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**Abstract:**

Among the cultural texts used by Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) figures the classic fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*. It is here that the author initially develops the theme of bad parents and victimized children, a subject elaborated throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. By placing the fairy tale in a broader framework of Teutonic mythology, with its heathen gods and goddesses, Pynchon demonstrates the workings of cultural conditioning not only on individual characters, but also on narratives initially unfit in the dominant culture. The theme of *Hansel and Gretel* refers to one of the central questions of *Gravity's Rainbow* as well, that of the possibility of freedom for a culturally conditioned entity, be it an individual or a narrative.

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# “The Movies Had Not Prepared Him For This Teutonic Version Here”: The Significance of the *Hansel and Gretel* Fairy Tale in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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Anahita Rouyan

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Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) is a novel informed by many diverse disciplines and cultural texts, among them the German folk tale *Hansel and Gretel*. This article argues that Pynchon’s representation of the fairy tale explicitly refers to its psychoanalytical reading offered by Julius Heuscher in his influential study entitled *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*.<sup>1</sup> It is in his most significant rendition of *Hansel and Gretel*, the Oven game, that Pynchon encapsulates the theme of bad parents and victimized children, a subject elaborated throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Tom LeClair notices that the themes of dominance and victimization, introduced through Pynchon’s rendition of the fairy tale, “are some of the essential emotional and narrative coordinates in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.”<sup>2</sup> The tale’s involvement with this topic has been pointed to by other literary critics, who emphasize the Oven’s sadomasochistic character as one of the many manifestations of violence in the novel.<sup>3</sup>

However, no considerable attention has been paid to the motivation behind Pynchon’s take on the narrative of *Hansel and Gretel*. In his essay on the significance of the fairy tale in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Jean-Marie Léonet argues that Pynchon manipulates the plot of the story “in a way that emphasizes the fundamental change that has occurred in human history,”<sup>4</sup> which he considers to have been powered by the introduction of quantum physics and relativity theory.<sup>5</sup> My article attempts to explain Pynchon’s rendition of the *Hansel and Gretel* tale in a radically different framework: Teutonic mythology. By locating the fairy tale in the context of the German pagan belief system, with numerous allusions to its heathen gods and goddesses, Pynchon demonstrates the workings of a dominant culture on elements incompatible with its ideology. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the misrepresentations of Germanic heathen figures are a direct result of the interactions between Teutonic

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mythology and Christianity, a belief system Pynchon depicts as prevalent in the cultural reality of his novel.

It is worth noting that the story of *Hansel and Gretel* has been itself manipulated to fit the purpose of a certain ideology. In his study of European fairy tales, Jack Zipes exposes the Grimm brothers' motive behind collecting the tales to have been development of "a strong national bourgeoisie by unraveling their ties to Germanic traditions and social rites," and linking "the beliefs and behavior of characters in the folk tales to the cultivation of bourgeois norms."<sup>6</sup> *Hansel and Gretel* can be therefore considered a narrative produced within and for a specific ideology, modern German nationalism. The historical context of the fairy tale further emphasizes its involvement with the themes of victimization and dominance mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, linking *Hansel and Gretel* to one of the central concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow*: the possibility of freedom from authority.

### The Concept of Freedom in *Gravity's Rainbow*

As noted by other critics,<sup>7</sup> some of the fundamental concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow* are evidently intertwined with the counter-cultural discourse of the 1960s and its characteristic values and anxieties. Even though the novel takes place during the Second World War, it is replete with references to cultural concepts of the Sixties, with a particular emphasis placed on the idea of freedom from established repressive agencies that overshadow the reality of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The counter-cultural notion of freedom was informed by the idea of a "private space,"<sup>8</sup> which, according to Herbert Marcuse, could be recovered as "oppositional consciousness,"<sup>9</sup> allowing for the formation of a new society that would embrace values Marcuse considered to have been eliminated from the postindustrial social dimension, "freedom of thought, speech, and conscience."<sup>10</sup> Correlative to the preoccupation with freedom was an attitude of rebellion against capitalism, combined with a feeling of paranoia originating chiefly from the politics of the Cold War.<sup>11</sup> The paranoid mode of thought accompanying the search for individual freedom can be considered a predominant mindset of characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>12</sup> Timothy Melley suggests that at the time of the novel's publication "the idea of social control comes as a profound revelation and conjures up an empire of conspiracy, a vision of the world in which individuals are forever manipulated by secret agents, hidden persuaders and malevolent organizations."<sup>13</sup> The power of the integrated forms of social control as envisioned by Melley is best articulated in *Gravity's Rainbow* by Webley Silvernail in a speech to his lab rats: "I would set you free, if I knew how. But it isn't free out here. All the

animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few."<sup>14</sup>

The guiding principle of systems of social control in *Gravity's Rainbow* is rationalism, and the novel connects the rational idea of progress to the emergent restraining social structures: "One of the dearest Postwar hopes: [...] that [society's] rationalization should proceed while we had the time and resources."<sup>15</sup> As a reaction against the repressive consequences of social advancement, such as the homogenization of society, various counter-cultural groups would often stage irrational and humorous performances, intended to expose the rigidity and danger associated with the corporate state.<sup>16</sup> A similar attitude surfaces in the novel, when Pirate Prentice describes to Roger Mexico the nature of the Counterforce: "They're the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements. Don't we . . . Mexico?"<sup>17</sup> In Pynchon's fiction, the structure exercising power over the characters, the corporations, the market, and even the war, emerges as a mysterious entity called "They," the "System," or the "Structure," an agency whose degree of control seems infinite. This is the system of tension and conflict in *Gravity's Rainbow* in which the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* acquires a prominent significance as a narrative featuring themes of freedom and domination.

## Hansel, Gretel and Blicero

*Hansel and Gretel* is directly alluded to four times in the novel. The earliest mention of the fairy tale appears in episode 14 of "Beyond the Zero," where Katje Borgesius is suddenly reminded of a relationship she used to be involved in when working as a spy in Holland. She played a game called the Oven or "Der Kinderofen"<sup>18</sup> with Lieutenant Weissmann/Captain Blicero and a young man Gottfried in a forest house located near a rocket launch site. Combined with images of Katje and Gottfried styled as children "out of old Märchen"<sup>19</sup> and submitted to Blicero's will, the elements such as a house in the forest and an oven clearly point to the German fairy tale. A scene closely related to the "Oven game" can be found in episode 17 of "In the Zone" with Miklos Thanatz and Greta Erdmann, often referred to as Gretel, holding hands and walking like a pair of lost children through the forest in the Lüneburg Heath, the location of Blicero's firing of the mysterious 00000 rocket.<sup>20</sup> Another, more overt, allusion to *Hansel and Gretel* appears in section 21 of the first chapter, where Roger Mexico takes Jessica Swanlake and her family to a Christmas pantomime based on the fairy tale. The play is brought to a standstill because of a sudden rocket blast, and Gretel, instead of pushing the witch into the oven, starts to sing a disturbing song.<sup>21</sup> The last equally explicit reference to

the fairy tale is presented in episode 11 of “In the Zone” in the description of Zwölfkinder, a “children’s resort”<sup>22</sup> and theme park where Franz Pökler is waiting for the yearly meeting with his daughter Ilse, arranged by his supervisor, Lieutenant Weissmann. One of the ruined decorations shows a frozen scene from *Hansel and Gretel* with the witch poking the “corroded Hansel” and Gretel staring at them with “eyes lock wide open” with fear.<sup>23</sup> This image echoes the Christmas pantomime, “frozen in perpetual arrest”<sup>24</sup> due to the rocket blast, in both cases emphasizing the helplessness of the children and the triumph of the evil witch.

One can notice that, excluding the pantomime, all instances of *Hansel and Gretel* in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are connected to the figure of Weissmann/Blicero, who always plays the part of the controlling subject. This character is quite peculiar; even though we almost never encounter him directly in the novel, he can still be considered an “individual character”<sup>25</sup> like Tyrone Slothrop and is granted a historical life within and between Pynchon’s novels, as he appears in *V.* as well. In the novel he functions like a ghostly presence, “the Zone’s worst specter,”<sup>26</sup> surfacing in the memories of characters acquainted with him in the past, such as Katje, Gottfried, Enzian, Thanatz or Greta Erdmann. Molly Hite considers him “the archetypal Aryan” and “an avatar of Nazi consciousness,”<sup>27</sup> and most critics agree with this view, adding that he is an embodiment of “the colonial mind,”<sup>28</sup> maniacally seeking “a way to transcend morality and history.”<sup>29</sup> Although some point to the positive value ascribed to Blicero as a “prophet,”<sup>30</sup> the majority of criticism evaluates him negatively, and the reader, aware of the close relation between the rocket industries that Blicero represents and the terror of the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp rocket facilities, will do so as well. Blicero's connection with the technological enterprise realizing destructive purposes of the corporate “System” places him in the role of “one of the novel's most apparent villains.”<sup>31</sup> This article argues that Blicero's malevolent nature becomes highly ambivalent as he, guided by his growing fascination with Teutonic mythology, strays from the path of technological progress, culminating in Blicero's final project of firing the Rocket ultimately expressing his desire for freedom from cultural premises that curb his mythical vision of reality.

## The Witch Figure

In his reworking of *Hansel and Gretel*, Pynchon concentrates on the dominating role of the witch, most explicitly represented in the Oven game in the character of Blicero.<sup>32</sup> The witch of the Oven is, however, just one of the witches in the web of themes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, another example being

Geli Tripping, who not only attends Walpurgisnacht, but effectively enchants Tchitcherine, thus preventing him from killing his brother, Enzian.<sup>33</sup> A different witch referred to in the novel connects the fairy tale to American history; when Slothrop and Geli are waiting on the top of the Brocken mountain for the sunrise, the narrator exposes one of Slothrop's ancestors, Amy Sprue, to have been a witch tried and hanged during the Salem trials.<sup>34</sup> Even Katje Borgesius is once referred to as a "rain-witch"<sup>35</sup> or "Domina Nocturna,"<sup>36</sup> but her involvement in the re-enactment of the fairy tale clearly places her in the position of the victimized child. The only witch in *Gravity's Rainbow* resembling the repulsive and terrifying figure from *Hansel and Gretel* is Greta Erdmann. In section 16 of "In the Zone" Slothrop meets Ensign Morituri, who discloses the details of her past in Bad Karma, where she, convinced of her own Jewish identity, murdered Jewish children.<sup>37</sup> In the passage describing her confrontation with a boy, she calls herself "the Shekhinah, queen, daughter, bride, and mother of God."<sup>38</sup> Ascribing divine attributes to herself, she emerges as a vengeful, cruel and powerful figure, a nightmarish witch. In his psychoanalytical study, Julius Heuscher maintains that the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* is in fact a dramatized version of the bad mother,<sup>39</sup> who in the fairy tale acts as the main cause of the dangerous situation the children find themselves in. Pynchon connects those two elements in the character of Greta Erdmann, who, apart from acting as a genuine witch figure, is also one of the most striking examples of bad mothers of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The theme of parents as a source of the victimization of children is one of many facets of the novel's general desire for freedom, and it is actually introduced through one of Pynchon's renditions of *Hansel and Gretel*, the pantomime from the first chapter, "Beyond the Zero." Apart from Roger and Jessica, one of the main characters in this section is Jessica's cousin, Penelope, who is taken to see the Christmas show, which is brutally halted by a nearby rocket blast. Following Gretel's disturbing song "of children who are learning to die," Penelope has a vision of her deceased father turned into a demon and instantly recognizes his ominous intention; "You want to possess me."<sup>40</sup> What follows is a passage in which the narrator explicitly states: "mothers and fathers are conditioned into deliberately dying in certain preferred ways [...] leaving their children alone in the forest."<sup>41</sup> It seems that they do far more than just abandoning their offspring, since there exists some kind of a conspiracy of fathers "all covering for each other."<sup>42</sup> This theme is brought up again in the long and bizarre section 6 of "The Counterforce," which includes an explicit allusion to "the Father-conspiracy."<sup>43</sup> The ultimate realization of victimization within the patriarchal structure is the finale of the

Oven-game, where Blicero, a father figure to Gottfried,<sup>44</sup> sacrifices him in the firing of the 00000 rocket.

## The Bad Mother/Witch Trope

Pynchon uses *Hansel and Gretel* to introduce the theme of victimization of children by both parents, but in the fairy tale it is the mother who persuades the father to leave their children in the forest. In Heuscher’s psychoanalytical reading of the fairy tale, the awareness of their mother’s malevolent plan induces in the children a feeling of rejection, which they subsequently deny by attempting to find their way home after being abandoned.<sup>45</sup> Confronted with the “*physical* world and its deprivations,”<sup>46</sup> the scared children long for the pleasure and simplicity of their home and thus psychologically regress, finally encountering the witch, who is “clearly a regressive image of the frustrating mother.”<sup>47</sup> The connection of the bad mother and the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* is further strengthened by the fact that after the witch is pushed into the oven, the mother disappears from the narrative as well, as once the children find their way back home, they learn of their mother’s death.<sup>48</sup> The link between mothers and witches is exploited by Pynchon in his numerous representations of the trope of the bad mother, most notably by the character of Greta Erdmann, where he emphasizes the nightmarish and threatening nature of this figure.

The theme appears early in the novel as “big mean mother”<sup>49</sup> and is developed in the pantomime Gretel’s song in which she points to the danger associated with this figure: “Oh your mother’s a big fat machine gun.”<sup>50</sup> This aspect is also referred to in a later song, which, by including the lyrics “the beating Mutti gave to me,”<sup>51</sup> points to the scene on the Anubis ship where Greta Erdmann and her daughter Bianca give a violent show, “playing stage mother and reluctant child.”<sup>52</sup> Apparently it is not only fathers that conspire in the reality of *Gravity’s Rainbow* but also mothers, as the reader is informed in the theory of the “Mother Conspiracy” formulated by one of the young characters. Otto claims that every year mothers meet in order to exchange information on the successful victimization of their children, be it recipes or key phrases to make the children feel guilty.<sup>53</sup> The most radical view of mothers is, however, expressed by Leni Pöckler, who asserts that they belong to “a civil-service category” and essentially “work for Them! They’re the policemen of the soul . . .”<sup>54</sup> Greta Erdmann embodies this idea entirely since she intends to market her daughter, Bianca, in the film industry.<sup>55</sup>

Mothers as agents of the “They-system” can also be considered relevant to the story of Byron the Bulb. If this narrative is an account of an individual

trapped in the "Structure," than the mother should act as his primary connection to it. As the reader is informed in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "in Germany the word for electric socket is also the word for Mother,"<sup>56</sup> therefore Byron "will be screwed into mother (Mutter) after mother, as the female threads of German light bulb sockets are known" and will never be able to leave the "System."<sup>57</sup> The impossibility of freedom from the authority of the mother/witch is affirmed by the scene from the Christmas pantomime, in which Gretel does not push the witch into the oven, paralleling Katje's reluctance in disclosing Blicero's location to the English.<sup>58</sup> Allen Tilley notes that Pynchon's representation of *Hansel and Gretel* does not realize its psychological function and prevents the children from separating from the mother, thus imprisoning them in the role of victims.<sup>59</sup> Mothers are children's primary sources of socialization, which in terms of *Gravity's Rainbow* can be interpreted as a form of conditioning one cannot escape from. Apart from emphasizing the role of mothers in this regard, Pynchon associates their unreliability as guardians and the symbolic behavior ascribed to the mother/witch in the psychoanalytical reading of *Hansel and Gretel*.

## The Oven

Returning to the most significant reenactment of *Hansel and Gretel*, the Oven game, the nature of Blicero's character as the dominating figure of a witch remains to be discussed. A striking feature of Blicero is his double identity; he is Lieutenant Weissmann, "a brand-new military type, part salesman, part scientist"<sup>60</sup> working in the V2 rocket industry, and Captain Blicero, a code name he, "enchanted," adopted for the SS operations.<sup>61</sup> The power of his second identity is more prominent in *Gravity's Rainbow* as we know almost nothing about Weissmann; he only appears in the memories of two characters: Franz Pökler, who used to be his subordinate in rocket batteries such as Kummersdorf, and Oberst Enzian, who knew him from the period of German colonization of South-West Africa. The etymology of both "Weissmann" and "Blicero" points to the color white, thus providing a link to Teutonic mythology, which is revealed as Blicero's obsession.<sup>62</sup> It refers to "Dominus Blicero," a Teutonic "Lord Death" in a shape of a skeleton, reported by Grimm to denote "the pale (bleich), or the grinning (bleckend)."<sup>63</sup> This color is a recurrent feature of the scenes including Blicero, especially the final firing of the 00000 rocket, which is compared to a "giant white fly," and the adornment of Gottfried, who is as if married to the rocket, dressed in "white lace [...] white satin slippers with white bows" and "gagged with a white kid glove."<sup>64</sup> This Teutonic character of "Blicero" has been gradually taking over Weissmann; it is "Blicero" after all that Katje recalls from the Oven.<sup>65</sup> Blicero's



doings are inspired by his developing obsession with Teutonic mythology, and consequently his role in the Oven game can be interpreted in this framework.

The distribution of power in the Oven game is clear: it is Blicero who dominates over Katje’s Gretel and Gottfried’s Hansel. Contrary to some opinions,<sup>66</sup> neither of the characters finds their submission unwelcome, since for all parties involved it provides a “shelter” against the unbearable “War, the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency.”<sup>67</sup> Denis Crowley remarks that in the Oven “the terror of the war’s violence is formalized into the controlled violence,”<sup>68</sup> a view easily ascribable to Gottfried, who enjoys his confinement and knows “that captive children are always freed in the moment of maximum danger.”<sup>69</sup> Blicero himself “trusts, perhaps only, by now, in the form, this out of all Märchen und Sagen [...] that this charmed house in the forest will be preserved” and that “no bombs could ever fall here by accident.”<sup>70</sup> According to Thomas Moore, Blicero does, however, contemplate a vision of the rocket falling down on the place it had been fired from, “destroying its own rationalized and rationalizing creators,”<sup>71</sup> endorsing his idea that “every true god must be both organizer and destroyer.”<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey Baker remarks that Blicero’s entanglement with the notion of destruction represents “death-directed idealist tradition in European thought,”<sup>73</sup> the Oven becoming what Robert Arlett calls “a primary symbol of the surrealistic drive toward destruction of western civilization.”<sup>74</sup> Only Molly Hite acknowledges the fact that the Oven game allows the realization of two desires deemed by Herbert Marcuse as forbidden and repressed in the postindustrial society, Eros (pleasure principle) and Thanatos (death-drive).<sup>75</sup> This view is in line with the argument of the present study, which aims to offer an interpretation of Blicero as highly ambiguous character, by demonstrating that the subversive nature of his “perverse fantasy”<sup>76</sup> matches his gradual immersion in Teutonic mythology. Through his departure from the conventional plot of the fairy tale and exposition of its inherent violence, Blicero exercises a relation essential to the “System,” the dominance/submission being the “resources it needs for its very survival.”<sup>77</sup> His reenactment of *Hansel and Gretel* is subversive to the system, which “needs our submission so that it may remain on power” and “our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game.”<sup>78</sup>

Blicero’s obsession with German paganism indicates that the significance of the Oven will depend on the logic of this system. The connection of this character to Germanic mythology, already mentioned in regard to Weissmann’s nickname, is even more evident in the first description of Blicero in the memories of Katje, who initially recalls his “long, terrible [...] yellow teeth.”<sup>79</sup> In *Teutonic Mythology*, Jacob Grimm includes this feature in his

description of a heathen semi-goddess, the fair and beautiful dame Holda, who sometimes "instead of her divine shape, assumes the appearance of an *ugly old woman*" or, as in one of the nursery tales, "an old witch with long teeth."<sup>80</sup> This figure is mentioned several times in *Gravity's Rainbow*; one of the passages in section 7 of "In the Zone" describes a "white woman" who is at the same time "the beautiful maiden" and "the ugly old woman with long teeth who found you in that dream and said nothing."<sup>81</sup> She has certainly found Gottfried, as he "dreams often these days of a very pale woman who wants him, who never speaks," and Blicero; "the Captain's seen her, of course."<sup>82</sup> Earlier in the passage Katje mentions Blicero's "witch-paranoia"<sup>83</sup> and Blicero himself elaborates on it, as the section is narrated from his point of view. He is "bewildered" that the "Witch" "should coexist in the same body as himself" and he does not understand the logic of this construct, "the hunger that defines him/her."<sup>84</sup>

Blicero's submission to the will of the "Witch" problematizes his dominating nature in the Oven game, as well as in the universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*, placing him in the role of "as much victim as victimizer."<sup>85</sup> Blicero's lack of control is already signaled in the Oven game but gains more significance in the development of his other project, the firing of the Rocket, all the while guided by German paganism symbolized by the "Witch." His witch is dame Holda, presented by Grimm as a "being of the sky" that "drives about in a wagon,"<sup>86</sup> an image corresponding to Blicero's "imagination [...] wholly of sky"<sup>87</sup> and his involvement with rockets, technological devices associated with the sky. I have already established that dame Holda may appear in two forms, and it is evident that Blicero is only able to connect with the "dark and dreadful" one, dreaming of her "kind and gracious" aspect.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, Grimm remarks that in Teutonic popular legends and nursery tales it is the latter, the beautiful and fair version of dame Holda, that is usually presented.<sup>89</sup> A possible explanation for such a distorted representation can be found in the novel itself.

## Teutonic Misrepresentations

Dame Holda is explicitly referred to twice in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in sections 2 and 6 of "In the Zone," which concentrate on Slothrop's adventures in former Germany. In both cases dame Holda is placed next to Venus; "Venus, Frau Holda, her sexual delights"<sup>90</sup> and "some Frau Holda, some Venus in some mountain,"<sup>91</sup> linking dame Holda to one of the myths often alluded to in the novel, that of Tannhäuser, "the troubadour who succumbs to the temptations of sensual pleasure and spends one year underground with Venus,"<sup>92</sup> thereby

causing his damnation. Weisenburger claims that some versions of the myth replaced Venus with dame Holda.<sup>93</sup> This assertion can be confirmed in Grimm, where he points to a direct connection between dame Holda and Venus, specifically to the fact that at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century the former was reinterpreted as the latter, losing the beauty and innocence in favor of devilish allure.<sup>94</sup> The source of this change was the influence of an established belief system, Christianity, which absorbed and gradually distorted the heathen figures and myths.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Grimm considers the tale of Tannhäuser as a reflection of “a hankering after old heathenism, and the harshness of the Christian clergy.”<sup>96</sup> In this story Venus is the cause of Tannhäuser’s damnation, therefore the Christianized dame Holda, a figure parallel to Venus and opposed to the heathen fair goddess, acquires a negative meaning as well.

The reality of *Gravity’s Rainbow* evidently does not allow the appearance of dame Holda as a beautiful and powerful figure; instead it distorts her image and obliges Blicero to connect exclusively with the dark aspect of the goddess. The cause of such a state is presented in the novel through multiple references to Christianity as a dominant cultural paradigm in Western Europe. Blicero himself admits to having been “brought up into a Christian ambience,”<sup>97</sup> a condition he is departing from through his obsession with Teutonic mythology, whereby he “wired his nerves back into the pre-Christian earth [...] into the Urstoff of the primitive German.”<sup>98</sup> The dominance of Christianity is demonstrated again in the story Thanatz recounts to Slothrop, where he admits: “You and I perhaps have become over the generations so Christianized.”<sup>99</sup> Western Europe’s connection with death, emphasized by Pynchon in passages about the Schwarzkommando, brings about more connections to Christianity, as he explores the idea of colonization as a spread of “Christian death,”<sup>100</sup> asserting that “Christian Europe was always death.”<sup>101</sup> It leaves no room for doubt that in the Christian culture of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, none of the heathen elements have any chance of accurate representation, and Blicero’s projects, however subversive to the “System,” will nevertheless remain ineffective in his desire to break free from the Christian realm.

Other distortions in the representation of Teutonic mythology are evident in the characters on the other side of the Oven game, Katje and Gottfried. Although they play Hansel and Gretel, their descriptions suggest a relation to Germanic heathen figures. Weisenburger points to Gottfried’s name as a connection to the Teutonic god Freyr,<sup>102</sup> and Grimm’s take on that figure confirms this comparison, since he describes Freyr as a god of peace.<sup>103</sup> In *Gravity’s Rainbow* even Thanatz at some point recognizes Gottfried’s name

as signifying "God's peace,"<sup>104</sup> and the connotation is more than accurate in case of this passive, victimized character. In relation to Gottfried, Katje is described as "looking easily his double."<sup>105</sup> The characters even dress up as each other and both are associated with the color gold; Enzian calls Katje "Golden Bitch"<sup>106</sup> and she calls Gottfried "her golden game-brother."<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere she calls him "her brother in play, in slavery,"<sup>108</sup> which not only serves as a link to the plot of *Hansel and Gretel*, but also indicates that Katje can be associated with another Teutonic goddess and Freyr's sister, Freya. Grimm describes the siblings as "alike in their attributes,"<sup>109</sup> which indicates that they can stand for one another, just like Katje and Gottfried. The etymology of the name of Freya is *frouwa*, which, according to Grimm, suggests the notion of "domina" and expresses "the dignity" associated with this figure.<sup>110</sup>

In section 4 of "Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering," Katje takes this image further when she acts as "Domina Nocturna" in the sexual game she plays with Brigadier Pudding.<sup>111</sup> The *dominae nocturnae* were witches appearing on battlefields to escort the souls of the dead soldiers<sup>112</sup> and this association is more than accurate, not only because what she is actually recreating in her game with Pudding is his experience of the Battle of Passchendaele, but also because, contrary to her brother, Freya is a goddess of war.<sup>113</sup> The dignified war goddess dominates over her peaceful brother Freyr, a relation realized in the Oven, where Gottfried is a "passive observer"<sup>114</sup> and Katje is an active agent, who at some point leaves the game. She is nevertheless unable to free herself completely from the influence of Blicero; she does not betray him after joining the White Visitation and, when confessing that inside she is "all corruption and ashes," she declares that she "belongs in a way none of them can guess cruelly to the Oven."<sup>115</sup> Even though Katje's Freya and Gottfried's Freyr seem to be accurate depictions, their roles of victimized children in the novel prevent them from truthfully representing the Teutonic figures, instead twisting their image and demonstrating their lack of power in the Christianized reality of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The novel's misrepresentations of dame Holda, Freyr, and Freya symbolize the impossibility of contradicting the dominant ideology and thus relate to the novel's central question of freedom.

## Significance of the Oven

The fairy tale represented in the Oven game may therefore be assumed to work on various levels of *Gravity's Rainbow*. It applies to the novel's concern with the notion of freedom by introducing the theme of parental victimization

of children and by demonstrating the techniques employed by a dominant Christian culture to absorb and distort Teutonic divine figures. The Oven as a center of victimization serves as an extra-textual historical reference as well, alluding to the many ovens burning during the Second World War in concentration camps<sup>116</sup> such as Auschwitz, Dachau or Mittelbau-Dora, which actually appears as a setting in the novel. The oven as a symbol of human exploitation is found in Teutonic tradition as well, specifically in one of the fairy tales recalled by Grimm, where a witch, Frau Trude, throws a girl into the oven as a log of wood in order to warm her house.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the plot of the Oven game can be understood as an indirect rendition of the terror of genocide, following Katalin Orbán, who considers the game played by Blicero, Katje and Gottfried a “textualized Holocaust.”<sup>118</sup>

Apart from alluding to the Holocaust, the Oven invites an interpretation as “the oven of technology,”<sup>119</sup> by virtue of its direct relation with the Rocket, pointed to in Pynchon criticism<sup>120</sup> as well as endorsed by Blicero, who directs the following words to Gottfried right before firing the Rocket: “The Oven we fattened you for will glow.”<sup>121</sup> The Oven/Rocket exposes the destructive potential of technological development, culminating in the novel’s last historically intelligible event, the explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima.<sup>122</sup> In *Gravity’s Rainbow* technology acquires a distinctively ominous character as it is fashioned to realize the goals of the “System” and exercises “Their technology’s elaborate terror.”<sup>123</sup> “Their” desire for total control, achieved through technological development, can be considered a correlative to the rational idea of progress mentioned at the beginning of this article, a concept informed by a kind of technical rationality deemed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to be “the rationality of domination.”<sup>124</sup> The threatening nature of technology is evident in the depictions of the V2 rockets blasts on London,<sup>125</sup> the creation of artificial materials such as Imipolex G,<sup>126</sup> or the rocket factory at the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp.<sup>127</sup> The image of Gottfried inside the rocket might additionally relate to “the manned space travel of the 1960s,”<sup>128</sup> with reaching the Moon becoming a celebrated event marking the peak of civilization’s achievement and demonstrating human mastery over his environment.

A highly probable influence on the rendition of technology in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*,<sup>129</sup> in which he identifies the death-drive as the motivating force that “feeds technological progress.”<sup>130</sup> The notion of Thanatos, already mentioned in the discussion of the Oven, acquires a similarly subversive significance in the firing of the Rocket, since Blicero’s final project is a continuation of the Oven game, and thus an overt

realization of the death-drive combined with pleasure principle, as the victim is his lover, Gottfried. Such an outburst is, according to Marcuse, prohibited in postindustrial society, for which Thanatos and Eros remain separated,<sup>131</sup> providing "energy for the continuous alteration, mastery and exploitation of nature to the advantage of mankind,"<sup>132</sup> a tendency illustrated most explicitly in the novel by the workings of the rocket industry, whose state of art invention is Imipolex G, a material designed to "move beyond life, toward the inorganic."<sup>133</sup> Imipolex G establishes the vision that scientists are "no longer to be at the mercy of Nature"<sup>134</sup> by accentuating "Their" desire for total control over the environment, finally suppressing any possibility of freedom.

### The Heath - Blicero/dame Holda Trope

The Oven as a recreation of a Teutonic mythical state is, as already mentioned, directly related to Blicero's other project, the firing of the 00000 rocket. In order to gain more information about Blicero, the reader will have to wait until Slothrop meets Greta Erdmann and her husband, Miklos Thanatz, whose reports are crucial in understanding the significance of Blicero's final project. The first to enclose information about Blicero's doings is Thanatz, who had been present during the firing of the Rocket at the Lüneburg Heath. There is a considerable gap between the Oven, which ends with the removal of battery Schußstelle 3 in Holland due to British bombing, and the Heath, which starts in the forest of Lüneburg in Lower Saxony, so it is unclear what happened to Blicero during that time. Blicero has evidently changed, as we follow the description provided by Thanatz, who depicts him as a "maniac" who "screamed at the sky, sat hours in rigid trance, with his eyes rolled clear up into his head."<sup>135</sup> This image stands in stark contrast to Pökler's, who recalls Blicero as someone "with every appearance of sympathy and reason."<sup>136</sup> At this point, however, Blicero represents all but reason, acting "in his final madness" and eventually devolving into an animal, described by Greta as "a werewolf."<sup>137</sup> The change experienced by Weissmann, as the reader learns from Thanatz' words, is the outcome of his intense obsession with Teutonic mythology,<sup>138</sup> demonstrating that the fascination with Germanic paganism he exhibited in the Oven game has developed, and proving his project of firing the Rocket to be informed by this framework.

I have so far only pointed to the fairy tale's association with Teutonic mythology, but the significance of this connection remains to be discussed. I have already signaled the shift in meaning when discussing dame Holda in detail, who after the emergence of Christianity as a dominant cultural system became associated with sin and damnation.<sup>139</sup> Within the logic of *Gravity's*

*Rainbow*, in which the narrator states “any System which cannot tolerate heresy [...] must sooner or later fall,”<sup>140</sup> Christianity materializes as a structure that ensures its existence by absorbing and distorting heathen elements. This has also been the case for other Teutonic figures, such as witches, which Grimm describes as “the former goddesses” after their transformation “from gracious adored being into malign and dreaded ones.”<sup>141</sup> Pynchon explicitly renders this transformation in the Oven game, where the witch is actually a goddess, dame Holda, fallen into the dark side. The fact that Blicero, in his gradual devolution into a heathen Germanic figure, aims at connecting with the original, pre-Christian image of dame Holda, may indicate that his ultimate desire of firing the Rocket is motivated by a similar will of returning to a pre-Christian state. He himself manages to devolve into “some ancestral version of himself,” described by Thanatz as “the Pre-Christian [...] the primitive German,” who later adds that he and Slothrop, “over the generations so Christianized,” are “appalled” by Blicero’s “reversion.”<sup>142</sup> In this light, Blicero’s “originally healthy erotic impulse,” which allows the forbidden realization of both Eros and Thanatos, will be distorted and “corrupted in passage up through civilized framings”<sup>143</sup> of the repressive Christianized historical background of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

The significance of Teutonic mythology in the value system of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is in the case of Blicero of crucial importance. If the reader were asked to categorize Blicero in *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Calvinist inspired system, it is probable that s/he would deem Blicero to be Elect and not Preterite. The character’s gradual immersion into the violent Teutonic realm and his link with dame Holda can be considered as evidence against this claim. Like her husband Wuotan, dame Holda is said to lead the Furious Host,<sup>144</sup> the “wütende heer,” which is a gathering of souls of the dead flying through the sky.<sup>145</sup> Traditionally the dead in question were “the spirits of departed heroes,”<sup>146</sup> but after their Christianization they became drunkards, victims of suicide and unchristened children.<sup>147</sup> This image implies that the Furious Host is in fact a gathering of the Preterite with dame Holda as its leader. The “wütende heer” is mentioned twice in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in association with rockets as its components<sup>148</sup> and as a proposition of an alternative name for the Schwarzkommando.<sup>149</sup> This far into the novel the reader is aware that the latter represents the community of the passed-over of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, so by offering another link between the Furious Host and the Preterite, Pynchon suggests Blicero to be a figure in radical opposition to the novel’s oppressive “System.”

## Blicero's Fate

The numerous ambiguities surrounding the character of Blicero complicate his categorization as either one of the Elect or one of the Preterite, a victim of the "System" serving as a seemingly authoritative figure. Considering the often parodistic style of Pynchon's prose, a possibility that Blicero is simply "caricaturing the German and northern style of mystic obsessiveness"<sup>150</sup> should be taken into account. The importance of Germanic mythology as an underlying cause of the success of the German nationalist ideology was pointed by Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke, who maintains that the central Nazi ideas could only flourish thanks to their religious and mythical origins, "derived from pre-rational and pre-modern traditions."<sup>151</sup> Categorizing Blicero as a character parodying a figure of Nazi madman obsessed with heathen Teutonic mythology is, however, problematic due to two factors. First, there is the argument about the ambiguity of his position within the Elect/Preterite system, which arises precisely because of his infatuation with the Germanic tradition. If an interest in Teutonic mythology was endorsed by the "System," Blicero's status would be devoid of ambiguities since his projects could easily be located within the dominant ideology of National Socialism and posited against Christianity as a belief system considered an impediment in the creation of a new German society.

The second argument against Blicero's total compliance with the Nazi ideology is related to the historical reality of the Second World War. In *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, Goodrick-Clarke points to the fallacy behind the belief of Nazism as an ideology principally inspired by the Teutonic tradition.<sup>152</sup> The interest in Germanic paganism was noted, however, in the *völkisch* movement initiated during the Romantic period, so in his fascination with Teutonic mythology, Blicero might be indebted to German Romanticism rather than to the National Socialist ideology. Given the apparent connection between the *völkisch* current and the ideological tenets of Nazism,<sup>153</sup> Blicero's turn to Germanic paganism might easily be interpreted as conforming to the latter, while in fact his wish to reconnect with the Germanic mythical reality adheres to the former. What further strengthens this argument is the actual content of Blicero's rare but informative monologues, which do not exhibit features characteristic of the discourse of German National Socialism. In his concept of "the Kingdom of Lord Blicero,"<sup>154</sup> he does not include references to racial purity, or the mythical Aryan race. Instead, following the words of Greta Erdmann, in his gradual development Blicero enters "his own space," an "Ur-Heimat," a primeval homeland, for which he devises a map representing the "mythical regions" of his very subjective vision.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the Nazi policy



for German colonization does not apply to Blicero's mindset either, despite his past a colonizer of South-West Africa. In his final speech to Gottfried, he condemns colonization as spreading of an “order of Analysis and Death,”<sup>156</sup> a death he subsequently admits to have passed on to Gottfried since “fathers are carriers of virus of Death, and sons are the infected.”<sup>157</sup> It is here that Blicero reveals the motivation behind his actions: “I want to break out – to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become. . . .”<sup>158</sup> Blicero's motivation can therefore be hardly considered a articulation of the Nazi ideology, as he is rather inspired by an idea of transcendence derived from his reading of Rilke, the presence of whom “transforms Blicero's technical project into something more, a destiny.”<sup>159</sup> His turn to Teutonic mythology can be considered a method for embracing “the Change,” enabling Blicero “to be taken, to embrace, to fall toward the flame growing to fill all the senses and [...] to be helplessly in the condition of love,”<sup>160</sup> a kind of love Weisenburger describes as derived from “the standpoint of a decadent and very *literary* romanticism,”<sup>161</sup> again pointing to Blicero's connection to the Romantic cultural patterns.

The novel’s finale, however, demonstrates Blicero attempt at breaking free from the Western Christianized culture to have been futile. Blicero hopes to escape the processes of cultural conditioning by realizing a violent and irrational outburst of pre-Christian energy by firing the 00000 rocket with Gottfried inside, thus materializing the forbidden combination of the pleasure principle and the death-drive. Nevertheless, this desire can be easily placed in the framework of the “System,” as corresponding to the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, a link provided by Pynchon himself in the name of one of the final episodes, “ISAAC.”<sup>162</sup> Given that Blicero's relationship with Gottfried is compared to that between a father and a son,<sup>163</sup> his attempt additionally realizes the pattern of a patriarchal victimization, a structure that Blicero considers a “cycle of infection and death,”<sup>164</sup> and from which he is desperate to break free.

The very end of the novel only emphasizes the ambiguity of Blicero, whose pursuit of freedom from the patriarchal constraints of the corporate model of reality, as well as from the Christian cultural paradigm, is depicted as unsuccessful. In the section “WEISSMANN’S TAROT”,<sup>165</sup> Pynchon reveals Blicero’s future as analogous to the fate of a historical figure, whose quote opens the novel – Wernher von Braun, a German rocket scientist who surrendered to the Americans and became involved in the NASA space program. In order to locate the future Weissmann/Blicero, the narrator

advises the reader to "look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low."<sup>166</sup> In his quest for freedom, Blicero employs various strategies posed against the "System," of which most prominent examples are the sadomasochistic relationship in the Oven and the gradual recreation of a reality embedded within Teutonic mythology, both perfectly encapsulated in Pynchon's rendition of *Hansel and Gretel* fairy tale.

## End notes

1. It is worth noting that Julius Heuscher's study, first published in 1963, was until 1972 the only available survey regarding fairy tales and psychoanalysis, later rivaled by *Folklore and Psychoanalysis* by Paulo de Carvalho Neto (Walle, p. 102).
2. LeClair, p. 58.
3. The motif of the Oven as the center of violence has been mentioned by Arlett (p. 122), Hamill (p. 65), Orbán (Chapter 3), LeClair (p. 59) or Purdy (p. 12).
4. Léonet, p. 43.
5. Ibid, p. 47.
6. Zipes, p. 47.
7. Baker, p. 323, Hite (2010), p. 679.
8. DeKoven, p. 37.
9. Ibid.
10. Quoted in DeKoven, p. 33.
11. The concept of paranoia has already appeared in the cultural paradigm of the preceding decade, the 1950s, mainly on account of the social repression and surveillance associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy, with paranoia expressed in the works of Vance Packard (*Hidden Persuaders*, 1957) or J. Edgar Hoover (*Masters of Deceit*, 1958). The 1960s Cold War period saw the spread of paranoia in American political thought, as pointed out by Richard Hofstadter in his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), soon to become a major theme in literature as well as cinema.
12. Paranoia is one of the leading themes on the novel, particularly in the first two chapters. Some characters are actually aware of their paranoid disposition, e.g. Tyrone Slothrop (p. 22) or Pirate Prentice (p. 638). Paranoia is often mentioned by the narrator as well, as he offers numerous conspiracy theories and "proverbs for paranoids" during the course of action.

13. Melley, p. 6.
14. Pynchon, p. 230.
15. Ibid, p. 81.
16. Hite (2010), p. 677.
17. Pynchon, p. 639.
18. Ibid, p. 94.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid, p. 485.
21. Ibid, p. 175.
22. Ibid, p. 419.
23. Ibid, p. 398.
24. Ibid.
25. Dalsgaard, pp. 82-84.
26. Pynchon, p. 666.
27. Hite (1983), p. 110.
28. De Zwaan, p. 162.
29. Dalsgaard, p. 97.
30. Moore, p. 76.
31. Sears, p. 109.
32. What should be noted here is Pynchon's change to the plot of the fairy tale: the reversal of gender of the witch figure, who is male in the novel in the character of Blicero. The section describing the Oven game, however, includes an image of Blicero "in highest drag" (p. 95), pointing to the fact that in the Blicero tends to experiment with his gender, thus rendering it flexible.
33. Pynchon, p. 734.
34. Ibid, p. 329.
35. Ibid, p. 221.
36. Ibid, p. 232.
37. Ibid, p. 476.
38. Ibid, p. 478.
39. Heuscher, p. 118.
40. Pynchon, pp. 175-176.
41. Ibid, p. 176.

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid, p. 697.
44. Ibid, p. 721.
45. Heuscher, p. 117.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Heuscher, p. 119.
49. Pynchon, p. 20.
50. Ibid, p. 175.
51. Ibid, p. 736.
52. Ibid, p. 465.
53. Ibid, p. 505.
54. Ibid, p. 219.
55. Ibid, p. 461.
56. Ibid, p. 299.
57. Ibid, p. 653.
58. Ibid, p. 94.
59. Tilley, p. 23.
60. Pynchon, p. 401.
61. Ibid, p. 322.
62. Ibid, p. 486.
63. Grimm, p. 849 (vol. 3). Weisenburger points to the same source as far as the etymology of the name "Blicero" is concerned (p. 31).
64. Pynchon, p. 750.
65. Ibid, p. 94.
66. Purdy, p. 12.
67. Pynchon, p. 69.
68. Crowley, p. 186.
69. Pynchon, p. 103.
70. Ibid, p. 97.
71. Moore, p. 256.
72. Pynchon, p. 99.

73. Baker, p. 326.
74. Arlett, p. 122.
75. Hite (2010), p. 695.
76. Moore, p. 48.
77. Pynchon, p. 737.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid, p. 94.
80. Grimm, p. 269 (vol. 1).
81. Pynchon, pp. 374-375.
82. Ibid, p. 103.
83. Ibid, p. 95.
84. Ibid, pp. 97-98.
85. Léonet, p. 45.
86. Grimm, pp. 267-268 (vol. 1).
87. Moore, p.77.
88. Grimm, p. 269.
89. Ibid, p. 267.
90. Pynchon, p. 299.
91. Ibid, p. 364.
92. Weisenburger, p. 214.
93. Ibid.
94. Grimm, p. 935 (vol. 3).
95. Ibid, p. 947 (vol. 3).
96. Ibid, p. 936 (vol. 3).
97. Pynchon, p. 99.
98. Ibid, p. 465.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid, p. 318.
101. Ibid, p. 317.
102. Weisenburger, p. 74.
103. Grimm, p. 212 (vol. 1).
104. Pynchon, p. 465.

105. Ibid, p. 95.
106. Ibid, p. 658.
107. Ibid, p. 96.
108. Ibid, p. 95.
109. Grimm, p. 212 (vol. 1).
110. Ibid, p. 299 (vol. 1).
111. Pynchon, p. 232.
112. Weisenburger, p. 146.
113. Grimm, p. 305 (vol. 1).
114. Pynchon, p. 102.
115. Ibid, p. 94.
116. Moore, p. 75.
117. Grimm, 1081 (vol. 3).
118. Orbán, chapter 3.
119. Purdy, p. 9.
120. Haynes, p. 315, Baker, p. 328.
121. Pynchon, p. 751.
122. Ibid, p. 693.
123. Ibid, p. 230.
124. Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 95.
125. Pynchon, p. 222.
126. Ibid, p. 487.
127. Ibid, p. 300.
128. Heise, p. 198.
129. Hite (2010), p. 680.
130. Marcuse, p. 52.
131. Hite, p. 695.
132. Marcuse, p. 52.
133. Pynchon, p. 580.
134. Ibid, p. 249.
135. Pynchon, p. 465.
136. Ibid, p. 401.

137. Ibid, pp. 485-486.

138. Ibid, p. 465.

139. Grimm, p. 947 (vol. 3).

140. Pynchon, p. 747.

141. Grimm, p. 1054 (vol. 3).

142. Pynchon, p. 465.

143. Moore, p. 257.

144. Grimm, p. 934 (vol. 3).

145. Ibid, p. 918 (vol. 3).

146. Ibid, p. 947 (vol. 3).

147. Ibid.

148. Pynchon, p. 72.

149. Ibid, p. 75.

150. Moore, p. 74.

151. Goodrick-Clarke, p. vii.

152. Ibid, p. 217.

153. Ibid, p. 2.

154. Pynchon, p. 486.

155. Ibid, p. 486.

156. Ibid, p. 722.

157. Ibid, p. 724.

158. Ibid.

159. Haynes, p. 314.

160. Pynchon, p. 97.

161. Weisenburger, p. 63.

162. Pynchon, p. 749.

163. Ibid, p. 723.

164. Ibid, p. 724.

165. Ibid, p. 746.

166. Ibid, p. 749.

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