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Grgas, Stipe

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Stipe Grgas
University of Zagreb

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Question of Capital

The author holds that the so-called "economic turn" in literary criticism has an unprecedented significance in coping with the present and in conceptualizing the past. On the present occasion, he engages Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and shows how the economic thematic is registered in the novel in different ways and on different levels. As a first step that substantiates this claim, he culls words and phrases from the novel that reference money. References to money are not confined to this or that episode or to the delineation of this or that character but are strategically strewn throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. After foregrounding the economic lexis in Pynchon and pointing to its incidence, the author proceeds to show how questions of the economy relate to thematic clusters which extant critical readings have designated as essential components of Pynchon's novel. One such essential of Pynchon's writing is his continual engagement with America. The author argues that a foregrounding of economic themes in *Gravity's Rainbow* correlates with the novelist's preoccupation with America.

Key words: *Gravity's Rainbow,* Thomas Pynchon, economics, money and finance, America

What terrible structure behind the appearances of diversity and enterprise?
(*Gravity's Rainbow*, 165)

1.

In the introduction to her book on recent "turns" in the study of culture, Doris Bachman-Medick writes, "As regards the historicization and contextualization of the cultural turns, an important role was initially played by

the fact that these turns came to replace scientistic, positivist and economistic explanations of the social world and initiated a fundamental reassessment of symbolization, language, representation and interpretation" (7)[1]. Later in the book, she recognizes that "there are already indications that the existing and still emerging turns are bringing the humanities as a whole into contact with fields such as biopolitics, economics, neuroscience and digitization" (30). I add that, for reasons immanent in disciplinary knowledge but also having to do with the world at large, not all of these contacts have developed apace. To use a formulation from the book *Financial Cultures and Crisis Dynamics* (2015), whose title points to the field that will be privileged in the following reading, I contend that the "intellectual use-value" (27) of the economic turn, a turn which I have used more and more in my recent forays into literature, culture, and society, has an unprecedented significance in coping with the present and in sifting through the past in order to find mappings for its complexity.

The history of theoretical turns shows that, in the humanities, past practices are never antiquated. Past ways of cognizing the world have a retentive power which explodes when new circumstances show that we have been overhasty in discarding extant knowledge. To be even more explicit: if Bachman-Medick registers how "economistic explanations" were superannuated by new developments, she also acquiesces that there are indications of how the field of economics is staging a reengagement with the humanities. The reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* that I offer here is biased towards the economic sphere. That bias is not a mere subjective preference but stems from and is a response to what I see as the hegemony of the economy over contemporary human life. I firmly believe that, if literary theory has any relevance to that life, it has to take up the challenge of that hegemony.

That imperative is even more pressing if we realize that literature has, in different ways, always engaged economic issues. My reading of *Gravity's Rain-*

1 Research for this article was supported by the HRZZ 1543 grant (A Cultural History of Capitalism).

bow will foreground those dimensions of the novel that show Thomas Pynchon partaking in that engagement. In due course, I will also argue that "the fundamental reassessment of symbolization, language, representation and interpretation," to quote Bachman-Medick again, did not take place in abstract space and time, but that these can be viewed as concurrent with mutations in the economic sphere. I will propose that, if collated with changes that money underwent during the latest phase of history, the said "reassessment"—very much contemporaneous with poststructuralism—can be retrieved as a "usable past" providing a horizon for thinking the economy today. Needless to say, the very fact that I reengage Pynchon on this occasion testifies to my belief that his work is part of that "usable" past. The reading I provide below assembles from *Gravity's Rainbow* a problematic that speaks to us from the past. In my conclusion I will argue that what it says, the "use-value" of Pynchon's novel, is less to be sought in the realm of action, in the overcoming of the all-pervasive hegemony, but rather in confronting and contemplating its gravity.

2.

The usability of literature stems from its apparent ability to lend evidence to the most diverse theoretical readings. If this is true for literature as such, it is even truer for works which are multi-layered, resistant to interpretative closure and thus welcoming of ever newer interpretations. A vast and ever-expanding archive of descriptions and interpretations confirms that *Gravity's Rainbow* is in this sense an exemplary work. Taking for granted the multifold readings to which it has been subjected, I am merely proposing here that it can be read as a text that, in ways that will be expounded upon below, addresses economic themes.

Keeping in mind the enormous corpus of critical writing on Pynchon, it can hardly be expected that others have not attended to this layer in Pynchon's palimpsest. Two examples will suffice. William Spanos, a keen appreciator of Pynchon, contends in his last book that *Gravity's Rainbow* is about the Puritan Calvinist doctrine of providential history that "in distinguishing

between the elect and the damned—the chosen and the 'preterite' or 'passed over,' in Pynchon's terms—produced the Puritan work ethic and the "spirit of capitalism" (135). In an earlier appraisal of the novel, Richard Powers wrote,

> A Corporate State, as the quickest study among slow learners long ago pointed out, knows how to turn even innocence to its many uses. Childhood, vulnerability, every fairy tale that ever soothed us to sleep will, along with the rest of individual experience, be exploited, interrogated, made to turn a profit, put to efficacious and pacifying work by the controlling powers. Such a nightmarish historical motion pervades *Gravity's Rainbow*. (Powers)

One can have no quarrel with these readings, and I think they, in summary terms, encapsulate the thematic at the core of Pynchon's novel. However, I maintain that these generalities, which presuppose the economic focus I am relying on here, deserve closer attention and greater analytic rigor. This is necessary because, as a rule, the economic dimension of literary texts is dealt with only summarily, if at all. I hold that both the economic presence in literary works and the mode of its inscription into fictional worlds, privileging these as the genre most accommodating to economic themes, need to be articulated differentially. I have undertaken such readings of Pynchon's first novel (2015a), of *Mason & Dixon* (2015b) and of his last novel (2014c). My findings point to the conclusion that Pynchon has always addressed economic issues in his work, and *Gravity's Rainbow* is no exception to this rule. Quite the contrary: it provides evidence that can be used to lend further proof to my findings; more significantly, however, it can help us contemplate the identity and difference of the economy and how that sameness and its mutation figure in the present conjuncture.

3.

Gravity's Rainbow abounds with evidence of the economic thematic. As a first step in substantiating this claim, I have culled from the novel words and phrases that reference money. To list all these references would tax the

reader with inflationary overkill. Rather, I will attempt to systematize them and restrict my page references to their first appearance in the text. Thus we find what I would label neutral referencing such as "amount of money" (74)[2]. However, this very first instance of the appearance of money is not as neutral as I make it out to be, and the quote illustrates the hazard of decontextualizing linguistic evidence. I admit to having left out the adjective which precedes the syntagm, namely the word "amazing." I stress that all the synonyms of this word—such as *stunning*, *fabulous*, etc.—are latently present and enact a slippage in Pynchon's statement of fact. For present purposes, I have pared down the phrasing because Pynchon's "amazement" at not only money but, as I show below, other elements of the economy find fuller expression elsewhere in the novel. But to continue with my listing, Pynchon evokes historical events which were primarily determined by economic processes such as "the Great Depression" (77). Not mere money but money aggregated in "funding" (77) or a "grant"(84) play an important role in the narrative. Pynchon inscribes into his text economic procedures and transactions such as "rate of exchange" (108). That he is in the know about how the nature of money value is changeable is evidenced by, for instance, the phrase "incommensurate with gold" (108). His sense of the economic past can be illustrated by the Dutch episode and the quip "tulips (a reigning madness of the time)" (108). There is talk of "fluctuations in currencies" (112), both in this anonymous form and designating national currencies: "Swiss francs" (261). Certain utterances are premonitory of developments that took place after the time frame of the novel: "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?"(258). Personifications of capital, to use a Marxist formulation, are alluded to both in generic form, "energetic businessman" (295) and in references to historical persons such as "Morgan money, there's Morgan money in Harvard" (332). Politico-economic formations of the time frame of the novel are named: "Red Army version of economics"

2 All further citations from *Gravity's Rainbow* will be followed by the page reference in parentheses.

(349) or "Reichsmarks" (371). Capital itself, the word that appears in my title, is referenced: "capital" (400). Colloquialisms for money are resorted to—"some dough" (439)—just as it appears in joking asides, as when Seaman Bodine denigrates a Red Cross volunteer girl: "wonderful organization that was charging fifteen cents for coffee and doughnuts, at the Battle of the fucking *Bulge*, if you really wanna get into who is stealing what from who" (600).

This is a mere sampling but suffices to show how the economic sphere—money and financing to start off with—is superabundant in Pynchon. References to money are not confined to this or that episode or to the delineation of this or that character but are strategically strewn throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. And yet, having documented the money nexus on the lexical level of the book, I ask, Can it be assigned a deeper significance? Doesn't the novel as a genre always register the economics of money in the attempt to reflect or, as Pynchon would probably prefer, construct a world? To a certain degree, I would answer "yes" to the question but add that the presence of money in narratives frequently goes unnoticed because readers have naturalized it. In other words, my groupings of money/finance references foregrounds a presence which readers frequently let pass under the screen of their attention. After foregrounding the economic lexis in Pynchon and pointing to its incidence, the next question to ask is whether its presence relates to thematic clusters which extant critical readings have designated as essential components of Pynchon's novel. This question can be placed in a different manner: what if the designated lexis is not epiphenomenal but relates to the more fundamental workings that ultimately produce *Gravity's Rainbow*? In what follows, in a series of subjunctive takes on the novel, I will show that the second part of the question is not a mere conjecture but rather a path of entry into the novel. Supplementing the lexical evidence, this will lend additional support to my economic reading.

4.

4a. To begin with, if *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel about war, which is saying the obvious, I would contend that Pynchon is less concerned with describing war in terms that we customarily associate with it, but gives expression to the rationale and causes of war that are usually given short shrift. This is adumbrated as early as the opening section of the novel, which describes characters and things as integral parts of a wartime, black-market, economy: "Pirate, driven to despair by the wartime banana shortage, decided to build a glass hothouse on the roof, and persuade a friend who flew the Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run to pinch him a sapling banana tree or two, in exchange for a German camera, should Pirate happen across one on his next mission by parachute" (5). A few pages later we read of "black-market marshmallows"(9) and of "waffle batter resilient with fresh hens' eggs, for which Osbie Feel has exchanged an equal number of golf balls, these being even rarer this winter than real eggs"(9). These early indications of economic activity reappear and are elaborated as the novel develops. One can justifiably say that Pynchon is less interested in the human cost of war than he is in narrating how the cunning of market actors utilizes the opportunities opened up by war and surmounts the inconveniences of warfare. This pretty much summarizes many of the plot lines that constitute *Gravity's Rainbow*.

But Pynchon does something more. He unequivocally states that war is embedded in economic concerns. The most emphatic statement regarding this is the following:

> Don't forget, the real business of the War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War . . . Best of all, mass death's a stimulus to just ordinary folks, little fellows, to try 'n' grab a piece of the Pie while they're still here to gobble it up. The true war is a celebration of markets. Organic markets, carefully styled "black" by the professionals, spring up everywhere. Scrip Sterling, Reichsmarks continue to move, severe as classical ballet, inside their antiseptic marble chambers. But out here, down here among the people, the true currencies come into being.

> So, Jews are negotiable. Every bit as negotiable as cigarettes, cunt, or Hershey bars. (105)

The identification of war with "markets," with the business of "buying and selling," needs little explication. The reference to the Jews and the metaphoric equivalences Pynchon signalizes at the end of the passage can almost be labeled as profane, inhuman blasphemy.

Regarding the war theme, I note that Pynchon wrote about it with hindsight. The two quotations that follow, and there are many others in the text, stem from the post-war economic present of his writing. The first reads thus: "He saw the war in progress as a world revolution, out of which would rise neither Red communism nor an unhindered Right, but a rational structure in which business would be the true, the rightful authority—a structure based, not surprisingly, on the one he'd engineered in Germany for fighting the World War" (165).

The anticipation of what peace will bring—"the rationalized power-ritual that will be the coming peace" (177)—projects the essence of the world in which Pynchon's war story continues to resonate. The phrase "power-ritual" prefigures the thematic with which I will conclude my analysis.

4b. Secondly, if *Gravity's Rainbow* thematizes technology, an abiding concern in Pynchon's writing, then that theme in *Gravity's Rainbow*, like in his other novels, implicates and is enmeshed in economic issues.[3] I begin with a quote that brings together war and technology and then inserts the agency of pecuniary factors into that assemblage:

> It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . . by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be

3 I deal at length with this in my reading of his last novel (2014c). The English translation of my Croatian title signalizes that enmeshment: "On the Bleeding Edge of Technology and the Economy."

> damned, the very life of ⌈insert name of Nation⌋ is at stake," but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more. . .* The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite. . . (521)

I have used this quote as epigraph to a paper discussing the place of the Gothic in American Studies (Grgas 2014a). Here I merely state that Pynchon depicts finance capital in the above passage as a vampire whose dynamic subsumes both war and technology. The interdependence of technology and the economy had been adumbrated in an earlier passage describing the German building of the rocket: "But others had the money, others gave the orders—trying to superimpose their lusts and bickerings on something that had its own vitality, on a technologique they'd never begin to understand"(401). A telling comparison appears in the same section when the scientists are depicted working on the construction of the rocket:

> They called it the magic number, and they meant it literally. As some gamblers on the stock market know when to place stop orders, feeling by instinct not the printed numbers but the *rates of change,* knowing from first and second derivatives in their skin when to come in, stay or go, so there are engineering reflexes turned always to know, at any moment, what, given the resources, can be embodied in working hardware—what is "feasible." (406)

I think that the references to "stock market," "orders," "rates of change," and "derivates" in this context are not incidental but point to the economic nexus I am foregrounding in my reading. The "magic number"—the serial number 00000 on the rocket—deserves, as I argue below, particular attention. As a matter of fact, an important part of my argument, one that I have not encountered elsewhere, hinges on the importance I assign to those zeroes. Here I merely draw the reader's attention to the fact that the "magic number" is obviously an instance of Pynchon's earlier mentioned "amazement" and

that the passage enacts a slippage from technology into the economy.

4c. Thirdly, if *Gravity's Rainbow* has a main character, if after reading it, we "can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more" (740), can a reading geared to economic concerns help us describe Slothrop? To answer this question, we can start with family genealogy. "In 1630,"Pynchon writes, ". . . Governor Winthrop came over to America on the *Arabella*, flagship of a great Puritan flotilla that year, on which the first American Slothrop had been a mess cook or something" (204). The Slothrop family's role in America's "errand in the wilderness" is shown to have been socially differentiated ("mess cook"). Furthermore, when Pynchon writes that "the anarchist persuasion" (268) appeals a little to Slothrop, he goes on to ruminate that it might relate to his pedigree: "Back when Shays fought the federal troops across Massachusetts, there were Slothrop Regulars patrolling Berkshire for the rebels, wearing sprigs of hemlock in their hats so you could tell them from the Government soldiers" (268). The 1786–7 uprising was of course sparked by issues of economic injustice and taxes. Pynchon's ruminations on that pedigree earlier in the novel are particularly telling:

> They began as fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon, went on into glassmaking, became selectmen, builders of tanneries, quarriers of marble. Country for miles around gone to necropolis, gray with marble dust, dust that was the breaths, the ghosts, of all those fake-Athenian monuments going up elsewhere across the Republic. Always elsewhere. The money seeping its way out through stock portfolios more intricate than any genealogy: what stayed at home in Berkshire went into timberland whose diminishing green reaches were converted acres at a clip into paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word. They were not aristocrats, no Slothrop ever made it into the Social Register or the Somerset Club—they carried on their enterprise in silence, assimilated in life into the dynamic that surrounded them thoroughly as in death they would be to churchyard earth. Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility, claimed the Slothrops, clasped them for good to the country's fate. But they did not prosper . . . still they would keep on. The tradition, for others, was clear, everyone knew—mine it out, work it,

> take all you can till it's gone then move on west, there's plenty more. But out of some reasoned inertia the Slothrops stayed east in Berkshire, perverse—close to the flooded quarries and logged-off hillsides they'd left like signed confessions across all that thatchy-brown, moldering witch country. The profits slackening, the family ever multiplying. Interest from various numbered trusts was still turned, by family banks down in Boston every second or third generation, back into yet another trust, in long rallentando, in infinite series just perceptibly, term by term, dying . . . but never quite to the zero. . . . The Depression, by the time it came, ratified what'd been under way. (27–28)

Pynchon's history of the Slothrop family is recounted here through the lens of economic processes and events. These constitute the milestones of its chronology. I quote this passage at length not only because it is so very pertinent to the economic topic but because I consider it the most usable and yet succinct passage in the archive of American literature for focusing on the sphere that I think American Studies have to prioritize. [4] Furthermore, it is significant that the outlined historical trajectory builds up to the Depression, an event that recurs in Pynchon's writing and that in *Gravity's Rainbow* plays a specific role.

That early in the novel, on page 28, one does not yet recognize the significance of the Depression in Tyrone Slothrop's narrative. It fully dawns upon the reader when Slothrop comes to the knowledge of what befell him:

> Nice way to find out your father made a deal 20 years ago with somebody to spring for your education. Come to think of it, Slothrop never could quite put the announcements, all through the Depression, of imminent family ruin, together with the comfort he enjoyed at Harvard. Well, now, what was the deal between his father and Bland? I've been sold, Jesus Christ I've been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef. (286)

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4 In my recent book on contemporary American Studies, I argue that the study of the United States has to recognize the centrality of the economy, of capital to be more precise, at its point of origin, during its history, and in contemporary America (2014b).

The motif of Slothrop having been used for pecuniary interests is repeated on page 444: "You sold me out." The insight that his life has been capitalized is a turning point in Slothrop's self-exploration. But I reiterate that those self-explorations are more than attributes of a character. They are centrifugal and, almost as a rule, include Pynchon's thoughts on America itself. Such is one of Slothrop's epiphanies in the Zone:

> Trees, now—Slothrop's intensely alert to trees, finally. When he comes in among the trees he will spend time touching them, studying them, sitting very quietly near them and understanding that each tree is a creature, carrying on its individual life, aware of what's happening around it, not just some hunk of wood to be cut down. Slothrop's family actually made its money killing trees, amputating them from their roots, chopping them up, grinding them to pulp, bleaching that to paper and getting paid for this with more money. (552–53)

This passage on "trees" can be put to use in American Studies. It subverts Perry Miller's notion of America as "nature's nation" and unearths how this ideologeme whitewashed historical evidence: America does not have a special relationship with nature but subjugates it and puts it to use for profit. Put otherwise, Pynchon inscribes historical evidence that shows how the nation betrayed its utopian origins.

There are other instances in the novel where Pynchon registers this betrayal. One is Pynchon's description of Slothrop's ancestor William's "pig operation." The position of the family in the American story is indicated when Pynchon writes that William "wasn't really in it so much for the money as just for the trip itself." Imagining his ancestor in relation to his society, Pynchon comments, "pigs out on the road, in company together, were everything Boston wasn't, and you can imagine what the end of the journey, the weighing, slaughter and dreary pigless return back up into the hills must've been like for William" (554–55). In the same section of the novel, Pynchon asks a poignant question: "Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from?" (556). That

Slothrop ought to be read less as a character than as a synecdoche through which Pynchon engages America itself can be read in the following description of Slothrop: "He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose—but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go" (623).

4d. Fourthly, if, to use Pynchon's phrasing, *Gravity's Rainbow* cannot "let go" of America, does the American theme connect to the economic nexus that I have been excavating? Obviously, the previous section was not only the story of Slothrop but America's story as well. Let me add a few references that show how Pynchon's America has more to do with economics than with anything else. The first is historical: "'It is gone where the woodbine twineth.' Exactly what Jubilee Jim Fisk told the Congressional committee investigating his and Jay Gould's scheme to corner gold in 1869" (438). The second is Pynchon's reference to America's most powerful icon: "There is a theory going around that the U.S.A. was and still is a gigantic Masonic plot under the ultimate control of the group known as the Illuminati. It is difficult to look for long at the strange single eye crowning the pyramid which is found on every dollar bill and not begin to believe the theory, a little" (587). That dollar bill enables the "primal American act," the act of paying, in which the American officer Marvy, for example, is "more deeply himself than when coming, or asleep, or even dying" (605). Economic concerns are also included in Mom Slothrop's letter to Ambassador Joe Kennedy: "We've *got* to modernize in Massachusetts, or it'll just keep getting worse and worse. They're supposed to be taking a strike vote here next week. Wasn't the WLB set up to prevent just that? It isn't starting to break down, is it, Joe? . . . Sometimes I think—ah, Joe, I think they're pieces of the Heavenly City falling down" (682).This lament, an example of what Bercovitch has labeled as the "American jeremiad," shows that the schemata of American Studies, including the "city upon a hill" myth, factors into the horizon of ideas through which Pynchon presents the American experience. Thus, if we restrict our search for a usable past that would be pertinent to the discipline of American Studies, there is no doubt that *Gravi-*

ty's Rainbow is an important part of that past. Self-representations of the United States as a nation on an "errand" or as "nature's nation," the allusions to the "frontier thesis," the American jeremiad as well as the "city upon a hill"—all of these are revisited by Pynchon. In that context, one can say that Pynchon deploys the economic theme in order to explode these self-representations. But my reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* did not solely seek to assimilate the novel into disciplinary interests. On the contrary, the focus of my reading has been to foreground a problematic in the novel that undermines the *very raison d'être* of identity studies, since that problematic is more fundamental than identity, whether it be of the individual or of the nation. At a time in history when both of these are being undermined, when as a consequence we have lost the capacity to understand what is unfolding, the retrieval of the said problematic in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be of use in our epistemological floundering.

5.

At one point in the novel, Pynchon writes,

> It was widely believed in those days that, behind the War—all the death, savagery, and destruction—lay the Fuhrer-principle. But if personalities could be replaced by abstractions of power, if techniques developed by the corporations could be brought to bear, might not nations live rationally? One of the dearest Postwar hopes: that there should be no room for a terrible disease like charisma . . . that its rationalization should proceed while we have the time and resources. . . (81)

This is another instance in the novel where Pynchon is writing his present into the past as a hypothetical possibility. The reader knows that, in the period that ensued after WWII, "abstractions of power" and "techniques developed by corporations" did replace "charisma." They of course still hold sway. I would wager to say that, in the novel itself, those "abstractions of power" had already found embodiment in entities such as "IG itself, Interessengemeinschaft, a fellowship of interest" (164), or, in a more generically named

entity such as "the Firm," which, "it is well known, will use anyone, traitors, murderers, perverts, Negroes, even women, to get what They want" (32–33). Put otherwise, the future projections that Pynchon inscribes into the war were prefigured in the forces that brought the war about in the first place.

After I documented the economic presence in Pynchon by mustering lexical evidence and then by connecting this evidence to some of the crucial thematic clusters in the novel, in the above postulating of a reader "in the know," I might be accused of interpretative overkill. Recognizing that possibility, I nevertheless believe that my deductions from the novel or, as others would say, my graftings onto the novel are warranted not only by Pynchon's multi-layered complexity, but by exigencies of the moment. Leaving aside these exigencies for the moment, I note that, when we choose a particular approach, it foregrounds and priorities elements in the object of study. The anxiety of interpretation stems from the dilemma of whether we are bringing to light something inscribed in a text or whether we are reading into the text our own concerns and interests. In the preface to his book *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (1987), which will serve me to propose a reading of the rocket in Pynchon's novel, Brian Rotman is caught in a quandary regarding his preoccupation with his subject: "Is there a zero-phenomenon out there, some actual preoccupation with an extreme or terminal state, with the condition of being a cypher, manifested in these titles, or have I merely sensitised myself to any mention of zero, zeroing in on zero, obsessively foregrounding it out of the cultural noise?" (ix). I share Rotman's dilemma and paraphrase it as follows: is there an economic phenomenon in Pynchon, or have I sensitized myself to any mention of it in the text? I hope that the answer to the first part of the question will be affirmative, although I cannot wholly deny the possibility that the second part is the case. That second caveat ought to be kept in mind, particularly as I embark on the next step of my argument.

If up to now I have found corroboration for the economic theme in the novel by citing passages where it is explicitly named, in what follows I incorporate the rocket into these considerations or, more specifically, its "magic number." As quoted above, that number does at one point in the novel

connect with "gamblers on the stock market,""stop orders," "*rates of change*," and "derivatives" (406). Arguably it can be objected that I am assigning too much significance here to an aside comment on a phenomenon which recurs throughout the novel. In my defense, and taking up present exigencies, I will say that the stratospheric numbers spawned by today's finance have "sensitized" me to the serial number on Pynchon's rocket. Brian Rotman's reading of the zero phenomenon gave me the theoretical framework.

Needless to say, the rocket is an integral and important part of the war and technology motifs in *Gravity's Rainbow*. As Dan Geddes has noted, it is a part of Pynchon's take on "cartels" and "multinational corporations" (Geddes). I have remarked upon these economic entities and draw attention to the serial number "00000." Rotman's discussion of the "semiotics of zero" provides a clue for how to discuss this number within the economic framework. Rotman summarizes his argument as follows:

> certain crucial changes in the codes of number, visual depiction, and monetary exchange that occurred as part of the discontinuity in Western culture known as the Renaissance—the introduction of *zero* in the practice of arithmetic, the *vanishing point* in perspective art, and *imaginary money* in economic exchange—are three isomorphic manifestations, different, but in some formal semiotic sense equivalent models, of the same signifying configuration. (1)

Of the three domains in which he discusses zero, the one that is most pertinent to my discussion is, of course, money. I hold that "imaginary money" finds a correlate in Pynchon's novel in the serial number of the rocket. This "meta-sign" disrupts, as Rotman writes, "the code in question by becoming the origin of a new, radically different mode of sign production; one whose novelty is reflected in the emergence of a semiotic subject able to signify *absence*" (57). I am proposing the possibility that Pynchon registered the mutation of money that occurred during the time he was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. I am referring to the "Nixon shock," which brought to an end the

dollar's convertibility to gold or, to use Rotman again, inaugurated its "loss of anteriority" (57). If this seems far-fetched, I remind the reader that the fourth section of *Gravity's Rainbow* is headed by the simple epigraphical quotation "What," which has been attributed to Richard M. Nixon. More importantly, in *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon returned to Nixon, and there he placed strong emphasis on what transpired in the sphere of money during Nixon's term in office.

It would be surprising if Pynchon had not taken cognizance of the epochal change wrought by Nixon's decision. Ole Bjerg gauges its significance as follows: "When the US dollar and consequently all the other major currencies pegged to the US dollar was taken off the gold standard in 1971, this was not a temporary exception but rather the institution of a new permanent order. The collapse of the Bretton Woods system signifies a paradigm shift in the history of money" (155). If we now go back to the inventory of money references strewn throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, we can supplement the syntagm "incommensurate with gold" (108), which, I am proposing, registered that new money regime, with other phrasings such as "money would lose its reality" (613), "in the morning the cash multiplied tenfold" (625), and "funny money" (711). Put otherwise, if we contextualize Pynchon's novel into the time of its writing, it is warrantable to argue that it shows a seepage of then contemporary monetary developments into its reconstruction of history. In that light, it can be argued that in choosing it, Pynchon was aware that the "0" is, as Rotman states, "the urmark of absence" (59) and that he employed it knowingly at a point of time marked by "the ontological abuse involved in the printing of money unbacked by specie" (91).

Before my concluding remarks, I want to show how the use to which I have put *Gravity's Rainbow* can be broadened to encompass postmodernism itself, a label under which it has been frequently subsumed. In doing so, I am taking issue with Bachmann-Medick, who, as we saw, contends that the "fundamental reassessments" undertaken by recent turns in theory replaced, amongst other things, economistic explanations. Are economic concerns wholly absent from these turns? It is symptomatic that Rotman, in his last

chapter, entitled "Absence of an Origin," goes to Derrida, Baudrillard, and other poststructuralists. There, he is answering a question he posed at the beginning of the book. After explicating the "new global order of money signs," he asks, "Now since money is the dominating source of 'value', the image of images, the only absolute given signifying credence in this culture, the question arises whether there ought to be isomorphic patterns, changes parallel to that experienced by money within other contemporary codes" (5–6). This question turns out to be rhetorical, and he convincingly shows that "isomorphic patterns"—or, as he phrases it elsewhere, a "structural morphism" (103)—exist between the mutations of money and other "codes." Of course, he is not alone in recognizing this isomorphism.

In their book *Cartographies of the Absolute* (2015), Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle write:

> One may even see money's hegemony as leading, especially with its detachment from a standard or base (in gold, namely), to a general "ungrounding" of representation, from floating currencies to floating signifiers—a theme evident in the concern with credit-money in the philosophical writings of Lyotard and Deleuze & Guattari in the days of the "Nixon Shock." (38)

My citing of Toscano and Kinkle is not fortuitous. Their succinct statement exemplifies how issues that I have brought up in my reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* are of immediate concern. They also indicate how poststructuralist thought and, I would add, postmodernist narratives, with which Pynchon's novel is frequently grouped, always already address questions of capital. To generalize, I think that those who propose that there is a homology between the "general 'ungrounding' of representation" in poststructuralisms and the mutation of money that we are living through are doing a service to the authors mentioned by Toscano and Kinkle. They show how their thinking provides a usable past in our perplexing present. To return to Pynchon, I think that he provides a similar past not if we confine our readings to the "ungrounding" strategies of his narratives but if we see these as gesturing to what I hope to

have shown always looms in the background, sometimes named, sometimes alluded to, but most frequently presupposed as its structuring core. To return to my title, that background presence is capital, capital in history, capital in action, capital as the ultimate horizon of the human world.

6.

Of course, this is not to say that Pynchon is an exception in dealing with this theme. It can hardly be so if, as Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler hold in their book *Capital as Power* (2009), capitalism "seems to be everywhere":

> The newspapers, radio, television and the internet overflow with talk of neoliberal globalization and crisis, imperialism and post-colonialism, financialization and government intervention. Experts preach the gospel of capitalist productivity, while alter-globalization protestors blame the IMF and transnational companies for many of our social ills. Some view capitalist growth as a magic bullet; for others it spells ecological disaster. (1–2)

They go on to contend that no aspect of capitalism seems to escape debate. Returning to Pynchon, one can say that his oeuvre has addressed every aspect referred to here. The historical scope of his work has dealt with stages of the development capitalism from its mercantilist period (*Mason & Dixon*), to the heyday of industrial capitalism (*Against the Day*), to today's finance capitalism (*Bleeding Edge*). But amidst this omnipresence of capitalism, Nitzan and Bichler note that something really important is missing: "In all the commotion, we seem to have lost sight of the concept that matters most: capital itself" (2). In their analysis, Nitzan and Bichler voice a disaffection with both neoclassical and Marxist thought: "Political economy, both mainstream and critical, lacks a *coherent* conception of capital. And it lacks such a theory because it deflects the issue of power. The liberals analyze capital *without* power, while the Marxists explain capital *and* power—but what we need is to theorize capital *as* power" (64). I bring this up because I think, if

political economy has proven unsatisfactory, perhaps a hearing should be given to literature in order to fathom what capital is. Pynchon, in my opinion, is high on the list of those writers who have engaged the problem of capital. To return to Nitzan and Bichler's critique, I wager to say that, in all of Pynchon's work, power is a constitutive force. I ask the reader to recall the prophesy that has already been cited: "the rationalized power-ritual that will be the coming peace" (177).

However the power of capital is conceived, the reader will find in Pynchon a rendering of its dynamics, its embodiments, its historical trajectory, its price, and its effects. What the reader will not find in Pynchon is a celebration of capital as power. However, neither will the reader find a promise of transcending that power. This is precisely the reason I believe Pynchon engages capital in a more convincing fashion than those activists who need to reduce its complexity in order to deal with it. To show how this is rendered in the text, I refer the reader to the following passage from the "Byron the Bulb" section of *Gravity's Rainbow*:

> Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don't last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. (654–55)

If one can speak in terms of "truth" when addressing capital, Pynchon here is fathoming its horrendous power and consequences. That insight can be put to little practical use. Its "use-value" is no more than an abetment to thinking. In its essence, that knowledge is tragic. It finds utterance in the following: "They will use us. We will help legitimize them, though. They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical. . . ." (713).

To conclude: if we do use Pynchon to map our present circumstances, he constantly warns us that this does not mean that it will preclude our being used as a dividend by the powers that be. The Preterite, and these grow in number from day to day, watch in awe the proliferation of the number on the rocket falling "absolutely and forever without sound" (760) and read the final dash in *Gravity's Rainbow* not as an invitation to sing but as a gesture commanding silence.

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