narrative unfurls, and within which the fictional world comes to being. In short, I propose to undertake an ontological critique—within the limits, of course, of that type of language known as fiction—of *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and, shortly, *Gravity's Rainbow*: an examination of the way they conceive the ground upon which their worlds are built. I will illustrate this in each work in its turn and, in the final part of my discussion, bring them together to show that in the similarities and divergences between the spatial and temporal conceptualizations of these novels, in the way, in short, their worlds at the most fundamental ontological level are constructed, we can discover something of the shape and meaning of the arc that stretches between them. Whatever history they stand at the beginning and end of, it is that very positioning at the two extremities that is of consequence, for it is at the moments of construction and final dissolution that the framework is laid bare. The unique ontologies of these two works bespeak something essential that the history they uphold otherwise leaves unvoiced.

But there is much to cover before we arrive there, and so let's return to the matter at hand—Rabelais's world—and examine the novel's relation to the other traditional spatial axis: the vertical—*l'échelle des êtres*, the Dantean rise and descent. The medieval, we might want to say, or the official version anyway. Bakhtin, whose reading of Rabelais couldn't be any more foundational for my own, uncovers the novel's distinctive handling of this model: "The essential

principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1981, 19-20). Rabelais collapses the vertical dimension; he pulls the elaborate hierarchy of being down to a single level; he topples, flattens, and overturns the ranks that compose ascendant space, and nowhere more characteristically than in one of the central scenes of the novel, one which will also serve to bring the question of time explicitly before us—and so we’ll start again, first things first this second time around: the birth of the hero, the beginning:

Peu de temps après, elle commença à soupirer, lamenter et crier. Soudain vindrent à tas de saiges femmes de tous coustez, et, la tastant par le bas, trouverent quelques pellauderies assez de mauvais goust, et pensoient que ce feust l’enfant ; mais c’estoit le fondement qui luy escappoit, à la mollification du droict intestine – lequel vous appelez le boyau cullier – par trop avoir mangé des tripes, comme avons declairé cy dessus. (Rabelais 1962, 30)

The birth is not the birth, and the confusion here between the anus full of *tripes*, themselves full of shit, and the womb full with the unborn hero, himself full of endless Christian virtue, is eminently illustrative of Bakhtin’s “principle of grotesque realism”: degradation. Gargantua will shortly be delivered into this world and, in a gesture of mythic purity totally at odds with the imagery of the passage above, he will emerge out of Gargamelle’s ear. This is the place, after all, through which Mary conceived, and our hero is nothing if not Christ-like; and it is also the site through which Minerva—virgin goddess—enters the world; Alcofribas brings as much to our attention. The confusion of the virgin birth of the virgin hero with the *tripes* is the collapse of lofty heroism and spirituality. The vertical dimension of space, as represented by Gargamelle’s body, buckles upon itself as the highest and purest virgin regions are inextricably linked to the lowest and dirtiest of bodily functions.

Short work is made of the traditional Medieval spatial hierarchy, but more compelling is the temporal inversion that these scenes enact. It goes without saying that biblical time, still the most familiar in Rabelais's day, is inherently eschatological, which is to say, teleological. The modern concept of time, articulated in its early renaissance humanist color in Gargantua's letter, similarly partakes in a forward, directed temporality; it's differentiated from its mythical precedent primarily by the notion of human progress. And we've already run up against Duval's proposal for the end to which everything tends—Rabelais's design.⁴ But while Rabelais certainly does invoke teleology, it is always only to subvert it. The series of scenes that leads to Gargantua's birth begins in this mode, with an announcement from Alcofribas of the purpose and end of what he is about to relate: "*L'occasion et maniere comment Gargamelle enfanta fut telle, et, si ne le croyez, le fondement vous escappe !*" (Rabelais 1962, 21). In this non-birth that precedes the birth, in the eleven months' gestation, we're clearly dealing with a telos that is deferred, displaced, and delayed. "*L'occasion et maniere*" are not what they at first seemed to promise to be, but there's something further at work as well. In light of the scene before us, Bakhtin illustrates the convoluted notions behind the eating of *tripes*, where what is eaten is also that which eats, where that which is ingested is moreover that which is excreted, where all this is tied together in a grotesque knot of "life and death, birth, excrement and food" (Bakhtin 1981, 163). His emphasis is on the mythopoeic thematic convergence, the ambivalent fusion of bipolar concepts, but we'll draw out of his analysis the contorted temporal structure that underlies it, for here, where Alcofribas promises us the story of Gargantua's beginning, the beginning is not the beginning; what was supposed to be the hero's birth, the originary moment, is instead a grotesque act of defecation, and defecation is an end. The same displacement that collapses the

⁴ This was in regard to *Pantagruel*, of course, but it's safe to assume that his reading of Gargantua would not differ in this respect.

vertical spatial element also serves to substitute an ending for an origin. We can take this yet another turn further and note that Gargamelle's ailment is, as it were, preceded by itself, for as we saw above, Alcofribas has already warned us: "*L'occasion et maniere comment Gargamelle enfanta fut telle, et, si ne le croyez, le fondement vous escappe !*" It's a metaleptic gesture of foreshadowing and although the curse is playful, it is nonetheless forceful, at least as much so as a narrative enactment. Beyond that, in this simple phrase, we are pointing to the "end" of the present story, which is the beginning of Gargantua's life, but the false beginning (defecation, an end) that we end up at, is already present here at the beginning as an end (our final disbelief). In this thorny scheme, birth and shit are aligned even before they're diegetically aligned, beginning and end confused before they're confused.⁵ The traditional notion of teleological, forward-directed time is turned over upon itself and all temporality is hopelessly convoluted.

In this vague, initial sketch, we find that Rabelaisian time is not a consecutive movement, but a thing that throws its shadow before itself, that loops around itself several times over, that displaces, defers and delays. How does this temporal scheme come into being? The answer, of course, is connected to Rabelaisian space—but what *is* the spatial structure of the novel? What's even left beyond the vertical and horizontal? Another perpendicular shift, one that ruptures these traditional planes: the angle inward.⁶ We've touched the coordinates already, of course—Gargemelle's body is our initial figure for the novel's spatiality, after all—but to make the significance and extent of all this clear, we have Alcofribas at the very outset of the saga, in the first lines of the preface to *Gargantua*, delivering a warning to those who would dismiss the work for its superficial frivolity:

⁵ This is the case in starker, but far simpler, terms in the concurrence between Pantagruel's birth and Badebec's death.

⁶ This is the case with time too, the source and meaning of the convolutions seen above—if using a spatial direction here to describe temporality admittedly seems inapt.

Alcibiades, ou dialogue de Platon intitulé Le Bancquet, louant son precepteur Socrates, sans controverse prince des philosophes, entre aultres paroles le dict estre semblable es Silenes. Silenes estoient jadis petites boites, telles que voyons de present es boutiques des apothecaries, pinctes au dessus de figures joyeuses et frivoles, comme de harpies, de satyres, oysons brides... et aultres telles pinctures contrefaictes à plaisir pour exciter le monde à rire (quel fut Silene, maistre du bon Bacchus); mais au dedans l'on reservoit les fines drogues comme baulme, ambre gris, amomon, musc zivette, pierreries et aultres choses precieuses. Tel disoit estre Socrates, parce que, le voyans au dehors et l'estimans par l'exteriore apparence, n'en eussiez donné un coupeau d'oignon, tant laid il estoit de corps et ridicule en son maintien, le nez pointu, le regard d'un taureau... mais, ouvrans ceste boyte, eussiez au dedans trouvé une celeste et impreciable drogue : entendement plus que humain, vertus merveilleuse, couraige invincible... (Rabelais 1962, 5-6)

There are gestures, of course, toward the major themes and imagery of the novel—the grotesques of the *pinctures*, the virtue and wisdom of Socrates—but it's the articulation of spatiality here that's absolutely foundational to the narrative that follows. It's a spatiality built, seemingly, on the contrast between exteriority and interiority. The exterior position in both the examples of the *boites de Silenes* and Socrates is represented by the narratee (in the second phrase, joined by the narrator “*telles que voyons*”; by the end, alone, “*n'en eussiez donné*”). In both cases, the surface of the object in question is emphasized—in its disharmony, its ugliness, in its *grotesqueness*. This is the interface that stands between the viewer and the true thing he seeks, for finally, in both instances, the interiority of the object is brought forth to view as the seat of meaning and value. Such, it is promised, is also the case with the book in hand: “*la drogue dedans contenue est bien d'aultre valeur que ne promettoit la boite*” (Rabelais 1962, 7). Alcofribas's first words point us inward, toward the hidden inner life of the book where are secreted away these *fine drogues* and wisdom. It's a spatial configuration that's immediately rearticulated, and then compounded once over again, in the wonderful passage, so rightly lauded by Auerbach, wherein the reader is urged to approach the text as does a dog a bone:

A l'exemple d'icelluy vous convient estre saiges, pour fleurir, sentir et estimer ces beaulx livres de haulte gresse, legiers au prochaz et hardiz à la rencontre ; puis, par curieuse

leçon et meditation frequente, rompre l'os et sugcer la sustantificque mouelle... (Rabelais 1962, 7)

Here, we are urged not only to open the way inward, to break through the bone to the marrow, but exhorted further to suck the marrow down—to ingest the *mouelle*, to re-secrete the *drogue* that we there find secreted away.⁷ This recursive movement is mirrored and thereby compounded again by the self-reflexive gesture that motivates it. The movement is pressed upon the reader and it is a *mise en abîme*; for even as the reader is urged to take on the text in terms of this inner-outer spatiality, the novel itself rests (as we will see) on that very same idea of spatiality; the structure of space that the novel constructs is the same as that in which it situates itself in relation to the reader.

But how can this interior-exterior spatial mode predominate in a book in which, as Bakhtin rightly remarks, “A human being is completely external,” a book in which, “The known limits to a man’s possible exteriority are achieved” (Bakhtin 1981, 239)? Indeed, the search for secret interior virtue in any of Rabelais’s four volumes is in vain; there’s no Socrates here, or at least not as described by Alcibiades. Yet it is the image of the dog that ousts the others, and it’s not, after all, entirely about the marrow: “*Si veu l’avez, vous avez peu noter de quelle devotion il le guette, de quel soing il le garde, de quel ferveur il le tient, de quelle prudence il l’entomme, de quelle affection il le brise, et de quelle diligence il le sugce*” (Rabelais 1962, 6). Only by the final clause have we arrived at the goal; it’s the ravishing energy of the dog that’s truly in play; the focus is not on the interior qua interior, but on the dynamic movement by which the border between the exterior and interior is violated, a movement that splits that boundary, brings the interior outside, and then swallows it back down to a new interiority. It’s about making the inner outer and the outer inner, ever over again. This dynamic interchange, the very recursiveness of

⁷ Indeed, the compounding of this movement is already present in the *boîtes de Silenes* passage inasmuch as, though none of the *drogues* here mentioned are for consumption, the connotation edges us in that direction.

this process, the feedback loop it engenders, erases the distinction between interior and exterior, creating a world in constant flux across some liminal realm. Bakhtin is right that everything is external, but that idea cannot be opposed to interiority; it must rather be situated on the very current of this movement. The prologue, in making its case for the proper way to read the book that it precedes, sets up this fluid interchange between the interior and the exterior along which the novel will construct its spatial—and indeed, its temporal—world. I will refer to this two-way movement as the inner-outer dynamic.

Time is created by this movement as well. The temporal distortion that we've already examined occurs by means of the transit between the inner realm of Gargamelle's body and the outer world. Time is twisted over upon itself by the passage of the *tripes* (an end of digestion, brought over into a new beginning) into the body and the passage of her *fondament* and finally Gargantua (an end preceding a beginning) out of the body. Throughout the whole of the novel, the inner-outer dynamic sets the temporal rhythm and this is nowhere more clear than in the growth of the giants: "...*et [Gargantua] temps passa comme les petits enfans du pays : c'est assavoir à boyre, manger et dormir ; à manger, dormir et boyre ; à dormir, boyre et manger*" (Rabelais 1962, 48). One is left to wonder, however, which *petits enfans du pays*, precisely, did two of the three in such fashion as he. In Rabelais's world, time is not only measured by consumption and excretion, it is thereby created.⁸ Bakhtin's illustration of the temporal function of the feast fits nicely with this time-creating inner-outer dynamic: "The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness" (Bakhtin 1981, 9). In Rabelaisian time, however, it is not only that the feast is related to time, not only that it marks it, but the feast in fact creates that time; it *is*

⁸ These are actually one and the same notion, in so far as, in a narrative, the marking of time, the enunciation of the moment, the means that bring the "was," "is," and "will be" to the page, *is* the temporality of that narrative.

the event and it is always characterized by prodigious consumption and, often enough, excretion, which is to say movement across the inner-outer limit. In *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, time runs like wine down the hourglass of the gullet.

And just so does the rhythm of Gargantua's childhood proceed: "*Il pissoit sus ses souliers, il chyoit en sa chemise, il se mouschoyt à ses manches, il mourvoit dedans sa soupe, et patroilloit par tout lieux, et beuvoit en sa pantoufle...*" (Rabelais 1962, 48). The catalogue of (chiefly, at least) bodily functions, of movements across the barrier between the human and world—of, that is to say, enactments of the inner-outer dynamic—sets a paratactic cadence that articulates what seems at first an almost metronomic rhythm; it's the body functioning as the clock, yes, but the shape of the temporality produced by this syntax would seem to be successive, even progressive. Beneath this rhythmic feature, however, time is nevertheless subtly contorted, for each element of the catalogue is a *dicton* of the day that has been inverted. As each bit of popular wisdom is undone, as the reader—expecting Gargantua not to piss on his shoes, not to shit his shirt—finishes each saying with amused astonishment and returns to reread that same saying, to verify the defiance of expectation, each clause folds back over upon itself, each *dicton* ingests and excretes itself, and like these nuggets of common sense, the successive temporality set up by the paratactic structure is turned on its head.

As they might be said to compose the two poles of modern interpretation of Rabelais, it's noteworthy that both Bakhtin's and Duval's readings entail something like this concept of time and space. In regard to Bakhtin, this perhaps goes without saying; the grotesque body that he measures in all its permutations stands at the center of this; I'm merely drawing out another aspect latent in his discussion: the way narrative space and time flow through the open body and what that passage means in terms of the world that thereby emerges. The inner-outer dynamic

engenders what we might call grotesque space-time; in Bakhtinian terms, time is a corporeal rhythm in Rabelais and space is nothing other than flesh. But Duval too settles his reading on the field we're delineating, and only partially in spite of himself. His interpretation of the prologue to *Pantagruel*, for example, his reading of this first articulation of the "design" does, after all, turn on, "the fundamental distinction between the Old Testament and the New as one of veiled, imperfect revelation of a partial, mediated truth, on the one hand, and a complete unveiling—that is, a 'revelatio,' or 'apocalypse'—of a perfect, seen truth, on the other," (Duval 1991, 9)—which is to say that Rabelais's book, like the New Testament, brings the hidden inner word to light. If pulling Duval into our camp seems strained on these meager grounds, further support for this move will be furnished as our discussion proceeds. What we will eventually find is that grotesque space-time is perhaps not so different from Christian humanist space-time, that these are merely two different aspects of a multifaceted world. For the creation of a *world* is the ultimate effect of the inner-outer dynamic. Rabelais's deep concern for the ontological establishment of his fictional world is most clearly manifest in this function; the reworking of space and time by means of the inner-outer dynamic creates a world that moves in endless transit along that recursive flux. Examples that thematize this deepest level of the novel's structure, that explicitly figure this world-creating movement are numerous; thematization, of course, takes place on the diegetic level, and here we see the inner-outer dynamic figured as an interchange between the human being and its setting⁹ that engenders the world—this is precisely what is in question in all the episodes wherein the giants rework the earth, establish the monuments of

⁹ By "setting," in terms of this general movement by which a world comes to be, my thinking runs very much in line with what Heidegger means by "earth" in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art"—that cosmic obscurity out which a world comes to be disclosed to Da-sein—but I would otherwise not wish to invoke this seminal work, however aptly it might apply, and so I've settled for the somewhat unsatisfactory "setting," which seems to me at least to invoke something more neutral than "environment" and something more human-specific than "exterior": a region into which one is placed, to which one is always related, and with which one might bring a world into being.

France, engage in all those typical activities of the mythic hero that explain the features of the world that we all inhabit. In order to bolster my claims, I'll seize onto only a few of the examples of this that explicitly evoke the question of time and space, before turning to the central scene wherein what I will call the ontological density of Rabelais's world truly comes to the fore.

In this regard, the proposal for the reconstruction of the walls of Paris, in its explicit invocations of spatial delineation, is worthy of mention. The walls as they stand will not do, "*car une vache avecques un pet en abbatroit plus de six brasses*" (Rabelais 1962, 295). The remark is offhand and wholly invested in its comic effect, but we may note nonetheless that the threat to the enclosure of a horizontal boundary comes from an act traversing the boundary of the body. Pantagruel responds with an explanation of the reason why Lacedaemone was not walled: "*qu'il n'est muraille que de os et que les villes et citez ne sçauroyent avoir muraille plus seure et plus forte que la vertu des citoyens et habitans*" (Rabelais 1962, 295). Sparta is defined not by the physical manifestation of its geographical limit, nor its extension onto a cartographic abstraction, but by the actual human beings who compose it. For Pantagruel, the virtue of the citizens—an inner quality, to be sure—is the essential constituent of the city space, and true protection does not involve hemming a community in, keeping the inner inner, but letting all strength and righteousness flow outward. As he so often does, Panurge retorts with the Bakhtinian bodily foil to Pantagruel's Christian humanist vision:

« Je voy que les callibistrs des femmes de ce pays sont à meilleur marché que les pierres. D'iceulx faudroit bastir les murailles, en les arrangeant par bonne symmetrye d'architecture et mettant les plus grans au premier rancz, et puis, en taluant à doz d'asne, arranger les moyens et finalement les petitz, puis faire un beau petit entrelardement, a poinctes de diamans comme la grosse tour de Bourges, de tant de bracquemars enroiddys qui habitent par les braguettes claustrales. » (Rabelais 1962, 296)

This is more than simple ribaldry; it's a re-conceptualization of the meaning and creation of space. Panurge brings Pantagruel's idea of Spartan virtue fully into the body in this remarkable, grotesque, and rightly offensive image, an image all the more striking in that the very bodily component that Panurge proposes to construct his barrier is one most typically characterized by its quality of openness—its central function, after all. And this is the quality that is most of the essence here, accentuated as it is not only by the *bracquemars*¹⁰ required for the *entrelardement*, but also by the fable that follows, wherein the lion mistakes the old woman's "*comment a nom*" for a wound: "*Que diable ! ceste playe est profonde*" (Rabelais 1962, 299). These walls are composed of fleshly orifices—bodily limits that allow rather than impede the transaction between the inner and outer worlds, the human being and the setting—and bodily agents of penetration; they are built on the very things they are meant to forefend against. And so, whereas Pantagruel's wall of virtue emphasized the strength of the citizenry, the outflow of their might as a force to push back invasion, Panurge's walls operate on a contrary principle, for entry to Paris now is hardly forbidden—indeed, we've already noted the ease of access to these *callibistrys*—but does not come without its dangers: "*Et puis, que les couillevrines se y vinsent froter, vous en verriez (par Dieu !) incontinent distiller de ce benoist fruict de grosse verolle, menu comme pluye, sec au nom des diables*" (Rabelais 1962, 296). This mode of defense actually depends on a partial penetration of the city walls, a penetration that leaves the *couillevrines* themselves penetrated, infected with syphilis; in the *jeu de mot* on *couille* and this infectious mode of resistance, the bodily element, as if it couldn't be stressed enough, is yet further heightened. Thus does the question of securing a spatial border become a demonstration of the human-setting relationship that, in foregoing all static partition, opens up all boundaries

¹⁰ Which themselves have apparently broken out of their *braguettes claustrales*.

and creates a spatial world that is not defined by set forms and frontiers, but is always taken up in the flux of this osmotic interchange. All fixed bearings are set in motion.

It is in these terms that the Abbey of Thélème, contrary to Bakhtin's judgment, fits into Rabelais's philosophy and system of images, and centrally, I will argue. Bakhtin's objections stem from the discord between the humanist, courtly atmosphere that presides in the monastery and the rowdy populist energy he molds into his own reading (Bakhtin 1981, 138-9); the validity of his case is, of course, debatable on those very grounds, but for the purpose at hand what is at stake is whether or not Thélème is situated within the realm of narrative space and time as created by the inner-outer dynamic, and on this account alone, we can see that it is an eminently fit culmination to the first novel. Whereas Duval's reading flounders before the grotesque, Bakhtin's here meets its match as Rabelais assumes his most humanist guise, but in both cases, interpretation runs ashore as a particular thematic concern ebbs into its contrary, while the same underlying structural principle—the inner-outer dynamic—presides as always below these currents. This is an especially unfortunate short-coming for Bakhtin's reading in this instance, inasmuch as Thélème serves as the final expression of *Gargantua*'s ongoing¹¹ world-creating endeavor.

As such, it embodies the peculiarities of the Rabelaisian world. The abbey is therefore built in the inverted image of every other, as Gargantua explains,

...parce que es religions de ce monde tout est compassé, limité et reiglé par heures, feut decreté que là ne seroit horrologe ny quadrant aulcun, mais selon les occasions et oportunitéz seroient toutes les œuvres dispensées ; car (disoit Gargantua) la plus vraye perte du temps qu'il sceust estoit de compter les heures – quel bien en vient il ? – et la plus grande resverie du monde estoit soy gouverner au son d'une cloche, et non au dicté de bon sens et entendement. (Rabelais 1962, 189)

¹¹ Which is to say, not teleological, but something realized on every page; Thélème is merely the culminating figure.

Mathematical notions of measured time are restrictive; they encompass, limit, and regulate time; which is as much as to lose time since it abstracts this foundational mode of existence from out of our human way of being in the world. To keep time, rather, to preserve it and make it meaningful, it must be related to the human. This is not to restrict it to the bounds of our individual existences, but once more to open things up, to let it flow outward in the form of *œuvres dispensées*—to let time pass between the human and its setting and create thereby a world. If this is not strictly Bakhtin’s bodily rhythm, it is nonetheless internal and this is where Rabelais the populist and humanist meet, in that innermost region where flesh and the spirit fuse. Space, of course, is to be handled in like manner in the Abbey and so the very idea of walling off is once more subverted as all boundaries are done away with—“*il n’y fauldra jà bastir murailles au circuit, car toutes aultres abbayes sont fierement murées*” (Rabelais 1962, 189)—stripping the abbey of all that might make it cloistral and letting the virtue therein cultivated pass freely into the world: “*...tant hommes que femmes là repceuz sortiroient quand bon leurs sembleroit, franchement et entierement.*” (Rabelais 1962, 190).

The tension between this kind of free passage and the traditional notion of enclosure is brought to our attention in a characteristic fashion by the inscription over the abbey door:

*La parolle sainte
Jà ne soit extainte
En ce lieu très saint;
Chascun en soit ceinct;
Chascune ayt enceincte
La parolle sainte* (Rabelais 1962, 197)

La parolle sainte—the sacred word in the traditional sense, certainly, but also, and I would suggest no less, every word that flows out of the giants, that overflows out of every character in the book, the tremendous current of speech that carries the narrative. Terrance Cave takes up the

topic in terms of the general meaning of speech for the cornucopian writers of Rabelais's time, and brings this question fully within the bounds of our present discussion:

Breath is shaped, as it emerges from the unseen interior, by tongue, lips, and mouth: the physiology of speech becomes the metaphor of coming-into-presence; by extension, the whole body offers itself as the model *par excellence* of a discourse articulated in the mode of life. Oral emission is linked, by means of what is at once a figure and physiological theory, with genital and anal emission... (Cave 1979, 149)¹²

In this, the humanist face of the inner-outer dynamic, the correlative of the ingestion of food and drink is the intake of knowledge, and excrement meanwhile transubstantiates into the word. Just as, in Bakhtin's terms, the narrative seems to overflow out of the body, so here we find the narrative swept along by the current of speech. The word is the humanist world-creating medium, and in the verse in question, we find this function explicitly figured. The second line brings time into play—"Jà ne soit extainte"—and the time of immortality, no less; as the world-creating force¹³, *la parolle* is a continuous, unending principle. In the third line, *la parolle* establishes the sacred space, and the configuration of this space is much like what we've witnessed already. For although the idea of freedom that serves as the cornerstone of Thélème will suffer no walls to spread out around it, a sort of border is nevertheless brought into play: "*Chascun en soit ceinct.*" *La parolle* surrounds and envelops us all, belts us in, but in a manner where confinement is not in question, for, indeed, "*Chascune ayt enceincte/ La parolle saint.*" The gender shift from "*chascun*" to "*chascune*" should not be read literally to distinguish between a man's and a woman's relation to *la parolle*, whereby the man would be girded by the word, the woman inseminated, but rather a dual ambivalent role that each of us plays in relation

¹² Cave's investigation of language and writing in Rabelais in terms of *copia* transpires on terms remarkably similar to those we are pursuing here, such as when, "*copia* takes on the sense of 'storehouse', although the store is always envisaged in terms of release mechanisms which will allow the processed materials to flow back into the stream of writing," (Cave 1979, 27). This is the inner-outer dynamic of writing, and since, "The word *copia* may thus be seen to provide a unifying frame which overrides the duality of words and things," (Cave 1979, 21) it perhaps not so different from the inner-outer dynamic in question here.

¹³ Indeed, we might note here Auerbach's play on this notion in the double meaning of his title, "The World in Pantagruel's Mouth."

to the speech principle, a role that emphasizes the bodily limit even as it transgresses it—a role by which *la parolle* is both the demarcation that sets the human off from its setting and also the vehicle that carries all that is inner outside and all that is outer inside, creating a world. Speech and hearing are the modes by which human beings are brought into relation; the word draws bonds that link the community of Thélème, as it brings what is inner to the light of day and *l'entendement* of all. That we end here on the note of pregnancy suites our discussion fittingly, for insemination, pregnancy, and birth are wholly in line with the biological facet of world-creation, wherein the outer movement always signals natural generation, and the inner insemination and formation. Thus is the new cosmic order that Thélème represents brought to life.

For all the Christian humanist overtones that fall right in line with Duval's reading, the grotesque is nonetheless present inasmuch as the impossible dimensions and shifting proportions of Thélème, the tremendous quantities of building material and goods that are moved in—and enumerated in much the same manner as the dishes of Pantagruelian feasts—figure this piece of architecture as the giant body, as Gargantua in stone. A Pantagruelian mandala whose center holds the seed of it all: “*Au milieu de la basse court estoit une fontaine magnifique de bel alabastre ; au dessus les troys Graces, avecques cornes d'abondance, et gettoient l'eau par les mamelles, bouche, aureilles, yeulx, et aultres ouvertures du corps*” (Rabelais 1962, 197). Cave's image of the cornucopia as a figure for the superabundance of Rabelaisian prose and *la parolle* is made manifest—and in alabaster, no less—in the very center of the Pantagruelian cosmos. Like Plotinus's fountain that brims over and brings reality into being, time and space in the novel are the very bodily overflow that pours like water out of these orifices, the inner plenty that spills out into a world.

Of course, there's the giant body, and then there's the giant's *body*. The chapter begins with the army setting forth to sack Almyrodes when a storm overcomes them. Pantagruel, “*comme une geline faict ses pulletz*” (Rabelais 1962, 378), sticks out his tongue—“*seulement,*” it doesn't go unnoted, “*à demy*”—to cover the troops, spreading a new sky over them, as it were. Bakhtin cites the wide-open mouth as the leading theme of *Pantagruel*, and already, the creation of space is being figured. And so the narrative moves with Alcofribas into the penetralia of the Pantagruelian body, the innermost sanctum through which food and wine pass, out which laughter and *la parolle* arise, the very bodily region from which, in one way or another, all the giants' names derive. It's the spout of Neoplatonic fount, the world-creating center, and we are here brought explicitly before this question of the world:

- *Jesus, dis je, il y a icy un nouveau monde ?*
- *Certes, (dist-il), il n'est mie nouveau; mais l'on dist bien que, hors d'icy y a une terre neufve où ilz ont et soleil et lune, et tout plein de belles besoignes ; mais cestuy cy est plus ancien.* (Rabelais 1962, 379)

Indisputably, we have a historical gesture to America, and Auerbach, in his exceptional analysis, takes up this invocation of the *nouveau monde*: “This is one of the great motifs of the Renaissance and of the two following centuries, one of the themes which served as levers toward political, religious, economic, and philosophical revolution” (Auerbach 2003, 269-270). This is a clear articulation of what is at stake, but I must contend with Auerbach's notion that “Rabelais only lets the theme begin to sound, he does not develop it” (Auerbach 2003, 270). This is the case only inasmuch as the horizontal spatial plane and what new territory it might offer is of no consequence here; Rabelais's *nouveau monde*, although borrowing America as a figure, is something else entirely, and something far more revolutionary. What's transpiring unseen behind (or rather, *outside*) Alcofribas's journey brings the nature of this move further to light.

Nowhere is the ultimate insignificance of war qua war more apparent in Rabelais's work than in the fact that the conquest of the Almyrodes, the final victory that secures the earthly Pantagruelian reign, is left entirely unrepresented; in its place we have the narrator's essentially undramatic (in comparison to the high theater of war, anyway), relatively conflict-free sojourn in Gorgias. Again, it is not a question of horizontal conquest, of establishing a traditional empire on the rough surfaces of the earth, but rather of recreating the world entirely by means of the exchange between the human and its setting, of reworking time and space by means of the inner-outer dynamic, by means of the grotesque body and humanistic Christian words and wisdom. This is the significance of the climatic chapter in Pantagruel's mouth. And in this regard, the setting, of course, is telling:

The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself... The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage. (Rabelais 1962, 281).

The inner-outer dynamic that propels the narrative is figured on the diegetic plane by the movement of exchange between the human and its setting that begets a world. The episode in Pantagruel's mouth takes us to the figurative source of this process; it is the novel's most concentrated image. And it is no accident that it coincides with the invocation of the *nouveau monde*, but the new continent across the Atlantic bears on the meaning of the episode only as it stands in metonymy to the restructuring of the entire world under a new vision of the human being. The utopian (Bakhtin will call it, revolutionary) motivation behind Rabelais's oeuvre is everywhere present and absolutely essential; more than anything else, *Gargantua et Pantagruel* are concerned with the process by which a world is created, by which the human in interaction

with his setting can bring new possibilities of being to light. This is intimately related to historical change, and what this question finally brings before us is the historical engine that lies *behind* the bounded revolutions that Auerbach sketches in terms of the *nouveau monde* scheme.¹⁴ Rabelais articulates a full ontological reconceptualization, of which social, political, and historical phenomena are mere effects.

Here in the center of the inner-outer dynamic, time receives the treatment we have come to expect, as has already been brought to our attention by the cabbage-planting peasant, whose world, he says, is “*plus ancien*” than the terrestrial.¹⁵ The world inside the giant precedes the world that produced the giant; the world that he *is* antedates the world that he is *born into*. These insights send us back to the beginning of the book, where we might note that this external world that receives Pantagruel is illustrated with remarkable clarity; indeed, it’s perhaps the most “objective” passage of the whole novel, portrayed, as it is, unmediated by any of the massive characters that will soon dominate the stage; the pre-Pantagruelian world of *la secheresse* stands out in this respect. The world in Pantagruel’s mouth will shortly be described in like manner, as Alcofribas gives us a travel account, a sample of his “*Histoire de Gorgias*” (Rabelais 1962, 381). These two opposed, objective, scenic pictures have no other parallels in the novel, which in general eschews such local description in favor of action, speech and character. A binary opposition is thereby established between the external and the internal worlds. And yet, what a

¹⁴ Duval’s interpretation also fails to penetrate below the surface here: “The single exploit for which Pantagruel is predestined, and that marks the climax of his epic, is a military and political one very much like those of all epics in the tradition of the *Iliad*, from Homer down to Turpinus” (Duval 1991, 2). This is, I argue, true only of the *penultimate* moment in *Pantagruel*. Alcofribas’s journey into Pantagruel’s mouth displaces these concerns and brings us before Rabelais’s largest and most profound intention. Duval’s discussion of this chapter in terms of the body politic (Duval 1991, 131) hits upon these issues; he nevertheless makes the Pantagruelian body a metaphor for the “body politic” rather than the other way around, and therefore does not shift the meaning of his overarching interpretation accordingly.

¹⁵ Of course, one is tempted to explain this away as another incongruity that so little pertains to Rabelais’s agenda as to merit no attention, or to say that the poor fellow is simply deluded, his understanding of the world beyond darkened by that same ignorance whereby, “*la moytié du monde ne sçait comment l’autre vit*” (Rabelais 1962, 380). The correspondence between the temporality here given voice and that which we’ve already seen should suffice to dismiss such temptations.

strange binary it is, when, as Auerbach astutely notes, the most remarkable quality of Alcofribas's journey is how very *unremarkable* it is. Certain inversions are in effect—getting paid for sleeping, for example—but this is hardly a world dominated by the fantastic monsters that the interior of a giant's body might seem to promise. As we have seen, one of the effects of the incessant interchange between the interior and the exterior is to erase that very differentiation. The schema that underlies our present example brings something essential about this mechanism to the fore. We're dealing with three nested levels here: the external world, the world inside Pantagruel, and, between these two, Pantagruel himself—the interface (to anticipate our next author) between internal and external. The world-creating dynamic passes back and forth between inner and outer realms, always along the transit of the Pantagruelian body, erasing the distinctions between this binary and essentially creating a single fluid world on the surface of the giant's flesh. Properly speaking, there is neither an internal nor an external world in question, only two poles between which a world is established—*between*, which is to say that this world *is* Pantagruel himself. And so the inner world has cities and mountains, indeed, seems by all means to be a mirror of France, and the outer world meanwhile takes on flesh: “*visiblement furent veues de terre sortir grosses gouttes d’eau, comme quan quelque personne sue copieusement*” (Rabelais 1962, 230). The temporality that the inner-outer dynamic creates is, as we have seen, one in which the first is last and the last is first, in which the beginning is brought into the end and the end into the beginning. Time therefore is not a thing of progression, but a continuous interchange between two seemingly dialectical poles, an interchange that in its fluid, endless circuit effaces, in due course, all distinction between those two poles. And so the setting for Pantagruel's birth antecedes the very birth for which it is set. He is born before he is born. His presence is the necessary predicate for setting the scene for his birth, and so the earth

takes on the Pantagruelian body, the thirst-demon's body, at once dry and brimming sweat. Bakhtin observes that, "the grotesque body is cosmic and universal... It can fill the entire universe" (Bakhtin 1981, 318). It is that very universe.

Which brings us to the most striking and disorienting element of the chapter, one we've passed over thus far, but which is in play from the very beginning of the scene, as Pantagruel unfurls his tongue over the army: "*Ce pendent, je, qui vous fais ces tant veritables contes, m'estois caché dessoubz une feuille de bardane...*" (Rabelais 1962, 378). The use of the first person pronoun is something of a shock, and the adjectival clause that follows indicates a narrative awareness of this fact—as if to remind the reader, "Yes, I who *tell* you these stories, I who am also *in* these stories." For what kind of narrator is our *Abstracteur de Quinte Essence*, after all? In narratological terms, Alcofribas is explicitly an intradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator—he's in the story he tells but it's not his story. Furthermore, the extent to which he is actually *in* the story is limited and the better part of the time he functions as a third person narrator, all the more so in that, in most regards, he is, in addition, an omniscient narrator. That god's-eye-view that would seem to belie his intradiegetic status is the very reason his entry into the action is jarring here, fifteen chapters after he last stepped on the scene. In any case, he is the narrative voice and the narrative voice as a rule is the voice of widest berth, the one that holds all the others in, and all the more so in a voice as encyclopedic, as multi-registered as Alcofribas's—it holds *everything*, it would seem, within its bounds. It is not merely as a character, but first and foremost as narrator that he enters the giant's mouth. This self-reflexive gesture occurs again when Alcofribas's author-function is added to the emphasis on him as a narrator: "*j'en ay composé un grand livre intitulé l'Histoire des Gorgias*" (Rabelais 1962, 381). And let's now recall that the name of our narrator is an anagram for Francois Rabelais himself.

All these qualities are explicitly invoked and all of them point to Alcofribas as marking the absolute outer limit of the textual world.¹⁶

So what does it mean that Pantagruel swallows Alcofribas? That the narrative voice is swallowed by a character that it spoke into life? That the text is taken into the giant's body? The outer limit of the text is, in effect, brought within itself, drawn into the gullet, and swallowed down to its own innermost center—something like the Ouroboros eating its own tail from the inside out. It's as if the polyvocal voice—already marked by a certain density, attributable, among other things, to its incessant self-reflexivity, that inward turn that has it fold over itself—as if the voice that seemed to be the very fabric of the Pantagruelian world were concentrated down into a single member that composed that composite body and then that very same move repeated all over again. Cave draws our attention to a crucial aspect of Rabelais's prose that will help us illuminate the meaning of this movement:

If writing mimes the body in order that its detours, congenital irregularities, improprieties, figures, and semantic indeterminacies will appear as the inscription of an *anima* (*natura, ingenium, vis mentis, afflatus*), it necessarily follows that the textual body will display with unrestrained evidence the topologies and tropologies of writing. The discourse of such an incorporated text might be characterized as a kind of perpetual prosopopeia: a figure of speech presenting a speaking figure. (Cave 1979, 150-1)

Much of this insight depends on earlier developments in Cave's extended argument, but what we need to grasp onto for the purpose at hand is the conjunction between a self-reflexive textuality and a linguistic mimesis of the body. The speaking figure in whom the pretense toward linguistic materiality is incorporated is Alcofribas himself; as the largest voice, he is the textual body, in this sense; he is the incorporation of the text. But as such, the fact that he is swallowed by Pantagruel, taken inside another body, signals the compounding of this movement. The text is incorporated twice over. If Pantagruel is the cosmic giant, if he is the very world that

¹⁶ It's perhaps somewhat anachronistic but nevertheless worth remarking the triumph of the Rabelaisian imagination in having brought the seemingly inevitably *insubstantial* metafictional move quite literally into the body.

Alcofribas's *parole* called into being, here we see *la parole* swallow the speaker. Schematically, it's a situation not dissimilar to that of the temporal paradox of Pantagruel's birth. In both, we see the inner-outer dynamic at its most recursive.

Alcofribas's journey into Pantagruel's mouth thus represents the novel's most ontologically dense image. Auerbach's judgment that "the passage... is a comparatively simple one" (Auerbach 2003, 271) is plainly off the mark¹⁷; it is, on the contrary, the most concentrated and forceful demonstration in the whole work of the engine of world-creation. For the mouth, as we've seen, is the world-creating center, and what's taken into it here is the very figure of the work that figured *it* as its world-creating center. This state of affairs in which the text folds over upon itself, in which every word reverberates as the echo of itself, in which the layers of meaning are stacked over against each other in endless self-replication, in which the narrative world buckles over of its own gravity and creates a self-contained universe—all these factors in combination produce an *ontological density* rarely to be found in a fictional world, and this at the very moment that the new world theme is posed explicitly; by extension, we are given a glimpse of the depth, complexity and richness of the world-creating endeavor that has been transpiring from page one on. On the interpretive level we can see the consequence of all this. On the level of the narrative progression, the text proceeds by means of the inner-outer dynamic; on the level of the story itself, we see the creation of a world by means of the human-setting interchange; on the interpretive level, the ontological density that is here made apparent yields a text that is a meaning generating machine,¹⁸ a text composed of such a rich complex of themes and imagery as to open itself to an abundance of interpretive possibility.¹⁹

¹⁷ Not to mention incongruous, since he does, after all, single the passage out as the starting point of his analysis.

¹⁸ I'm by no means waxing Deleuzian here on purpose; the terms just seems to best fit the phenomenon in question.

¹⁹ Hence, a text wherein Bakhtin's as well as Duval's interpretations are equally possible and wholly coherent.

There is one more element we must retrieve off the thematic level before we can get to the full import of this episode. Here, Alcofribas, upon his return to the surface world, is confronted by Pantagruel:

Quand il me apperçut, il me demanda :
« *D'ont viens tu, Alcofrybas ?* »
Je luy reponds :
« *De vostre gorge, Monsieur.*
— *Et depuis quand y es tu, dist il ?*
— *Depuis, (dis je), que vous alliez contre Les Almyrodes.*
— *Il y a, (dist il), plus de six moys. Et de quoy vivois tu ? Que beuvoys tu ?* »
Je reponds :
« *Seigneur, de mesmes vous, et des plus frians morceaulx qui passoient par vostre gorge j'en prenois le barraige.*
— *Voire mais, (dist il), où chioys tu ?*
— *En vostre gorge, Monsieur, dis je.*
— *Ha, ha, tu es gentil compaignon, (dist il).* (Rabelais 1962, 381)

Auerbach points to the heroic goodwill and humor evidenced in the last line, and it's this very statement that concerns us too, if we will arrive at our version of that spirit not quite so directly, taking a detour through the word. Etymologically, of course, “*compaignon*” relates directly to the eucharist; *un compaignon*, is one with whom we break bread. The sense was very much at the forefront in Rabelais's time and I propose that this meaning is forcefully being called out. Alcofribas, after all, in partaking in all that Pantagruel consumes, is more than just breaking, but in the most intimate sense, *sharing* bread with the giant.²⁰ The spiritual function of eating is always in play in Rabelais, and here it is brought forth in a manner in line with Miri Rubin's study of the Corpus Christi feast:

In the eucharist there was a powerful assimilation of eating, the most common of human functions into the economy of the supernatural. The offer of oneness with God through physical assimilation was combined with the promise of all that was beneficial in this life and the next, and gave the eucharist enormous potential appeal. The promise of being one with God in a bodily sense could hardly be surpassed. (Rubin 1991, 26)

²⁰ We might even want to assume that, at some point during these six months, our Christian hero takes communion, and our narrator too, right out his mouth—but I hardly need to insist on this to draw out the meaning that I'm aiming for.

The Christly aspect of Pantagruel is never closer than it is here, where physical assimilation and the sharing of bread are the central topoi. Duval notes the parallel between the image with which the chapter begins of Pantagruel extending his tongue over the army “*comme une geline faict ses pulletz*” and Christ’s comparison of himself to a hen covering her chicks with her wing (Duval 1991, 130). Moreover, Duval continues, this episode within the giant’s body summons echoes of Paul in Corinthians:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? ...For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 6.15, 12.12-13 and 277)

All of which stands behind the ideas of transubstantiation and the eucharist. Inside Gorgias, Alcofribas has literally become a member of the body of Pantagruel. Duval insists that, “it is difficult to imagine that a sixteenth-century reader would not have associated these unexpected descriptions [ie, of the world in Pantagruel’s mouth] with... the *corpus Ecclesiae mysticum*,” (Duval 1991, 129). As the cosmic giant, Pantagruel is also the Corpus Christi. The deepest ontological level of Rabelais’s thought—which is precisely what we stand before—could hardly be without a strong Christian element. But moving beyond Duval, we can see that that element here is, from one angle at least, somewhat, well, *eccentric*. But nevertheless pertinent and topical; Rubin brings us before one of the great controversies of years past surrounding the eucharist:

The body of Christ alone was present in every bit of what still appeared as bread and wine, no ordinary food, since the accidents were not there to nourish the body of Christ, only to save. The question of digestion was related to the function of eating through which the eucharist was consumed; the degradations of eating, breaking, digestion, and excretion could not be allowed to work on the holy substance, not even in appearance, and this question was often raised in criticism of the eucharist. In Roland Bandinelli’s section ‘De sacramento altaris’, a tale was told of a person who attempted to live on nothing but the host. The author explains that such a person was, in fact, consuming his

own body from inside, digesting himself, and after fourteen days, died. So it was not the eucharist which was being digested and excreted by him. (Rubin 1991, 37)

Rabelais, needless to say, could stomach a far less ethereal concept of deity. Indeed, as much as they are *compaignons* in that Alcofribas eats what Pantagruel has already eaten, such is also the case in that Pantagruel eats what Alcofribas has already eaten, digested and excreted.²¹ The convergence of shit and the eucharist is hardly beyond the bounds of Rabelais's imagination; in point of fact, he explicitly brings us at least halfway there in Gargantua's explanation for why monks are secluded from the world: "*La raison peremptoire est parce qu'ilz mangent la merde du monde, c'est à dire les pechez, et comme machemerdes l'on rejecte en leurs retraits,*" (Rabelais 1962, 151). Rabelais's thoughts on monks are always ambivalent, but surely we might say that Christ too, in taking on the sins of the world, as much as ate them; and would not a *machemerde*, after all, stand as a figure of great humility? The eucharist that Pantagruel takes from Alcofribas then is indeed, as Auerbach would have it, an emblem of his tremendous magnanimity in that he not only eats Alcofribas's shit, but additionally his sins.

We've already covered the necessary material to push this even farther, for there is yet another aspect of this cheerful coprophagia that we must consider. As we've seen, the inner-outer dynamic is figured on many levels, and in terms of the humanist worldview, the equivalent of excretion, the vehicle out of the inner world and into the outer world, is *la parolle*—the theme that is the torque that drives the self-reflexive turn of the book, nowhere more evidently than here. Cave characterizes Rabelais's sense of language in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* by "the sense of gratuitousness" and "an exhilarating freedom from constraint" (Cave 1979, 193)—which is to say language that operates in terms of the inner-outer dynamic as a cornucopian overflow of the inner into the outer world. This has everything to do with the world-creating ambitions of the

²¹ Again, Bakhtin's examination of the ideas behind the *tripes* puts all this into close conjunction even outside of the situation we are presently examining.

text, both in the texture of the writing and in the role *la parole* plays on the diegetic level, where speech becomes a primary temporal-spatial creative force. Now, Alcofribas's part as speaker of *la parole* is emphasized in this episode, and thereby role as primary world-creator, his function as the widest berth of the text; and indeed, the output of his journey into Pantagruel's mouth—into, that is to say, the other image of the world-creating center, the other source of *la parole*, the gullet of the cosmic body that is the text—is whatever quantity of excrement he leaves behind and the book his experience allows him to write, *L'Histoire des Gorgias*.

Here in the center of this meaning generating machine, countless thematic vectors are sent out in every direction, making this episode—which, in its very setting, it behooves us now to note, is also the most explicit image of the inner-outer dynamic anywhere in the novel—the fit culmination to *Pantagruel*. All the novel's energies are drawn back into the giant's gullet. But with our setting and these considerations in mind, another question arises: How is it that in six months in Gorgias, in six months of residence in the giant's mouth, Alcofribas never heard Pantagruel speak? What would it have been to have heard those words, that joyous laugh rumbling out of the depths?

The answer is found in the fact that the setting has become the human; the poles of the inner-outer dynamic have fully collapsed. The confusion of the interior and exterior worlds is now so complete that Alcofribas and Pantagruel partake of the same body and word; they become one flowing thing, the current of a polyvocal narrative, a meaning generating machine. And as the cosmic principle in Rabelais's world, *la parole*, is always, literally, incorporated in the Corpus Pantagruelian, it's all along been the silent rumble of Pantagruel's voice heard from the inside—heard always and ever from the inside, since we're always inside the cosmic body—the reverberations that make the very fabric of the cosmos, always passing in and out of itself.

Then given the equation between *la parole* and the bodily vehicle out the inner world, we can finally conclude: *donc, Pantagruel chioit en sa propre gorge.*

3. There Once was a Kid from Kenosha
Who Drank of the V-2's Ambrosia
It Filled up his Head
Till into Others he Fled
And You Think he's now Dead, now Don'tcha

With World War II as the background, *Gravity's Rainbow (GR)* opens on a scene in which the Picrocholian madness of conquest has brought humankind to that long-awaited temporal endpoint. Nation states, alliances, *Lebensraum*, the drawing of Cold War lines—all this concerns the horizontal spatial mode. Of course, however present that mode may be, it is at the same time explicitly undermined: “It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War” (Pynchon 1995, 105). These real movements transpire in some obscure behind-the-scenes realm; it's the space of paranoia and conspiracy, and a good deal of the themes of the novel unfurl in this darkness, in this endlessly complex matrical space, this labyrinthine space, this network drawn by a hidden logic: “tapping instead out of that global stratum, most deeply laid, from which all the appearances of corporate ownership really spring” (Pynchon 1995, 243). In this aspect, Pynchon's universe partakes in the postmodern conceptualization of space that Fredric Jameson brings to our attention: “the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 1991, 44). And so in *GR*, the corporate conjunctions, snarled lines of power, and conspiratorial plotting weave a spatial structure that underlies and undermines the Good War that we were all sold. Postmodern space receives a concentrated and definitive treatment from Pynchon, but this is not the most fundamental spatial mode of the novel, for Jameson's cold circuitous network is foreign and hostile to the human being trapped in it:

...this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its

immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. (Pynchon 1995, 44)

This is the case in *GR* only inasmuch as conspiratorial space is always a threat, a suspicion, something that ever menaces the narrative from behind the scenes, whispering that *it* is the true structure of events; but as such, it is always obscure, always at a distance, ultimately but the shadow of the true spatial-temporal structure, the one that upholds the narrative as a whole, and if this vision of the world shares something of the shape of postmodern hyperspace, contrary to the hostility that characterizes Jameson's vision, in *GR* space and time pass through the human being and takes their shape and duration by the turn and tenor of that body and mind; in this, the two could not be any more different. Or so I will argue. Coming off our insights into Rabelais, I will demonstrate how the narrative movement of *GR* articulates a vision space and time that looks, from one angle at least, strikingly similar to that established by the inner-outer dynamic in *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, how it too creates its world through an interchange between human beings and their setting, and how the text on several levels thematizes this movement in such a manner as to produce an analogous ontological density.

As in Rabelais, the spatial-temporal ground of the narrative is set at the very beginning. In place of Alcofribas's prologue, we have the two opening episodes centered around Pirate Prentice to serve as our *mise en abîme*; here we find articulated, at the thematic level, the shape of the world-creating narrative movement that will carry us through to the end and the first in a series of figures that will help us to decipher the precise import of this fundamental structure for the meaning of the novel as a whole. Spatial and temporal bearings are in question from the very beginning: "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into," (Pynchon 1995, 3). The evacuation of London's anonymous crowd spirals down into the underground, the channels of the city body, through narrow, tightening space—*inward*:

[...] ²²with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero [...] cornering tighter and tighter until all at once, much too soon, they are under the final arch: brakes grab and spring terribly. It is a judgment from which there is no appeal. (Pynchon 1995, 3-4)

As with the *boites de Silenes*, the movement is toward some innermost realm, but here, the inner treasure is apocalypse and our arrival is to be at a temporal zero. The interiority of the passage is heightened as we come to realize that it is all a dream, that the push into the depths of the earth has been transpiring inside Pirate Prentice the whole time. The human-setting dynamic is just so immediately established. Time and space are still in question as we move into the waking world and Pirate reflects on the rocket and its spatial relation to the curve of the earth (Pynchon 1995, 6), and the inversion of approach and impact effected by the breaking of the sound barrier (Pynchon 1995, 7). All this warping of time and space seems to be within the postmodern mode, but when these thoughts intermingle with the warmth and odors of Pirate's famous banana breakfasts, something of a very different tenor is given voice:

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 the winter sunlight, taking over not so much through any brute pungency or volume as by the high intricacy to the weaving of its molecules, sharing 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. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 10)

It's an overture to the thematic movement in question, and the whole ethos of the novel is contained in this, not to mention a fair number of the dominant themes—molecular chemistry, life's struggle with death, the past as it will bear down upon and bolster up Slothrop. This expression of beleaguered hope, the materiality of the banana communion in which Pirate's unit partakes, the way this simple meal unites them under the imminent threat of death from the

²² Given Pynchon's penchant for ellipses, I bracket mine to distinguish them.

skies—we will come to see all this tied to the inner-outer dynamic and the creation of space and time. The phallic banana is “a spell, against falling objects,” that like all good charms claims its power by its intimate resemblance to that against which it protects: the phallic falling object, the rocket. A certain vision of space grounds this hope already: “the high intricacy to the weaving of its molecules,” the labyrinthine “living genetic chains.” This is the thematization of the essential spatial-temporal structure of the novel, the fundamental ontological ground that below all the terror and paranoia offers a promise that by this “assertion-through-structure” humanity will prevail despite it all; it’s an inner molecular space, a material space, brought to form by the human being in its setting, and persisting through time. This structure is the very one that will weave the narrative into being. We will turn to this shortly, but first note the Rabelaisian echoes of banana-time: “Pirate takes up a last dipper of mead, feels it go valving down his throat as if it’s time, time in its summer tranquility, he swallows,” (Pynchon 1995, 11). Shortly after this mystical slug, the novel takes the first of its temporal detours.

The bananas in their unifying aspect, in their assertion-through-structure, figure Pirate’s function in the novel, which itself is to figure the nature of the narrative movement as a whole, and ultimately to *prefigure* Slothrop’s final role, which is to embody the meaning of this narrative movement. Already, the intricacy of this text is apparent, but in the simplest terms, what’s at stake right now is the way in which the story simultaneously progresses through and creates narrative space and time—the most striking quality, after all, of this striking novel. Pirate’s “strange talent for—well, for getting inside the fantasies of others” (Pynchon 1995, 12), although appropriated by the Firm, although put to the sinister needs of the enterprise behind the war, nevertheless is predicated on a structure of space and time that draws a bond of common thought, flesh, and humanity between the characters, a bond that, in its assertion-through-

structure, might just be enough to build a hospitable world out of the wreck of the war. What is involved here is an inner-outer dynamic by which space and time are produced, a mechanism whereby a world comes into being in the interchange between human beings and their setting, a world that they all participate in as members of a single unified body—an ontology that *GR* shares with Rabelais.

Pirate's talent turns on his ability to navigate this ontological network. This involves an ability to descend into his self—much like the descent into London with which the novel opens—into an innermost region and to pass, as though through a portal, into the innermost region of another, and finally to emerge out into a world of space and time born of this foreign interiority. This is the very same path that the narrative progression will pursue, weaving a world that links person to person in the most intimate way. Of course, in the case of Pirate, this would seem to be a purely psychic ability, turning on an inwardness utterly foreign to Rabelais, but we wouldn't be here if there weren't resolutely *physical* ground on which these two works meet, and Pirate's ability is no bloodless mysticism. It's related to the body by the very language that introduces it to us: "What better way to cup and bleed them of excess anxiety [...] to get their erections for them [...]" (Pynchon 1995, 12). Most notable in this regard, of course, is the first full-fledged fantasy we descend into with our poor surrogate dreamer, that first definitive mark that, yes, we are once and for all in the hands of Thomas Pynchon: "*It was a giant Adenoid,*" (Pynchon 1995, 14). And where, outside of Rabelais, could Bakhtin find a more conspicuous image of the grotesque than in this mass of lymphoid tissue:

[...] a hideous green pseudopod crawls toward the cordon of troops and suddenly *sshhlop!* Wipes out an entire observation post with a deluge of some disgusting orange mucus in which the unfortunate men are *digested*—not screaming but actually laughing, *enjoying* themselves. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 15)

This ambivalent, open body is inseparably tied to the open mind; Pirate's passage through the depth of his being into another person and another time and space involves traversing a liminal region where mind and body, mind and mind, body and body all connect. If the gullet is the center of the Rabelaisian human being, the center in *GR* is the nexus where mind and body connect²³, where any given mind and body might pass into another—where one might touch, if only for a fleeting moment, another person. Pirate navigates the network that opens up from this central station, tracing the same circuitous path as the narrative to come, the narrative that will be driven through the detours of dozens of human beings, into disparate nodes of space and time, bringing a world into existence by means of this inner-outer dynamic and the interchange between human beings and their setting. Only Slothrop will be as at home in these interior junctions that spill out into the spatial-temporal worlds of his fellow beings, although he will never be quite conscious of that fact. “The mark of Youthful Folly” (Pynchon 1995, 13) that characterizes Pirate's younger self and the appropriation of his ability by the Firm anticipate Slothrop, who too will play the fool and will ultimately disintegrate entirely under the outside forces that are brought to bear upon him, to be scattered about the Zone, and ultimately incorporated into the men and women who compose the Counterforce.

But before we arrive at our protean hero, we must examine the narrative movement for which these first two episodes serve as a *mise en abîme*—the structure that will, despite it all, assert the fundamental promise that grounds the novel. It is everywhere present in the text, but our introduction to Katje is the episode in Part 1 that not only most clearly reveals the process in all its complexity but additionally enunciates the structure on the thematic level, and finally

²³ To call this the pineal gland—inasmuch as it serves as an important neuropharmacological center for DXM and, as Bataille's “pineal-eye,” figures a blind-spot in Western rationality, an organ of excess and delirium—to go fully Cartesian here, in that sense at least (and possibly *only* in that sense), probably wouldn't be entirely unappealing to Pynchon actually.

comes to stand in a synecdochical relationship to the narrative movement as a whole. And so we find her first in London, having lately defected to the Allies, but by the peculiar turn of the inner-outer dynamic, she will serve nevertheless as our portal into the other war polarity, our window into the war-torn Continent. The scene opens framed by falling rockets and a camera:

Widest lens-opening this afternoon, extra tungsten light laid on, this rainiest day in recent memory, rocket explosions far away to south and east now and then visiting the maisonette, rattling not the streaming windows but only the doors, in slow three- and fourfold shudderings, like poor spirits, desperate for the company, asking to be let in, only a moment, a touch . . . (Pynchon 1995, 92)

The ambivalence that underlies the novel's world-creating concern is nowhere more apparent than in the fact that the rocket is, ultimately, as much a creative force as a destroying force. Every A-4 strike represents an opportunity for the text to articulate spatial and temporal bearings²⁴; without fail, we find the world coalescing around these explosions, and the rhythm of creation—the “three- and fourfold shudderings” that set the cinematic frame rate—is simultaneously that of destruction. In this explicit setting of the spatial-temporal scene, although we are plainly in the exterior world, we find already the tension that will finally buckle and bring the narrative inside by means of the inner-outer dynamic: the rocket bursts rattling the room from outside and the spirits desiring entry, to be let in, to be touched—the spirits who, we will see, are perhaps the very men and women who compose this world, asking to be let in on each other. For Pirate Prentice's power is not his alone; he's just the one most conscious of it.

We do not remain in the White Visitation long. The ground for the first of the many spatial-temporal segues that characterize the episode is laid early on, as Katje passes before the camera's eye:

²⁴ Examples are legion, but to back up my statement: “But a rocket has suddenly struck. A terrific blast quite close beyond the village: the entire fabric of the air, the time is changed,” (Pynchon 1995, 59); “And Slothrop is yawning ‘What time is it?’ and Darlene is swimming up from sleep. When, with no warning, the room is full of noon, blinding white [...] rattling the building to its poor bones, beating in the windowshade,” (Pynchon 1995, 120). And then, of course, there's Slothrop's map of sexual conquests, which is also the map of V-2 strikes.

But she happens to've glanced in just at the instant Osbie opened the echoing oven. The camera records no change in her face, but why does she stand now so immobile at the door? as if the frame were to be stopped and prolonged into just such a lengthwise moment of gold fresh and tarnished [...] hand resting against the wall [...] a pensive touch. . . . Outside the long rain in silicon and freezing descent smacks, desolate slowly corrosive against the medieval windows, curtaining like smoke the river's far shore. This city, in all its bomb-pierced miles: this inexhaustibly knotted victim (Pynchon 1995, 93)

It's a prolongation of time described in spatial terms ("lengthwise"), and although we have not yet had a glimpse of Katje's thoughts, although we are still fully in the exterior realm, it is already her inner presence that is molding the setting into this frozen world; it's her reaction to the sudden sight of the oven that is the cause for the shift. And so as the narrative gears up for that full inward turn, all the tension of the passage runs along the boundary between the inner and outer—as Katje reaches out, as the rain corrodes its way slowly in, as the landscape stretches out to the river and the city is sketched, as inner and outer press against each other, until she is finally conflated with the city in common victimhood and the glass boundary between them is erased.

Time suffers another freeze shortly thereafter, as Pynchon gives us the first of his many long-duration exposures of Katje: "She has posed before the mirrors too often today, knows her hair and make-up are perfect, admires the frock that they have brought her from Harvey Nicholls, a sheer crepe that flows in from padded shoulders down to a deep point between her breasts [...]" (Pynchon 1995, 94). She's physically put together as the passage continues, a literally mimetic construction before a mirror, and all the while, "the translucent guardian of a rainfall shaken through all day by rocket blasts near and far, downward, dark and ruinous behind her the ground which, for the frames' passage, defines her" (Pynchon 1995, 94). The rocket fall still sets the background (four directional terms are here applied), aligning the exterior, even as the narrative meticulously constructs the body that will soon serve as the threshold between the inner and outer worlds. Once everything is thus aligned, the move is finally made:

[...] inside herself, enclosed in the *soigné* surface of dear fabric and dead cells, she is corruption and ashes, she belongs in a way none of them can guess cruelly to the Oven. . . . to *Der Kinderofen* . . . remembering now his teeth, long, terrible, veined with bright brown rot as he speaks these words, the yellow teeth of Captain Blicero, the network of stained cracks, and back in his nightbreath, in the dark oven of himself, always the coiled whispers of decay. (Pynchon 1995, 94)

The transition is swift and fluid: from the *soigné* surface, through the flesh and into Katje's dead core, through the oven, and out again, into the witch's house at *Schußstelle 3*, grazing past Blicero's teeth, glimpsing already his own dark interior. The pace is such, in fact, that it takes the reader some time to realize that this is not a memory that we are glimpsing midst the background of the present, not a mere look into Katje's thoughts while in the White Visitation, but that we have actually moved into Katje, passed through her innermost self, and passed into another time and space.²⁵ The Oven here is the figure for that inner nexus where mind and body meet and through which time and space transform. Although we've moved toward Blicero, the passages that follow seem to maintain Katje's point of view for the most part in this new spatial-temporal mode, and yet even from this perspective, the general fluidity of character that the passage has opened up brings whispers of Weissmann's thoughts to us: "The humiliation would be good for the boy each morning at quarters" (Pynchon 1995, 95). And the full movement into Blicero comes shortly, and again via the oven:

It adds an overtone to the game, which changes the timbre slightly. It is she who, at some indefinite future moment, must push the Witch into the Oven intended for Gottfried. So the Captain must allow for the real chance she's a British spy... (Pynchon 1995, 96)

These are not simple coincidences between the image of the Oven and the segue; the further movements into Blicero's past, into the African Südwest, all pass through the Oven as well; and

²⁵ For this very reason, it is difficult to convey the effect of these transitions through select quotations. Indeed, although the passage above does capture the moment of change, it's the large-scale momentum and the wake it kicks up behind it that truly epitomizes the technique in question, and to experience this, one must sample pages at a time.

so will our move into Gottfried. With evident deliberation, the Oven is established as the portal through which all these transitions pass.

Isolating the uniqueness of this method of narrative progression is essential for my argument. For all its cinematic aspirations, the novelistic eye in *GR* doesn't move like a camera across a set, doesn't advance the way readers of prose have come to expect.²⁶ The narrative's most characteristic changes of scene come neither by means of a progressive traversal of space and time nor by some sort of paratactic scenic syntax or filmic cut; what distinguishes Pynchon's narrative technique is the way in which he draws the narrative focus into a character, pulls it to that innermost realm, and then draws it either into that same innermost realm of another character or outside again, into the external world, but in another space and time. Moreover, this inward-directed segue is not an analepsis, not a flashback, not a mere memory. For, in the first place, these traditional techniques are never more than one step removed from the main diegetic action—we dip down into them and rise back to the surface—whereas here, we shall pass through dozens of segues into dozens of different spatial-temporal scenes. Further, these techniques are limited to one point of view, while here, the very essence of the movement involves the passage from one character into the next. These differences, however, turn on the most fundamental distinction: these traditional modes of internal segue involve the invocation of a representation inside the character's consciousness; the narrative moves into a memory and examines it as a memory. In *GR*, on the other hand, these characteristic scenic shifts have

²⁶ To set the younger medium as the archetype for the older is admittedly anachronistic, but nevertheless best conveys what typifies the way the novel as a genre segues from scene to scene, place to place, time to time, and character to character. Whichever of the two serves as the model for the other, the fact that the cinematic camera is necessarily limited to segues that pass across surfaces—a horizontal scheme—brings to the fore the fact that, though constrained by no such necessary limitation, novelistic prose nonetheless generally walks this same path. Memory being perhaps an exception we will deal with shortly.

nothing to do with such representations. Heidegger brings the nature of just such a sense of temporality and spatiality to light:

We do not represent distant things merely in our mind—as the textbooks have it—so that only mental representations of distant things run through our minds and heads as substitutes for the things. If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg, this thinking toward that locale is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the essence of our thinking *of* that bridge that *in itself* thinking *persists through* [durchsteht] the distance to that locale. From this spot right here, we are there at the bridge—we are by no means at some representational content in our consciousness. (Heidegger 1977, 358)

Substitute “narrating” for “thinking” and you could hardly have a better articulation of what’s at work in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The novel’s movement is characterized by such segues, coming often enough in dizzying succession, moving us through a rhizomatic structure of space and time at an astonishing space, provoking that *where-the-hell-am-I-now* response from the reader. This movement, whereby the narrative telescopes through the self, into other spaces, times, and, most strikingly, other selves, generates the novel’s ontological ground. Space and time are twisted into new shapes along these traverses and the narrative passes through the interstices of the place and moment to weave its own structural fabric. In the particular intensity this movement exhibits here, and the thematization it receives through the image of the Oven, this, the longest episode of Part 1, is a deep gaze into the workings of this fictional world.

Beyond its ubiquity and the respect it commands in terms of sheer writerly innovation and technique, the importance of this narrative progression and the way it conceptualizes space and time is nowhere more apparent than in the thematic weight the Oven brings to the table as a figure for the focal point of this movement. The Oven, of course, stands at the center of the sadomasochistic play of Hansel and Grettel, and in that sense, aligned with its role as the dominant image of entryway into the inner-outer dynamic here and throughout the episode, it’s also part of a *mise en abîme*, with the *Märchen* serving as a textual frame. If the Hansel and

Grettel is a substitute for the novel as a whole—and what story within a story isn't?—the Oven transfers over into the center position of the narrative, of the novel in its entirety—that goal of all “Holy-Center-Approaching” (Pynchon 1995, 508). Which couldn't fit the thematic tendency in question more nicely, for it is an image of death and transformation—of the 00000 itself, with Gottfried enclosed and the Oven door shut upon him. All these thematic values are stacked on top of the Oven's function in the inner-outer dynamic of the narrative progression. Already the ontology in question takes on substance.

Through the Oven then we pass, like Pirate Prentice through these bodily windows to other selves, and the narrative twists new spatial-temporal worlds into being, until the episode's deepest push takes us upstream Katje's blood inheritance to Mauritius and Frans Van der Groov, and the movement is brought to a climatic halt before the sheer density of loaded images, so characteristic of *GR* as whole, contained in Frans's showdown with the dodo egg:

It was then, if ever, he might have seen how the weapon made an axis potent as Earth's own between himself and this victim, still one, inside the egg, with the ancestral chain, not to be broken out for more than its blink of world's light. There they were, the silent egg and the crazy Dutchman, and the hookgun that linked them forever, framed, brilliantly motionless as any Vermeer. Only the sun moved: from zenith down at last behind the snaggleteeth of mountains to the Indian ocean, to tarry night. (Pynchon 1995, 109)

The conscious construction of space and time is indisputably the engine behind the passage.²⁷

The egg is the first image that engages a notion of temporality: the future, that is to say, the *to be*—although, as that future is nothing if not in doubt right now, one might even suggest the time of the subjunctive. Next we move to an articulation of the continuous past in the ancestral chain, and then—what it continues right up to perhaps—the future negative: “not to be broken out for more than its blink of the world's light,” ephemeral enough to be the past already. But fixed:

²⁷ Although, the wild west imagery, the dusty Main Street showdown here as the sun hits the mountains, is a noteworthy work of genre subversion and a fine touch in and of itself.

“forever, frozen, framed, brilliantly motionless as any Vermeer.” Indeed eternal. The sunset “tarrying night” is curious too: is “tarry” being used as a transitive verb? is it the night that is being made to tarry? or is the sun tarrying and thereby impeding night? Is there any difference? All these temporal vectors push outward from this—ultimately static—image.

This series of temporalities—a fairly complete representation of the temporal possibilities, all in all—is tied to the construction of a spatial mandala. We begin with an axis (“potent as Earth’s own”), a world axis drawn between two dichotomous points, and framed (“as any Vermeer”), enclosed, a limit drawn around it. Finally, the mandala is laid over the world, from the mountains to the sea, ordering the land to its sacred geometry. And yet no construction so ordered, so safely static can hold together long in this text. The seed of dissolution was planted with the world tree, for here along the very axis of the mandala, the line drawn between death as the hookgun and the beleaguered birth contained within the egg, this bipolarity whose charge calls the figure into being, collapses upon itself before its barely sparked to life—for what precisely does “still one” refer to? Although the instinct might be to apply this to the egg—an undivided zygote?—the syntax also allows, and perhaps even, in light of the axis as a bond, *suggests* that we ought to read this as a preserved evolutionary unity between Frans and the egg—between death and life—still linked somewhere on the “ancestral chain.” As much as to confirm such a reading, we have the next segue through the inner-outer dynamic, and a space, time and person very much in the other direction of the ancestral chain:

. . . he can believe only in the one steel reality of the firearm he carries. “He knew that a snaphaan would weigh less, its cock, flint, and steel give him surer ignition—but he felt a nostalgia about the haakbus . . . he didn’t mind the extra weight, it was *his* crotchet. . . .”

Pirate and Osbie Feel are leaning on their roof-edge [...] (Pynchon 1995, 111)

Frans’s thoughts are an echo of Pirate’s earlier in the chapter, and indeed, as the quote is in the third-person, the words themselves would have to be Pirate’s; we’ll shortly discover that Frans is

haunting him. As for the segue, yes, the phallic aspect is, as always, overdetermined, but there's a narrative shift here away from the Oven—whose place in the genital polarity ought to be clear—to the haakbus as the ontological portal, and a continuation of our axis, a doubling over, and an extension of our link between egg and mad Dutchman to pull Pirate into the equation. But we were pursuing this question of the collapse of the mandala sustained on the axis between Frans and the egg, and our suspicion is as much as confirmed—this is, after all, the end of the inner-outer dynamic—and the mandala is wiped away like so many grains of sand.

By means of this construction of space and time via the inner-outer dynamic, through the dizzying passage of the narrative, even amid the general angst and terror of an episode as dark as this, an ontology is articulated whereby, in the process of a world coming to being in the interchange between human beings and their setting, these men and women are linked together in the innermost recesses of their being. It's the hopeful note that the overture of the two Pirate episodes sounds, and it takes on its full significance in the figure of Tyrone Slothrop—our Pantagruel, if anyone here is. In his wandering across the Zone, in the burden of the past that he carries inside him, in his shifting identities and his liaisons with characters from all the disparate narrative strands, he will come to serve as the very ontological fabric of *GR*'s world. From the opening scene on, the narrative begins moving the pieces into place, but it's only in the first episode of Part 3, marking his arrival in the Zone—the novel's widest berth of spatial transformation, a giant *Märchen* oven—that Slothrop's Pantagruelian micro-macrocosmic function truly comes to the fore. Little time is wasted in spatially and temporally orienting the scene on our traditional planes—the German countryside, “safely past the days of the Eis-Heiligen”—only to turn everything inside out:

Signs will find him here in the Zone, and ancestors will reassert themselves. It's like going to that Darkest Africa to study the natives there, and finding their quaint

superstitions taking you over. In fact, funny thing, Slothrop just the other night ran into an African, the first one he ever met in his life. Their discussion on top of the freight car in the moonlight lasted only a minute or two. (Pynchon 1995, 281)

The narrative is pulled through a disorienting series of temporal convolutions in these four short phrases.²⁸ We begin in the future tense (“will find... will reassert”), move to an indefinite present assertion (“it’s like”), and finish in the past (“just the other night ran”), but the actual temporal position of the narrative in relation to these points, which is to say, where we seem to stand in the progression of events regardless of these tense shifts, is the precise opposite: signs *have* already found him (the red tulip left between his toes: “He has taken it for a sign” (Pynchon 1995, 281)), and the meeting atop the freight car has not happened yet; indeed, the progression of events that will lead us there has only now just begun. The verb tenses invert the actual temporality, and moreover, at the very moment within the larger story arc when Slothrop’s race after his own destiny—his future, that is—has brought him to a place that seems to be a return to the primal past, “that Darkest Africa.” This is at once the Zone, the apocalyptic endland of the West, so similar to a primitive beginning, and also a region that, as Slothrop’s sodium amytal trip of Part 1 suggests, is as much *inside* Slothrop and his obscure racial uncertainties as it is in the past of some external time.²⁹ Indeed, it is the very fact that we are actually moving inside Slothrop here, toward that innermost region, the origin and end he holds within himself, that the temporality of the episode suffers such distortion—it’s the creative work of the inner-outer dynamic. Hence,

²⁸ Signs, of course, are also of essence here; the theme of language, writing and signification plays into the world-creating functions of both works under investigation; as in Rabelais (by light of Terrance Cave’s reading), the self-reflexivity adds to the general ontological density that the text establishes. This is a major characteristic of the shared ground between our two novels, and that it will be given short shrift here is not by any means an indication of its insignificance, but rather of the fact that it is so important that our discussion will not be able to do it even a semblance of justice, and therefore will leave it largely to the side.

²⁹ Also of note is the fact that the encounter on the train is to be with Enzian of the Schwarzkommando, the renegade Herero unit that seems, on some level, to have actually been brought into existence by the Ally propaganda film that played on German’s racial fears—in other words, a case where the representation precedes that which it represents. A curious temporal situation, to say the least.

we find the theme of blackness merging with that of the ancestral Slothrop, as time is restructured, mediated by Slothrop himself:

[...] well, certainly nothing was said then of any Herero beliefs about ancestors. Yet he feels his own, stronger now as borders fall away and the Zone envelops him, his own WASPs in buckled black, who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 281)

The borders that fall away are only secondarily those of nation-states rearranging themselves in the Zone; the political transformation during the interregnum is just the reflection of the work brought about by the narrative play that draws characters into intimate, inter-configuration—ancestors, be they early American Puritans or haakbus-wielding Dutchmen, included. Just as he is beginning to assume the sum shape of this inter-configuration, Slothrop's dissolution is set into motion.

Which is to say his end. Which again, paradoxically enough, is to say that beginnings are here in question. The temporal reversion seen above takes place at the same time as it is slowly dawning on Slothrop, while he pores over the information he received in Zurich, that his quest for the A-4 and the attendant mystery of Imipolex G is in truth a quest for his own origins:

He reads his name without that much surprise. It belongs here, as do the most minor details during *déjà vu*. Instead of any sudden incidence of light (even in the shape of a human being: golden and monitory light), as he stares at these eight ink marks, there passes a disagreeable stomach episode, a dread tangible as vomit beginning to assert itself [...] A gasbag surrounds his head, rubbery, vast, pushing in from all sides, that feeling we know, yes, but . . . He is also getting a hardon, for no immediate reason [...]

Once something was done to him, in a room, while he lay helpless. . . .

His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost here in our raw and clamorous world, another office representing Their white Metropolis far away. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 285)

There's a tremendous richness of thematic material packed into these lines. The temporal dislocation is carried by the notion of *déjà vu*, which is characterized by the very same conjunction and confusion of disparate temporal moments as is in question in the merger of the

beginning and end. In his reckoning with destiny, Slothrop is being brought back to his beginning, when what is to be was set in motion, when the future was fixed for him by Pavlovian machinations with global consequences. Behind the novel's grappling with determinism stands the suspicion that it is merely a scientific version of good old Puritan predestination—something ultimately teleological. The sound reversal of the rocket, the dozen odd passages of *hysteron proteron* (or time-reversal) that Steven Weisenburger cites³⁰, not to mention the involutions and contortions of time we've drawn out already, all turn on the metaphysical conundrum that in any teleological movement, the end must, in setting and deciding the path before it's begun, precede the beginning—a dilemma that itself is compounded, Rabelais-style, that is itself turned on its head in that the inner-outer dynamic that carries the narrative movement strips teleology of all meaning by twisting the forward vector of time into a knotted Möbius strip. For time here is brought into Slothrop; it is a part of him. His childhood as Pavlovian guinea pig, the Puritan burden of his blood, the scars of African colonialism, the entirety of history—it's all written on his body, as much as is the future contained somewhere in that instrument They fastened onto him, Slothrop's divinatory rocket-dowsing rod.³¹ And in a send up of the clockwork universe, we find that this fleshly timepiece doesn't perhaps function with Swiss precision:

[...] though he has never come across any of the stuff among the daytime coordinates of his life, still, down here, back here in the warm dark, among early shapes where the clocks and calendars don't mean too much, he knows what's haunting him now will prove to be the smell of Imipolex G. (Pynchon 1995, 286)

³⁰ For example: "Ghosts of fishermen, glassworkers, fur traders, renegade preachers, hilltop patriarchs and valley politicians go avalanching back from Slothrop here, back to 1630 when Governor Winthrop came over to America on the *Arbella*, flagship of a great Puritan flotilla that year, on which the first Slothrop had been a mess cook or something—there go that *Arbella* and its whole fleet, sailing backward in formation, the wind sucking them east again [...]" (Pynchon 1995, 204)—the passage goes on like this for several more stunning lines. It's perhaps the longest time-reversal; Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* lists dozens of similar passages.

³¹ In addition to the historical weight invested in this final image, we also see the spatial dimension of the Slothropian cosmic body, as it is stretched across the surface of the earth, out the metropolitan center and into the dark, colonial nether-regions. The spatial question will be further elucidated below.

From the outer, daytime world, we descend by these spiraling clauses into the deepest, timeless interior depths of Slothrop's inner self and bottom out at Imipolex G—the indecipherable mark that stands at his origin. It's an explicit enactment of the inner-outer dynamic and the mark of its guise on the diegetic level: the human-setting-world dynamic. The spatial sense is in play too: “down,” “back,” “among these early shapes” all characterize the congested spatiality at that innermost pole of the world-creating pendulum, where this synthetic originary seed is also the apocalyptic moment that everything is pushing toward. For Imipolex G is the outer shell of the central mystery of the novel, that barrier through which Slothrop never does break, behind which he never does find Gottfried inside the rocket that brings the novel crashing down to an end—the phallic rocket³² that contains the living seed that will inseminate the earth, the beginning after the end.

A human container of all space and time, Slothrop is the cosmic body of the novel:

Slothrop, though he doesn't know it yet, is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days. Not paranoia. Just how it is. Temporary alliances, knit and undone. He and Geli reach their arrangement hidden from the occupied streets by remnants of walls, in an old fourposter bed facing a dark pier glass. (Pynchon 1995, 291)

He is both a part of the Zone and the Zone as a whole; he unifies the collective body, and largely through just such “temporary alliances.” Sex is one of the major forces that rework space and time throughout the novel; much as is the case with the rocket, Pynchon's lovers are always configured in space because they always configure that very same space.³³ The totality of sex acts composes a network of carnal nodes denser than the “*leiués de France*” (Rabelais 1962,

³² For all the overdetermination behind the V-2/Slothropian penis equation, for all the ironic equivocation it engenders, it is nevertheless the linchpin of the whole thematic system of the novel.

³³ Again, there are as many examples as there are sex scenes, but this meeting of Roger and Jessica—a relationship that itself is predicated on an endless deferment of an ever-imminent end—is particularly explicit: “Fucking the last (already the last) day's light away down afternoon to dusk, hours of fucking, too in love with it to uncouple, they noticed how the borrowed room rocked gently, the ceiling obligingly came down a foot, lamps swayed from their fittings, some fraction of the Thameside traffic provided salty cries over the water, and nautical bells. . . .” (Pynchon 1995, 37).

335), and the configurations of these sexual entanglements is everywhere thematized, as, for example, we see in Holland, in the scene we're only recently turned from:

[...] down the length of Gottfried's docile spine ("The Rome-Berlin Axis" he called it the night the Italian came and they were all on the round bed, Captain Blicero plugged into Gottfried's upended asshole and the Italian at the same time into his pretty mouth) (Pynchon 1995, 94)

A fine example of how Pynchon never misses a satirical beat, but the gag works entirely in the service of a more substantial purpose. We took up the Katje-Blicero-Gottfried-Frans episode in terms of the narrative progression and the creation of time and space, but alongside this there was, of course, the more coital aspect of the (never more aptly named) inner-outer dynamic. Just as the narrative progression draws characters together through the deepest recesses of their selves, so do they find another sort of intimacy all on their own, as all possible permutations of coupling, tripling, quadrupling, etc. proliferate into a complex molecular configuration, an organic opposite/counterpart to the synthetic molecule, to plastic, to Imipolex G. At the same time, of course, it's a function of the grotesque body, the overflow of one creature into another, and identities are thereby knotted together: "[Gottfried's] face ascending, tightening, coming, is so close to what [Katje's] been seeing all her life in mirrors," (Pynchon 1995, 94); "Gottfried and Bianca, *are the same*. . . ." (Pynchon 1995, 672); "Slothrop curls in a wide crisp-sheeted bed beside Solange, asleep and dreaming about Zwölfkinder, and Bianca smiling... And 'Solange,' oddly enough, is dreaming of Bianca too, though under a different aspect: it's of her own child, Ilse," (Pynchon 1995, 610). Ultimately, if we were to graph out and draw lines between the characters who have had sex, we would end up with something much like the orgy aboard the *Anubis*, the whole novel linked together into a great circle by covalent sexual bonds. Or, as we've already seen (and I will quote it again; it's just too apt not to):

[...] as by the high intricacy to the weaving of its molecules, sharing 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 [...] (Pynchon 1995, 10)

And at the center of the structure we find the shared material nucleus of all these lives, the identity into which they are all assumed, the Corpus Slothropi.

And it is, again, a grotesque body. It's no accident that the descent into Mittelwerk follows the descent into Slothrop and the disclosure of his cosmic function; just as the inward-spiraling plunge into London with which the novel opens is revealed to be a plunge into Pirate, to that dream nexus where he touches all those fleeing anonymous victims, the first two chapters here in Part 3 are incorporated in the same body, seen from two different aspects.³⁴ The narrative will shortly carry us into the earthly aspect,³⁵ down into the depths where the A-4s were assembled, just as in the episode prior, our descent into the Slothropian microcosm brought us to face Imipolex G. Unlike our analogous scene in Rabelais, however, this Gorgias could hardly be mistaken for France; in Mittelwerk, grotesque imagery holds the center stage from the very beginning: "Mud across the cobblestones is so slick it reflects light, so that you walk not streets but these long streaky cuts of raw meat, hock of werewolf, gammon of Beast," (Pynchon 1995, 295). The fluidity of creaturely substance found in the move from mud to meat to monster flesh typifies the chapter. The space helmets of the Raketen-Stadts Raum-Jockeiers, for example, are drawn in the same tones:

At first you may be alarmed, on noticing that they appear to be fashioned from skulls. At least the upper dome of this unpleasant headgear is certainly the skull of some manlike creature built to a larger scale. . . . Perhaps Titans lived under this mountain, and their

³⁴ There's something very Cartesian going on here, something perhaps not imaginable as such in Rabelais. We'll take this up later.

³⁵ And the novel, of course, constantly figures the city, the earth, the Zone as a body: "[...] red pockmarks on the white skin of lady London, watching over all . . . *wait* . . . *does* she carry the fatal infection inside herself?" (Pynchon 1995, 125).

skulls got harvested like giant mushrooms. . . [...] For an extra few marks you are allowed to slip one of these helmets on. (Pynchon 1995, 296-7)

The tourists here in this dark cosmic maw, Alcofribases in the age of capitalism, can pay to have their spatial world compounded, waiting in line in a Titan's skull (the cosmic body that is Mittelwerk) to encase their heads in Titan skulls, all for a few marks. From the skeletal, the biological, the organic—picked like mushrooms—to the melding with technology brought forth in the description of the helmets, there's that same fluidity of substance that opens the scene:

The eye-sockets are fitted with quartz lenses. Filters may be slipped in. Nasal bone and upper teeth have been replaced by a metal breathing apparatus, full of slots and grating. Corresponding to the jaw is a built up section, almost a facial codpiece, of iron and ebonite.” (Pynchon 1995, 297)

The composite nature of the cyborg body is always grotesque, as Tchitcherine exemplifies, but the description here, clinched with the facial codpiece, pushes it even further in that direction, and ties the image to the sundry other open, priapic bodies that dominate the text.

All of which is in order, for this is, after all, a descent into the Raketen-Stadt. Pynchon conjures a whirlwind of figures for every theme at every turn, but this is the most explicit spatial-temporal image of the dystopian future that menaces this moment of tremendous historical change, and as such, it's the dark side of Rabelais utopian Abbey of Thélème, the very image of grotesque spatiality:

No, this Rocket City, so whitely lit against the calm dimness of space, is set up deliberately To Avoid Symmetry, Allow Complexity, Introduce Terror (from the Preamble to the Articles of Immachination)—but tourists have to connect the look of it back to things they remember from their times and planet—back to the wine bottle smashed in the basin, the bristlecone pines outracing Death for millennia, concrete roads abandoned years ago, hairdos of the late 1930's, indole molecules, especially *polymerized* indoles, as in Imipolex G— (Pynchon 1995, 297)

The way the modern is mingled with the grotesque, the merger of the organic and the synthetic is typical of Pynchon's grotesque style, and crucial to the themes the novel develops. The

participation of the tourists in the creation of this spatiality should not go unnoted; even as everything is aligned to terrorize them, to overwhelm them in this immense strangeness, they, nonetheless, “have to connect the look of it back to things they remember from their times and planet.” The human-setting dynamic is in effect even in the creation of this hostile space.³⁶ And time, of course, is pulled along as well; the modern meets the primitive in a spatial realm reminiscent of something we’ve already seen: “The wall-paintings lose their intended primitive crudeness and take on primitive spatiality, depth and brilliance—transform, indeed, to dioramas on the theme of ‘The Promise of Space Travel,’” (Pynchon 1995, 297). It’s the counterpoint to the previous episode’s realm of “early shapes”—a regression to a primitive inwardness that is at the same time the future. The grotesque body twists beginnings and ends till they meet on the ground of the transit that otherwise would separate them—that liminal realm across which the inner-outer dynamic incessantly passes.

And so the tourist set-piece, this anatomization of Mittelwerk, carries us down into the earthly grotesque body that gave birth to the V-2, down the double integral-shaped spine of the underground passageways to the “center” of its own strange geometry:

The double integral stood in Etzel Ölsch’s subconscious for the method of finding hidden centers, inertias unknown, as if monoliths had been left for him in the twilight, left behind by some corrupted idea of “Civilization,” in which eagles cast in concrete stand ten meters high at the corners of the stadiums where the people, a corrupted idea of “the People” are gathering, in which birds do not fly, in which imaginary centers far down inside the solid fatality of stone are thought of not as “heart,” “plexus,” “consciousness,” (the voice speaking here grows more ironic, closer to tears which are not all theatre, as the list goes on . . .) “Sanctuary,” “dream of motion,” “Cyst of the eternal present,” or “Gravity’s gray eminence among the councils of living stone.” No, as none of these, but instead a point in space, a point hung precise as the point where burning must end, never launched, never to fall. And what is the specific shape whose center of gravity is the Brennschluss Point? Don’t jump at the infinite number of possible shapes. There’s only

³⁶ It’s not the time to open this up fully, but note too the pine cones’ confrontation with death—so much like the banana and genetic model we saw in the Pirate sections—as well as the invocation of the synthetic molecule, which we’ve seen is counterpoised by the organic molecule, most graphically figured by the sexual network. Even in dystopia, assertion-through-structure holds out a promise.

one. It is most likely an interface between one order of things and another. (Pynchon 1995, 302)

From the inner aspect of external spatiality that is *Mittelwerk*, the narrative moves inward, into Ölsch's subconscious, and from here imagery unfolds, as if along the spine of the double integral, in exteriority—the spread of the stadium, the spatial markings of monoliths, of civilization—the *Raketen-Stadt* is established on the grounds of this fascist spatiality. And then we turn toward one of the novel's many critiques of the notion of a hidden center. A series of possible conceptualizations of the center is enumerated, only to be ironized, equivocated, dismissed, if with tearful regret, till we settle on what we might call the novel's subversive alternative center³⁷: the *Brennschluss Point*, when the rocket's arc takes its fatal turn. An interface between one order and another. If a typical center secures, grounds, stabilizes, totalizes, indeed, *centers*, what is proposed here is a full inversion: an anti-center, if *central* nonetheless. This is the center not as something fixed, but as the moment of change, the point of rotation, the limit, the threshold across which everything is undone. And indeed, we've already seized onto just such an idea of an anti-center: the *Oven*. As the portal through which we pass from one world into another, one spatiality into another, one temporality into another, one person into another—one order of things into another—the *Oven*, which figures the “center” of the human as well as the inner-outer dynamic that guides the narrative progression as a whole, is to be equated with the interface.

And here, the narrative turns—a shift in tone and style, moving out of the tourist set piece and into the normal narrative sweep, as if crossing over the very threshold it just called into being: “Double integral is also the shape of lovers curled asleep, which is where Slothrop wishes

³⁷ Yes, it's equivocated and a strong case could be made against claiming even the subversive notion of a center that I'm about to claim, but if we left everything that's equivocated in this text aside, we'd be leaving *everything* aside. In any case, I will suggest, rather than insist.

he were now—” (Pynchon 1995, 302). The grotesque cosmic body is pulled across that limit and compressed into the personal body, and the descent into Mittelwerk, to the center where we expected to find the rocket, or some trace thereof, brings us instead finally to Slothrop, just as the descent into Slothrop brought us not to some core self but Imipolex G, and by metonymy, the rocket. One begins to wonder if there’s any difference:

As you walk deeper, you retrace the Rocket’s becoming: superchargers, center sections, nose assemblies, power units, controls, tail sections . . . lotta these tail sections still around here, stacked alternately fins up/fins down, row on row identical, dimpled ripply metal surfaces. Slothrop moseys along looking at his face in them, watching it warp and slide by, just a big underground fun house here folks. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 304)

He’s looking into a mirror, looking at himself even as he looks at this technology of death, and he sees his image morphing across the warped sheen of the rocket into all the grotesque shapes of the fun house; indeed, it’s as if he’s morphing *into* the rocket, already assuming his transformation into Racketemensch. For the rocket *is* this transitional center, the marker of the Benschluss Point, this limit between one form of order and another. Its dominant function is to mark the moment of cataclysmic historical change in this novel that is never so much about WWII as such, but rather the war as a passage of transformation, the war as a historical kiln. Slothrop passes before these shining metal sheens and sees himself on the other side, as if he looked into the explosive core and found himself there, looking back; and in fact, his is not only the image on either side of the transitional membrane that is the rocket fin, but it is also the very thing that defines that membrane, that composes that limit, for it is his image that marks the polished surface. As the journey inward follows the path set in the previous episode, and the underground machinery out which the rocket arose is aligned with Slothrop’s deepest psychic core, the remote range of influence between the V-2 and Slothrop is collapsed down into a single body, and as an outcome of this conflation, Slothrop too comes to function as the passage from

one order to another. Pointsman, who is our strongest claimant for a theorist of the inner-outer dynamic in either novel, came upon this realization long ago: “Could Outside and Inside be part of the same field? If only in fairness . . . in fairness . . . Pointsman ought to be seeking the answer at the interface . . . oughtn’t he . . . on the cortex of Lieutenant Slothrop,” (Pynchon 1995, 144).

Slothrop is the novel’s cosmic body; he incorporates time and space. He is the rocket, the Oven, the transitional center. He is the embodiment of the inner-outer dynamic which guides the narrative progression while linking the characters together in their innermost beings. He is the major world-creating force. He fills the inner role in the human-setting-world dynamic. The entire war, it is suggested, might be nothing other than his own paranoid projection. He is the interface. Again, everything is endlessly equivocated in this text, but in light of the passages we’ve examined, Pointsman’s theorizing holds as much validity as anything can. Now, if the outside world is always his own projection, if his paranoia not only hails the rockets down onto London but calls a whole world into being, then Slothrop is like Pantagruel, always lost within his own mouth. For, all the folly of Holy-Center-Approaching aside, Slothrop does—yes, in an equivocated way, but nevertheless he still does—stand at the point where everything in the novel converges: “. . . and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth [...]” (Pynchon 1995, 626). In *Mittelwerk*, this all comes to a head, as the image of the cosmic body collapses upon itself.³⁸ As he descends into these tunnels—into himself—the fictional world folds over upon *itself*, the recursion sets all the novel’s vectors of

³⁸ It’s a more ambitious (and at the same time more subtle) version of a comic bit that will come later in the text: “Now something, oh, kind of *funny* happens here. Not that Slothrop is really aware of it now, while it’s going on—but later on, it will occur to him that he was—this may sound odd, but he was somehow, actually, well, *inside his own cock*,” (Pynchon 1995, 469-470)

meaning spinning around themselves, sends them echoing down these underground passageways. Here, as we approach that Holy Center,³⁹ as the personal body enters the cosmic body, the poles of the inner-outer dynamic with all their weight and antagonistic charge, meet at the interface, and the structure buckles inward into a singularity of tremendous ontological density. The movement, repercussions of meaning, the structural reduplication—everything here recalls the world in Pantagruel’s mouth. And it is here too that we come to see the text as a meaning generating machine, accommodating a plenitude of interpretations by means of this dense recursive network of themes.

At this point in our discussion of Rabelias, we moved quite naturally into the figure of the eucharist and the Christly function of Pantagruel—the thematic color that filled in the ontological background. It shouldn’t be a shock that this very same path opens before us now; after all, as Weisenberger goes to lengths to demonstrate, the Christian liturgical calendar structures the novel. Again, although the major refrains of the novel always come in the key of paranoia and dread, underneath this is the counterpoint of a fundamentally positive ontology; it’s thematized throughout, if never with the insistence of the more apocalyptic topoi, and it is quite natural that religious imagery should be summoned to carry off stage once and for all the figure who embodies it. The novel’s engagement with Christianity reaches its height in the leave-taking—it’s not a death, and we can hardly call it his “end”—of Slothrop, and this summation occurs by means of two ambivalent images of the eucharist. The first comes courtesy of the (seemingly traitorous) “Spokesman” for the Counterforce. His rambling explanation, if we must

³⁹ Which is to say, the center of the earth, where we find several of the novels crucial themes converging: “Imagine coal, down in the earth, dead black, no light, the very substance of death. Death ancient, prehistoric, species *we will never see again*. Growing older, blacker, deeper, in layers of perpetual night. Above ground, the steel rolls out fiery, bright. But to make steel, the coal tars, darker and heavier, must be taken from the original coal. Earth’s excrement, purged out for the ennoblement of shining steel. Passed over,” (Pynchon 1995, 166). Blackness, death, extinction, preterition, shit, and, of course, a poignant binary, are all in play here. Most crucially, perhaps, the earthly center is figured as a place of *transformation*. This is by all means where the episode in *Mittelwerk* is headed and it ties to the cosmic body function.

so call it, of what Slothrop means to the ragtag resistance circles its way to a vision of the holy rite conjured in vampiric terms: “We drank the blood of our enemies. That’s why you see Gnostics so hunted. The sacrament of the Eucharist is really drinking the blood of the enemy. The Grail, the Sangraal, is the bloody vehicle,” (Pynchon 1995, 739). It’s a strange and obscure speech, and, although he’s nominally the topic, the connection to Slothrop (hardly an enemy to the Counterforce, even if our speaker is a traitor) seems tenuous at best. What follows complicates it even further with an added level of ambivalence: “We drank the blood of our enemies. The blood of our friends, we cherished,” (Pynchon 1995, 739). I’m not sure what to make of the drinking the enemies’ blood⁴⁰; it’s only function would seem to be to equivocate what is to come, but that very move of equivocation also serves to reinforce, to highlight the significance of what comes next. In this novel so obsessed with binaries, such doubling up signals a thematic key.

On the heels of this cryptic statement comes the second image of the eucharist, and, curiously enough, it’s catalogued: “Item S-1706.31, Fragment of Undershirt, U.S. Navy issue, with brown stain assumed to be blood in shape of sword running lower left to upper right,” (Pynchon 1995, 739). The story behind this artifact is the content of the last “appearance,” as it were, of Slothrop, and it’s relayed by Seaman Bodine, “one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more,” (Pynchon 1995, 740). The stain on the undershirt in question is indeed of blood, and the blood of no less than John Dillinger. Bodine recounts the day of his death outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago, how he and half the city came running at the sound of gunfire to find the outlaw hero dead and bleeding on the concrete and how they

⁴⁰ Although there is this insight given us by William Slothrop in his tract on preterition: “William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite,” (Pynchon 1995, 55). And our Spokesman: “I am betraying them all . . .” (Pynchon 1995, 739). More on this in a moment.

proceeded to sop up his blood with anything at hand, a behavior whose exact motivation he struggles to articulate:

Maybe I went along without thinking. But there *was something else*. Something I must've needed . . . if you can hear me . . . that's why I'm giving this to you. O.K.? That's Dillinger's blood there. Still warm when I got to it. They wouldn't want you thinking he was anything but a 'common criminal'—but Their head's so far up Their ass—he still did what he did. He went out socked Them right in the toilet privacy of Their banks. Who cares what he was *thinking* about, long as it didn't get in the way? A-and it doesn't even matter why *we're* doing this, either. Rocky? Yeah, what we need isn't right reasons, but just that *grace*. The physical grace to keep it working. Courage, brains, sure, O.K., but without that grace? forget it. (Pynchon 1995, 741)

There's all the awkward marks of sincerity here, and with the emphasis on grace clinching the Christian undertone, what transpires is a sort of communion between Slothrop and Bodine, with Dillinger's blood binding them together. And of course, Dillinger's blood is not just Dillinger's blood. The terms in which he's invoked point directly to the messiah that he only anticipates. For some time now, something unprecedented has been arising: "There is a counterforce in the Zone. Who was the Soviet intelligence man who showed up just before the fiasco in the clearing? Who tipped the Schwarzkommando off to the raid? Who got rid of Marvy?" (Pynchon 1995, 611). The answer to every question, of course, is Slothrop. Like Dillinger, They'd have you think he was a nobody, just another boot gone wrong, lost in the Zone. Yet, he is still a force that stands against Them. As for what "he was *thinking* about," in all three cases above, Slothrop had no notion of the subversive work he was performing. Yet, he still did it, for he has that *grace*, that "*something else*." Even as he disintegrates, Slothrop becomes the animating spirit of the Counterforce—Slothrop, whose ancestor William seems to have foreseen his role, writing *On Preterition*, re-Christianizing Christianity for "the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation" (Pynchon 1995, 555). Even the Spokesman must

acknowledges that for some among them he is “a genuine, point-for-point microcosm” (Pynchon 1995, 738).⁴¹

If the move I’m clearly angling toward still seems somewhat strained, there remain two factors that must be considered: this is Slothrop’s last appearance and his final eucharistic function has been prefigured since the very beginning. For all that the narrative’s intention in regard to Slothrop seems structured to brush him aside to as silent and anti-climatic a fate as possible, the final glimpse of the protagonist surely deserves extended consideration, surely calls for contemplation, and there’s really no other direction that that consideration can move—even the equivocatory rambles of the Spokesman can’t halt the symbolic and thematic momentum that has gathered to push us to just such conclusions. And then consider, if you will, the banana. Yes, Pirate’s banana breakfast with which the novel and our analysis began, that strange set piece that serves as an overture to the work, that thematized the inner-outer dynamic, that sounded the subtle note of hope and communion, that set the possibility of assertion-through-structure before us even as death clouded over the London skies. All these elements have come to be invested in Slothrop. And after all, the line from the phallic banana to the phallic rocket to the Slothropian phallus was never too hard to trace. The holy host then has a distinct banana flavor, and as Slothrop appears before Bodine, it’s almost as if his last touch with the substantial world is nothing other than *his* transubstantiation into the consecrated scrap of cloth, and the Counterforce partakes, each and all, in the Corpus Slothropi.

⁴¹ In regard to the previous footnote, we can see that by the light of William Slothrop’s theology, if Tyrone is our messiah, he must somehow connect to Judas Iscariot. The Spokesman for the Counterforce and his strange ramble that abuts finally the secret of the most holy rite might serve to bring that Judas function into play without loading the traitorous baggage onto our hero. There’s hardly enough evidence here to insist, but I for one am at a loss to fit the Spokesman into the picture in any other way (which confusion itself, of course, might very well be his function in this elusive text).

Which brings us to the true reading of Slothrop's Tarot, his fate, and the critical point here is simply that he doesn't die. He dissolves, disintegrates, scatters:

Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.

-Werner von Braun (Pynchon

1995, 1)

The epigraph, the first words in the novel. And as good as the last.⁴² For what is it, "to thin, To scatter"? It's a question of "personal density," we're informed, which is "directly proportional to temporal bandwidth," and,

"Temporal bandwidth" is the width of your present, your *now*. It is the familiar " Δt " considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. The narrower your sense of the Now, the more tenuous you are. (Pynchon 1995, 509)

The prospect sounds bleak enough, especially when we consider that up until now, Slothrop, with his personal past, ancestry, and Western inheritance, has been the repository of a weighty history, and that in his vatic vengery, forecasting rocket fall, he's something of the oracle too. It's as if the past and the future, the whole temporal bipolarity were to collapse into the transitional center through which one passed into the other. Yes, we've seen this before. Slothrop's fate is to dissolve into pure interface, to transfuse across the ontological flux that the inner-outer dynamic enacts and become the very principle of the possibility for recreating the world. He's Osiris much as he is Christ, and although he's been dismembered and scattered into the Nile, the promise of regeneration resides in that last body part, the one never recovered, the one that's been in question all along. Yes, *Gravity's Rainbow* as a text generates and destroys meaning with a reckless profusion and will punish any effort at final summation. Nevertheless, this

⁴² Of course, von Braun is just one of the many—including Weissmann and Rilke—to give voice to this theme of death as transformation in the novel, and for all that it's counterpoised by the evident Nazi satire, it's nevertheless not fully undermined.

affirmation of being and life, this *spiritual* affirmation that springs out the deepest level of the narrative *is* thrown into play by that very same self-consuming process and carries all the resilience owed to its source.

And yet, it doesn't *feel* like the same affirmation we find in Rabelais. In the end, yes, these are enormous fictional worlds and hence contain a multiplicity that counts the good with the bad; this type of abundance always holds ambivalence within; Rabelais, as we shall see, is no different. But somehow we don't feel the same at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we don't feel that joyous insouciance at finding we've swallowed down our due portion of shit in this world. We feel rather, well, more like poor Brigadier Pudding:

Bread that would only have floated in porcelain waters somewhere, unseen, untasted—risen now and baked in the bitter intestinal Oven to bread we know, bread that's light as domestic comfort, secret as death in bed . . . Spasms in his throat continue. The pain is terrible. With his tongue he mashes [...] (Pynchon 1995, 236)

Machemerde, indeed. And, yes, *le pain est terrible*. I'll spare you the rest and turn instead to examine the less graphic side of the problem.

4. Impact

“You will want cause and effect.”

Beyond a vigorous subversive drive, an endless zeal for the appropriation of language games, a polymathic digressiveness, a textual openness, and a marked transgressive tendency, *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *Gravity's Rainbow* share an overriding concern for the ontological ground across which their narrative worlds unfold and in both works this concern rests on the construction of space and time by means of what we have called the inner-outer dynamic. Both Rabelais's and Pynchon's worlds are created through the ceaseless interchange between the human being and its setting, and the full meaning of this world-creating movement comes finally to be invested in a single—and at the same time, composite—protagonist who thereby assumes the embodiment of the narrative world as a whole. We might say then that they share a common spiritual message, for lack of a better word. But the cosmic man is hardly a figure uniquely common to Rabelais and Pynchon, of course; the Christian imagery that they both deploy to enact the final movement of this mythic assumption says it all; there's perhaps no trope that can claim greater literary currency. What is unique to these two authors, however, is the way in which an ontological framework is assembled around this figure, reinforcing his function at every level, such that the endless recursion between thematic layers that the inner-outer dynamic produces effects a continual return to this central—but always transitional—function. The framework becomes the very skeleton of the cosmic man and everywhere in the text we find ourselves within him. It's assertion-through-structure, the silent rumble of Pantagruel's voice heard always from the inside. It gives what would otherwise be a metaphysical commonplace—the cosmic man trope, that is—a remarkable ontological density. The worlds of these novels, as narrative constructions, pass into and out of these characters. The multifarious network of

meanings that this process continually produces comes to be the very stuff of the Pantagrueian-Slothropian body, a meaning generating machine.

This is the ground where they meet. But to rephrase the critical question: If these novels are just so astonishingly similar on just so fundamental a level, how to account for the massive, inescapable, flagrant *differences* between them? The answer is already contained in, of all things, the gross disparity between Brigadier Pudding's and Pantagruel's respective coprophagias. But there are some preliminary matters to deal with first.

The argument for the essentially human foundation upon which these fictional worlds are built likely sits more easily in regard to Rabelais. *Gravity's Rainbow* generally suffers from the complaint that it lacks that human element, that its characters are dwarfed by all the erudition and heady conceptual development. The notion, however, that Pynchon gives us two-dimensional figures who are little but springboards for the philosophical departures of the plot (or, worse yet, mere occasions for gag names) rests on a myopic attachment to the "roundness" of character.⁴³ To call this roundness or three-dimensionality of character a textual illusion is, of course, meaningless—for what isn't?—but by the 1970's, we're certainly looking at a sleight-of-hand that's lost something of its grace and magic. Far from being uninterested in its characters, *GR* intertwines the ontological fabric of its world into their very beings, and in doing so, replaces roundness with a layering of translucent moments that fall into and rise out of the depths of these characters, and, more strikingly, brings their fellow men and women into the fold, weaving a vast world of overlapping lives and stitching together a spatial-temporal network wherein the self-contained consciousness of the nineteenth century novel spills out in every direction and the very core of who one *is* diffuses out beyond the limits of the self and colors this polydimensional

⁴³ Rabelais's characters, for instance, have nothing resembling this trait and yet are abundantly, even excessively human. The exteriorization that they enact simply creates another mode of being human. Pynchon, as we will see, takes this in the other direction.

cloth. This is the ultimate meaning of Slothrop's dissolution and it bespeaks something fundamentally human.

But just as the notion of the lack of the inner man in Rabelais points to the process of continual exteriorization, this misunderstanding has a legitimate source in Pynchon's text. For if *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Gargantua et Pantagruel* both turn on the process of a dynamic movement between human beings and their setting, and if in Rabelais the process is geared primarily in the outward direction, this two-way exchange in Pynchon's world has its emphasis largely on the inward. Whereas the robust humanity of the giants brims over and spills out into the world, in *GR*, the human is decidedly on the ebb; the external setting always encroaches and, in their retreat, the characters seem to disappear within themselves, leaving the reader with an embattled, diminished image of the human. Of course, this process is dynamic, fluid, and recursive, and so necessarily moves always in both directions, but the tilt of the movement, the direction of dominant sway, tends toward one pole in Rabelais and the other in Pynchon, and this has everything to do with the stark divergences between the two texts.

And so behaviorist experimentation, global capitalist machinations, the downward momentum of Western history, and a technology that's assumed a life of its own and dedicated it to the destruction of its maker—all these external forces intrude deep into Slothrop's flesh and psyche. It's the inward push of the world-creating dynamic. *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel*, and the other giants (regardless of size) who populate Rabelais's novel, meanwhile, talk the world into being, mold it into shape, piss and shit it into movement. All that infringes is shortly digested and the dominant thrust is always outward.

This distinction also accounts for the difference in the manner by which the inner-outer dynamic structures the narratives of each work. The outward impulse of the world-creating

movement dominates in Rabelais and therefore we have a narrative progression carried largely by *la parolle* as it opens up and exfoliates the world into being. Spatial and temporal shifts occur most often then through the vehicle of speech; interior concerns and experiences take the form of story and discourse; and as they let out all that is held within, the characters achieve an exterior fluidity of being by which they flow one into the other. In *GR*, on the other hand, the spatial-temporal shifts and, more especially and crucially, the narrative connections between characters transpire, as we saw in the Katje-Blicero-Gottfried-Frans scene, in the innermost region of the human being. As the exterior world imposes itself ceaselessly on all that is inner, the human ebbs to such a point as to pass out of one existence and into another, turning what seems to be a loss into a signal recovery of what is perhaps a deeper sense of humanity. And so we find one novel characterized by the superabundance of *la parolle* and the other by an inwardness that recedes to the vanishing point.

There is no doubt that this is related on a highly complex causal level to the fact that Rabelais is writing before Descartes, while Pynchon stands at the moment when the full implications of our Cartesian inheritance have come finally before us. That said, Pynchon is a dedicated anti-Cartesian, or so it seems to me anyway, and at the very foundation, his novelistic world, as we've pieced it together here, is designed to combat all the dualistic demons that haunt several centuries of Western thought. But one cannot with any ease shake off a legacy such as this. Even as the novel's gravity concentrates in that nexus where mind and body, self and other meet, thus reducing duality to illusion, even as the deepest ontological level of the text has everything rest on this hope, it all seems to proceed on a level below the vast majority of the novel's concerns—foundational, yes, but by that very fact unknown to those who walk its ground. If this is the ontology, the epistemology nonetheless remains Cartesian. Everything

beyond that traditional metaphysical enclosure escapes the awareness of the characters and reaches them, if at all, only as an uncertain promise. To be anti-Cartesian is still always to react to Descartes and, in contrast, Rabelais remains wholly untroubled by such concerns.

And so when the inner-outer dynamic collapses into the ontological singularity, Pantagruel wraps his gaping maw around the world while Slothrop dissolves into it like the unleavened host. The Pantagruelian overflow washes over the universe entire and Slothrop recedes away to be infused into all time and space. Alcofribas's shit doesn't impinge upon Pantagruel so much as Pantagruel encompasses all worldly outflow even in the act of intake, while Pudding's very being is pushed down his own throat with that nauseating mouthful.

Important and conspicuous as this departure between Rabelais and Pynchon is, as much as it cannot be overemphasized, it is not by any means the end of the story, for the very momentum of the world-creating movement that here ebbs, there flows, always drags ambivalence in its wake. It's the inevitable fate of any dichotomy, and both works embrace it explicitly. Bakhtin brings to our attention the ambivalence that lies at the heart of the Rabelaisian grotesque, wherein,

Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming, even though the image may be separately presented. Through its participation in the whole, each of these images is deeply ambivalent, being intimately related to life-death-birth. (Bakhtin 1981, 149)

Any given moment of ambivalence in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* is not easily apprehended as such because it is found not in the juxtaposition of two contradictory meanings clamoring to fix a shared event in their own image,⁴⁴ but rather as the bedrock that holds all meaning up. Cave too

⁴⁴ This statement falls apart entirely in regard to *Le tiers livre* where this is, in fact, the very mode by which the narrative progresses. In general, this third installment and *Le quart livre* pursue the darker turn that *Pantagruel* (as we presently will see) takes at the very end, and the question of ambivalence receives a full treatment there. Indeed, the final half of the total oeuvre is primarily where Cave turns when he approaches Rabelaisian anxiety toward writing. But again, our discussion is constrained to the first two books.

finds ambivalence to be a sort of gravitational center in the novel, specifically in regard to ambitions and ideals of cornucopian language, viewing the text as a marker for, “both a recurrent ideal of French Renaissance writing, and of a recurrent anxiety” (Cave 1979, 173)—that anxiety being the suspicion that plenitude is actually a form of exhaustion. Both critics are on the mark as they take aim at an ambivalence situated as a backdrop phenomenon, but in terms of the present discussion, there’s a far more distinct instance of ambivalence in play, and in taking this up, we might once more, like it or not, be forced to repose the coprophagic question.

Having passed out of Pantagruel’s mouth on the joyous note we’ve focused so much attention upon, the narrative takes a strange detour before reaching its conclusion:

Peu de temps après, le bon Pantagruel tomba malade et feut tant prins de l’estomach qu’il ne pouvoit boire ny manger, et, parce qu’un malheur ne vient jamais seul, luy print une pisse chaulde qui le tormenta plus que ne penseriez... Son urine tant estoit chualde que despuis ce temps là elle n’est encores refroydie, et en avez en France, en divers lieulx, selon qu’elle print son cours, et l’on l’appelle les bains chaulx... (Rabelais 1962, 382)

Recall that we’ve only just left Gorgias; the world at this point has been intimately tied to Pantagruel’s inner being, has been shown to thrive on the vigor of his tremendous health; what then could be the meaning of this scene that brings the action of the novel to a close? The bodily exuberance of the giants is never feeble and even in sickness Pantagruel’s world-creating role is fulfilled in spades, bringing forth hot springs and healing waters, but this is troubling nonetheless, and the true darkness of the problem doesn’t become evident until the giant swallows down the copper capsules and the people within, and we stand in the midst of the malady:

Quand en l’estomach, chascun deffit son ressort et sortirent de leurs cabanes, et premier celluy qui portoit la laterne, et ainsi cheurent plus de demye lieu en un goulphre horrible, puant et infect plus que Mephitis, ny la Palus Camarine, ny le punays lac de Sorbone...

Après, en tactonnant et fleuretant aprocherent de la matiere fecale et des humeurs corumpues ; finalement trouvèrent une montjoye d'ordure. (Rabelais 1962, 384)

The corruption that's taken over Pantagruel's insides is especially unsettling given his recent assumption of the cosmic body. In Rabelais, of course, a stomach full of shit could mean many things and excrement by itself is by no means intrinsically negative, but the comparison, "*un goulphre horrible, puant et infect plus que... le punays lac de Sorbone...*" resolves the question in favor of the most pessimistic reading possible; even if we're referring to an entity with only a satiric false etymology to link it to the institution, that etymology was a humanist invention, and the name so often invoked at the novel's most derisive moments can't easily be disentangled from a value so deliberately tied to it. If there's anything that's not ambivalent in Rabelais, it's his disdain for the Sorbonne.

What this all means, of course, is debatable. Duval construes the problem in terms of the metaphor of the body politic (Duval 1991, 133-4), while Bakhtin's reading would surely tie the question to the ambiguous knot of life and death that consumption, digestion and excretion always seem to entail. In light of what we've elaborated here, the sensible move would be to investigate the incident in terms of the link between shit, sin, *la parolle*, and the eucharist. However the question is pursued, there is nevertheless something highly ambivalent going on, enough so to make us reconsider the ultimate benignity of Alcofribas's evacuation in Gorgias. Only a page after Pantagruel laughs off his involuntary coprophagia and gives his companion a gift of "*la chatellenie de Salmigondin*" (Rabelais 1962, 381), our hero finds himself fallen ill with "*une montjoye d'ordure*" in his stomach. The world's impingement on the giant's body was perhaps not so light and harmless as it seemed. Again, meanings are debatable: Is this the accumulation of all the world's sins? Is this Alcofribas's own excrement, which is to say, *la parolle*, the flow of language that composes the novel, that remnant of anxiety that, as Cave tells

us, even cornucopian exuberance can't shake? Ambivalence trades in shades of the same color and we'll leave these questions to the side. Suffice it to say that the Pantagruelian overflow too must come to ebb and the world imposes itself on the giant body even as the giant body shapes the world.

The ambivalence that serves as a dark backdrop in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* is brought to the center stage in *GR*, where it's theorized and dramatized at many a reprise. Once more, Pointsman serves as our philosopher:

Pavlov was fascinated with "ideas of the opposite." Call it a cluster of cells, somewhere on the cortex of the brain. Helping to distinguish pleasure from pain, light from dark, dominance from submission. . . . But when, somehow—starve them, traumatize, shock, castrate them, send them over into one of the transmarginal phases, past borders of their waking selves, past "equivalent" and "paradoxical" phases—you weaken this idea of the opposite, and here all at once is the paranoid patient who would be master, yet now feels himself a slave. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 48)

In *GR*, the world as a whole has effectively been sent over into the transmarginal phase—ever more so in that that world is an aspect of poor paranoid Slothrop, the very cortex here in question. The ultimate function of the novel's overdetermined dichotomies is to collapse, to fall apart, just as much as this is the ultimate function of the inner-outer dynamic that carries the narrative as a whole. And in this sense, the bipolarities are mere illusory markers and the world of *GR* is situated firmly on the ground that lies between them: "Where ideas of opposites have come together, and lost their oppositeness. (And is it really the rocket explosion that Slothrop's keying on, or is it exactly *this depolarizing*, this neurotic 'confusion' that fills the wards tonight?)" (Pynchon 1995, 50). By this equation, the very thing that links Slothrop and the rocket—in itself an ambivalent link—is the collapse of dichotomies (beginning and end, approach and detonation) into ambivalence.

This theme is so prevalent in the novel that we need not linger over it any longer, but may turn to what I propose to be the unexpected upshot. Ambivalence in Rabelais served a blow to Pantagruelian sanguinity; in Pynchon, midst the darkness and turmoil, it could be read as reinforcing the optimism hidden in the ontological ground of the narrative. For as ambivalence spreads its fog generally, nothing suffers more its obscuring effect than the dominant vectors of the novel, and as those vectors all seem to push toward that final destructive crash, we must question that eventuality:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out . . . a few feet of film run backwards . . . the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning . . . a ghost in the sky. . . . (Pynchon 1995, 48)

The meaning of this reversal is a central question in the novel, and in that *reversal* in general serves as a key theme, we might ask in all seriousness, what is the reversal of death and destruction? There's a promise hidden here, as if the inversion needed only to be pushed further, ratcheted up another notch for all history's cataclysms to be undone.⁴⁵

Despite all the terror in *Gravity's Rainbow*, despite the desperation and horror, I argue that the same fundamental hope runs from Rabelais through Pynchon, and even—especially—into such dark corners as that held by the Katje-Blicero-Gottfried-Frans episode discussed above, for despite all, there remains the very real and meaningful (however strange and lurid that meaning might be) connection between one human being and another. It's what we might want to call an ontological optimism. And somewhere within it lies the possibility that the blast of the rocket, the conflagration, is not the end of the world, but rather the divine promise to never undo it all again: the rainbow.

⁴⁵ Again, Weisenburger's many instances of time-reversal (*hysteron proteron*) lend a certain legitimacy to pushing further in this direction.

That covers a fair portion, if by no means the entirety, of what these two works have to say about each other, but what do they have to say about what lies between them? That depends what we place between them, and as we saw at the beginning, there are several options.

Among the inventory of adjectives we could apply to both novels, if we were to go about it this way, would likely be found the word “encyclopedic.” *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* might be said to meet, as a matter of fact, on the ground of that ill-named subgenre the encyclopedic novel, which we can assume includes *Ulysses*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Moby Dick*, just to call out the most likely suspects. Ill-named, I wrote, but not because these novels don’t have that cornucopian ambition. They do, but is that really what links them? Is that really what defines them? that they have a lot—if never quite an encyclopedia’s worth—of *stuff* in them? Standing under these structures that reach toward just such an impossible totality, supporting them, holding them up, is a deep concern for the fundamental ontological ground of the narrative world. This is the strongest link between the works in this loose subgenre, and in this sense, Rabelais and Pynchon, who mark one of the earliest and latest cases of the type, share not only that concern but a common understanding of the nature of that ground. The novel as a work of art has a particular investment in an understanding of space and time; it is arguably the literary form most involved with the creation of a linguistic world. The encyclopedic novel as a species of novel concerns itself with the ontology that lies behind the idea of a novelistic world.⁴⁶ Whereas a standard novel contents itself to create a world whose fundamental ontological parameters are taken as a given, this subgenre insists upon rooting its narrative as deeply as possible, and in doing so, it points in a critical manner toward the default parameters of the genre. As two exemplars of the encyclopedic form and two novels that could

⁴⁶ In this, of course, it is pushed toward multiplicity and openness—such being, according to Bakhtin, inherent in the novel as a genre—hence the “encyclopedic” quality is an effect of the ontological concern.

be argued to mark the beginning and something like the end of the genre, *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *GR* make manifest the fundamental distortion of the novelistic world that ensues when the ontological question is let drop; for this is the literary genre not only most concerned with the creation of a world, but also the one most concerned with the creation of the human; in failing to recognize the intimate interconnection between these two projects and sending out characters—however well “rounded”—onto a preset stage, such a traditional novel fails to recognize the ontology that lies inherent within it. These two works, on the other hand, reveal the essential nature of space and time as conceived by the novelistic form.

Gargantua et Pantagruel and *Gravity's Rainbow* extend their concerns beyond their particular art form to the question of the human in general. The worlds that pass into being through the Pantagruelian gullet and the Slothropian interface are worlds in which space and time are neither quantities aligned on a cold Cartesian grid nor idealistic projections nor categories that could be set *before* or *outside* human existence and experience. Rabelais and Pynchon sinew time and space to the flesh. We might bring Heidegger in now to give us another perspective:

When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them *space*; for when I say “a man,” and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner—that is, who dwells—then by the name “man,” I already name the stay within the fourfold among things. (Heidegger 1977, 358)

Of course, our authors characteristically have a far more biological take on this, and it would be foolhardy to facilely conflate yet another highly particular thinker into our scheme, but nevertheless they do all share a vision of space not as a scene to be stepped onto, not as an ineluctable category of understanding, but as something inseparable from our being in this world. These novels then mark the beginning and perhaps the end of a certain idea of what it means to

be human—an idea that perhaps in the intervening centuries masqueraded as something else, but which at the foundation that these two works expose always remained the same.

And they also mark the history of a certain vision of the world. Utopie, the Zone, *un nouveau monde*, the Raketten-Stadt, Thélème—the process by which these worlds come to be is the driving force behind these novels. Rabelais’s giants piss out rivers and hot springs, establish the monuments of France, rework the material of the earth, realize Biblical prophecies, and, of course, hold entire worlds on the tips of their tongues. Something remarkably similar is at work in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in the concern for mandalas of every form, in its sexual-molecular assertion-through-structure, in Slothrop’s map that calls the V-2 down to remake London in its image, in the narrative that telescopes into the human being and exfoliates out into a world. The creation of space and time through the mediation of the human is at once the creation of a new worldview and a new world. This is not an external process, not the inexorable movement of something outside the human being, but rather history as generated by human beings, dependent on the energies of the flesh and the mind, tied to the very movement of the person, even as it etches its own mark on every one of us. History is the outer form that the inner-outer dynamic finally engenders.

We’ve taken up in turn our initial three possibilities for what history these novels mark, but this final consideration has only served to open up another question: in what way are these novels marking, in a certain sense, something fundamental about history itself?

To the notion that these works stand on historical turning points, the reply, “What work doesn’t?” is tempting and utterly to the point. The claim could be made, of course, that this is nonetheless more true, more meaningful in their case—that we have here a monument of the Renaissance and a wholly characteristic marker of the strange interregnum in which we still find

ourselves, that there are certainly few turns in time as consequential as these—and a sufficiently strong case could surely be made, but perhaps this is not, in the end, what’s at stake. That they stand on these turning points, that they indeed mark them, are mere facts that pale beside the narrative *enactment* of the historical process that they undertake. For what *is* history, in the most absolute, basic sense? Human beings in time and space. Simple as that formula is, it’s not in any way reductive. Rabelais and Pynchon bring to their works an ontology of the historical process situated firmly on these three essential elements.

Which brings us to the realization—long in the making—that our initial image, our historical parabola, will not stand. What *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* shared, in those untenable terms, was, of course, a position on the y-axis: zero. The suggestion here was that their placement in regard to the history they traced situated them such as to disclose the very ground—the x axis—off which that history was launched, the ground back into which it came crashing. But x and y, even as mere points of orientation, have been hopelessly complicated. And yet we might not be forced to abandon the image entirely; it might rather be a question of modification. The path of the rocket, after all, the titular gravity’s rainbow, opens up finally, near the very end, to a larger view:

. . . not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it “rises from” and the Earth it “strikes” No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it’s only the *peak* that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world [...] (Pynchon 1995, 726)

This places *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* at that very surface, *as* that very surface, as interfaces, signified by the very thing they enact. The end product of these meaning generating machines is this final movement of recursion that loops now outside of the texts, a movement by which they become, not the beginning and ending of any specific history, but

artistic figurations of the very process through which history comes into being, reminding us that well below the pathway traced over our heads, under our very feet in fact, is that other silent world that propels the visible arc above us, the ground that never actually did break the figure into an origin and a end, but which served always as a transitional limit, through which the trajectory passes, again and again, into the interior, where history is born of the human being placed in time and space.

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