

ABSENT-CENTRED STRUCTURE IN FIVE MODERN NOVELS:
HENRY JAMES'S THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA, JOSEPH
CONRAD'S THE SECRET AGENT, ANDREI BELY'S PETERSBURG,
JOSEPH HELLER'S CATCH-22, AND THOMAS PYNCHON'S
GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

by

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ABSTRACT

Though the notion of absent-centred structure enjoys a current fashionableness in a number of contemporary theoretical discussions, the variety of interpretations, some of them implicitly contradictory, and most of them excessively abstract, prevents "absent-centredness" from being the useful critical category it might be. By surveying the history of the term in my Introduction, and by describing the textual realizations of absent-centredness in a number of modern novels, my thesis attempts to define the term as a special strategy of narrative structure. That strategy is identifiable by such formal devices as indirect narration, anti-climax, cancellation, and negation; and by structuring images of spatial and temporal distortion, especially the anarchist explosion and the urban labyrinth. The introductory discussion of works which might or might not be considered absent-centred fiction demarcates the category more clearly, though my choice of novels for more detailed discussion is exemplary rather than exhaustive.

My discussion begins with Henry James's The Princess Casamassima (Chapter II) because, in its use of anarchism, the Dickensian labyrinthine city, and anti-climax, that novel represents, albeit uncertainly, the late-Victorian beginnings of absent-centred structure which James's literary descendents shape more consistently. Hence, Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent (Chapter III) is governed, paradoxically, by a prominent absence, the unseen and indirectly narrated bomb explosion which operates as a narrative

mataphor, for the temporal and spatial distortions of the text are both the logical result of the bomb's blast and a means of circumscribing the absent centre.

Andrei Bely's Petersburg (Chapter IV) illustrates best the High-Modernist use of the absent centre, though it relies on the same devices of anarchist plot and foiled explosion which Conrad exploits. And while Bely's Symbolism has a particular Russian coloration, it co-opts, like Conrad's, the same fragmentary features of the bomb-threatened city as images for narrative structure. And whereas Conrad shows us that absent-centredness is an apt description of the moral vacancy which he sees as characteristic of the early twentieth-century West, Bely shows us that it is also an apt description of his mystical and metaphysical view of the early twentieth-century East.

Like Petersburg, whose narrative is fragmented more literally than The Secret Agent's, Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (Chapter V) exploits the chronological and spatial disruptions which result from explosion. Fragmentation in this work is mimetic of Yossarian's consciousness which, shattered by the realization of Snowden's "exploded" secret, prefers to, but cannot, forget the horror of his comrade's death. As in other works of absent-centred fiction, the hero's hyperbolic fear of his own death is transformed into the fear of apocalyptic nullity. The military establishment which prevents Yossarian's escape from that fear occasions an exploration of the blackly humorous and absurdist nature of a world with no sane centre of control.

Most, if not all, of these themes, images, and strategies are gathered together encyclopedically in the most ambitious of these absent-centred works, Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow. Here, the anarchist bomb, metaphor for

absence, finds its sophisticated contemporary counterpart in the rocket which, in a rainbow arc from "point to no point," transports apocalyptic absence. Under the shadow of that trajectory moves Slothrop, a failed quester whose grail eludes him and who wanders directionless in the labyrinthine and centreless post-war "Zone" until he disappears from both landscape and text. More reflexive than earlier absent-centred works, Gravity's Rainbow makes us aware that Slothrop's experience in the Zone is also the reader's, for like Slothrop, he searches for a centre in the "zone" of a fiction too complexly structured and too exploded to reveal its unifying source, which can only be, paradoxically, the absent centre itself.

Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT	ii
CHAPTER I A Theoretical and Analytical Introduction	1
CHAPTER II Henry James's <u>The Princess Casamassima</u> : The Misplaced Middle	48
CHAPTER III Joseph Conrad's <u>The Secret Agent</u> : Sudden Holes in Time and Space	76
CHAPTER IV Andrei Bely's <u>Petersburg</u> : Rapid Expansion	107
CHAPTER V Joseph Heller's <u>Catch-22</u> : The Secret of Snowden	140
CHAPTER VI Thomas Pynchon's <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> : The Single Root Lost	174
CONCLUSION	212
BIBLIOGRAPHY	218

CHAPTER I

A Theoretical and Analytical Introduction

1

By "absent-centred structure" I mean a novelistic structure which has at its centre a more or less consciously constructed absence that governs the entire narrative. This phenomenon, I attempt to show in this study, can be analyzed in considerable detail by describing the particular narrative devices, ploys and strategies of each author. Some of these devices are spatial structuring images, such as the anarchist explosion and the urban labyrinth; others are temporal fragmentations, such as disrupted chronology, indirect point of view, cancellation, negation and repetition. Though absent-centred structure is perhaps most easily identified in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent and the later works which I discuss (Andrei Bely's Petersburg, Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow), my study begins with Henry James's The Princess Casamassima because, together with much of Dickens, it illustrates the Victorian roots of this narrative phenomenon.

The task is necessarily incomplete. Which works belong to and which works are excluded from the category of absent-centred narrative could expand into a kind of encyclopedic parlour game. To avoid such a game, I have, in the latter half of this introduction, discussed some of those texts which more obviously than most invite themselves into the parlour. The result is that I have delineated a "set"--exemplary I would claim--but

nevertheless a limited modern set within the larger field of absent-centred fiction. The novels in this set share a number of strikingly similar narrative strategies; spatial and temporal images and devices of absenting. Part of the discussion in my thesis attempts to explain the similarities and differences between these works, thereby highlighting the particular coloration of each absent-centred narrative according to the talents and tastes of each author. Some of these connections are due to source and influence; the Dickens-James-Conrad-Heller lineage is a highly visible one. Others have to do with cultural fashion; Bely's Modernism, despite its distinctive Russian persuasion, connects easily to Conrad's Modernism.

The task is further complicated by a wide theoretical frame of reference. As a result, I have thought it prudent to chart in the first half of my introduction the usage of the term "absent centre" in a number of critical theories--especially prudent since that term enjoys a certain current critical fashion. It is useful to look at the special cuts and colours of that fashion, for while the philosophical discussions do not always outline the narrative consequences of the absent centre, they do often provide a rich discussion of the philosophical, historical and cultural context of the term, especially, as we shall see, in regard to Modernism. In some instances, however, such as Tzvetan Todorov's work on Henry James, the theory bears more directly on particular texts. By surveying such positions on the absent centre, I will be able to draw the borders of and define more clearly the way in which the five narratives I discuss operate with an absent centre that is more particular than the theoretical descriptions of the term. I will, in other words, create a circle of lamp posts which sheds light on the subject matter it circum-

scribes--a strategy which echoes at least one device of absent-centred narrative.

The analysis is not intended to be prescriptive, for the phenomenon I detail is not so much a genre as it is a structuring technique (though I believe a kind of taxonomy of absent-centred structure might be undertaken). Nor is this phenomenon restricted to a particular literary tradition; the very internationalism of my authors points to the cross-cultural nature of absent-centred structure.

2

In at least two ways, all works of fiction are absent-centred. If we assume that a work of fiction has at its source a well-spring of authorial intention, we must also assume that such intention remains outside and absent from the text. Indeed, if it is not absent, it is either distrusted, as in the case of the unreliable narrator or, as in most propagandist literature, so painfully present that the fiction remains naive. This is not to say that intention is unrecoverable from the text, merely that as a level of discourse it remains other than the primary flow of narrative language, image, character and plot. An author may, of course, declare himself in a preface, which as an instrument of intentionality presents special problems, but even here we may distinguish broadly between the fictional preface of, for example, Defoe's Moll Flanders and Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, and the more "truthful" preface of Henry James. The former, if considered as part of the text, becomes an unreliable bearer of authorial intention, while the latter always remains outside the text,

though not necessarily all that more reliable because of its external positioning. At this simplest level, authorial intention is antithetical to and hence absented from fiction because it represents the didactic and the prosaic; the language of what one intends is not of the same order as the language of executing that intention. The former, it seems, is destined to exclusion from the literary text. Yet intentionality, in the more sophisticated sense that means a force intending literary production, may also include the historical, social, psychological or philosophical forces--or to embrace all of these, the ideological "intention" which can be shown to be both central yet external and instrumental to the linguistic and formal manoeuvres of the text.

Different from but not unrelated to the absence of authorial and ideological intention is the phenomenological unknown which pulls the reader through the space between the two covers of a text--that tantalizing tug across the narrative time between beginnings and endings--even of the open kind. At the simplest level, this type of absence is the "what happened" or the "who done it" which centrally governs all narrative. It is certainly exploited by texts and it may be (and often is) discussed in texts, but ultimately it remains an extra-textual phenomenon. At a more complex level, this controlling but absented force becomes a problem for hermeneutics, a problem of the space or "gap" between reader, text and the process of recovery. The first class of absence, we can say, is mediated by or through the author, while the second is mediated through the reader.

It is, more or less, the first type of absence which interests both Pierre Macherey in A Theory of Literary Production and Terry Eagleton in

Criticism and Ideology. For Macherey it is important to ask of every work what it does not say in addition to what it does say, for, like an utterance, what is said depends partly on what is not said. And just as Freud relegated the unspoken to a space he called the unconscious, Macherey relegates literary production to a kind of unconsciousness of the text. When Macherey speaks of literary discourse, he speaks of it as "sealed and interminable, completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent centre which it can neither conceal nor reveal."¹ Macherey examines this centre by locating the text's "otherness," by ignoring criticism's conventional strategy of describing organic, unified structures and by concentrating instead on the text's ideological imperfections, its careful avoidances and resonant blind spots.

... the work exists above all by its determinate absences, by what it does not say, in its relation to what it is not. Not that it can conceal anything: this meaning is not buried in its depths, masked or disguised; it is not a question of hunting it down with interpretations. It is not in the work but by its side: on its margins, at that limit where it ceases to be what it claims to be because it has reached back to the very conditions of its possibility (TLP, p. 154).

Thus, in searching for the central origin of the text's coming into being, Macherey sees the critic's function as unmasking the limitations of the text and not as revealing its fictional structure. "The work derives its form from this incompleteness which enables us to identify the active presence of a conflict at its borders" (TLP, p. 155). The difficulty with Macherey is that the absences which he locates need not be central to a description of the text's structure. The text's coming into being--its production--is not necessarily the same as its performance. The absences

which Macherey identifies are primary in regard to production but only secondary in regard to the text itself. Ultimately, the critic who adopts Macherey's strategy is led to a kind of poetics of the negative.

In an attempt to rescue literary texts from such a poetics, Terry Eagleton, unlike Macherey, refuses to let ideology remain entirely external to the literary work. Eagleton restores a more dynamic and more complex relationship between the mutually shaping forces of text and ideology:

... it [the relationship] can only be grasped as a ceaseless reciprocal operation of the text on ideology and ideology on text, a mutual structuring and de-structuring in which the text constantly overdetermines its own determinations. The structure of the text is the product of this process, not the reflection of its own ideological environs. The 'logic of the text' is not a discourse which doubles the 'logic of ideology'; it is, rather, a logic constructed 'athwart' that more encompassing logic.²

By allowing the text's structure a measure of authority which Macherey does not, Eagleton is able to locate the absence in the text as a totalizing system, whereas for Macherey the absence remains at the borders of the text. The notion of an absence in a totalizing structure is, as Eagleton acknowledges, partly inspired by Perry Anderson's essay "Components of the National Culture" in which the term "absent centre" is used in a quite different context. For Anderson, Britain alone among European nations is characterized by a lack of a "totalizing conceptual system," the symptom of which is the absence of a classical sociology and a naturalized Marxism. The result is that the society is "characterized by an absent centre," and "the whole configuration of its culture has been determined--and dislocated--by this void at its centre."³ When Eagleton brings this notion to bear on

Conrad's fiction, the term takes on somewhat greater critical precision, for he finds in Conrad's aesthetic a movement and a structuring towards organic unity and totality, but one which at the same time "contains its own negation."

Ideological dissonances emerge in his fiction not, as with Dickens, in an exploitation of open-ended, internally discrepant forms, but in the calculative organisation of interlacing patterns around a central absence. At the centre of each of Conrad's works is a resonant silence: the unfathomable enigma of Kurtz, Jim and Nostromo, the dark, brooding passivity of James Wait in The Nigger of the Narcissus, the stolid opacity of McWhirr in Typhoon, the eternal crypticness of the 'Russian soul' in Under Western Eyes, the unseen bomb-explosion and mystical silence of the idiot Stevie in The Secret Agent, Heyst's nonexistent treasure in Victory. These absences are determinate--they demarcate the gaps and limits of the Conradian ideology, represent the 'hollows' scooped out by a collision or exclusion of meanings (CI, pp. 137-38).

Thus, the central absence in each of Conrad's novels points to the signification of what is excluded. Yet, when we look closely at Eagleton's list of absences, we can see a significant shift, a shift which illustrates the difficulty of describing narrative absences with precision. The absences in Heart of Darkness, Nostromo, The Nigger of the Narcissus and Typhoon are enigmas of character, a central mysteriousness constructed into the hero. Similarly, Eagleton finds that in The Secret Agent Stevie constitutes a "mystical silence" and is thus another absenting enigma, but "the unseen bomb explosion" because it differs in kind and degree sticks out prominently in the list; it is an absence which concerns narrative structure rather than enigmatic character. An enigma, however, does not necessarily constitute an absence, for all kinds of narratives have all kinds of mysteries--of character, plot and subject matter, mysteries which are both intentional

and to a lesser degree accidental. From the Bible to Beckett, from Hamlet to Robbe-Grillet, mystery, secrecy and enigma, as Frank Kermode has shown in The Genesis of Secrecy, are necessary ingredients in the author-reader relationship of all literature of parable. When Kermode speaks of parables as a "simultaneous proclamation and concealment,"⁴ he echoes Macherey's notion of absences which are both concealed but present, yet, a hermeneutical description of secrecy (or in Macherey's case, an ideological one) does not necessarily describe narratives which have been intentionally crafted around an absent centre.

While both Macherey and Eagleton share a Marxist search for textual absences which will betray a work's origin, the ideological intention which is absented from the text, Eagleton's theory, which is more accommodating of the text's performance, is better equipped for a formal analysis of narrative absence, though he warns against any "fresh empiricism of the literary object" (CL, p. 99). In spite of this difference, both theorists in the end are intent on destroying organicist notions of structure by undermining them with ideological determinateness.

Jacques Derrida is also intent on destroying organicist notions of structure, but his tactic is to question the very idea of structure in the first place, so that, for him, there is no longer a "privileged" centre for structure. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss who claims that "there is no unity or absolute source of the myth," Derrida implies that likewise there can be no unity or absolute source for structure--especially, he claims, modern structure. The history of the concept of structure, he goes on to say, is the history of origins, sources, fixed centres and absolute presences.

What Derrida sees is an "event" or a "rupture" of these notions, and while he is reluctant to pin-point the source or time of such an event, he does, nevertheless, say that it occurs when the centre becomes not a fixed locus but a function, "a sort of non-locus."

From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse--provided we can agree on this word--that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.⁵

More specifically, he suggests that this phenomenon is "part of the totality of an era, our own," and cites "the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics," "the Freudian critique of self-presence," and "the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics ... of the determination of being as presence" as the originators of decentred structure. In short--Modernism, for Derrida's critique of structure is one more way of describing the fragmentation of modernist ideology in reaction to a locus-centred world-view of the nineteenth century and previously, that moment when, as he says, "European culture--and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts--had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference" (SSP, p. 251). But unlike Macherey and Eagleton, Derrida refuses to allow any causal relationship here, nor is he as quick as Eagleton and Macherey to affirm absence for fear of simply re-establishing another empiricist locus. Thus, the structure

he describes is merely the function, the free-play of the structure itself. It is not something which generates the structure, like ideology, or which explains the structure; rather, it is something which is the structure. "It is a rule of the game which does not govern the game; it is the rule of the game which does not dominate the game" (SSP, p. 167).

The problem that Derrida faces as a result of this strategy is how to speak of the absence; it is the same problem that Macherey and Eagleton face when they speak paradoxically of the absence's concealment and presence. The non-centre must be described and defined, but it must not be affirmed, because, especially for Derrida, it is unrecoverable. Derrida remarks that he is attempting to place himself

at a point that I do not know any longer where I am going. And, as to this loss of the center, I refuse to approach an idea of the "non-centre" which would no longer be the tragedy of the loss of the center--this sadness is classical. And I don't mean to say that I thought of approaching an idea by which this loss of the center would be an affirmation (SSP, p. 267).

Yet, if absence can not be affirmed, then Derrida's refusal to affirm absence becomes the new locus of structure. Derrida is arguing for a kind of critical mimesis, for a critical language which permits a discussion of absence but which at the same time will not affirm it in the language of empiricism. But like the new novel which attempts to cut off the hideous head of traditional narrative only to find another one sprouting hydra-like in its place, so too Derrida's language of free-play, of negation and evasion sprouts another source for structure. For all the indeterminateness of, for example, Robbe-Grillet's The Voyeur or Jealousy, a locus governing such indeterminateness is still clearly visible--there are even

conventional metaphors for such indeterminateness in the text, such as in the opening paragraph of The Voyeur:

It was as if no one had heard
The whistle blew again--a shrill, prolonged
noise followed by three short blasts of ear-
splitting violence: a violence without purpose
that remained without effect. There was no
more reaction--no further exclamation--than
there had been at first; not one feature of one
face had even trembled.⁶

"A violence without purpose that remained without effect," is a very accurate metaphor for the girl's death which is about to be narrated. And inasmuch as the fragmented narrative is a violence to conventional literary structure, the metaphor suggests a locus (actually, a "non-locus") for such fragmentation, just as "the sudden holes in time and space" of The Secret Agent suggest a metaphor for its narrative structure. The difference is one of degree, not of kind.

While Macherey and Eagleton reject an empiricist description of narrative absences because they fear that it will compromise the ideological sources of such a phenomenon, Derrida rejects a formal description of absence because to embrace it would be a contradiction of his thesis that there is no source.

This position is not so much a denial of structuralist notions of absence as it is a modification. In his critique of structuralism, Beginnings: Intention and Method, Edward W. Said notes that what becomes a purely metaphysical loss for Derrida is a loss rooted in language and linguistics for the structuralists. French thought, he claims, is characterized by "the need to make a beginning," a need which is symptomatic of the

loss of a point of origin in language.

When words lose the power to represent their inter-connections--that is, the power to refer not only to objects but also to the system connecting objects to one another in a universal taxonomy of existence--then we enter the modern period. Not only can the center not hold, but also the network around it begins to lose its cohesive power.⁷

Such a rupture ultimately goes back to Lévi-Strauss's descriptions of the language of myth, but, as in Derrida, the fragmented structure has most relevance for the modern era. The result for the structuralists is the removal of any privileged "Origin" which "commands, guarantees and perpetuates meaning" (BIM, p. 315). Civilized man has no real access to the "zero point" of a primitive language of a "pure semantic value"; thus, modern man and the structuralist in particular is plagued by thought and language which is "pitilessly relational." In other words, man now lives in a circle without a center, in a maze without a way out" (BIM, p. 316).

Said locates here, in one breath, two of the predominant images which govern the absent-centred narratives which I have chosen to discuss: the image of concentricity and the maze or labyrinth. Yet neither Said nor Derrida nor the structuralists in general (with the notable exception of Tzvetan Todorov) explore the textual and especially the narrative consequences of such structuring images. The theoretical discourses on absent centres tend to shift rapidly from the notion of a narrative absence to the lack of an ideological centre (literary production) or to the lack of a locus-centred world view (Modernism) or, in a final act of reflexivity, to the lack of a centre in structuralist thought itself. The same shift holds true for the psychoanalytic offshoots of structuralism. In his

reworking of Freud, for example, Lacan relegates the unconscious to a curiously absent space. It is "neither primordial nor instinctual";⁸ instead, the unconscious becomes, like the structuralist model based on linguistics, a grammatical operation and a system. And just as language for Lacan is a kind of opening into the "Other" from the child's state of "biological namelessness," so the separation from the mother represents the initiation of sexual desire for lost plenitude. The separation is felt as a "primal lack" or a "gaping" and it is this experience which is felt as castration in children. Neurosis, then, becomes the failure to accept this condition, a failure to accept that at the centre of life itself is this "primal lack." Thus, Fredric Jameson sums up the Lacanian view of castration as "a kind of zero degree of the psychic--that essential charged absence around which the entire meaning--or language--system necessarily organizes itself."⁹

Yet when structuralists, as Said notes, draw on Saussure and Lévi-Strauss (or Freud) to lament the lack of a "totalizing" semantics, a purely primitive relationship between signifier and signified, they describe sociological and historical phenomena but rarely discuss the narrative responses to such theory. In fact, there is a significant rift between the criticism of modernist texts and the response of critical theory to modernism. About the latter, Said says: "There is no center available to the modern thinker, no absolute subject, since the Origin has been curtailed off" (BIM, p. 318). Yet, what is true of the modern "thinker" must certainly be true of the modern novelist, though there has been scant attention to the lack of this centre in modern narratives. Part of the reason may be

that critical theory has outstripped critical practice; for no sooner do critics reveal the fragmentation and indeterminacy of Modernist texts--Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner are the three usual English-language novelists in the "fast lane" of Modernism--than they re-constitute and re-unify those texts, usually around the potentially present centres of myth, historicism and language. Yet, if, as so much of contemporary theory propounds, Modernism is chiefly defined by its de-centring, then such a view must have a more explicit narrative and novelistic correlative than has so far been documented.

Critical language has no special privilege over literary language, and if the forces of Modernism are frequently at work de-centring theoretical structures, the same must be true of literary structures. What Said says about the structuralists' predicament, for example, is also applicable to the novelists' predicament:

The structuralists' predicament is an accurate symptom of man's condition, mired as he is in his system of signification. Their work can be construed as an attempt to manipulate their way out of our enslavement by language into an awareness and subsequent mastery of our linguistic situation. If their continuing enterprise is functional (like that of Robinson Crusoe, marooned yet surviving and organizing the possibilities of his island around his needs), then their vision of the past is fondly utopian and their anticipated future dimly apocalyptic (BIM, p. 319).

A vision of the past which is fondly utopian and one of the future which is apocalyptic is, in part, the vision of the texts which I have isolated as absent-centred narratives. Not that apocalypse provides a foolproof litmus test for absent-centred narrative, but such a vision, which is really

a response to the fear of absence, in conjunction with other devices and images--for example, indirect narration, cancellation, explosion, concentricity and spatial imagery of the labyrinth--can be useful in locating absent-centred narratives. Such a category--if it is to have any critical precision at all--must be capable of being defined as a special literary strategy with particular narrative ploys and devices which have a particular cultural reference.

That is why, of the structuralists, Tzvetan Todorov comes closest to a systematic discussion of absent-centred narrative, a discussion which provides the critical precedent for my study. Using Henry James's short stories, he sets out to show how "the Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause."¹⁰ Todorov undertakes what other structuralists and Marxists fear would concede too much to the autonomy of the text. But the value of Todorov's essay is the way he uses conventional categories of character, point of view, plot and style and makes them subservient to the structural principle which is prominent in so many of James's short stories. He is explicit about this approach:

There exists a cause: this word must here be taken in a very broad sense; it is often character but sometimes, too, an event or an object. The effect of this cause is the narrative, the story we are told. It is absolute: for everything in this narrative owes its presence to this cause. But the cause is absent and must be sought; it is not only absent but for the most part unknown; what is suspected is its existence, not its nature. The quest proceeds; the tale consists of the search for, the pursuit of, this initial cause, the primal essence. The narrative stops when it is attained. On the one hand there is an absence (of the cause, of the essence, of the truth), but this absence determines everything; on the other hand there is the presence (of the quest), which is only the search for an absence (PP, p. 145).

By stressing the presence of the quest, Todorov is able to handle the paradox of affirming absence in a more successful way than either Macherey or Derrida. Thus, he asks himself at the end of the essay if he is not betraying the Jamesian principle that the truth cannot be designated by name; "How does it come about that we can now name the secret, render the absence present?" Because the truth is the dynamic act of questing for what is absent, the reader's quest in the text will always be validated.

But criticism too (including mine) has always obeyed the same law: it is the search for truth, not its revelation, a treasure hunt rather than the treasure itself, for the treasure can only be absent. Once this "reading of James" is over, we must then begin reading James, set out upon a quest for the meaning of his oeuvre, though we know that this meaning is nothing other than the quest itself (PP, p. 177).

Todorov restricts his quest for the meaning in James's oeuvre to the short stories written between 1892 and 1903. Almost half of the tales were written during this period, and Todorov sees the previous work as lessons learnt from Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. No doubt a short story, being more formulaically condensed than a novel, is ideally suited to Todorov's purposes, though he does say that James's stories "stand as so many theoretical studies in which James poses the great esthetic problems of his work" (PP, p. 143). This is indeed the case, and I attempt to show that this narrative experiment with absence is seeded if not germinated at least as early as The Princess Casamassima (1886). Unlike his discussion of detective fiction in which he outlines a broad narrative typology, Todorov does not suggest whether the quest for an absence is a narrative strategy at work in other novelists than James, or--true to his structuralist leanings--whether or not such a strategy has a

particular historical and cultural context. By beginning with James's The Princess Casamassima and by tracing the progression of absent-centred narrative through to Conrad and Heller, I attempt to show that this narrative technique is not a peculiarly Jamesian phenomenon but a formal strategy, present in nineteenth century fiction to be sure, but also warmly welcomed into the Modernist literary context.

Both structuralist and Marxist critical theories propound what may be called ideological and intentional views of the absent centre, in the sense that they search out an absolute or a source outside the text which generates and explains the lack of a centre. Even Derrida's notions of structure, which at first glance appear to avoid such an approach, are governed by an ideological refusal to affirm absence. Not so easily fitted into this taxonomy is the hermeneutical tradition and theories of reader-response which also appropriate the term "absent-centred."

There are two senses in which Wolfgang Iser in The Act of Reading speaks of absence. One of these refers to the "space" between reader and text:

... the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process; the lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference corresponds to the contingency and the "no-thing" which bring about the interaction between persons. Asymmetry, contingency, the "no-thing"--these are all different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank which underlies all processes of interaction.¹¹

In the second sense of the term what is absent is located more specifically by the text, though, according to Iser, not necessarily in the text; gaps

activate the reader and force him to "project" a relationship with the text, so that what is not said, just as much as what is said, helps the reader to recover the text. These gaps are "various types of negation":

Blanks and negations both control the process of communication in their own different ways: the blanks leave open the connections between perspectives in the text, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives--in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text. The various types of negation invoke familiar or determinate elements only to cancel them out. What is canceled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate--in other words, he is guided to adopt a position in relation to the text (AR, p. 169).

Such notions would seem to take us a considerable distance in describing how texts can be structured around an absent centre, especially since Iser notes an increase in these blanks and negations in the modern novel, in the indeterminacy between reader and text. Yet it is interesting to notice where these descriptions of absence lead Iser. In his discussion of Ulysses, which he takes as exemplary of modernist fragmentation and indeterminacy, he concludes that the blanks and negations efface the conventional nineteenth-century narrator:

In Ulysses we still have the perspective of the implied author, for without it the novel could not exist. But the implied author traditionally supplied his reader--at least implicitly--with some form of orientation, and as this is missing from Ulysses, our frustrated expectation leads to the impression that the narrator has disappeared. But herein lies the very strategy of the narrator's perspective. The fragmentation of the familiar narrative patterns leads to such an intensive switching of viewpoints that the reader cannot work out any central focus; he cannot find the orient-

ation he had expected, and so his expectation forms the background against which the disconcerting jumble of narrative patterns is thrown into relief. The background of his expectations is indeed invoked by his disorientation, but at the same time he is made to experience the nonfulfillment of an expected function--the nonfulfillment of a function is its negative fulfillment. The frustration of such basic expectations leaves a blank which the traditional novel had always filled (AR, p. 207).

While the effacement of the nineteenth-century narrator illustrates a legitimate narrative phenomenon, it does not advance us very far towards a description of more consciously constructed narrative absences. All texts create their own absences--varying degrees of distance, really--between reader and narrative. This is a phenomenon of the reading process. But some texts, more than others, are individually programmed by narrative material which the author conspicuously absents. This is a special case of narrative structure. The absence which Iser locates in Ulysses is symptomatic but not necessarily programmatic; that is, the absence of the narrator signals a literary historical progression, but it is not necessarily exclusively programmed by that novel. The Sound and the Fury, with its multiple narration, also absents the omnipotence of the nineteenth-century narrator. In Iser's sense, any Modernist novel which is characterized by a fragmented or disjointed plot line must be deemed absent-centred. But there must be a more precise narrative explanation for the fact that, for example, Bely's Petersburg, Joyce's Russian rival as exemplar of High Modernism, is an explicitly absent-centred narrative in a way which is quite unlike that in Ulysses.

For Iser the upshot of textual absence is that "the openness of structure which characterizes such texts arises not from the fact that this

type of blank stimulates extra productivity in the reader, but from the fact that the productivity is exploited through the suspension of conditions the absence of which actually constitutes the blank" (AR, p. 211). And ultimately, we may see ideological absolutes slipping into Iser's critique of absence, for the reader's experience with these blanks and negations constitutes "the historicity of his standpoints through the act of reading itself" (AR, p. 211). And on an even more abstract level, Iser implies that such a history of changing viewpoints has application for the reader's experience of several texts and even of several periods. In other words, the reader's experience of absence plots a graph that becomes a history which is "a condition for the production of new codes" (AR, p. 212).

If contemporary theoreticians disagree about the genesis and placement of the absent centre, what they do agree on is that it makes a prominent, though by no means exclusive, appearance in the modern era. James M. Mellard in his book The Exploded Form, a restatement of the tenets of Modernism (fragmentation and a world view which is relational), posits a taxonomy of Modernist texts, a taxonomy which attempts to explain the frequent appearance of the absent centre in this century. Drawing heavily on scientific theory, his work documents the "naive," "critical," and "sophisticated" phases of Modernism. Generally, the movement governing these phases is framed in the following way:

For the novel, as the world goes so goes the form itself: as the world proposed by twentieth-century science "explodes," so explodes the novel. And a new metaphor is born to replace the old.¹²

Though Mellard does not explore its specific narrative embodiments, the

metaphor of explosion is a rich one for my purposes, for not only does it point to the violence done to nineteenth-century forms, but it also points to the absence it leaves in the narratives in which the detonation has occurred. The metaphor has more historical relevance than might be discerned at first glance. Thus, standing in awe of the onslaught of science and technology at the great world's fair which ushered in the twentieth century, Henry Adams is forced to conclude that "bombs educate vigorously," and of the anarchist bomb in particular he says that it is a "powerful persuader."¹³ It is, then, more than coincidence that the anarchist explosion should appear in several of the absent-centred texts which I have selected: The Princess Casamassima, The Secret Agent and Petersburg. As the hardware of warfare becomes more sophisticated, so do the narrative responses, as evidenced by the explosions in Catch-22 and Gravity's Rainbow. Yet even the warhead's trajectory, the rocket's rainbow arc, which governs the narrative of Pynchon's novel, is prefigured in The Education of Henry Adams:

The motion of thought had the same value as the motion of a cannon ball seen approaching the observer on a direct line through the air. One could watch its curve for five thousand years. Its first violent acceleration in historical times had ended in catastrophe in 310. The next swerve of direction occurred towards 1500. Galileo and Bacon gave a still newer curve to it, which altered its values; but all these changes had never altered the continuity. Only in 1900, the continuity snapped.¹⁴

Thus, the metaphor of explosion for the rupture brought by Modernism (present here in a seminal text which serves as a cultural and historical reference) is also present as an operative narrative principle in Modernist literary texts.

Of course, not all Modernist or Post-modernist texts which exploit the explosion metaphor do so for the purpose of absenting a narrative centre.¹⁵ Muriel Spark, in The Girls of Slender Means (1963), for example, flaunts the trappings of anarchism, war and explosion but structures the narrative to a different end and in a different way than Conrad does in The Secret Agent or Bely in Petersburg, novels which use much of the same hardware.

As an instrument of death, the bomb is almost invariably shaped in the texts in which it appears as a metaphor for apocalypse--death on the grandest scale. This tactic poses an immediate problem, for while bombs explode spectacularly throughout these texts, characters, narrators, authors and readers alike still remain alive and mostly well after the smoke and dust have settled. One explanation is that the explosions in these novels function as a kind of synecdoche for the larger, more threatening cosmic explosion. More ingeniously, however, the novelists of explosion rely on prolepsis, the representation of a future condition as occurring in the present. In The Secret Agent, Catch-22, Petersburg and Gravity's Rainbow, "the immense panorama of anarchy and futility," to use T. S. Eliot's tag for Modernity, is at once a suspenseful threat of a nearby apocalypse and at the same time, a grim description of contemporary life, as though that apocalypse had already arrived.

Muriel Spark's panorama of anarchy and futility in The Girls of

Slender Means, however, is not so much a proleptic look at apocalypse as it is a backward glance to the shell-shocked lives in London immediately after World War II. Spark, in fact, works against the notion of war as a special explosion. Without understating the evils of war, her novel illustrates how unexpected eruptions of disaster are permanently ordinary rather than spectacularly special. Thus, the unexploded bomb which lies buried beneath the hydrangeas in Greggie's garden is a mere remnant of war which unexpectedly detonates and sets the boardinghouse on fire. But Mrs. Dobell, a bystander at the fire, assumes that "belated bombs went off every day in Britain."¹⁶ And ironically, while London crowds celebrate the end of death-dealing war in front of Buckingham Palace's balconied royalty, Nicholas is witness to a seaman who "slid a knife silently between the ribs of a woman" (GSM, p. 141). This particular crime is enough to convert Nicholas to missionary revolution in Latin America; as he says: "a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good" (GSM, p. 140). Yet, he too dies, stabbed as fortuitously as the woman in the park. No one disaster takes prominence over another. The fire, Joanna's death, Nicholas's death, the stabbing in the park, the loss of life at sea (Joanna recites with neurotic repetition "The Wreck of the Deutschland")--all these are tallied up to undermine the comfortable security of a time capsule which characters so obsessively search for. The end of war, then, does not mean the end of fate's random punishments, and thus the novel announces its distinctly metaphysical use of the explosion--as a metaphor for the unexpected eruption of fate. The explosion in The Girls of Slender Means, unlike that in the novels of Conrad, Bely and Pynchon, does not so much distort characters' lives and author's narrative, as it does shock

characters into a realization of their distorting idealism and bring them rudely into a time-bound, unpredictable reality.

Where Spark does exploit the device of prolepsis is in her use of endings; indeed, she elevates that trope to narrative prominence in The Driver's Seat. In The Girls of Slender Means, the narrative moves, on the one hand, conventionally forward, following the plight of the boarding-house girls to the climax of their near deaths, while on the other hand, it moves in a "catch-up" fashion to Nicholas's martyrdom in Haiti which is revealed in the opening pages of the novel and repeated several times afterwards. Thus, some characters move towards an unpredictable fate while Nicholas moves towards a known one. The narrator's self-consciousness of this device is evident when we learn that Nicholas, a poet, bequeaths his manuscript to Rudi before leaving England: "'You can have it,' said Nicholas, meaning the manuscript. He said, not foreseeing the death he was to die, 'You can keep it'" (GSM, p. 137). Thus, Nicholas lives, not unlike Stevie in The Secret Agent, in a narrative limbo. The reader's knowledge of Nicholas's death a priori serves as an ironic undercutting device to his actions as he moves closer and closer to his death.

The repeated passages about Nicholas's death, however, function only partly like the repetitions of Snowden's death in Catch-22 which occupies, by virtue of its absence, a central position in the narrative. Nicholas's death belongs to a sub-plot and is really only one more unexpected disaster in the more prominent narrative line which follows the fate of the girls. Spark, in fact, absents no important narrative material; she works not with the absent but with the unexpected, the slings and arrows

of an outrageous and extremely fickle fortune.

More generally, Spark's use of repetition (entire conversations and paragraphs are replayed) does not disrupt the novel as seriously as is the case in Catch-22 and Petersburg. Like Joanna's endless recitations of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," which she makes her elocution students recite just as endlessly, the repeated passages point to the futility and persevering neurosis of the girls' socially and culturally slender lives, but it stops short of seriously fragmenting the narrative. The device of repetition, then, like the explosion metaphor, is really only another gear in the machinery of irony.

This ironic authorial stance is made clear in a passage which echoes the image of Conrad's professor wired to a bomb and with his hand on the detonator:

There is a kind of truth in the popular idea of an anarchist as a wild man with a home-made bomb in his pocket. In modern times this bomb, fabricated in the back workshops of the imagination, can only take one effective form: Ridicule (GSM, p. 59).

We must take this epigrammatic statement with more than a grain of salt (Paul Theroux's characters, for example, in The Family Arsenal do spectacular things with home-made bombs); yet the passage does point to the function of irony in many of these texts (The Secret Agent, Petersburg and Catch-22), which is to disrupt conventional narrative structure. But whereas Conrad invades his narrative structure with irony to emphasize the myopic immorality of his characters and the nightmarish world they inhabit, Spark uses irony mainly to set metaphysical traps for her characters who

are too blithely unaware of the power of fate to shatter their lives with the unexpected. Thus Spark jolts her characters out of complacency by ironically undercutting their actions with one disaster after another. The power of these characters to maintain composure with self-deception, delusion and fantasy is considerable, but a bomb, as Henry Adams says, is "a powerful persuader." Certainly the false security of their fragile domestic and social world, if not their illusions, goes up in smoke.

The explosions are more spectacular in Paul Theroux's The Family Arsenal (1976), a novel which invites itself into the house of absent-centred narrative by a number of doors. Its very title connects it to the fiction of anarchist arsenals, The Princess Casamassima, The Secret Agent and Petersburg, and like these works, The Family Arsenal is an exploration of anarchist intrigue foiled and made morally absurd in the light of a distorted domesticity. Theroux, in fact, takes his epigraph from The Princess Casamassima:

"I determined to see it"-- she was speaking still of English society--"to learn for myself what it really is before we blow it up. I've been here now a year and a half and, as I tell you, I feel I've seen. It's the old regime again, the rottenness and extravagance, bristling with every iniquity and every abuse, over which the French Revolution passed like a whirlwind; or perhaps even more a reproduction of the Roman world in its decadence, gouty, apoplectic, depraved, gorged and clogged with wealth and spoils, selfishness and scepticism, and waiting for the onset of the barbarians. You and I are the barbarians, you know."¹⁷

There are other allusions to The Princess Casamassima in the text proper. Lady Arrow, like Lady Aurora in The Princess Casamassima, assuages the conscience of the privileged classes by "slumming it" with the poor, in

Lady Arrow's case, with unwashed artists and transients. She journeys to Greenwich Observatory with one such female transient, Brodie, just as Verloc travels there with Stevie, and Paul Muniment with Hyacinth. Lady Arrow reminds Brodie of the parallel: "In my favorite novel there's a lovely scene here in Greenwich--an outing like this. Do you know Henry James?" (FA, p. 200). Since a reference to Conrad follows shortly after this passage, the mention of the Greenwich outing is a double allusion; it alludes to the mildly suggestive homo-erotic scene between Muniment and Hyacinth (Lady Arrow has a lesbian interest in Brodie); and since Conrad uses Greenwich for the setting of Stevie's hideous death, the "lovely scene" is poignantly ironic. These explicit allusions situate Theroux comfortably in the James-Conrad tradition. For example, about The Secret Agent, the novel's hero, Hood, reflects with an echo of the opening of The Voyer ("a violence without purpose that remained without effect"): "It was a simple tale, a shadowy outrage, a bout of madness. It started, it squawked, it was gone" (FA, p. 247). The Family Arsenal is perhaps too close to The Secret Agent, for Theroux's use of all the Conradian props (bowler hats, crumpled newspapers, streetlamps and carving knives) means that the novel, at best, straddles the fence between the parodic and the derivative. The novel is a kind of update of The Secret Agent using the topicality of the 1970's IRA bombings in London--just as both James's and Conrad's novels of anarchism are also inspired by topical events: The Princess Casamassima by the Hyde Park Riots and The Secret Agent by the Greenwich Bomb Outrage. Theroux, however, expresses more interest in the motley, loosely glued family of degenerates, eccentrics, and thrill seekers (who pose the real threat) than in the IRA anarchists

who so ineptly lose the arsenal. James and Conrad keep their irony aimed at the degeneracy of anarchists and their families and friends, whereas Theroux shifts the irony to characters on the fringe of bourgeois life who, ironically, undermine the anarchists themselves.

The explosion in The Family Arsenal, like those in the Conrad, Bely and Pynchon novels, is worked as a motif into the private lives of characters (a moral and domestic context), but inevitably it expands to include the apocalyptic theme (a philosophical and social context). For Gawber, in his dull bureaucratic life, the exploding arsenal, which lights the sky in "majestic detail" and sends "sparks traveling up in gusts curling above the rooftops," is first a private matter: "It is the end of my world" (FA, p. 293). Gawber, however, senses earlier in the novel, as he walks through Deptford squalor (Conradian squalor with an emphasis on disease) that the end might not begin so spectacularly:

No: that was fancy's need for theater, the mind's idle picture, inaccuracy's enlargement. Catastrophe was like this, it was this--smoke, silence, emptiness and slow decay, an imperceptible leaching that was a strong smell long before it was a calamity. The knotting of the city's innards into dead hanks, not combustion, but blockage, the slowest cruelest death (FA, p. 230).

He disdains Londoners because "They didn't know; ignorance was part of the disease, because the illness would kill them before they understood it was fatal" (FA, p. 231). Each of Theroux's characters has his own special version of the explosive end. For Murf, Hood's crass, unhygienic side-kick whose hippie tastes have run to knives and feats of bomb-wiring genius, the explosion ("Widdy-widdy-boom") is a work of destructive beauty.

A dirtier version of a Burgess droog, he wanders with Brodie through London like an anarchist tourist imagining how he could "bring down the Admiralty Arch by blasting the central supports with plastic explosive-- 'then nip on a Number One bus'" (FA, p. 76). Only two well-placed charges, he thinks, would be needed for the National Gallery, and "a parcel of nitro in the tube station" would take care of Saint Martin's church. Ever the outcasts, Murf and Brodie can only "possess the city, by reducing it to shattered pieces. Exploded, in motion, it was theirs" (FA, p. 77). Hood, too, transforms London into a post-apocalyptic scene. Like the Professor in The Secret Agent who thinks that "the low brick houses had in their dusty windows the sightless, moribund look of incurable decay--empty shells awaiting demolition,"¹⁸ Hood imagines a graveyard as the gutted remains of an explosion: "This was how the whole of London might look if it was devastated by bombs: miles and miles of shallow moaning cellars" (FA, p. 210).

The city, then, in most of these novels exists as a convenient setting for proleptic explosions: characters seem confused as to whether the apocalypse is about to burst or whether it has, in fact, already arrived. As a symbol, the city is at once a testament to man's highly-organized social structure and, at the same time, a graveyard for its collapse. It provides the same dual function for the individuals who wander there: a workshop for participation and social experiment, and a flophouse for moral depravity and guilty concealment. In The Family Arsenal, Hood notices that

for every one who used the city as an occasion to perform, a thousand chose it as a place of concealment. In its depths bombs were stifled. His own

was local, personal, a family matter; it had not been heard here. ... He had been driven here, to a narrowing space in the vast now featureless city where if he was not careful he would be caught. You were allowed to hide if you made no sound. The city confounded like a sea; it was penetrable, but it was endless and neutral, so wide that on a train tossing between stations--those named places, those islands--you could believe you had gone under and were dead (FA, pp. 296-97).

The city is "featureless" and "endless," and at the same time "narrowing" and "penetrable." Because the city has both structure and chaos, the labyrinth or maze becomes a favourite image for the novelists in my study who search for ways to depict the modern city. The labyrinth is at once a construction of complex order and complex disorientation. Thus, just as Hyacinth finds himself in the whirl of staircases and corridors of Millbank prison, Hood finds himself led down

the clanking elevator cage and down the circular stairwell to the tunnel under the Thames. It was the sort of glazed endless corridor Hood had seen when he was high, a tube of echoing tiles, without doors or windows, stretching away, and ringing with the footsteps of people he could not see. Voices chimed from the walls and his own footsteps gulped. ... On the far side of the river they emerged from the stairwell and its stink of urine and chalk to a dark muddy garden and a maze of earthworks (FA, p. 246).

The labyrinth image here in The Family Arsenal, as in the novels of James, Conrad, Bely, Heller and Pynchon, is consistent with its mythological and historical origins as a tomb to secure the safety of the dead and as a temple for restoring vitality to the living.¹⁹ James, in particular, is truthful to the classical rendition of the image; Hyacinth speaks of "sacrifice" in the "innermost sanctuary" of the "temple" of the anarchist underworld. Characters in the modern novel of absent-centred structure,

like their classical predecessors, search desperately for a life-renewing centre, and more often than not, find themselves confronted, both by King-god and Minotaur--or else they become permanently lost, unable to find the centre at all.

In its use of these narrative images--proleptic explosion and labyrinthine city--The Family Arsenal shares much with the novelists of absent-centred structure. But ultimately it falls outside that category because it forgoes other essential devices such as fragmentation, anti-climax, and in particular, indirect narration. Moreover, the explosion in Theroux's novel is central to the narrative only in the sense that it is a fitting climax to an anarchist mystery (and The Family Arsenal, more than its predecessors, is descended from mystery fiction, though it also has some genetic material from Ian Fleming's spy fiction). Even the arsenal itself, which is abducted from the terrorists, does not remain "hidden" from the narrative focus as does, say, the silver treasure in Conrad's Nostromo. Nor does the arsenal's explosion operate as a narrative centre, for it is not something given which the narrative then absents and returns to reluctantly. And unlike The Secret Agent and Petersburg in which the explosion is a metaphor for the fragmentation of the narrative structure, Theroux's explosion is simply the expected bang at the end of the plot's fuse--indeed, in its suspenseful linearity, the novel is surprisingly conventional. Theroux absents nothing but the outcome (the rudimentary sense in which all novels are absent-centred), and even here, he does not toy with anti-climax like James or exploit it prominently like Bely and Pynchon. Nor is the explosion especially symbolic; it does carry a certain ironic weight, but as a narrative

device it lacks structural prominence such as in The Secret Agent and metaphysical resonance such as in Spark's The Girls of Slender Means.

Theroux denies anarchism its political validity by placing its machinery in the hands of characters who, in the smallness of their moral and political natures, remain in inverse proportion to the size of the bomb and the dazzle of its blast. G. K. Chesterton in The Man Who Was Thursday (1908) denies anarchism its validity by distorting it in the service of fantasy and parable. Written one year after Conrad's The Secret Agent, the novel begins with a kind of social satire and drawing room comedy, delves briefly down to the haunts of underground anarchism, surfaces and then runs rapidly away as a quasi-adventure chase that flirts with the fantastical. It uses, like Theroux's and Spark's novels, anarchism for a quite different purpose than the absent-centred novels of my study. More than Theroux's and Spark's, however, Chesterton's novel seems earnestly disturbed by the scope and the seriousness of the threat posed by anarchism. No doubt, there was good reason in 1908, for, as we learn from the background to the James and Conrad novels, newspapers at the time were speculating rampantly about a vast international network of conspiracy and violence. Conrad's response to this anarchism is to view it as symptomatic of a larger moral decay, and like Theroux, he explores the private, domestic context which might explain it. Spark's anarchism is presented as the futile response to metaphysical truths which are difficult for characters to grasp and even more difficult to deal with once painfully understood. Chesterton's angle on the antics of anarchism is to shape them into moral parable for the purpose of discussing the two-sided coin of good and evil. In this sense, the novel is closer to Heart

of Darkness than to The Secret Agent, despite the strong parallels in imagery to the latter.

Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday opens in the London suburb of Saffron Park which "lay on the sunset side of London, as red and ragged as a cloud of sunset."²⁰ Less uniform than Coketown's red brick houses on large and small streets "like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another" (Dickens, Hard Times),²¹ and tidier than the "grimy brick houses" in Verloc's London, the houses of Saffron Park seem, nevertheless, distorted because the people who live in them are distorted. "The stranger who looked for the first time at the quaint red houses could only think how oddly shaped the people must be who could fit in to them" (MWWT, p. 9). And just as Verloc makes his way to the embassy under a sun that looked "bloodshot," Gabriel Syme notices, as the novel opens, that Saffron Park is bathed in a sunset that "looked like the end of the world," and that "the whole was so close about the earth as to express nothing but a violent secrecy" (MWWT, p. 11). And so once again London lies vulnerable to the threat of anarchism and apocalypse.

But Chesterton, more than the other novelists who deal with this violent vision, seems intent on unmasking its shortsightedness. What seems like gloomy distress for a decaying moral humanism in The Secret Agent is presented as a cheerful reproach for a fact forgotten in The Man Who Was Thursday. Conrad's novel seems regretful; Chesterton's is corrective---which is a function of its parable form. Gabriel Syme, for example, makes it clear that there are lessons to be learned. He is a man "fighting for order" who feels it is wise to be intimate with the

anarchist experience so that "the real lie of Satan may be flung back in the face of this blasphemer, so that by tears and torture we may learn the right to say to this man, 'You lie!'" (MWWT, pp. 183-84). But the novel's humanistic idealism is not rescued without a tussle from the scepticism of early twentieth-century modernism. For example, about Syme's perceptions of a forest, we read:

For Gabriel Syme had found in the heart of that sun-splashed wood what many modern painters had found there. He had found the thing which modern people call Impressionism, which is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe.

As a man in an evil dream strains himself to scream and wake, Syme strove with a sudden effort to fling off this last and worst of his fancies (MWWT, p. 127).

While Chesterton's fantasy parable charts a different course than the anarchist fictions of his immediate predecessors, James and Conrad, the spatial imagery in the novel is cut from the same cloth. Just as Hyacinth descends into the prison and Conrad's characters into the London labyrinth, Syme and Gregory descend into their own kind of inferno:

The next moment the smoke of his cigar, which had been wavering across the room in snaky twists, went straight up as if from a factory chimney, and the two, with their chairs and table, shot down through the floor as if the earth had swallowed them. They went rattling down a kind of roaring chimney as rapidly as a lift cut loose, and they came with an abrupt bump to the bottom. But when Gregory threw open a pair of doors and let in a red subterranean light, Syme was still smoking with one leg thrown over the other, and had not turned a yellow hair.

Gregory led him down a low, vaulted passage, at the end of which was a red light. It was an enormous crimson lantern, nearly as big as a fireplace, fixed

over a small but heavy iron door. In the door there was a sort of hatchway or grating, and on this Gregory struck five times (MWWT, p. 22).

More explicitly hellish (roaring chimney, red subterranean light, fireplace) than James' and Conrad's renditions of anarchist underworlds, this particular abyss is a surprising forerunner of the entombed arsenals of technology and warfare that we find in the underground tunnels of Pynchon's Germany. Walled with bombs, the very room in which Syme and Gregory find themselves "seemed like the inside of a bomb" (MWWT, p. 23), just as in Gravity's Rainbow the boy Gottfried finds himself about to be launched inside the Schwarzgerät.

Yet, as in The Family Arsenal, labyrinth and bomb in The Man Who Was Thursday are not elevated to a structural prominence for the purposes of absenting a centre. Chesterton leads us not to a narrative gap but along a mesmerizing journey of mysteries and enigmatic confusions, and always towards the intricate play of opposites: of anarchists and police, of the seeming and the real, of nightmare and wakefulness and of good and evil. Like Alice's adventure through the glass, Syme's descent down the anarchist's elevator is a device for disfiguring and thus for commenting on a world blurred by familiarity.²² By contrast, the novelists of absent-centred narrative feel that there is ample disfiguration in the world as it is.

If Spark, Theroux and Chesterton reject absent-centred structure in favour of other narrative strategies (while exploiting the metaphors of anarchism and explosion), other novelists achieve a high degree of absent-centred structure by relying on the detective fiction genre instead of

anarchism and explosion. Hubert Aquin's Hamlet's Twin (Neige Noire), for example, foregoes the fireworks of anarchist explosion and the labyrinth of underground intrigue, but it does exploit other spatial structuring images and temporal distortions which connect it to The Secret Agent, Catch-22 and Petersburg.

Not surprisingly, authors like Aquin, persuaded by the strategy of absent-centred narrative, must turn to image clusters of concentricity. Bely does so on the opening page of Petersburg (the city is designated on maps by two concentric circles with a dot in the centre); Stevie's "coruscations of innumerable circles" are a messier version, but they point to the same explosive shockwaves, the same urban disorder and the same moral confusions. Similarly, in Hamlet's Twin, Nicolas and Sylvie, belated honeymooners, travel towards the arctic circle and the north pole--Conrad has a like interest in longitude, latitude and the first meridian. During their voyage, they pass through Tromsø, "a city without a centre, a long landing-stage rimmed with a few houses and buildings."²³ And Nicolas dreams about an Italian enclave in the Svalbard Archipelago:

The city was built according to a concentric plan.
The avenues come out of the centre like radii, the
streets are circular and cut across the avenues.
The central area is a masterpiece (HT, p. 117).

The architectural plan might have been borrowed from Peter the Great, for Petersburg is constructed precisely in this way, as Bely reminds us repeatedly. Nicolas notices that Spitsbergen, too, is "a barely circumscribed emptiness." To be defined, an emptiness or an absence must be circumscribed, and this is why the novels of absent-centred structure must,

paradoxically, refuse to tell the story by indirectly and reluctantly narrating what they wish to avoid. The bomb explosion in The Secret Agent is conspicuously absent in the linear flow of narrative at the beginning of the novel, but eventually the circumstances and descriptions are recreated for us in characters' imaginations in grim detail.

Similarly, Nicolas blots Sylvie's murder from his consciousness and his script, but eventually the details forcefully intrude back into the screenplay. The narrator explains it thus:

The present is being used here to take an inventory of what is lacking. This tabulation evokes lacunae, gaps, omissions, absences (HT, p. 188).

And the central absence is spotted by Eva when she reads the script:

Eva

I've reread everything you've written from the beginning. Do you want to know what I think of it? Some important scenes are missing.

Nicolas

For instance?

Eva

You skip over Sylvie's suicide. She kills herself, that's stated quite clearly, but we aren't there when it happens except through the intermediary of Nicolas' account (HT, p. 154).

Sylvie's suicide is, of course, a lie, and eventually Nicolas is forced to change the script to include the sadistic, ritualistic murder because he wants it to be autobiographically accurate. At this point Nicolas protests that his screenplay is truth, though others who read the script are reluctant to see it so. Sylvie's murder, they assume, must be a fabrication for the sake of art, and thus, for a time, Nicolas is allowed

to write about his crime in the guise of fiction. It is not so much a case of life following art as it is art being invaded by life. Only when Eva and Linda Noble, the actress who is to play Sylvie's role, glance over a summary of the crime do they realize that Nicolas' screenplay is fact, and thus, that there is a danger he may repeat the crime in art, when the film is being produced. (Nicolas has, in fact, tied Linda to a bed earlier in the novel.) Nicolas is correct when he hints at the absent crime and its effect on his film; "it's the fiction that is trapped by a reality it didn't contain and which hypocritically invades it" (HT, p. 120). Hence the reluctantly included crime is very much like Conrad's missing explosion and even more like Yossarian's reluctant remembering of Snowden's death in Catch-22. Sylvie's words, in fact, as she dies ("I'm cold Nicolas, I'm so cold" HT, p. 196) are a clear echo of Snowden's words as he dies in the plane ("I'm cold," Snowden whispered, 'I'm cold').²⁴

Aquin, Conrad and Heller all find it necessary to radically disrupt narrative time because, to circumscribe the central narrative absence, they must interrupt the temporal flow and absent the crucial event or crime. We follow Verloc to and from the Embassy to the point where he conceives of the bombing plan; then suddenly the narrative jumps to a point after the explosion. We follow Nicolas' and Sylvie's journey to Spitsbergen; then suddenly the narrative jumps to Nicolas' return to Oslo after Sylvie's death. Heller differs somewhat in that Snowden's death functions as a narrative absence from the beginning. Yet all three narratives follow the same pattern of returning to the absented event in an attempt to recover the details and circumstances and to grapple with its significance.

It is this narrative emphasis on the recovery of circumstances surrounding the crime which situates these novels, like Robbe-Grillet's The Voyeur, in the detective fiction mode.²⁵ But whereas the emphasis in detective fiction always rests on the question "who done it," novelists of absent-centred narrative are more preoccupied with the fragmenting effect of the absented violence itself. Detective fiction, we might say, constitutes another sub-set of absent-centred narrative controlled by the absent centre of character. The absent centre here, however, is only an absence in the sense that it is an unknown which is deployed in the service of mystery and suspense. The "who" is the formulaic gap which every reader of detective fiction implicitly knows is the raison d'être of the narrative.²⁶ Agatha Christie plays on this principle in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd in which the reader scans the cast of characters looking for the criminal who fits most logically into the gap in the syntax of the crime's plot. But, defying all laws of detective fiction grammar, Christie conflates narrator and criminal. Assuming that he is a reliable narrator, the reader absents Dr. Sheppard from the cast of potential murderers. Yet, Dr. Sheppard, like Nicolas in Hamlet's Twin, is a reliable narrator in the sense that his narrative is a truthful record of the crime. He explains:

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:
"The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone."

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then

have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?²⁷

However, the temporal lacuna of those "blank ten minutes" diminishes in its effect on the narrative structure when compared to the temporal lacuna of absent-centred narratives which use this detective fiction mode as a skeleton for more monstrous experiment.

Mathias, for example, in The Voyeur, as a travelling wrist-watch salesman, is virtually a vendor of distorted time. In fact, amid the flashbacks, shifting points of view and repetitions (or near-repetitions), the only way to track the linear time of the narrative is to track the number of his wrist-watch sales--just as keeping track of the number of bombing missions in Catch-22 helps to sort out the time scheme of that fragmented narrative. And The Voyeur, like The Secret Agent, Catch-22 and Hamlet's Twin, proceeds towards the crime or violent death and then carefully avoids it. Robbe-Grillet, however, is more perspectivist in his strategy; Mathias's role as murderer is strongly suggested, but so confused and even contradictory are the descriptions of the crime that there must always remain an element of uncertainty. Part of the reason is that, more than other absent-centred narratives, we are enclosed within the mind of the central character, and because "he was taken for a madman" (V, p. 133), we doubt his reliability. For example, the story could be read as the fantastical concoctions of a dreary loser with a furtive persecution complex.

Robbe-Grillet's distinctive use of indeterminacy is evidenced by his special rendition of the labyrinth in The Voyeur. James, Conrad, Chesterton,

Bely, and to a lesser extent, Heller, appropriate the labyrinth as a symbol for doomed cities and as a setting for doomed characters. Robbe-Grillet's urban labyrinth of In the Labyrinth does this too, but it, together with the labyrinth of The Voyeur (which is the only rural one of the group), are also used explicitly as metaphors for the novels' narrative technique, and ultimately, as an illustration of the notion that it is difficult if not impossible to find one's way in the objective world. Mathias, on his return to the scene of the crime, chooses a shortcut through a field:

Unfortunately none of the numerous existing paths coincided with the theoretical direction Mathias had selected; he was therefore confined, from the start, to one of two possible detours. Besides, every path looked winding and discontinuous--separating, reuniting, constantly interlacing, even stopping short in a briar patch. All of which obliged him to make many false starts, hesitations, retreats, posed new problems at every step, forbade any assurance as to the general direction of the path he had chosen (V, p. 159).

This language is, of course, descriptive of the character's meanderings (and perhaps of his mind), but it also describes the discontinuity, the separations, repetitions, cancellations and interlacings which characterize the narrative structure and which circumscribe the details of the rape and murder which are never directly narrated. All of the information about the crime comes indirectly and reluctantly, some of it, as in The Secret Agent, by way of a newspaper. Reading through the article on the murder, Mathias notices that

the article did not have much of importance to say. It was no longer than a minor news item. In fact a good

half of it merely traced the secondary circumstances of the discovery of the body (V, p. 61).

Like Ossipon in The Secret Agent, who finds the "mere newspaper gup" inadequate for understanding the explosion, Mathias finds the "conventional language of the press" hopelessly unsuited to the particulars of the crime. "The scene," he concludes, "would have to be re-invented from beginning to end, starting with two or three elementary details, like the age of the victim or the color of her hair" (V, pp. 61-62). In The Secret Agent, the police begin with the triangle on Stevie's overcoat. Absent-centred narratives must follow precisely the same procedure: re-invent by beginning with the "secondary circumstances."

The narrative circumscribing the crime in The Voyeur takes its imagery, like other absent-centred novels, from concentricity. Thus, the road on the island "made a large semicircular curve which reached the furthest point of the island and then curved back towards the center" (V, p. 126). And going into a store in the village, Mathias' eye is caught by a "round, long-handled enameled iron skimmer" which is chipped so that "concentric lines faded out toward the edge."

To the right, a dozen identical little knives--mounted on a cardboard strip, like watches--formed a circle, all pointing toward a tiny design in the center which must have been the manufacturer's trademark (V, p. 42).

The knives point, like the narrative, to a centre of crime, and since the instruments of violence are likened to an arrangement of watches, the passage also points to the timelessness of that crime in the story. A

version of the circle image, the sideways figure eight, also suggests that the murder is unrecoverable. The two anchor rings on the wharf; the twisted cord Mathias keeps in his pocket (possibly used to strangle the girl); the seagull's eyes which are "two perfect, motionless circles set side by side, each one pierced at the center by a black hole" (V, p. 183); the cylindrical lamp with "two superimposed series of equal tangent circles--rings more exactly, since their centers are hollow" (V, p. 194); and the two cigarette holes that Mathias burns in his newspaper--all of these are images of hollowness and stillness at the centre of the narrative. The doubling of the circle into a sideways eight (the mathematical symbol for infinity) emphasizes the endless travelling, circling, and recircling that the reader experiences as he attempts to contain the narrative line. Mathias himself describes his journey as "a kind of figure eight" (V, p. 212), and like him, the reader can only follow one loop, then its mirror loop, ever passing over the still and elusive centre of the crime.

What Robbe-Grillet's and Aquin's novels share with the absent-centred narratives in my study is a temporal distortion of time and a series of structurally functional spatial images which are also metaphors for the absent event. The sub-set I have selected (James, Conrad, Bely, Heller and Pynchon) is more particularly governed, in addition to imagery of concentricity, by the imagery of explosion. These strictures, of course, necessarily exclude many other works which in a larger study would deserve attention. But Conrad's Heart of Darkness, for example, despite the array of dark and blank enigmas which are suggested by that work's imagery, is not as useful for my purposes as The Secret Agent.²⁸ Kurtz's heart, like

the Congo's, may ultimately be unexplainable, but the narrative structure is as neatly framed and episodically down-stream as Huckleberry Finn. Mystical neo-primitivism alone is not enough to constitute an absent-centred narrative, nor, for that matter, is the philosophical metaphysics of Kafka's The Castle, nor the carefully complex nuances and psychological mysteries of the later James, for example, The Wings of the Dove. My study begins, then, with The Princess Casamassima because it contains most of the features of absent-centred narrative--albeit in a rudimentary form--and because in its abandonment of the Victorian Bildungsroman it looks back to Dickens, thereby drawing the parameters of the Modernist social and cultural context of absent-centred structure. It ends with Gravity's Rainbow, for that work represents a veritable encyclopedia of this particular narrative pattern.

Notes

¹ Pierre Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, translated by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 27. Further references are given in the text by page number following the abbreviation TLP.

² Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso, 1978), p. 99. Further references are given in the text by page number following the abbreviation CI.

³ Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," New Left Review 50: 1968, p. 12.

⁴ Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 47.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," in The Structuralist Controversy: the Language of Criticism and the Science of Man, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977), p. 249. Further references are given in the text by page number following the abbreviation SSP.

⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, The Voyeur, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove, 1958), p. 3. Further citations as V.

⁷ Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 285. Cited in text as BIM.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, as quoted in Said, Beginnings, p. 329.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 173.

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 145. Cited in text as PP.

¹¹ Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 167. Further citations as AR.

- 12 James M. Mellard, The Exploded Form (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 11.
- 13 Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (New York: Modern Library, 1931), pp. 496 and 431 respectively.
- 14 Adams, The Education, p. 457.
- 15 Graham Greene, for example, gives us bicycle bombs and a spectacular explosion at the end of The Quiet American (1955), but neither functions as a narrative structuring metaphor. Similarly, Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party (1980) is a playful and macabre parable of hate and greed, but its toying with the anti-climax of the unexploded bomb is not so much a function of an absent centre as it is a device for pointing to a serious moral to be drawn from the parable.
- 16 Muriel Spark, The Girls of Slender Means (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963), p. 115. Further citations as GSM.
- 17 Henry James, The Princess Casamassima, quoted as an epigraph in Paul Theroux's The Family Arsenal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 45. Further references to The Family Arsenal cited as FA.
- 18 Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963), p. 74. Further citations as SA.
- 19 W. H. Matthews gives the following account of mazes and labyrinths:

Above all, the labyrinth was the centre of activities concerned with those greatest mysteries, Life and Death. There men tried by every means known to them to overcome death and to renew life. The labyrinth protected and concealed the dead King-god in order that his life in the after-world might be preserved. There the King-god went to renew and strengthen his own vitality by association with the immortal lives of his dead ancestors. The labyrinth was the centre of all the strongest emotions of the people--joy, fear and grief were there given the most intense form of expression. These emotions were directed into certain channels, producing ritual and the earliest forms of art--not only music and dancing, but also sculpture and painting. The labyrinth, as tomb and temple, fostered the development of all art and literature, activities which in those days possessed a religious and life-giving significance.

"Mazes and Labyrinths," in The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World, ed. S. H. Hooke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935), p. 42.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, The Man Who Was Thursday (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1937), p. 9. Further citations as MWWT.

²¹ Charles Dickens, Hard Times (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969, rpt. 1974), p. 65.

²² The allusion to Alice is explicit on p. 178 when Syme claims that the masquerade which Sunday convenes is "as absurd as Alice in Wonderland." Thus, The Man Who Was Thursday is linked once more to The Secret Agent, in which, claims William Bysshe Stein, we can see Lewis Carroll's influence at work in the Humpty-Dumpty descriptions of the Secretary. See: "The Secret Agent: The Agon(ie)s of the Word," Boundary II, VI (1978) 2: 521-40.

²³ Hubert Aquin, Hamlet's Twin, translated by Sheila Fischman (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 48. Further citations as HT.

²⁴ Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1955), p. 455. Further citations as C-22.

²⁵ Patricia Merivale expertly locates and compares the absences in The Secret Agent and Catch-22, and mentions the connections with Aquin and Robbe-Grillet. See: "Catch-22 and The Secret Agent: Mechanical Man, The Hole in the Centre, and the 'Principle of Inbuilt Chaos,'" in English Studies in Canada, 7 (December, 1981) 4: 426-437.

²⁶ Other possibilities that warrant consideration as absent-centred narratives of character include Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, in which a major character, the sister Caddie, is denied her own narrative. Benjy, Quentin, and Dilsey have the privilege of self-revelation but Caddie's story is indirect. Seymour in J. D. Salinger's stories is a much-discussed but never-present character, and in drama, Godot is conspicuously absent. But, as seems to be the case, characters talked about create enigmas but do not necessarily disjoint the narrative.

²⁷ Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (New York: Pocket Books, 1939), p. 196.

²⁸ For a discussion of Heart of Darkness as an absent-centred narrative see: Perry Meisel, "Decentering Heart of Darkness," Modern Language Studies 8 (no. 3, 1978): 20-28. The claim is that critics have erred in "filling in" the enigmas that Conrad intended as absence.

CHAPTER II

Henry James's The Princess Casamassima:
The Misplaced Middle

"The secret of Jamesian narrative," claims Tzvetan Todorov in The Poetics of Prose, "is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and superpowerful force which sets the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion."¹ Todorov restricts himself to James's short stories between 1892 and 1903, discarding the previous work as "prefatory labor," as a "brilliant but scarcely original exercise." Yet, The Princess Casamassima (1886) is impelled to motion by "essential secrets" and "absent forces" as powerful as any to be found in the tales. And given that a novel has necessarily more scope than a tale, and given that The Princess Casamassima was written six years before the first of Todorov's dates, James's formal use of absence is more extensive than Todorov would suggest. This is not to say that absence in The Princess Casamassima is not problematical, for as will become clear, its formal positioning in the narrative is not always consistent nor always uniformly patterned as in a tale like "The Beast in the Jungle," or in a late novel like The Wings of the Dove, or in the more successfully absent-centred fiction of Conrad. Yet, as a late Victorian precursor to absent-centred structure in the modernist and post-modernist novel, The Princess Casamassima occupies a useful if not exemplary position, especially since it contains many of the themes and images of the particular set of novels

which I have demarcated in the larger set of absent-centred fiction.

Absence in The Princess Casamassima is created in part by a structural reliance on antithesis, "the precious element of contrast and antithesis," as James calls it in The Art of the Novel.² It is announced early in the novel when we learn that Hyacinth is the unfortunate product of an unfortunate liaison between an English aristocrat and a French peasant woman. The mother, Florentine Vivier, is serving a life sentence in Millbank prison for her murder of Hyacinth's father, Lord Frederick. As Hyacinth's foster-mother, Amanda Pynsent faces, at the novel's opening, the difficult task of deciding whether or not to grant the mother's death-bed wish that she see her son one last time. Beyond the hereditary antithesis of aristocrat and peasant--what the narrator calls later "the blood of his passionate, plebian mother and that of his long-descended, super-civilised sire"--Hyacinth is also caught in a social antithesis between his surrogate parents, Amanda Pynsent and her neighbour, Mr. Vetch. Amanda Pynsent coddles and protects Hyacinth from harsh social realities (mostly as a result of her resigned belief that "the truth never is found out"³), and her greatest desire is that Hyacinth should someday capitalize on his "high connections" and live an aristocratic life of leisure. Mr. Vetch, on the other hand, when asked his advice about the prison visit, expresses an entirely different view: "give him a good stiff dose of the truth at the start" (PC, p. 43), he says with all the cynicism of his thwarted socialist idealism. Not surprisingly, then, Mr. Vetch believes that Hyacinth's future should be guided by intimate observation of life among the downtrodden classes. Each antithesis, the

social and the hereditary (his surrogate parents and his real parents), operates from the beginning of the novel with great power over Hyacinth's life, even though at this point each is a mysterious force absent from his conscious knowledge.

The formal strategy which James adopts to develop antithesis is to situate Hyacinth on the outside edge of two mysterious worlds which constitute the terms of the antithesis; he proceeds alternately to the centres of both worlds where he meets with rejection, disillusionment or betrayal. The pattern is deftly worked with images of the labyrinth: the prison, London itself, the Princess's aristocratic world and Paul Muniment's anarchistic one. Hyacinth, thinking he is on the outskirts of important truths and values, plunges or is plunged to the centre of these geometric and usually hideous labyrinths where he inevitably meets with a Minotaur in one shape or another. The opening prison scene, for example, forcefully establishes the pattern of plunging into labyrinths. Approaching from the outside, Hyacinth and Amanda Pynsent see the prison

... lift its dusky mass from the bank of the Thames, lying there and sprawling over the whole neighbourhood with brown, bare, windowless walls, ugly truncated pinnacles and a character unspeakably sad and stern. It looked very sinister and wicked, to Miss Pynsent's eyes ... (PC, p. 47).

Little Hyacinth resists: "I don't like this place," and later, "I won't go in." Nevertheless, they do enter the "huge dark tomb," and, with a Dickensian emphasis on geometry, they cross "the bare semicircle" at the gateway and find themselves in a "draughty labyrinth" with "high black walls." They then make their way tortuously to Hyacinth's mother

through a "circular shaft of cells," where there are "walls within walls and galleries on top of galleries." They also notice that "dreadful figures, scarcely female, in hideous brown uniforms and perfect frights of hoods, were marching round in a circle" (PC, pp. 49-50).

Hyacinth's mother, we may assume, endured just such a purgatorial existence and ritualized punishment. Now, however, on her deathbed at the centre of the prison labyrinth, she appears to Hyacinth as a "hollow bloodless mask." Miss Pynsent, pondering the effect of such a powerful image upon an impressionable consciousness, wonders "what thoughts were begotten at that moment" (PC, p. 56). The germinal scene of the novel thus contains a potent symbol for Hyacinth, a death mask which points to marital betrayal and to death, the ultimate negation, the ultimate absence which threatens Hyacinth's life from the beginning.

This formal strategy which opens the novel is really James's version of the Dickensian Bildungsroman, for example David Copperfield.⁴ Like David, who insists on his own delicate and precocious nature,⁵ Hyacinth is described as "altogether, in his tender fineness, an interesting, appealing little person" (PC, p. 32). Each child is subjected to an initially damaging experience which later resurfaces as both a cause and an explanation for subsequent behaviour. In Hyacinth's case, the prison scene imprints antithesis irreparably on his consciousness so that, as a young man searching through back issues of The Times in the British Museum, he stumbles across the facts of his parentage and realizes that "the reflexion that he was a bastard involved in a remarkable manner the reflexion that he was a gentleman" (PC, p. 128). In a similar passage,

the formal pattern of Hyacinth's life--and of the novel--is rooted explicitly in the opening scene: "... his fate was to be divided to the point of torture, to be split open by sympathies that pulled him in different ways; for hadn't he an extraordinarily mingled current in his blood...?" (PC, p. 126)

Considering the strength of the initial antithesis, it is structurally logical that midway through the novel Hyacinth should be swinging precariously between two social poles: the Princess Casamassima's world of refined manners and graceful respectability, and the fervent, underground socialist world of Paul Muniment at the pub, The Sun and the Moon (its very name a signpost of James's antithetical imagination). Eventually, it becomes clear that James has balanced these antitheses all too well. Indeed, he seems to have been aware of the problem from the outset. In a passage often quoted to illustrate James's uneasiness with the novel, critics overlook James's own confident qualification:

It is absolutely necessary that at this point I should make the future evolution of The Princess Casamassima more clear to myself. I have never yet become engaged in a novel in which, after I had begun to write and send off my MS., the details have remained so vague.... the subject of the Princess is magnificent, and if I can only give up my mind to it properly--generously and trustfully--the form will shape itself as successfully as the idea deserves.⁶

It is interesting to note that, having sent off only two installments of the novel, James is uneasy about the "future evolution" and the vagueness of detail but quite confident that the subject is "magnificent" and that "the form will shape itself." Critics' comments about the uncertainty of

direction of the novel are confusing, for it is remarkable how many foreshadowings of the ending there are in the opening scenes of the novel. Such foreshadowings suggest that James did indeed let "the form shape itself," and because that form in the beginning is rigidly antithetical, he continued to construct the novel on that pattern. In the Preface to Roderick Hudson, James addresses the issue of antithesis squarely:

One is ridden with the law that antithesis, to be efficient, shall be both direct and complete.

His qualification is that "the ideal antithesis rarely does 'come off,' and ... it has to content itself for the most part with a strong term and a weak term...."⁷ This might be true of Roderick Hudson, but in The Princess Casamassima, James has, in fact, balanced the antithetical poles so finely and so complexly that there can be no "resolution"--in the sense that The Bostonians reaches a resolution to its less elaborate antithesis. To unload either end of the balance scales at the end of The Princess Casamassima would be a betrayal of form. Thus, there is no centre of restitution or resolution as such at the climax of the novel; there is merely a kind of cancellation which leaves Hyacinth in a vague, dreadful space, in a void between two worlds. As we shall see, this particular narrative strategy is the richest though not the only source for the absent-centred nature of the fiction.

As one term or pole of the structural antithesis, the plot which involves the Princess has its own absent centre. Having been introduced to the Princess at the theatre, Hyacinth agrees to visit her at a country residence. Early on the morning after his arrival, he rises, and since

the Princess is not yet awake, decides to walk outside in the garden:

... he had passed out of doors and begun to roam through the park, into which he had let himself loose at first, and then, in narrowing circles, through the nearer ground.... Round the admirable house he revolved repeatedly, catching every aspect and feeling every value, feasting on the whole expression and wondering if the Princess would observe his proceedings from a window and if they would be offensive to her..... There was something in the way the gray walls rose from the green lawn that brought tears to his eyes; the spectacle of long duration unassociated with some sordid infirmity or poverty was new to him (PC, p. 249)..

The image of Hyacinth "revolving" around the house in "narrowing circles" is reminiscent, in geometry at least, of the female prisoners in Millbank "marching round in circles." The grey walls rising from the lawn invoke the prison "lifting its dusky mass" from the Thames, and certainly "the sordid infirmity or poverty" of which the narrator speaks is an accurate description of Hyacinth's first and only view of his mother. Finally, the fact that he is moved to tears clearly shows to us, if not to Hyacinth himself, that there is a significant and powerful act of association and memory taking place. The Princess becomes yet another surrogate parent, and Hyacinth finds himself yet again circling the perimeter of a labyrinth that seems to deny him access. "Seems" because the irony is that access comes all too easily for Hyacinth; he is especially lucky in gaining entrance into the Princess's world. What he fails to realize is that this labyrinth, while not so forbidding as the prison, has, nevertheless, beneath its superficial attractiveness a centre equally as frightening and dangerous and certainly much more elusive than Millbank. Madame Grandoni, the Princess's elderly companion, warns Hyacinth that the

Princess is a "capricciosa"; she refers to Hyacinth as "Poverino" because she knows that Christina Light's treatment of young men has been less than exemplary in the past. The Princess attracts young men, uses them to her own advantage and then ruthlessly discards them; the hero of Roderick Hudson met just such a fate in the novel from which James revived the Princess. Hyacinth, then, finds himself at the entrance to a labyrinth, tempted by his ambition, his impulsiveness and his curiosity to explore its centre. He ignores warnings from both Madame Grandoni and Paul Muniment (though he does get approval and encouragement from Pinnie), and persistently seeks to unravel the ominous mysteries which he encounters--or manufactures, for the dangers seem obvious to the reader. What is most mysterious is that Hyacinth can be so blind to his own folly.

The centre of the Princess's labyrinth is more mysteriously absent than the centre of the prison labyrinth because the Princess herself is such an enigmatic character. That James felt Christina Light warranted a revival after Roderick Hudson suggests that he considered her an incompletely drawn character, or at least that there was more to her story. Yet, her story seems to be the story of a character who defies understanding, for at the end of The Princess Casamassima we do not know a great deal more about her than we did at the end of Roderick Hudson. We know that she has a great deal of personal fortitude and singularity of mind regarding matters which she cares about, and we believe her when she says that she would gladly undertake Hyacinth's revolutionary task herself. (Indeed, she would probably be a more effective anarchist than Hyacinth.) We also sense that she has hidden resources of humanity and warmth, as suggested when she makes a final but fruitless attempt to save Hyacinth

from folly. Nevertheless, James never reveals her psychology as fully or as intricately as he does Hyacinth's or Isabel Archer's in The Portrait of a Lady, which, we mustn't forget, preceded The Princess Casamassima. The novel's title suggests that the Princess is the central character; no critic claims that James has so placed Christina Light. Invariably, critics assume that Hyacinth is the major character, the primary focus of James's interest. Certainly most of the narrative is concerned with Hyacinth, and the Princess appears relatively late in the novel. This displacement, or de-centring, of the major heroine establishes the Princess as a mysterious force lurking inscrutably in the background, looming over Hyacinth, at once an invitation and a threat.

If Leon Edel is correct, part of the reason may be due to the fact that the Princess's original seems to have been one of the most enigmatic women in James's life. James met briefly in Rome Elena Lowe, the daughter of a Bostonian, and James from the first found her "beautiful, mysterious, melancholy, inscrutable." He wonders if this was her way "of seeming, or had she unfathomable depths within?"⁸ The same characteristics follow her fictional counterpart in both Roderick Hudson and The Princess Casamassima where she remains an "enigma" with "unfathomable" coquetry and with a nature "large and mysterious."

As Todorov points out, James's handling of characterization is consistent with his handling of point of view and plot. Speaking of the tales Todorov notices that "the part replaces the whole, according to the familiar rhetorical figure of synecdoche." The technique originates with Flaubert but is extended in James to the extent that it becomes "the con-

structive principle of his oeuvre." ⁹ Certainly much of the mystery surrounding the Princess results directly from James's habit of giving us only details or partial pictures rather than omniscient insight and interpretation. For example, at the theatre when the Princess is first introduced, Hyacinth notices "a lady concealed by the curtain; her arm, bare save for its bracelets, was visible at moments on the cushioned ledge." The detail invites us to believe that the Princess is, after 137 pages, finally going to be introduced. She is, but it is Madame Grandoni's arm that we see, not the Princess's. Hyacinth is invited to the Princess's box by Captain Sholto, and as Hyacinth enters, we see that the Princess is "overshadowed by the curtain of the box, drawn forward with the intention of shielding her from observation of the house" (PC, p. 147). James manages to delay a full face-to-face confrontation for a considerable number of pages, and when that finally does occur, the description is still vague: her eyes are "dark ... blue or grey, something that was not brown" (PC, p. 148). Other description tells us more about Hyacinth's romanticizing than it does about the Princess herself. Hyacinth notices her "purity of line and form," her "light nobleness" and her colour "that seemed to live and glow."

As the centre of one of Hyacinth's labyrinths, the Princess is not only mysteriously attractive, vague and enigmatic; she is also dangerous. Madame Grandoni knows that Hyacinth is in danger when she says to Captain Sholto, one of the Princess's "discarded" suitors: "Certainly he'll have to be sacrificed." The Princess is a kind of consuming goddess who "goes through" men in her selfish campaign of social and personal appeasement.

Captain Sholto once occupied Hyacinth's seemingly enviable position with the Princess, but she cast Sholto off, reduced him to a kind of pimp searching out potential candidates for the Princess's benefit. Speaking of Rosy, Lady Aurora and Paul Muniment, the Captain says to Hyacinth: "I'm keeping them in reserve for my next propitiatory offering" (PC, p. 292). And Paul Muniment neatly encapsulates the relationship between Sholto and the Princess in a bitterly toned metaphor--although he fails to heed his own warning: "He [Sholto] throws his nets and hauls in the little fishes--the pretty little shining, wriggling fishes. They are all for her; she swallows 'em down" (PC, p. 180). Hyacinth is, of course, one of these fishes, and he too is sacrificed on her personal altar. The imagery makes it clear that the centre of this particular labyrinth, though superficially attractive, is ultimately death-giving and certainly as terrifying as the "hollow death mask" of the novel's opening.

While the Princess represents one labyrinth which invites access to the outsider, Paul Muniment, the anarchist leader at the Sun and the Moon pub, represents an antithetical labyrinth from which Hyacinth is also removed and into which he plunges impulsively. Paul, at first, admits Hyacinth only to the safe fringe of the socialist gathering and its plots. Hoffendahl, the real leader who engineers the group from the continent, is not mentioned. But when Hyacinth, in an impulsive moment, speaks out with impressive conviction in defense of the downtrodden classes, he shows himself to be potentially "useful." From that moment, Paul admits Hyacinth to the "inner circle," though Hyacinth never suspects that his treatment will be just as ruthless as the treatment he receives from the Princess. Eventually, Paul takes Hyacinth to meet Hoffendahl for the purpose of

confirming Hyacinth's commitment. They drive at midnight, a drive that "seemed interminable," and "they ended by sitting silent as the cab jogged along the murky miles, and by the time it stopped our young man had wholly lost, in the drizzling gloom, a sense of their whereabouts" (PC, p. 246). Hyacinth is indeed "wholly lost," for he has entered unwarily, from the outside, two very obscure and dangerous labyrinths--the Princess's and Muniment's. His situation is further complicated because he thinks that those two worlds are separate and that he can live in each safely. But when the Princess meets Muniment--when surrogate parent meets surrogate parent--and when they both betray Hyacinth, they repeat the pattern of his real parents by ousting him from the centre of affection and stability. Hyacinth invests too much in both the Princess and Muniment, so that, when the values and ideals which they represent are proven false and superfluous, Hyacinth likewise becomes superfluous. The self-inflicted gun shot is a measure of just how superfluous he feels.

Predictably (because of James's fascination with the symmetry of his antithesis), the anarchist labyrinth is imaged in a way that parallels the aristocratic one. Having made a vow to perform an unspecified act of violence at some future date when called upon, Hyacinth later explains the situation to the Princess: "I pledged myself to everything that's sacred. I gave my life away." And later he invokes religious imagery:

It has made this difference, that I've now a far other sense from any that I had before of the reality, the solidity of what's being prepared. I was hanging about outside, on the steps of the temple, among the loafers and the gossips, but now I've been in the innermost sanctuary. Yes, I've seen the holy of holies. (PC, pp. 275-76).

The irony is that this temple is as pagan as the Princess's in which, as Madame Grandoni warned, Hyacinth is to be sacrificed. Indeed, the Princess herself calls Hyacinth a "sacrificial lamb." The only "reality" and "solidity" of what is being prepared in this revolutionary temple or labyrinth is the certainty of Hyacinth's own demise. Hyacinth thinks he finds in the "holy of holies" something to believe in with certainty, yet the Princess's question--"Then it is real, it is solid?"--draws attention to, with James's own emphasis on the verb of being, the danger of Hyacinth's commitment. The centre, being neither real nor solid, is absent. There are uncertainties, contingencies, and more important, motives and attitudes of which Hyacinth is completely oblivious. The most important of these is Hoffendahl's and Paul's attitude that Hyacinth is expendable, not to mention Paul's eventual affair with the Princess which becomes a double betrayal. In fact, Hoffendahl and the Princess are linked explicitly in the text:

He [Hoffendahl] had exactly the same mastery of them that a great musician--that of the Princess herself--had of the keyboard of the piano; he treated all things, persons, institutions, ideas, as so many notes in his great symphonic massacre (PC, p. 280).

Beyond undercutting previous scenes in the novel, where the Princess entices Hyacinth into a romantic reverie as she plays the piano, the passage clearly points to Hyacinth's double victimization. The centres of the Princess's and Hoffendahl's labyrinths are false--absent--because Hyacinth invests in them too much personal and social value, too many of his own hopes, dreams and ambitions. When he finds out that what he thought was at the centre is not there--when he ceases to care for his

rather adolescent socialism and when he realizes that the Princess's interest in him is selfish--he finds that all of his idealistic foundations crumble beneath him. Regrettably, for Hyacinth, his intelligence and his character are too finely honed, too tender, to withstand the force of that devastation.

Hyacinth's subsequent suicide thus represents the space or the void between two antithetical worlds, the idealistic socialist world of legitimate political and moral action, and the reactionary world of refined sensibilities and artistic form. The reader follows Hyacinth for so long on the outskirts of these alternatives that he feels a sense of defeat when Hyacinth cannot satisfactorily resolve the antithesis, when he is denied shelter from all possible worlds. This feeling of loss is also connected to dramatic expectation, the mystery and suspense created by Hyacinth's vow to perform an act of violence. James introduces this strategy early in the novel, and we wait anxiously for the outcome of Hyacinth's foolhardy promise. But the anarchistic act of violence is never realized. The reader is left with a sense of anti-climax, which is not to say that suspense does not come to a head, but rather, that the expected and desired denouement is cancelled, or at least the closure of the text is uncomfortably rearranged. It is as though James loads the poles of his antithesis so finely and so symmetrically that they cannot be unweighted satisfactorily. Perhaps, this is what James meant when he complained of the "misplaced middle" in The Princess Casamassima. F. W. Dupee interprets this phrase to mean that "the preparations for the action are over-developed."¹⁰ If Dupee means that all actions in the

novel are overly prepared, then the explanation is incomplete. If, on the other hand, he means that only the final climactic action is over-prepared for, then the statement makes sense in terms of anti-climax.

There is further comment from James on this issue:

Again and again, perversely, incurably, the "centre" of my structure would insist on placing itself not, so to speak, in the middle.... In several of my compositions this displacement has so succeeded, at the crisis, in defying and resisting me, has appeared so fraught with probable dishonour, that I still turn upon them, in spite of the greater or less success of final dissimulation, a rueful and wondering eye. These productions have, in fact, if I may be so bold about it, specious and spurious centres altogether, to make up for the failure of the true....¹¹

These enigmatic statements by no means bring us out of the woods, but, at the very least, they do point to a consciousness on James's part of certain kinds of centres. But what exactly constitutes a centre is not clear; resolution of conflict and plot, termination of suspense, authorial intent, ideology and point of view are all possibilities. Moreover, if the centre of The Princess Casamassima is displaced, what precisely is the specious and spurious centre of which James speaks? Perhaps James never really solved these problems for himself until he discovered the "central consciousness" of a character like Strether in The Ambassadors. With a central consciousness, James had a natural limiting device, a point of view and a structuring principle all in one. Yet James does suggest that the centre appears "at the crisis" and that the problem of his "misplaced middle" is "the direct and immediate fruit of a positive excess of foresight, the overdone desire to provide for future need and lay up a heavenly treasure against the demands of my climax."¹² J. A. Ward

would concur and places the problem in the context of James's symmetrical imagination:

James's embarrassment over his "misplaced middles," failures in proportion caused by excessive preparation, follows from his conviction that coherence is necessarily symmetrical.¹³

The narrative consequences of this symmetry are twofold. Hyacinth fails to see that the antithesis is, in fact, spurious; the similarity between his predicament in the Princess's sphere and Muniment's should have warned him. Their movement towards each other obliterates the dialectic and leaves him vulnerably unhoused from the warmth and safety of their affections--a condition which he endures from the novel's beginning. Hyacinth is a committed hero apprenticed to opposing characters who, through a compromise which betrays, find their own peace. Anarchist and aristocrat are really not so opposed after all.¹⁴ The second consequence is that, for the reader, the preparations for the clash and resolution of this antithesis have been so thorough that the unexpected resolution is felt as an anti-climax, or at least as an uncomfortable closure. And as Andrei Bely shows us more clearly in Petersburg, anti-climax is a useful ploy to effect a sense of loss in the reader, a loss or a vacancy which is, in part, the experience of the hero but which is also the reader's experience of the absent-centred text.

The special anti-climax quality of James's ending is better understood when it is contrasted with Ivan Turgenev's in Virgin Soil. James's friendship with Turgenev in Paris is well-documented,¹⁵ and of course, James's knowledge of Virgin Soil, evidenced by his review of that novel,

has been rigorously inspected as a source for and influence on The Princess Casamassima.¹⁶ Certainly the similarities are inescapable; both Hyacinth and Nezhdanov struggle with inner dualities ("... there are two men in me, and one won't let the other live,"¹⁷ says Nezhdanov pre-figuring Hyacinth's social and hereditary split); both commit themselves impulsively to an anarchistic cause which they later come to doubt; both are infatuated with and used by female radicals who attempt to throw off their upper class trappings in favour of a socialistic commitment to the lower classes; and both heroes choose suicide as the only escape from irreconcilable conflicts.

Yet, despite the similarities between the novels and even the uncomfortable borrowings, James's ending is conspicuously different. Turgenev's description of Nezhdanov's suicide is direct--some of it, from Nezhdanov's own point of view, is actually melodramatic. Hyacinth's death, by contrast, is reported with the indirectness and decorum of classical tragedy. It occurs off stage. The narrative discards Hyacinth on his way to his room with a loaded pistol in his pocket; when the Princess rushes to his help shortly afterwards, she discovers that the bloody deed is done. In this small narrative gap at the climax of the novel, Hyacinth drops from our sight. Nezhdanov's death, which also takes place at the climax and which is as pathetic as Hyacinth's death, is described with all the dramatic sentiment--worthy of Dickens to whom both novelists are indebted--that Turgenev can muster. Then, in nineteenth-century fashion, Turgenev adds another chapter in which he tidies up all the loose ends of the novel, what James called "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and

cheerful remarks."¹⁸ Not that Turgenev's ending is exactly cheerful or out of tone, but the neatly rounded closure contrasts sharply with James's ending which undercuts with intensity, if not irony, the expectations--Hyacinth's and ours--which were so meticulously aroused during the course of the narrative.

The drama of expectation differs in Turgenev's Virgin Soil largely because of its episodic nature. Whereas James uses London as a centring device for The Princess Casamassima, Turgenev's novel wanders across the Russian landscape from locale to locale in a picaresque way such that each setting achieves a drama and a suspense of its own. The only general thread of suspense to pull the narrative forward is a frayed one: "What will happen to this character?" Or at best, "Will this character realize his revolutionary ambitions?" There is no great anticipation; things simply and methodically go from bad to better to bad to worse to tragic. James, however, establishes very early in The Princess Casamassima a specific and important question that pulls the narrative powerfully forward: "What will come of Hyacinth's vow to perform the unspecified act of violence?" James, after all, inherited a Gothic strain, and we are apt to forget that, beneath the filigree of his psychological introspection, he is a master of suspense, especially of invoking an ominous future for his characters. In a letter, James writes:

The present and the immediate future seem to me the best province of fiction--the latter especially--the future to which all our actual modern tendencies and leanings seem to build a sort of material pathway.¹⁹

"The Beast in the Jungle," The Wings of the Dove and of course, The Turn of the Screw are more finely-honed examples of this strategy. The effect in those works, as in The Princess Casamassima, is to achieve not only a narrative that grips but also a narrative that challenges us with a rearrangement of the anticipated closure. The reader is required to make an adjustment which is felt as anti-climax.

James's Modernist descendents will craft this technique of anti-climax more deftly for creating absent centres, but none of them surpasses James's use of indirectness and mystery which are also necessary strategies for constructing absent-centred narrative. James himself referred to this technique as "that magnificent and masterly indirectness." Turgenev's narrative, by contrast, is more omniscient--the narrator informs us more than Nezhdanov is informed about himself. James prefers to create mysteries around Hyacinth which affect him as much as they do the reader. The governing principle, the source of command that controls Hyacinth's life, is as removed from us as it is from him. We don't know as much as we would like about Hoffendhal and his gang or about the sources of his instruction; we don't know as much as we would like about Hyacinth's mother in prison, or about the Princess's past, particularly about her relationship with her husband. (It is just as mysterious in Roderick Hudson.) In his Preface to The Princess Casamassima, James claims that his "scheme called for a suggested nearness. ... a presentation not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities."²⁰ The reader is always forced to guess the subterranean relationships, motives and shadowy mysteries. Such a technique goes a long way in creat-

ing an aura of suspense, of things concealed, of important information absented from the text. Todorov agrees that such a device is consistent with James's narrative principle of the "quest for an absence." Unlike Turgenev, whose narrative emphasis remains with the episode, James stresses the character's struggle to make sense of the episode. According to Todorov,

the 'essence' of the events is not given straightway; each fact, each phenomenon first appears enveloped in a certain mystery; interest is naturally directed to 'being' rather than to 'doing.'²¹

But it is precisely the "being" of events which escapes Hyacinth. The Princess's question concerning the significance of anarchist action ("Then it is real, it is solid?") carries with it an obviously rhetorical negative. Hyacinth would be better off had he listened to Pinnie from the beginning: "The truth never is found out." It is James's point that beneath the text's "vague symptoms and motions" there are no certainties or truths. Hyacinth's flaw is his failure to realize that the Princess's world and Muniment's are as empty of solidities as the spurious antithesis of those worlds in which he foolishly ensnares himself.

Thus, in the pattern of his failure, Hyacinth, for a Victorian, is a surprisingly Modern hero, a quester failed because the emotional and ideological objects of his quest collapse around him. The world refuses to conform to his sensitive and intelligent nature which implodes as a result of his misdirected idealism. In this respect, The Princess Casamassima becomes a valuable late-Victorian link to Modernism. Hyacinth's suicide, which is felt as an anti-climax to or an adjustment of the

powerful antithesis, illustrates Kermode's notion that peripeteia becomes the Modernist trope for handling apocalyptic vision, the "falsification of simple expectations as to the structure of a future."²² In this respect as well, then, The Princess Casamassima emerges as a precursor to the modern apocalyptic novel--that is, in its departure from the paradigm of the end.

The claim that any novel by Henry James is pre-apocalyptic may seem exaggerated in the context of much James criticism which tends to emphasize his refined psychological positivism. Yet, F. W. Dupee is correct when he claims that The Princess Casamassima is the "darkest" of James's novels, that it is the most "palpably 'modern,' even in its defects." He continues by saying that it is "addressed to the fate of the superior individual in a situation where things fall apart and the center cannot hold."²³ It is debatable just how "superior" Hyacinth is as a hero;²⁴ nevertheless, the Yeatsian invocation is significant, and, as we shall see, it will surface more than once in the discussion of these novels. Dupee implies that nineteenth-century ideological certainty is undermined in this novel and that it moves towards the fragmentation of Modernism. Speaking of the characters in the novel, he says that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," and invoking another touchstone of Modernism, he claims that the novel's setting in London suggests a "waste place."²⁵ Lionel Trilling expresses something of the same sentiment but with an emphasis on the historical: "It is a novel which has at its very center the assumption that Europe has reached the full of its ripeness and is passing over into rottenness ... that it may meet its end by violence."²⁶ For both Dupee and Trilling, then, The

Princess Casamassima is a pivotal work between nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century Modernism. In terms of the present discussion, we could say more specifically that the novel is Janus-faced, looking back to Dickens and Turgenev while looking forward to Conrad and Bely.

While employing a Modernist terminology to describe The Princess Casamassima may seem somewhat like hitting a tack with a sledgehammer, there is ample evidence in the text to warrant such an approach. James himself claims in a letter to his friend A. C. Benson in 1896: "I have the imagination of disaster--and see life as ferocious and sinister."²⁷ And certainly as Leon Edel has shown, James's view of contemporary political activity was bleak, if detached. (He did, however, express an interest in going to Ireland to witness some political uproar firsthand.)²⁸

In the novel itself the imagery and numerous references to imminent disaster give credibility to the notion of an apocalyptic theme. In imagery that prefigures Yeats' gyre and the theme of confusion when its centre can no longer hold, the narrator writes that Hyacinth was "almost morbidly conscious that the circle in which he lived was an infinitesimally small shallow eddy in the roaring vortex of London, and his imagination plunged again and again into the flood that whirled past it and round it" (PC, p. 107). Hyacinth imagines that everyday London life flows precariously over the surface of a "trap door" into which British society will soon fall to its doom. And in imagery that prefigures Conrad's The Secret Agent, he imagines a fervent mass of anarchistic activity going on "beneath the surface," occasionally raising its head through "ugly black holes." Ultimately, such imaginings are ironic, because Hyacinth over-

estimates the extent and the power of the underground activity, and the only person in the entire novel who falls into a trap door is himself.

Much of this imagery of disaster is, of course, connected with the revolutionary movement, and in this sense, it is inevitable that it should appear in the novel. Yet, revolution or war are frequently associated with apocalypse, for they become convenient metaphors for the ultimate crack of doom. During one of his innumerable walks through London, Hyacinth imagines just such a disaster:

There were nights when every one he met appeared to reek with gin and filth and he found himself elbowed by figures foul as lepers. Some of the women and girls in particular were appalling--saturated with alcohol and vice, brutal, bedraggled, obscene. "What remedy but another deluge, what alchemy but annihilation?" he asked himself as he went his way; and he wondered what fate there could be in the great scheme of things for a planet overgrown with such vermin, what redemption but to be hurled against a ball of consuming fire. (PC, p. 410)

This is, unmistakably, the "imagination of disaster," and we will meet similar renditions of this cosmopolitan nightmare in each of the four remaining novels to be discussed. In The Princess Casamassima the scene occurs at the moment when Hyacinth's options are becoming more and more foreclosed. Both Paul Muniment and the Princess have deserted him for each other; Millicent Henning, his childhood friend and his last hope for charitable understanding, has fallen in league with Sholto, the Princess's discarded lover; Pinnie is dead; he has distanced Mr. Vetch; but most important, he has lost his revolutionary commitment, even though he has received the directive to kill the Duke and even though he carries a loaded pistol in his pocket. Thus the quoted passage is at once an

expression of his bleak view of the world and an omen of his own fate. This is the special Jamesian coloration of the apocalyptic theme: the novel represents not so much an apocalyptic view of the world as it does an apocalyptic view of the fate of one pathetic individual who is unable to cope with a hostile world. The individual's fate becomes a microcosm for a larger historical fate, and this too is a pattern which is repeated in Conrad, Bely, Heller and Pynchon. The terror of the world's end gradually shifts to a character's terror of his own personal end, which the novelist then doubles back and uses as an image of apocalyptic doom. Verloc in The Secret Agent, Nikolai in Petersburg, Yossarian in Catch-22 and Slothrop in Gravity's Rainbow are all ridden with paranoia, the psychological consequence of such terror.

The apocalyptic theme is relevant to absent-centred structure because, in an obvious sense, it asks the most critical questions: what is the world's fate and what is man's fate in that world? What remains after death and after the final upheaval? To ask such questions is to fear the end, to fear annihilation and ultimately, to fear the void. The nagging doubt that there may be only an absence, a signifying of nothing after the sound and the fury, is the powerful force that drives the characters in these novels to such desperate actions--and their creators to such lengths to devise narrative correlatives. At the end of The Princess Casamassima, Hyacinth, alone in his dingy room, is described as "overpast"; "he had become vague, he was extinct" (PC, p. 502). When the Princess finds his body a few pages later, she finds "something black, something ambiguous ..." (PC, p. 510). Hyacinth dies of ambiguity, because he is unable to live with uncertainty and fear. When the narrator

describes Hyacinth as "extinct," he reduces him to a soulless and misplaced biological creature. Compressed in the word "extinct" is both the disillusionment Hyacinth has painfully experienced and the total lack of hope for a future which he prefers not to face. Thus, the apocalyptic theme, the terror of the end, provides part of the ideological underpinning which explains--if not generates--the structure of the novel which explores the origins and bleakness of that state.

Notes

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 145.

² Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York: Scribner's, 1934).

³ Henry James, The Princess Casamassima (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 41. Further references and their page numbers to this edition of the novel are included in the text after the abbreviation PC.

⁴ Leon Edel points out that one of James's earliest memories is of lying under a chair as a child in the midst of adult conversation and reading David Copperfield. See The Untried Years (New York: Avon, 1978), pp. 98-99. The Dickensian influence is rooted early. In his Preface to The Ambassadors (New York edition, 1907-17, Vol. XXI) James addresses himself specifically to David Copperfield and claims that "the first person in the long piece is a form foredoomed to looseness." He goes on to object to the "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" in David Copperfield. In The Princess Casamassima there is one reference to Dickens in general and two references to Micawber; it would seem that David Copperfield is one of James's literary touchstones.

⁵ Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1966), p. 61:

...if it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics.

⁶ Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 68.

⁷ James, The Art of the Novel, p. 18.

⁸ Leon Edel, The Conquest of London: 1870-1881 (New York: Avon, 1978), pp. 111-112.

⁹ Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, p. 151.

- ¹⁰ F. W. Dupee, Henry James (Toronto: George J. MacLeod, 1951), p. 156.
- ¹¹ Henry James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 85-86.
- ¹² Henry James, The Art of the Novel, p. 86.
- ¹³ James A. Ward, "James's Idea of Structure," PMLA 80: 1965, 420.
- ¹⁴ As Patricia Merivale notes, Conrad and Heller are heir to this spurious antithesis. In Conrad, "the opposites are remarkably alike," while in Heller, "the categories overlap." See: "Catch-22 and The Secret Agent: Mechanical Man, the Hole in the Centre, and the 'Principle of Inbuilt Chaos,'" in English Studies in Canada, 7 (December, 1981) 4: 427.
- ¹⁵ See Leon Edel, The Conquest of London: 1870-1881, pp. 203-221 and pp. 292-294.
- ¹⁶ See Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, "Henry James's Divergences from His Russian Model in The Princess Casamassima," in Revue des Langues Vivantes 37 (1971): 535-44, and Eunice C. Hamilton, "Henry James's The Princess Casamassima and Ivan Turgenev's Virgin Soil," in South Atlantic Quarterly, 61 (1962): 354-364.
- ¹⁷ Ivan Turgenev, Virgin Soil, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: Grove, 1977), p. 283.
- ¹⁸ Henry James as quoted in Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 22.
- ¹⁹ Henry James as quoted in Leon Edel, The Untried Years: 1843-1870, p. 299.
- ²⁰ Henry James, The Art of the Novel, p. 76.
- ²¹ Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, p. 153.
- ²² Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, p. 23.
- ²³ F. W. Dupee, Henry James, p. 154.

²⁴ See, for example, J. M. Luecke, "The Princess Casamassima: Hyacinth's Fallible Consciousness," in Modern Philology 60 (1963): 274-280.

²⁵ F. W. Dupee, Henry James, pp. 158 and 160 respectively.

²⁶ Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination (New York: Anchor, 1953), p. 58.

²⁷ E. F. Benson, ed., Henry James: Letters to A. C. Benson and Aguste Monod (London: Elkin Matthews & Marrot, n.d.), p. 35.

²⁸ See Leon Edel, The Middle Years: 1882-1895 (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 168.

CHAPTER III

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*:
Sudden Holes in Time and Space

The narrative absence in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* grows uncomfortably from various and sometimes confusing sources: indirect point of view, intentionally crafted mystery, imagery, anti-climax, spurious antithesis, and, in James's own phrase, a "misplaced middle." By contrast, the absent centre of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is more easily identified, mainly because it so prominently governs the entire narrative structure. A discussion of this phenomenon in *The Secret Agent* profits especially by a comparison with *The Princess Casamassima* since both novels share similarities in subject matter, imagery and theme; moreover, such a comparison vividly illustrates the maturation of absent-centred structure from its uneasy beginnings in Dickens and James to Conrad and Early Modernism where it is developed with greater confidence and sophistication.

Beyond the frequently noted similarity that both novelists chose England as their literary asylum, it is interesting that both James and Conrad should have chosen anarchism as subject matter for fictional treatment--especially interesting since both were quick to disclaim any direct knowledge of anarchist activity. To compensate for a lack of such knowledge, both authors relied upon, among other sources, newspaper reports, James only sparingly on the Piccadilly Riots, and Conrad generous-

ly on the more spectacular and much better documented "Greenwich Bomb Outrage."¹ For the most part, critics have been more tolerant of Conrad's depiction of anarchist character and action than they have been of James's. The Princess Casamassima seems fated to squirm under the charge that its anarchists are naively and incompletely drawn--a charge that persists despite James's stated intention to present only the "surface" of anarchist activity for special literary reasons already discussed.²

Other than newspaper reports, the city of London, insist both novelists in their Prefaces, offered significant inspiration for their fiction. James claims that Hyacinth's history "sprang up for me out of the London pavements," while Conrad writes in his Preface:

I had to fight hard to keep at arm's length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after another from a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line. ("Author's Note" to The Secret Agent, p. 11)³

Yet, the difference here is as noteworthy as the similarity. There is no evidence to suggest that James had to "fight hard" to maintain an ironic and objective "arm's length" distance from his impressions of London. Indeed, if his fact-finding visit to Millbank prison and his numerous walks about the city to document labour class speech are an indication, he seems to have intentionally sought impressions of London with a cool objectivity, even in the mode of naturalism, it has been noted. Conrad, however, apparently struggled with the abundance and the emotive richness of impressions, so that the Jamesian distancing device of irony was

"formulated with deliberation." That there might be a direct influence by James is scarcely surprising considering that Conrad claimed a "frequent communion" with James's work.⁴ Certainly, the imagery of the London streets is unmistakably parallel in both novels to the extent that it depicts the city as a labyrinth and to the extent that it originates from Dickens, an observation which F. R. Leavis made as early as 1941: "Conrad's London bears something of the same kind of relation to Dickens as Henry James' does in The Princess Casamassima."⁵

In Little Dorrit, for example, houses in the city of London are very difficult to locate if they have not been--so it seems--misplaced altogether; Mr. Meagles hands Arthur Clennam a slip of paper on which is written Miss Wade's address:

"Here is no number," said Arthur looking over it.

"No number, my dear Clennam?" returned his friend.
 "No anything! The very name of the street may have been floating in the air, for, as I tell you, none of my people can say where they got it from." ...

... They rode to the top of Oxford street, and there alighting, dived in among the great streets of melancholy stateliness, and the little streets that try to be stately and succeed in being more melancholy, of which there is a labyrinth near Park Lane.... (Little Dorrit, p. 303. Italics mine.)⁶

Or, more spectacularly, in Martin Chuzzlewit, characters, unable to locate "Todgers'" even though it is within view, are doomed to walk directionless through labyrinthine streets:

You groped your way for an hour through lanes and byways, and court-yards, and passages and you never once emerged upon anything that might be reasonably called a street. A kind of resigned distraction came

over the stranger as he trod those devious mazes, and giving himself up for lost, went in and out and round about and quietly turned back again when he came to a dead wall or was stopped by an iron railing, and felt that the means of escape might possibly present themselves in their own good time, but that to anticipate them was hopeless. Instances were known of people, who being asked to dine at Todgers', had travelled round and round for a weary time, with its chimney-pots in view, and finding it at last impossible of attainment, had gone home again.... Todgers' was in a labyrinth, whereof the mystery was known but to a chosen few. (Martin Chuzzlewit, pp. 147-48. *Italics mine.*)⁷

Similarly, in The Princess Casamassima, Hyacinth takes a carriage ride with Paul Muniment at midnight through the "murky miles" of London fog until "he had wholly lost, in the drizzling gloom, a sense of their whereabouts" (The Princess Casamassima, p. 246). As a child, he goes with Amanda Pynsent to see his mother in Millbank prison, that "draughty labyrinth" with "walls within walls and galleries on top of galleries " (p. 50), and as an adult, to see Millicent Henning he must travel through "the labyrinth of the shop" where she works. Not unlike a character trying to find Todgers', Hyacinth, at the end of the novel just before his suicide, wanders through "streets, into squares, into parks" in "the great, indifferent city" until he ends up in Saint James's Park where he "followed the thoroughfare that communicates with Pimlico. He stopped here presently and came back again; then, over the same pavement, he retraced his steps ..." (The Princess Casamassima, p. 504).

In the London of Conrad's The Secret Agent, the "topographical mysteries" of the city are as striking as those in either James or Dickens. Verloc, as he nears the Embassy for his interview with Mr. Vladimir,

reaches No. 1 Chesham Square and then proceeds diagonally to No. 10:

This belonged to an imposing carriage gate in a high, clean wall between two houses, of which one rationally enough bore the number 9 and the other was numbered 37; but the fact that this last belonged to Porthill Street, a street well known in the neighbourhood, was proclaimed by an inscription placed above the ground-floor windows by whatever highly efficient authority is charged with the duty of keeping track of London's strayed houses. (SA, p. 22)

The Embassy and London houses, then, are as obscurely situated in the labyrinth of Conrad's streets as Miss Wade's house or Todgers' establishment is in Dickens's. Conrad invokes the labyrinth or maze explicitly on two occasions: once when Verloc travels with Stevie and the bomb to Greenwich Park via "Maze Hill" station, and a second time when Winnie, having just murdered Verloc, walks desperately alone into the London streets and finds that "the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out" (SA, p. 218).

In keeping with the noticeable symbolic use of geometry in the text (Verloc's triangle and Stevie's circles are two of the more obvious examples), Conrad's labyrinth of streets is described with an emphasis on the geometric. Having betrayed Winnie by sending her alone on the train which eventually carries her to her suicide, and having swindled her out of Verloc's money, Ossipon walks the streets of London self-condemned and rapidly sinking under the weight of his moral decrepitude:

And again Comrade Ossipon walked. His robust form was seen that night in distant parts of the enormous

town slumbering monstrosly on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist. It was seen crossing the streets without life and sound, or diminishing in the interminable straight perspectives of shadowy houses bordering empty roadways lined by strings of gaslamps. He walked through Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons, through monotonous streets with unknown names where the dust of humanity settles inert and hopeless out of the stream of life. He walked. (SA, p. 241)

Ossipon becomes a form, an "it," and the "squares," "ovals," and "interminable straight perspectives" remind us that, for Ossipon, there is no way out, nor is there a perceptible centre to this geometric labyrinth.

The London labyrinth, however, is not only a structure in which characters risk interminable walking; it is also a structure ridden with corruption, disease and deformity, thus providing a suitable setting for the morally grotesque characters who wander there. In Little Dorrit's Park Lane, for example, Dickens stresses distortion and disease when he invokes "parasite little tenements, with the cramp in their whole frame, from the dwarf hall-door on the giant model of His Grace's in the Square to the squeezed window of the boudoir commanding the dunghills in the mews...." They are "rickety dwellings" with "a dismal smell" and so deformed that their iron columns seem to be "scrofulously resting upon crutches" (Little Dorrit, p. 303. Italics mine). No less horrific or monstrous, London, for Hyacinth in The Princess Casamassima, becomes "an immeasurable breathing monster," and as he walks the streets at night, he meets characters reeking of "gin and filth," and "figures foul as lepers," all "vice, brutal, bedraggled, obscene" (The Princess Casamassima, p. 410). Similarly in The Secret Agent, characters in the labyrinth of London are deformed, fat, bloated and diseased: Verloc is "burly in a

fat-pig style," the Professor, a "dingy little man" with a sallow face and a "greasy complexion," and Yundt is cursed with a "skinny groping hand deformed by gouty swellings." The Professor feels particularly threatened by the multitude of such characters who "swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants," even in the back streets of the city where he wanders. The houses here, like those in Dickens's Park Lane, "had in their dusty windows the sightless, moribund look of incurable decay" (SA, p. 74). And in an image which hints at the bomb's explosion at the centre of this labyrinth (and which prefigures the urban hulks of Heller's Rome in Catch-22), the houses appear like "empty shells awaiting demolition" (SA, p. 74).. Similarly, Ossipon, during his rendezvous with the Professor at the Silenus Restaurant, imagines the place after an explosion:

For a moment Ossipon imagined the overlit place changed into a dreadful black hole belching fumes choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated corpses. (SA, p. 63)

If Dickens's imagery springs from social and moral invective, and if James's, informed with "the imagination of disaster," verges on apocalyptic ruin, then Conrad's imagery seems post-apocalyptic, as though the upheaval--the explosion--has already occurred, and as though his characters are doomed to walk interminably in purgatorial London. Looking at the imagery in this way brings into sharp focus its transition from Victorian to late-Victorian and to modernist fiction--especially in respect to the novelists' depiction of the city as labyrinth.

Conrad extends the spatial metaphor of the labyrinth by placing within its large spaces the smaller, enclosed and solitary spaces of his

characters. These claustrophobic spaces, which are emphasized by Conrad's window imagery, reveal the stifling confines of characters trapped in their own grotesque secrecy, unable or unwilling to communicate the nature of their own personal voids which exist within the larger void of London itself. Verloc, nervous and sweating during his interview with Mr. Vladimir, lunges impulsively towards the french windows hoping for some kind of rescue or escape, and later in the same scene he "heard against the window-pane the faint buzzing of a fly..." (SA, p. 31), an image which at once reduces Verloc's moral stature to the level of an insect, while at the same time hinting at his own futile "buzzing" in an attempt to escape the unpleasant situation in the room. That evening at home, Winnie notices him standing at the bedroom window with "his forehead against the cold window-pane--a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, wet, black, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones" ((SA, p. 54). Thus, it is a very delicate membrane, a "fragile film" like his own "mortal envelope," which separates Verloc's private space from the larger public space of the city. Both spaces are hostile to Verloc, the private space because its comfort and its "fanatical inertness" have been disrupted by Mr. Vladimir (and because he risks exposure to Winnie), and the public space because of the "enormity" of its indifference and its power to overwhelm. Michael Haltresht, in his article "The Dread of Space in Conrad's The Secret Agent," describes more fully the claustrophobic theme in the novel and contrasts it with acrophobia or the fear of falling.⁸ (Winnie's refrain which expresses her fear of hanging is the finest example: "The drop was fourteen feet.") A more appropriate contrast, however, would be agoraphobia (fear of large

spaces), especially in the light of Verloc's dilemma which places him "in the solitude of a vast and hopeless desert" (SA, p. 148). The relationship between large spaces and confined spaces, individual voids in the larger void of London, is neatly expressive of one of the novel's modernist themes: isolation in the waste place. Conrad's sea stories can be viewed in the same way. Characters, enclosed in the confined space of a ship, are lost in the vast space of the sea, a pattern which is strongly prefigured in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Shelley's Frankenstein. The pattern is clear in The Nigger of the Narcissus:

The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier.⁹

These two spatial worlds feed and intensify each other, for the more Verloc fears exposure from the outside world (Vladimir and Heat), the more withdrawn and uncommunicative he becomes. For a brief moment he considers "making a clean breast of things" and escaping to the continent with Winnie, but lacking the courage to speak the truth and set things right in his domestic sphere, his only alternative is to carry out Vladimir's directive in the public sphere.¹⁰ As long as Verloc remains inert, he is safe in his slothful role as double agent; however, when Vladimir forces him to unbalance his duplicitous loyalties, he becomes vulnerable. He risks danger if he acts and danger if he does not. It is, anticipating Heller, a classic "catch-22" dilemma.

These spatial complexities in The Secret Agent, however, while they have affinities with those in Dickens and James, move beyond them and in-

vade the narrative structure in a prominent way. Dickensian and Jamesian space is powerfully imaged, but it does not radically alter the narrative thrust. There are innovations in narrative strategies, to be sure, yet The Princess Casamassima and Little Dorrit are still bounded by what Joyce, tongue-in-cheek, called "wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot."¹¹ Conrad's plot or narrative structure is clearly not "goahead," disrupted as it is by both spatial and temporal distortions which fragment and weave the narrative (in a more literal sense than in Henry James) around an absent centre, the premature bomb explosion which kills Stevie. Terry Eagleton, in Criticism and Ideology, concurs and notices in each of Conrad's novels a "calculative organisation of interlacing patterns around a central absence."¹²

One such pattern, delayed narrative thrust, is felt as a distortion in the very opening of The Secret Agent: "Mr. Verloc, going out in the morning, left his shop nominally in charge of his brother-in-law" (SA, p. 13). However, the thrust of the narrative action of "going out" stalls in the first brief paragraph, and in the second Verloc is suspended at the shop door while the remainder of the chapter fills in background and history to establish the setting and character of the Verloc household. Chapter II repeats the opening action, and only then is Verloc "unfrozen" and free to continue on his way to the Embassy for his interview with Mr. Vladimir. Alan Friedman sees such a technique, on a larger scale, as a formal strategy designed as "... a brake against any mere mounting of 'effects' into sensationalism." And he continues:

Conrad's novels are continually about to open outward. One is aware of an imminent explosion as the 'progression' intensifies; but the inward refusal holds the cumulative force in check under increasing pressure; and the story 'opens' only at the end. There is a sudden crumbling of resistance, an eruption at maximum moral intensity.¹³

This "inward refusal" of the narrative is especially evident in Conrad's handling of the bomb explosion. Chapter III continues with a relatively straightforward narrative line, pausing chiefly to describe and outline the background of the anarchists who meet at Verloc's shop the evening before the explosion. Suddenly, in Chapter IV the setting shifts to Ossipon and the Professor sitting at a restaurant table discussing a newspaper report of the explosion. Having followed Verloc to the point where he receives the directive to plant a bomb by Greenwich Observatory, it is something of a narrative "cheat" to be deprived of action so central to the forward thrust of the narrative line. From this point until the murder, the narrative is stubbornly guarded about information concerning the explosion. The topic of conversation between Ossipon and the Professor does, of course, turn to the explosion, but the indirect reporting of the event (which is now spoken of in the past tense) through dialogue, and the irony of their mistaken assumptions (for instance, that it is Verloc who is killed by the explosion), only serve to distance the central event and remind us just how absent from the text this central event is.

There can be little argument that the explosion, while absent from the narrative, is also central to it. As Jeffrey R. Smitten observes: "... all the events relate back to the moment of the bombing either as a cause or an effect ... each scene in the novel is to be understood as a coexisting facet of a complete system of causes and effects which rest

upon a single moment in time" --and in space, he might have added. Smitten goes on to say: "Although it is never directly rendered, the bombing--or more specifically, the explosion--is the central event of The Secret Agent in a very literal sense."¹⁴ The centrality of the event need not be confused with the centrality of character. H. M. Daleski claims, for example, that despite the title of the novel, "Winnie's story ... may be thought of as the paradigmatic centre of a series of concentric circles."¹⁵ Conrad himself in the Preface writes: "This book is that story [Winnie's], reduced to manageable proportion, its whole course suggested and centred around the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion" (Preface to SA, p. 10. Conrad's italics). The event, then, as a formal centre need not contradict the centrality of Winnie as a character or her story, just as in Nostromo, the issue of the hero's centrality is not necessarily in opposition to the centrality of events concerning the stolen silver treasure. In The Secret Agent, the central event does not coincide as it does in James's The Princess Casamassima with the climax of the novel. In The Princess Casamassima the "misplaced middle" of the narrative is connected to the climax of Hyacinth's spurious antithesis, whereas in The Secret Agent the absence of the central event is more striking and more significant precisely because it is quite distinct from the climax (which would be Verloc's death or perhaps Winnie's suicide). Conrad situates the absent centre early in the novel so that, for the reader, it quickly becomes past narrative experience. Much of the subsequent narrative struggles, like the characters in the novel, to recover and understand the precise nature, the causes and effects of that momentous event which both captivates and horrifies. This very strategy of re-integrating

seemingly impenetrable events in the past helps to remove or absent the explosion from the text. The narrative always seems to be looking backwards. By contrast, James prefers to situate his central events in the future where they pull the narrative forward with a more conventional thrust of suspense. The unspecified act of violence in The Princess Casamassima which Hyacinth will one day perform is almost as forceful a mystery as Marcher's unknown but momentous event, "a great accident," which he awaits in "The Beast in the Jungle," the most striking of James's absent-centred tales.¹⁶

In The Secret Agent, the absence of the central event is achieved partly by burying the explosion in the past and partly by weaving a very indirect narrative line. Chapter IV introduces Chief Inspector Heat, and in turn, his superior, the Assistant Commissioner; the focus then shifts to the Assistant Commissioner's wife who is a friend of Michaelis' patroness. Finally in Chapter VII the narrative reaches the bureaucratic top when the Assistant Commissioner's superior enters the novel, "the great personage," Sir Ethelred. It is a curious pattern that, to describe and narrate the event of the explosion, Conrad weaves his narrative through such a tangle of bureaucratic hierarchies, always taking the time to round out his characters with ironic background, history and description so that their actions are legitimately motivated. Of course, much of the conversation in these four "diversionary" chapters (IV, V, VI, VII) has to do with Verloc and the explosion: Ossipon and the Professor discuss the newspaper reports and speculate on the event; Heat examines Stevie's shattered remains and discovers the all-important triangle on his coat collar; the interview between Heat and the Assistant Commissioner establishes

Verloc's connection with the police; and the interview with Sir Ethelred provides a rationale for the Assistant Commissioner's direct intervention in the case. Yet, the speculations, often erroneous, that occur in these interviews, and the piece-meal information about the explosion point out just how little is known about the central event. It is as though the temporal or horizontal flow of the narrative line is stalled (like Verloc at the opening of the novel) while a labyrinth of vertical (that is, hierarchical) relationships is explored. Expressed more concretely, the most significant actions subsequent to the explosion (Verloc's murder and Winnie's suicide) cannot take place until the complex circumstances leading up to and immediately following Stevie's death are entirely understood and painfully imagined, particularly by Winnie. Only then does Winnie have sufficient motivation for wielding the carving knife. When she does, she seems to release the narrative from temporal distortion and what follows is a relatively rapid succession of events as the text's chronology runs itself down to a static conclusion.

By absenting the central event, Conrad shifts the emphasis from the narration of events to a psychological and especially a moral exploration of characters and their motivations. The interconnections and interdependencies which explain the event are highlighted rather than the fact of the event itself. This notion accords with Conrad's view of the conflicting newspaper reports of the actual event in Greenwich Park, reports which were unable to arrive at a convincing scenario of either characters or their motivations. Conrad calls it:

... a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that
it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable

or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced with the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other. (Author's Note, SA, p. 9)

Thus, as Norman Sherry argues, "the quality of the initial incident which attracted Conrad was its inexplicableness,"¹⁷ just as James was inspired by the "mysteries abysmal" of anarchistic London. The challenge Conrad faced, then, was to preserve the quality of an inanity "impossible to fathom," while at the same time depicting characters convincingly flawed and convincingly enmeshed in flawed relationships so that the whole "absurd cruelty" of the explosion would still be sensible to the reader. Thus, the four "diversionary" chapters play a role in distancing the reader from the explosion while paradoxically explaining it by fleshing out the characters involved. This has not prevented E. M. W. Tillyard from complaining that these chapters are "disproportionate," that they destroy the "unity" of the novel, and that "the theme of the police is not perfectly integrated with that of the Verlocs."¹⁸ Tillyard is bothered, perhaps, by the interruption of the narrative line, yet apart from destroying the unity of the text, the interruptions created by these chapters actually create the text around the centre which the chapters circumvent.

The dislocation of narrative line is even greater in Chapter VIII because it shifts backwards in time so that logically it should appear between Chapters III and IV. The focus of this chapter is on Winnie's mother and her decision to leave Verloc's shop and take up residence in an almshouse, a decision which she hopes will insure Verloc's continued care

of her son, Stevie. The other theme stressed in this chapter is Stevie's intuitive horror of cruelty of any form: "Don't whip," he demands of the cabman who drives the horse-drawn carriage in which he, his mother and Winnie are driven through the London streets. However, these very themes--unselfish action (Winnie's mother's is perhaps the only one in the novel) and Stevie's supersensitive empathy--are undercut by the narrative positioning of the chapter. On re-reading we know that, in terms of narrative time, Stevie is actually dead at this point. (We may even suspect it on first reading.) Stevie lives, in this chapter, in a kind of narrative limbo, and thus the horror of the explosion is underlined because it claims the life of someone so harmless and vulnerable as Stevie, especially as he is portrayed in this chapter. Similarly, Winnie's mother's unselfish action is admirable but utterly ineffectual, since Stevie, we know, has been destroyed by Verloc's ill-conceived plot. The chapter, then, is a retrospective interpolation in which, as in the carriage ride through London, "time itself seemed to stand still" (SA, p. 131). Straightforward sequential narrative gives the illusion of forward movement, while Conrad's retrospective chapter, wrenched out of chronology as it is, gives the impression of stalled time. The effect is analogous to Winnie and her mother, who, as long as they can see houses "gliding past slowly and shakily" through the carriage window, have a reference point to demarcate time and space. However, we read later that "in the wider space of Whitehall, all visual evidences of motion became imperceptible." And at the end of the ride, the mother notices that "night, the early dirty night, the sinister, noisy, hopeless, and rowdy night of South London, had overtaken her on her last cab drive" (SA, p. 133). As characters are wrenched out of time and

space during their carriage ride, so too the chapter is wrenched out of the sequential narrative sequence.

The structural narrative irony which results from such distortion distinguishes The Secret Agent from its precursor The Princess Casamassima. Many critics comment on Conrad's ironic mode, which is scarcely avoidable since each of his characters is so severely and so systematically undercut. But irony, as Conrad uses it, goes beyond the sphere of language where that mode announces its presence most obviously. By manipulating narrative time with the interjection of the retrospective chapter, Conrad invades the narrative itself with a structural irony, and so, paradoxically, Stevie's presence in Chapter VIII is felt as a painful absence.

Chapter IX contains another backward leap and deals with the period of time preceding the explosion, in particular, the day of the event when Verloc takes Stevie to Greenwich Park to plant the bomb. It is as though Conrad creates the absent centre early in the novel but then returns to it to define the event by situating it in precise temporal and spatial terms. Christine W. Sizemore sees this chapter as a structural microcosm of the entire text and finds "a mysterious emptiness at its center that contains the darkness, light and destruction of the explosion."¹⁹ The "mysterious emptiness" results partly from the precise temporal designation of the event. Thus, at first we know only that an explosion has taken place; then, the circumstances of the particular day are revealed, circumstances which Winnie later designates more accurately by remembering that Verloc, with Stevie, "went out very early that morning and did not come back till nearly dusk" (SA, p. 156). And still more accurately: "He had

certainly contrived somehow to catch an abominable cold between seven in the morning and five in the afternoon" (SA, p. 158). To protect the essential absence of the event, Conrad is careful to allow little factual information to come from Verloc himself, who could, of course, reveal the entire story. Verloc is, however, allowed this speculation through the narrator's voice:

Fifteen minutes ought to have been enough for the veriest fool to deposit the engine and walk away. And the Professor had guaranteed more than fifteen minutes. But Stevie had stumbled within five minutes of being left to himself. (SA, p. 187)

The explosion is now narrowed down to a five minute time period. Thus, just as the Inspector and the Assistant Commissioner must "zero in" on the circumstances of the event--a well-worn device of detective fiction--so too Conrad "zeroes in" gradually on the explosion itself. In fact, Chief Inspector Heat "zeroes in" with inordinate specificity:

The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician, Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous! He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, screaming for the last time. The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye. (SA, pp. 78-79)

The narrative brackets around the explosion have been narrowed from "early morning ... till nearly dusk" to "two successive winks of an eye."

Speaking of Stevie and the temporal handling of the narrative, Joseph Wiesenfarth says that Conrad shifts "the chronological narration of events in their [Verlocs'] lives to center on the zero hour in his [Stevie's]." ²⁰ And as Inspector Heat's passage illustrates, the "zero hour" may contain the horrors of an eternity; it is that agony which cannot be understood rationally regardless of the temporal specificity.

Predictably, the same "narrowing" pattern is true of spatial designation. We learn that Winnie watches Verloc and Stevie as they leave the shop and walk down "the squalid street"; information is then revealed about their train ride to Maze Hill station; and finally, their entry into "the precincts of the park" is described, at which point Verloc sends Stevie on to the Observatory by himself. Even the precise location of the explosion is documented by the Inspector's assistant who notes that Stevie "probably stumbled against the root of a tree and fell" (SA, p. 79).

There may seem to be a contradiction here: what is left out of the text, the absent centre, is, in fact, designated spatially and temporally with extraordinary accuracy, just as the Greenwich Observatory very accurately designates space by longitude and time by the first meridian. But it is Conrad's point that regardless of how precisely the absent centre may be designated, the horror of the explosion as experienced by Stevie can only be imagined. And if Inspector Heat's imagining of this horror is dominated by emphasis on the temporal, then Winnie's imagining of Stevie's death is dominated by emphasis on the spatial. Her version of the explosion is

thus remarkably pictorial:

Greenwich Park. A park! That's where the boy was killed. A park--smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all sprouting up together in the manner of a firework. She remembered now what she had heard, and she remembered it pictorially. They had to gather him up with a shovel. Trembling all over with irrepressible shudders, she saw before her the very implement with its ghastly load scraped up from the ground. Mrs. Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and fading out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. (SA, pp. 210-11)

The "pyrotechnic display" in this passage (an image prefigured by Stevie's firecrackers in Chapter I) is the closest we come to a direct and disinterested narration of the explosion. But, of course, it is neither direct nor disinterested because it is so idiosyncratically shaped by Winnie's emotions and so fantastically exaggerated by her imagination.

In fact, so vivid and powerful are her imaginings that they instil in her the swelling outrage and wilful strength needed to avenge Stevie's death, thereby becoming a self-appointed instrument of effective if impulsive moral justice. (There is something of a revenge tragedy in The Secret Agent.) But this retribution itself is a distortion and can never redeem or re-establish a moral world, as proved by the quick chain of subsequent disasters that befall Winnie: her encounter with Ossipon and his entanglement in the crime, his betrayal of Winnie and his theft of Verloc's money, Winnie's suicide, and finally, Ossipon's fall to degeneracy and doomed walking through the streets of London. There remain no possibilities for effective moral action at the end of the novel. Stevie was a

fragile representative of and an inarticulate spokesman for the remnants of a moral order. His demise--the absent centre--thus means the demise of a moral order which is ultimately contingent and unrecoverable, extinguished in a moment beyond time and space. Put in other words, the absence is not only the explosion itself or the bomb but also the moral possibilities which the explosion destroys. The horror and the outrage stem from the violation of the moral order, a violation rooted in Vladimir's, Verloc's and the Professor's crude manipulation of time and space. The precise designation of time and space (as symbolized by the Observatory) is a vulgar invention by man, the symptom of extreme scientific rationalism (the bomb, after all, was intended as an outrage against science), and Verloc, among others, is its morally numb spokesman. Contrasted to Winnie and her "pictorial" imagination which makes her a moral agent, Verloc and his cohorts are stunted by a failure of the imagination. And it is through such a bleak moral vision that The Secret Agent bespeaks its modernism.

Conrad's narrative absent centre, then, exists because of the bomb, and the vacant space it creates points to the moral world which might have been. In a passage which undercuts Heat's unwarranted confidence in his knowledge of the precise location and actions of anarchist plotters, the nature of the narrative absence is eloquently described:

... in the close-woven stuff of relations between the conspirator and the police there occur unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space and time. (SA, p. 76)

Stevie's death occurs in such a hole, for he is beyond Winnie's overly protective eye, just as he is out of Verloc's sight in the park. No one sees the explosion; only the sound indicates that something has happened at a particular juncture of time and space. By manipulating the arrangement of narrative episodes, and by the special use of temporal and spatial imagery, Conrad creates just such a "hole" in his narrative. It is as though the explosion actually leaves a gap in the text and sends its reverberating and fragmenting shock waves throughout the remainder of the narrative. The notion is not extravagant, for as early as 1897 in a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad invokes the concept of explosion in regard to The Rescue which he had been working on:

Where do you think the illumination--the short and vivid flash of what I have been boasting to you came from? Why! From your words, words, words. They exploded like stored powder barrels--while another man's words would have fizzled out in speaking and left darkness unrelieved by a forgotten spurt of futile sparks. An explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space. Ask your Nihilist friends. But I am afraid you haven't blown me to pieces. I am afraid I am like the Russian governmental system. It will take a good many bursting charges to make me change my ways.²¹

The notion of explosion here is a resonant one for Conrad; he connects it to the power of language, to politics and to individual psychology. It is not surprising, then, that it should resurface as a controlling device in The Secret Agent. Certainly, the "Nihilist friends," "disorder," and "remembrance" (for example, Winnie remembering or reconstructing the explosion) are all visible constituents of the explosion as it occurs in The Secret Agent. As Avrom Fleishman concludes about this same passage:

... the imaginative perspective of The Secret Agent is consistent with the subject matter, both personal and social. This perspective is a vision of the modern world in a state of fragmentation--as if by explosion.²²

The fragmentation of the narrative is felt as distortions which both emanate from and circumscribe the absent centre (and thus define it). Prominent in the arrangement of larger structural units of narrative chronology, these distortions are also evident in Conrad's focus on the particular. He uses, at times, a kind of slow-motion telephoto or microscopic scanning of the moment and the object. For example, during one of the Verlocs' strained conversations, ridden as they are with silences and fragmented dialogue, Winnie, at one point, murmurs a sentence "after a pause which lasted for three ticks of the clock." And at the end of Chapter VII, before turning out the bedroom light, Winnie lets "the lonely clock on the landing count off fifteen ticks into the abyss of eternity..." (SA, p. 150). This kind of fastidious measurement of narrative time has the effect of trapping the characters and prolonging the agony of their situations.

The distortion is achieved in part by associating time with aural imagery and space with visual imagery. In Chapter IV, as Verloc and Winnie prepare for bed, they hear in the street below:

... measured footsteps [which] approached the house, then died away, unhurried and firm, as if the passer-by had started to pace out all eternity, from gas-lamp to gas-lamp in a night without end; and the drowsy ticking of the old clock on the landing became distinctly audible in the bedroom. (SA, p. 55)

The sound of footsteps and the ticking clock suggest, of course, interminable time, while the gas-lamps, like "spots of time," parallel the temporal image by invoking interminable space. The scene thus creates a particularly intense juncture of time and space by synaesthetically conflating aural and visual imagery. An even more spectacular use of synaesthesia is found in the scene which describes Verloc's murder:

Her [Winnie's] fine, sleepy eyes travelling downward on the track of the sound, became contemplative on meeting a flat object of bone which protruded a little beyond the edge of the sofa. It was the handle of the domestic carving knife with nothing strange about it but its position at right angles to Mr. Verloc's waistcoat and the fact that something dripped from it. Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. Mrs. Verloc watched that transformation with the shadows of anxiety coming and going on her face. It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin ... Blood! (SA, p. 214)

Winnie's eyes "travelling downward on the track of a sound," is an especially evocative image, since the drops of blood are likened to the ticks of the clock which grow faster to a continual sound which again becomes a stream of blood. Quite literally, "time has run out" for Verloc.

The entire chapter from which this passage is taken is a disproportionately extended motion which occurs in a relatively short period of time. The increased amount of narration compared to the brief action it describes lengthens and distorts the action into a kind of slow-motion nightmare which contains, perhaps, an element of poetic justice for Stevie's instantaneous nightmare during the moments of his death. As

Verloc's lifeblood flows out, he is, in a manner, passing into "a sudden hole in time and space" similar to Stevie's. And just as Heat prolonged in his mind Stevie's experience to contain an eternity, and just as Winnie imagined Stevie's death as a "pyrotechnic display," so Conrad in this chapter renders Verloc a similar fate in Bergsonian time. He is forced to experience the prolonged, melodramatically depicted action of Winnie plunging the carving knife into his own breast--prolonged and "leisurely" enough, for example, for Verloc "to taste the flavour of death rising in his own gorge," and "leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to elaborate a plan of defence" but "not leisurely enough to allow Mr. Verloc the time to move either hand or foot" (SA, p. 212). The narrative voice here seems to take particular relish in rendering Verloc knowledge of his own fate. The series of parallel constructions which conclude with a conspicuous negation is carefully concocted rhetoric which emphatically precludes any chance of escape for Verloc.

Even stronger evidence that the extended duration of Verloc's death scene is retribution for Stevie's is found in Conrad's description of Winnie as she approaches Verloc with the knife:

As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes.
(SA, p. 212)

It is as though Stevie comes back reincarnate in Winnie to haunt Verloc and reap revenge. Winnie becomes Stevie's medium acting wildly in a trance until the murderous deed is done, after which "her extraordinary

resemblance to her late brother ... faded" (SA, p. 213).

Winnie's murder of Verloc points to a rapidly increasing fragmentation of a moral and social order built on an already shaky foundation. The force which initiates that fragmentation (both of the Verlocs' world and of the narrative) is Stevie acting in absentia. Paradoxically, Stevie is a much more powerful force in absentia than he is when he is present in the narrative. As a spokesman for a moral order, he is totally ineffectual because he speaks with a "fragmented" voice. He is a kind of "half-wit" who loses his power of coherent speech whenever his impressionable moral sensibility is assaulted by cruelty. During the carriage ride through London, Stevie shudders at the thought of the decrepit horse pulling too much weight. So upset is he that he jumps from the moving carriage to the street in protest, but when asked to explain himself, "excitement as usual robbed him of the power of connected speech. ... he stammered himself into utter incoherence" (SA, p. 132). It is part of Conrad's irony that, while Stevie represents raw pity, empathy and morality, he can never articulate those values in any rational way. As the narrator says, Stevie is a "moral creature ... at the mercy of his righteous passions" (SA, p. 143). In this respect, Stevie can never be the hero of an effectual moral option; rather, like Benjy in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, he represents a measuring stick by which to gauge the moral decay and the threatening solipsism of those who surround him.

Stevie's death itself, appropriately enough, is reported in a fragmented way: generally, by virtue of the fact that information about the explosion and the chain of events comes only sparingly and interspersed

throughout the text, but more specifically when Ossipon reads the newspaper reports of the event:

"Ah! Here it is. Bomb in Greenwich Park. There isn't much so far. Half past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man's body blown to pieces. That's all. The rest's mere newspaper gup ..." (SA, p. 65)

To underline the horror and futility of the explosion which leaves "fragments of a man's body blown to pieces," Conrad reports the event through a fragmented, journalistic voice. Ossipon is, of course, reading the report to the Professor and is therefore being selective, yet, the short sentence fragments and the particular selection of details create a very distant and coldly objective tone quite like a newspaper's style. The effect and the situation are similar to the report of Mrs. Sinico's death in Joyce's "A Painful Case," in which Mr. James Duffy, reading the report of an inquest in a newspaper, suddenly becomes aware that his own perverse guardedness was responsible for the woman's death. The irony is especially poignant because the brevity and the succinctness of the objective language are at odds with the delicateness of the emotions involved. ("Death ... had been probably due to shock and sudden failure of the heart's action." "... he found the deceased lying on the platform apparently dead." "No blame attached to anyone.")²³ In both works journalistic objectivity, which is symptomatic of scientific rationalism, is discredited because, while it deals with the facts of an outrage, at the same time, it turns a deaf ear to its significance. It is guilty of the same kind of desensitized

calculation (Verloc and Duffy) which was responsible for the outrage in the first place. That journalism is used both as ironic device and as object of irony is further evidenced by the narrator's comment when the Professor leaves the restaurant through the doorway where "a dismal row of newspaper sellers" are handing out "damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink" (SA, p. 72).²⁴

To the post-Joycean reader, the fragmentation of The Secret Agent may seem rather unspectacular, yet when contrasted with the easily charted narrative chronology of James's late Victorian The Princess Casamassima, the structure of The Secret Agent appears significantly enough disrupted to situate it comfortably within the boundaries of modernism. Certainly, as Norman Sherry points out, the "difficulties" of Conrad's narrative denied The Secret Agent and other of his novels popularity among the contemporary reading public: "He was a difficult novelist whose complex methods of narration and use of broken time sequences ... militated against popularity."²⁵ These complex methods of narration and distortions of time originate principally from the absent centre, the explosion which kills Stevie and which is never directly narrated. At the same time, the fragmented or exploded narrative actually falls around the absent centre, circumscribes it, points constantly back to it and thus defines it. It remained for a novelist of High Modernism, Russia's Andrei Bely (Petersburg), to plant the absent centre even deeper into the narrative structure of fiction and fragment it in ways even more radical than Conrad's.

Notes

¹ Norman Sherry gives a thorough account of Conrad's indirect connections with anarchism, including the Rossetti children's anarchist newspaper, the explosion at Greenwich Observatory, and stories from friends and acquaintances, especially Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford). See: Conrad's Western World (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1971).

² See W. H. Tilley for a survey of these charges and his own refutation of them. The Backgrounds of The Princess Casamassima (Gainesville: University of Florida Monographs, Humanities #5, 1961).

³ Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963), p. 11. Further references and their page numbers to this edition of the novel are included in the text after the abbreviation SA.

⁴ Joseph Conrad, Notes on Life and Letters (New York: Doubleday and Page, 1926), p. 11. Ian Watt, among others, establishes a strong link between James and Conrad, especially in regard to narrative strategies. See: "Marlow, Henry James, and 'Heart of Darkness'" in Nineteenth Century Fiction 33 (1978/79): 159-74.

⁵ F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972), p. 241. The observation has been repeated variously since then; see, for example, Frederick R. Karl: "It soon becomes apparent that Conrad's London is a direct outgrowth of Dickens'" in A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969); and Leon Edel, The Untried Years, pp. 283 ff.

⁶ Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (New York: Odyssey, 1969), p. 303.

⁷ Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit (New York: New American Library, 1965).

⁸ Michael Haltresht, "The Dread of Space in Conrad's The Secret Agent," in Literature and Psychology 22 (1971): 89-97.

⁹ Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (Penguin, 1963), p. 35.

¹⁰ Avrom Fleishman sees a similar delineation: "The dramatic action presents this vision [social alienation] simultaneously in two plots, one in the public, political realm and the other in the private, domestic one." Conrad's Politics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 189.

¹¹ As quoted in Richard Ellman, James Joyce (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 597.

¹² Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso, 1978), p. 137.

¹³ Alan Friedman, The Turn of the Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 98.

¹⁴ Jeffrey R. Smitten, "Flaubert and the Structure of The Secret Agent," in Walodmyr T. Zyla and Wendell M. Aycock, eds., Joseph Conrad: Theory and World Fiction (Lubbock, Texas: Inter. Dept. Committee on Comparative Literature, 1974), pp. 151-66.

¹⁵ H. M. Daleski, Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession (London: Faber, 1977), p. 157.

¹⁶ See: Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 143-77. "The Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause." (p. 145, italics his). On "The Beast in the Jungle" specifically: "The secret was the existence of the secret itself." And "The figure we have observed throughout our inspection of the tales here assumes its supreme, ultimate form ..." (pp. 176-77).

¹⁷ Norman Sherry, Conrad's Western World, p. 239.

¹⁸ E. M. W. Tillyard, "The Secret Agent Reconsidered" in Essays in Criticism 11 (1961): 309-18.

¹⁹ Christine W. Sizemore, "'The Small Cardboard Box': A Symbol of the City and of Winnie Verloc in Conrad's The Secret Agent," in Modern Fiction Studies, 24 (1978/79): 23-29. Sizemore arrives at the absent centre imagery in the novel (houses, bomb package, shop packages, cab box) and relates it to the city. (Cf. my earlier argument of the city as a post-explosion labyrinth.) She argues: "The image of the box represents the structure of the novel itself, which is built around an empty space, the actual explosion which is never described" (p. 23).

²⁰ Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Stevie and the Structure of The Secret Agent," Modern Fiction Studies, 13 (1967-68): 515.

²¹ Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924, ed. Edward Garnett (London, 1928), p. 79, letter of March 8, 1897.

²² Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics, p. 188.

²³ James Joyce, Dubliners (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1956), pp. 105-115.

²⁴ I am indebted to William Bysshe Stein for the observation in "The Secret Agent: The Agon(ie)s of the Word," Boundary II VI (Winter 1978) No. 2: 525.

²⁵ Norman Sherry, Conrad and His World (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 94.

CHAPTER IV

Andrei Bely's Petersburg: Rapid Expansion

Andrei Bely (Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev) was not acquainted with, as far as we know, the works of either James or Conrad--though he did read much of William James. Where the three novelists do meet is at the feet of Ivan Turgenev. James, we remember, admired Turgenev enough to visit him in Paris and to review Virgin Soil when it appeared in English--and to borrow from it liberally for The Princess Casamassima. Conrad comes to Turgenev not only indirectly through James, but also directly, for Turgenev was the only Russian master Conrad consistently admired throughout his lifetime. In Petersburg there are explicit allusions to Turgenev's novel On The Eve, implicit ones to Fathers and Sons, and certainly the satirical and distanced view of the Russian historical situation in Virgin Soil is an obvious precursor to Bely's just as critical, though more ambitious, historical survey in Petersburg. But Bely belongs to Turgenev's family in more than a literary way: in 1910 he travelled to the Middle East and Africa with Turgenev's niece, Asya, who later became his wife. Oleg A. Maslenikov gives the following account of the significance of that journey for Bely:

Africa already foreshadows Petersburg, the city that has no physical dimensions beyond that of a point on a map, the city that is a phantom: a powerful, evil, metaphysical force. The Sphinx, the pyramids, the sultry African night, filled Biely and his Asya with

a foreboding of a catastrophe threatening mankind and its civilization. ... It was as though on the Dark¹ Continent they had come face to face with mystery.

Of course, Conrad also came "face to face with mystery" in the Dark Continent, but whereas Conrad fashioned the African heart of darkness to a metaphysical and moral exploration of evil, Bely was inspired to an apocalyptic exploration of history and civilization. (It is perhaps more than a coincidence that Bely fled to the mysteries of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy shortly after this visit.)

Explosion, as we have seen in Conrad's letter about The Rescue, was for him a resonant metaphor, for he speaks of Garnett's words as though they had "exploded like stored powder barrels." Andrei Bely, too, speaks of inspiration's flash in terms of explosion:

On long autumn nights, I scrutinized the images
swarming around me: from beneath them the central
image of Petersburg slowly ripened for me. It ex-
ploded within me. ...²

But whereas Conrad chooses the inexplicableness of the "blood-stained inanity" of the Greenwich Bomb Outrage as fit subject matter for his penchant for explosion, Bely's realization of the metaphor in Petersburg is motivated more idiosyncratically. Samuel D. Cioran gives the following account:

The choice of the bomb as a main symbol was no accident for Belyj. It may have been suggested to him by a critic of his earlier works who, in commenting upon the poetry of Pepel, and the novel, Serebrjanyj golub, alluded to Belyj's inability to create a "bomb": "In these instances [Belyj's Pepel

and Serebrjanyj golub'] Belyj resembles in literature an anarchist who is unable to find the secret for making bombs and in disillusionment becomes a reactionary traditionalist." This challenge did not go unheeded, as Petersburg proves, and a bomb of cosmic dimensions was prepared.³

Despite their different reasons for the choice of the bomb image for literary treatment, and despite the more important difference between the sources of their symbolism (Conrad's from visible reality and Bely's from mysticism and the occult), both novelists exploit the image of the bomb as a way of achieving temporal and spatial narrative distortions which circumscribe and define the absent centres of their texts.

Bely, however, in one respect, creates the absence in his narrative in a manner that is more like James's in The Princess Casamassima than Conrad's in The Secret Agent. Bely, like James, is fond of what James called "the immediate future" as the "best province of fiction"; Conrad, by contrast, prefers the immediate past, as evidenced by his placement of the explosion early in The Secret Agent so that characters must recover it with imaginative remembering. Bely, like James, exploits the future for the purposes of anti-climax, which in Petersburg helps coil the narrative back to its beginnings, creating a circle around the suspenseful expected which remains unfulfilled. Thus, the imagery of explosion--even the explosion of "cosmic dimensions" of which Cioran speaks--occurs predominantly in the future tense of characters' imaginations. Nikolai, for example, imagines the bomb's explosion this way:

And a life incomprehensible to the mind had already erupted, and the hour hand, the minute hand now crawled,

and the nervous fine hair that indicated the seconds began skipping around the circle--until the instant when--

--the horrible contents of the sardine tin would expand in a rush, uncontrollably; then: the sardine tin would fly apart. ...

--the gases would briskly spread in circles, tearing the desk to bits with a thunderous roar, and something would burst with a boom inside him; and his body would be blown to bits; mixed with the splinters in slush;

--in a hundredth of a second the walls would collapse, and the counters, expanding, would whirl off into the wan sky in splinters, stone and blood.

Shaggy dense smoke would billow and unfurl and tail onto the Neva.⁴

Yet, oddly enough, this passage, which is only one of numerous others like it, occurs over one hundred pages before the bomb actually does explode. The effect is to create an anti-climax not unlike the smaller one found at the end of James's The Princess Casamassima where we wait anxiously for the outcome of Hyacinth's impulsive commitment to anarchist terror. But that commitment remains unfulfilled, and we find instead Hyacinth's own destruction. In Petersburg, Nikolai, too, impulsively and extravagantly claims to a group of revolutionaries that he is capable of parricide. Some months later, Dudkin, an emaciated radical, delivers a bomb in a sardine tin for "safe keeping." Shortly afterwards, Nikolai receives a letter directing him to carry out his "promise," even though, unlike Hyacinth, he has little, if any anarchist commitment. It seems as though the remainder of Bely's very tortuous and fragmented narrative follows that germ of suspense to its rightful conclusion--when the bomb explodes. It does, in a manner, but the actual explosion in the end is relatively unspectacular. It is recorded with remarkable simplicity:

"--A thundering roar: he [Nikolai] understood everything" (P, p. 287).

This description is especially anti-climactic considering the numerous fantasies and forebodings of the explosion, crafted in rich imagery and dense detail, which have preceded the final bang. There has been so much preparation and fanfare during the text that a "thundering roar" hardly satisfies our curiosity to see the actual detonation. We do get some descriptions of after-effects--smoke, rubble and the like--but even these pale against earlier descriptions. Sidney Monas, in a 1959 review of the Cournos translation, felt uncomfortable enough with the novel's ending to claim: "Biely actually achieves the perverse triumph of making the reader feel disappointed,"⁵ while Helene Hartman-Kyer is more confident and accurate about the anti-climax:

Neither the relentless buildup of the verbal formula of the bomb nor the fantastic previews of imaginary explosions in the second part of the novel creates a feeling of imminent disaster; rather both devices arouse the suspicion that some farcical denouement, and not tragedy, lies ahead.⁶

The narrative consequence of such a game--potent suspense followed by anti-climax--is to make the narrative explosion a proleptic one. We sense the inadequacy of the final description of the explosion, yet, upon reflection, we also sense that the explosion has somehow occurred very vividly. Put in other words, the revolutionary bomb explosion becomes rather insignificant when compared to the extensive imagery of cosmic explosion with which the narrative is saturated. Describing the narrative explosion as proleptic is not to say that consequences precede causes, but rather that the "true" explosion is of quite another magnitude, one which

transcends in all its philosophical, historical and psychological complexity Nikolai's relatively unimpressive bomb. His functions as a kind of synecdoche for the eschatological bomb. It is as though the apocalyptic explosion is happening, unbeknownst to characters, all around them--above, where "daylight glowed blood red"; below them on the river where, at night, a ship passes with a "flaming lantern on the stern" leaving "ruby red" rings vanishing into the fog; and on the streets where people themselves, "bloated and swollen," move like silent broken fragments flung from the explosion. Thus, the anti-climax of the bomb's explosion is not so much the initial bang of an apocalypse as it is the final fizzle of an apocalypse already happened and trailing off into a new cycle of history. The cycle is suggested by Nikolai's "return" to Egypt after the explosion, as though, leaning "against the dead side of a pyramid" (P, p. 292), he is studying the beginnings and endings of great civilizations.

The emphasis on cycles and concentricity in regard to the bomb is announced in the very Prologue of the novel. The bomb is, as the narrator says later, a "rapid expansion of gases" which sends reverberating shock waves (concentric circles) from its centre. So too the city is a kind of bomb, as we learn from the Prologue:

Petersburg not only appears to us, but actually does appear--on maps: in the form of two small circles, one set inside the other, with a black dot in the center; and from precisely this mathematical point, which has no dimension, it proclaims forcefully that it exists: from here, from this very point surges and swarms the printed book; from this visible point speeds the official circular (P, p. 2).

Thus, the narrative explosion is already underway, "surging and swarming" from this centre which governs the entire fragmented narrative. Like Conrad attempting to fix Verloc's bomb in a precise mathematical point in space (Greenwich Observatory), the narrator in Petersburg attempts to situate the city--the source of the text--in a precise topographical location. The topographical image of circles is also applicable to the structure of the city itself, a city planned with rigid geometric care by Peter the Great in a vast, flat northern landscape. The narrator tells us that Petersburg (like Nicholas's vision in Aquin's Hamlet's Twin of the "Italian enclave," another city constructed in a northern vastness) is "surrounded by a ring of many-chimneyed factories," the working class districts from which radical forces press inwards in an attempt to destroy the reactionary centre of government. The centre houses the capital's bureaucracy in which Apollon, Nikolai's father, is a prominent official who circulates "official circulars."

The "official circular" is also Bely's text because, like the city, it begins with the dot or origin of inspiration (the image of the city), and with repetitions, overlappings, fragmentations and cancellations, expands outward in "coruscations of innumerable circles," to allude to Conrad, and in "great broken rings," to allude to Yeats, one of Bely's Symbolist contemporaries. Thus, the statue of Peter the Great, The Bronze Horseman, figures in the text as more than allusion to the creator of Petersburg. The statue actually comes alive in the text and pursues characters through the streets; Sofia, for example, from her carriage sees

a Mighty Horseman. Two flaming nostrils pierced the fog there like a white hot pillar. . . . a rider overtook the carriage and flew into the fog, brandishing a torch. A heavy bronze helmet flashed past, and behind it, rumbling and spewing sparks, flew a fire brigade (P, pp. 120-21).

The working of such a symbol goes beyond ironic and paradoxical allusion to include Bely's vision of the cyclical nature of history, for the revolutions and tribulations which Peter the Great faced are recycled here in the stormy riots and unrest of 1905, the year in which the novel is set.

Peter the Great is not the only character who "returns"; most characters, in fact, continually overlap, meet, and retrace their steps through Petersburg, rather like Hyacinth and Ossipon criss-crossing through the maze of London streets. The Apollonovich family, at the end of the novel, momentarily "returns" to family unity before its final disintegration, a unity which is exploded by Anna Petrovna's adultery and Nikolai's revolutionary involvement. Like the false domestic unity in The Secret Agent which is broken by Verloc's betrayal of Stevie, and like Hyacinth's search for a family which is defeated by the double betrayal of surrogate parents, the Princess and Muniment, Nikolai's family is disintegrated by the explosive pressures of disharmony at its centre. Grown old and retired from bureaucracy, Apollon's response at the end of the novel is to return to a kind of childhood, while Nikolai casts off his Neo-Kantian rationalism and returns to early Egyptian scholarship. As the narrator says of the text: "Cerebral, leaden games have plodded along within a closed-in horizon, in a circle that has been traced by us--" (P, p. 265).

That the novel is constructed on the principle of the circle is evidenced by Bely's own comment about Petersburg. According to Nina Berberova, when questioned about the structure of his novel, Bely replied: "'Petersburg ... is a circle. Not a cube but a wheel.' He snatched an old envelope from a table and on it drew a circle, and immediately another one."⁷ When defending his method in The Awkward Age, James also ran to paper and pencil to explain the circular construction of that novel:

... I drew on a sheet of paper. ... the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects.⁸

These designs of structure, as Berberova points out, are prefigured at least as early as Miscellanies Aesthetic and Literary in which Coleridge relies, like Bely, on the image of the wheel to explain literary structure:

An old coach wheel lies in the coach-maker's yard. ... There is beauty in that wheel. See how the rays proceed from the center to the circumference, and how many different images are distinctly comprehended at one glance, as forming one whole, and each part in some harmonious relation to each and all.⁹

The emphasis here in this passage from Coleridge rests on harmony and wholeness--Romantic unity, but the passage from James comes closer to Bely's aesthetic because it emphasizes perspectivism, the breaking down of unified vision.¹⁰ The source, then, of Bely's structure may ultimately be Romantic, but its realization is clearly Symbolist. For this reason, Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy provides a richer source for the many layers of concentricity

in Petersburg. Steiner's view of the wheel is all-inclusive:

It is the basis of the Universe.
 The whole cosmogony is a circle.
 The circle is the perfection of the inner unity of
 man.
 The square symbolizes the lowest state of man. The
 octagon is the intermediate stage.
 The wheel rotates around the sun, which is a wheel in
 itself and a spiritual illumination.
 The center of a circle is, of course, immobile--the
 Aristotelian "unmoved mover."
 A spider--an obsessive image in mythic thinking--sits
 in the center: God, as a spider, in the middle
 of his web.
 All this gives us a figure in two parts: periphery and
 center,
 And the rose-window of the Gothic cathedral,
 And the rose--the mystical flower,
 And the lotus, in the East.¹¹

As a prominent image in Bely's Symbolist vision, the expanding circle is not restricted to Petersburg alone. Loosely autobiographical, the novel, Kotik Letaev, written immediately before Petersburg, also contains the same principle of concentricity. Writing from the point of view of an adult attempting to recover the consciousness of childhood, the narrator this time fashions the circle image three-dimensionally:

The first conscious moment of mine is--a dot; it
 penetrates the meaninglessness; and--expanding,
 it becomes a sphere, but the sphere--disintegrates: ¹²
 meaninglessness, penetrating it, tears it apart.

This mesmerizing pattern works on a number of levels. As it relates to Kotik Letaev, Bely means that consciousness is an expanding force that attempts to make sense of chaos, but chaos itself is the driving force behind consciousness and eventually it explodes consciousness back to the condition of chaos. Similarly, the bomb in Petersburg is the "dot," the

compact package of chaos which undergoes a "rapid expansion" and destroys order, but, of course, in doing so it also destroys itself--chaos is reaffirmed. On another level, as John Elsworth points out, this complex pattern also applies to Bely's aesthetic:

He compares art to a bomb, and the evolution of art forms . . . to the path of a bomb from the hand that throws it to the wall of the prison it is to destroy. The ensuing explosion will destroy both the prison--the world seen in the category of necessity--and the bomb--art. Thus art will only achieve its true aim when it ceases to exist.¹³

Bely says as much in the Epilogue of Petersburg:

Culture is a moldering head: everything in it has died; nothing has remained. There will be an explosion; everything will be swept away (P, p. 292).

Thus, just as the city expands outward from the structuring point of state bureaucracy and eventually disintegrates into working-class chaos, and just as in Bely's eschatology, the structures of time and history eventually crumble back to chaos, so the narrative of Petersburg expands from its focal image of city/bomb and "disintegrates" into fragments of time and space, into the narrative flak and partial glimpses of image, scene, dialogue, character and event. Art and narrative become self-destructing or self-cancelling forces. They originate from absence and return to absence.

Bely achieves this narrative disintegration, in part, by a special handling of space. So while the city of Petersburg proclaims itself "forcefully" in the Prologue as a dot on the map, at the same time that mathe-

metrical point has "no dimension." The physical reality of the city is no more certain. The geography of the city is dutifully laid out for us--as with Joyce's Dublin, streets, buildings, houses and monuments all appear as recognizable places, yet the overall quality of the city which sticks with us is its shadowy elusiveness. More than once during the text, we read that "Petersburg vanished into the night" (P, p. 101). And as Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad point out in their introduction to the 1978 translation of the text,

external, man-made features tend to be as fluid as the waters that run through, around, and beneath the city itself: when we try to plot them on a map, we find, for instance, that the Ableukhov house occupies three very different locations, that the Likhutin house is an "impossible" composite of several others, and that the government institution headed by the senator cannot be even approximately situated, even though all three of these buildings are described in considerable detail.¹⁴

Like the undiscoverable Todgers in Martin Chuzzlewit, and like the "lost" embassy in The Secret Agent, the uncertain whereabouts of the Ableukhov house underlines the spatial disorientation of the labyrinthine city.

The space of Hyacinth's London in The Princess Casamassima is a "roaring vortex," and his dilemma is that, condemned to flounder in his own "shallow eddy," he can never manage to construct the moral and social order needed to organize the begrimed Dickensian chaos. In The Secret Agent, London appears even more begrimed, a labyrinth of dark, muddy streets dotted dimly with street lamps, behind every one lurking figures who are more shadow than substance. The vast geometric labyrinth of Petersburg also turns people into shadows:

The wet, slippery prospect was intersected by another wet slippery prospect at a ninety-degree right angle. At the point of intersection stood a policeman.

And exactly the same kind of house rose up, and the same kind of gray human streams passed by there, and the same kind of yellow-green fog hung there.

But parallel with the rushing prospect was another rushing prospect with the same row of boxes, with the same numeration, with the same clouds.

There is an infinity of rushing prospects with an infinity of rushing, intersecting shadows. All of Petersburg is an infinity of the prospect raised to the *n*th degree.

Beyond Petersburg, there is nothing (P, pp. 11-12).

This is a more cleanly mathematical rendition of the labyrinth than James's or Conrad's, and in this sense, is closer to Robbe-Grillet's version in

In the Labyrinth:

There must be identical rows of regular windows on each floor from one end of the straight street to the other.

A perpendicular crossroad reveals a second street just like the first: the same absence of traffic, the same high gray walls, the same blind windows, the same deserted sidewalks. At the corner of the sidewalk, a street light is on, although it is broad daylight. But it is a dull day which makes everything colorless and flat. Instead of the striking vistas these rows of houses produce, there is only a criss-crossing of meaningless lines, the falling snow depriving the scene of all relief, as if this blurred view were merely badly painted on a bare wall.¹⁵

But whereas Robbe-Grillet emphasizes the claustrophobic nature of his urban labyrinth ("high gray walls," "blind windows"), Bely is intent on emphasizing the scope of the Petersburg labyrinth, as though it goes on to infinity, to the "nth degree." He also stresses the idea that the city is a construct, the visible manifestation of Peter the Great's elaborate plans,

and as a human construct, the city is subject to the same threat of spatial disintegration as all other social, moral or psychological constructs.

Petersburg is not so much an organic, cancerous growth out of control--the metaphor applies better to James's and Conrad's London--as it is a geometry gone mad. The Jamesian and Conradian labyrinths function more as confusing and corrupt structures which are appropriate abodes for the morally corrupt characters who inhabit them. Petersburg is a vast, ambitious attempt to organize an empty northern space rationally and formally and to use that structure as a defense against the apocalypse which threatens to reduce it to chaos.

The problem is that the structure, once it becomes over-structured, has just as reductive an effect on characters as empty space. Wandering aimlessly through this structure among hordes of others wandering just as aimlessly through the same structure, characters cease to be individuals. Like characters in The Secret Agent and The Princess Casamassima, those in Petersburg become like shadows, scarcely recognizable, frequently interchangeable and often indistinguishable. Bely relies on imagery from the insect world to make the idea clear:

There the body of each individual that streams onto the pavement becomes the organ of a general body, an individual grain of caviar, and the sidewalks of the Nevsky are the surface of an open-faced sandwich. Individual thought was sucked into the cerebation of the myriapod being that moved along the Nevsky.

And wordlessly they stared at the myriad legs; and the sediment crawled. It crawled by and shuffled on flowing feet; the sticky sediment was composed of individual segments; and each individual segment was a torso.

There were no people on the Nevsky, but there was a crawling, howling myriapod there. The damp space poured together a myriad-distinction of voices into a myriad-distinction of words. All the words jumbled and again wove into a sentence; and the sentence seemed meaningless. It hung above the Nevsky, a black haze of phantasmata.

And swelled by those phantasmata, the Neva roared and thrashed between its massive granite banks.

The crawling myriapod is horrible. It has been moving along the Nevsky for centuries. Higher, above the Nevsky, the seasons run their course. The cycle there is mutable, but here it is immutable. The times of the year have their limit. The human myriapod has no limit; all the links are interchangeable; it is always the same; beyond the railway terminal it turns its head; its tail thrusts into the Morskaya; along the Nevsky shuffle the individual arthropodic links.

Exactly like a scolopendra! (P, p. 179)

Conrad prefers locusts and ants to scolopendra, but the idea is essentially the same:

He [the Professor] was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps (SA, p. 74).

Typically, Conrad focuses his entomological image on the moral, on blindness, order, sentiment, logic and terror, on the dangerous power of the multitude to blunt individual sensibility. Bely, by contrast, fashions his image in the service of Symbolism. Thus, the multitude is not particularized to 1905 Petersburg; rather, it is an immutable form that belongs to cosmic time. Similarly, the voice of this multitude is not only the

voice of Russia; it is the voice of all human language, the multitude's sentence which becomes a kind of centipede of syntax and which wafts into meaninglessness above the city.

The difference here is one of authorial perspective. Whereas James and Conrad struggle with moral and social critiques of contemporary character and event, Bely takes imperfections for granted (all of his characters are ineffectual, flawed and severely undercut with irony) and looks instead to the lofty Symbolist realm of cosmic pattern. This difference is evident in the spatial orientation of the authorial gaze. In James's The Princess Casamassima and Conrad's The Secret Agent, we sense that it is directed downward to the "ugly blackholes" and the murky London streets and the rank Thames river. It looks with critical distance, to be sure, but ultimately, it is a despairing gaze. By contrast, the authorial eye in Petersburg moves upward from the malodorous, green Neva, "higher, above the Nevsky" to the sparkling spires of St. Isaac's Cathedral and beyond to the spectacular sunsets of various tints of apocalyptic red. Bely's gaze also, unlike James's or Conrad's, stretches back in time sweeping into the novel motifs and themes from early Russian history, events which both echo the present and portend the future. Bely was, after all, from the beginning a prominent spokesman for and defender of early twentieth-century Russian Symbolism,¹⁶ and following that period he was deeply immersed in Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophy--that blend of Western rationalism and Eastern spiritualism which so appealed to him and which is realized thematically in the text by way of the east/west dichotomy. It is this special and very private vision which directs Bely's eye in the opposite

direction from the Conradian and Jamesian labyrinths to the "phantasmata" hanging threateningly above the city. And while there is social and moral rot in both London and Petersburg, we sense that it is explicable if not reformable in The Secret Agent and The Princess Casamassima, whereas in Petersburg it is overshadowed by the larger questions, cycles and patterns of human history. Bely looks beyond the chaotic unintelligibility of the city and finds a spatial orientation in mystical spheres.

Predictably, the narrative of Petersburg is fragmented by temporal distortions that are just as radical as the spatial ones. We have already mentioned the historical shifts in time from events in early Russian history to revolutionary events in 1905. In addition, the narrative leaps wildly from one present event to another disregarding chronology and moving backwards and forwards. Nikolai's mother, for example, returns relatively early in the novel, yet her visit is not mentioned again until late in the narrative. One chapter may begin with Senator Ableukhov's activities at his office and shift without warning to Nikolai's meeting with subversive friends months earlier. Phrases, sentences, entire paragraphs and scenes are repeated verbatim, a device which creates the effect of replayed time.

Novelists of absent-centred structure are fond of repetition because it is an effective interrupter and spoiler of chronology, though they exploit it for different purposes. Conrad achieves two effects: the scene of the explosion is repeated from different imaginative perspectives--Winnie's, Heat's, the police constable's, the newspaper's, the narrator's--and thus creates a rudimentary cubism, in the sense that the moment of Stevie's death can only be grasped fully through fragmentary angles of

of perception. The horror cannot be objectively understood; its significance lies in the subjective sum of its effect on a number of characters. The second effect Conrad achieves with repetition is the impression of stalled time. Characters in The Secret Agent are tagged with refrains. Thus, Winnie's "the drop was fourteen feet" is a grim reminder of death's power to destroy time altogether, while the refrains, "impenetrable mystery" and "he walked," associated with Ossipon, suggest the stalled aimless time of a living hell. Heller, to anticipate, uses repetition to suggest the perceptual phenomenon of reluctant remembering. Thus, Yossarian's flashbacks to Snowden's death in Catch-22 are replayed verbatim but gradually expanded in particulars to a point of crisis. Such a disruptive technique suggests the tortures of a mind both wanting to forget and fearing to remember the details of a horror. Robbe-Grillet's repetitions in The Voyeur and in In the Labyrinth disrupt the narrative chronology just as seriously, but they are directed to the end of exploring perception--objects, characters and events which are seen but only partly seen and which, when repeated in the text, are either properly understood, proven wrong, or, not infrequently, left mysterious. Bely's repetitions serve many of these same purposes: Nikolai's and Apollon's childhood memories "repeat" themselves and confuse present perception, and the replay of scenes from different viewpoints, as we shall see momentarily, creates a similar kind of perspectivism to that in Conrad's and Robbe-Grillet's novels. But in Petersburg there is the added emphasis that repeated images and symbols suggest return and cycle; they undercut narrative linearity and replace it with temporal circularity.

As a structural strategy, repetition, because by definition it invokes

boredom, must be used judiciously. In this regard, Robbe-Grillet takes the greatest risks because he exploits boredom as a theme--Samuel Beckett is his only rival. There are, however, other less risky devices for disrupting time, such as the prolongation of the moment. Conrad exploits it on a number of occasions: for Heat's imagining of Stevie's death, for the entire chapter which deals with Verloc's death, and for the painfully awkward moments in the domestic scenes between Winnie and Verloc. So too in Petersburg, time expands mercilessly; in fact, the entire novel, just as it expands spatially from the city/bomb image, expands temporally from the relatively brief period of twenty-four hours. The narrator explains in the monologue of the final chapter:

--These twenty-four hours!--

--these twenty-four hours of our narrative have expanded and scattered in the spaces of the soul: the authorial gaze has gotten all tangled up in the spaces of the soul.

Cerebral, leaden games have plodded along within a closed-in horizon, in a circle that has been traced by us--

--in those twenty-four hours!

The news of Anna Petrovna had come fluttering along from somewhere or other. We forgot that Anna Petrovna had returned.

Those twenty-four hours!

That is, an entire day and night: a concept that is relative, where an instant--

--or--something that can be defined by the amplitude of events in the soul is an hour, or a zero: experience grows apace, or is absent: in an instant (P, p. 265).

The instant, then, "grows apace"; it becomes an hour, it expands and events scatter "in the spaces of the soul." Similarly, Inspector Heat in The

Secret Agent knows that Stevie died "instantaneously," but that "ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye." And with an image that prefigures the structural principle of William Golding's Pincher Martin, he fears that Stevie's experience was like "the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, screaming, for the last time" (SA, pp. 78-79).

The "instant" referred to in the passage from Petersburg signifies the characters' fear of that experience which Heat imagines. They fear the instant of the exploding bomb which, as in The Secret Agent, occurs at a particular juncture of time and space. The bomb becomes an apt symbol for this juncture since its ticking measures time methodically while its explosion announces a violent fragmentation of space. The bomb, in fact, measures time in a very real sense in the text, for when Nikolai turns the key to activate it, he initiates the twenty-four hour period which is the narrative time of the text. But the ticking also has a very special private and psychological meaning for Nikolai. As a child, he experienced a vivid nightmare:

In childhood he had been subject to delirium. In the night, a little elastic blob would sometimes materialize before him and bounce about--made perhaps of rubber, perhaps of the matter of very strange worlds. It would produce a quiet laquered sound on the floor: pepp--peppep; and again: pepp-peppep. Bloating horribly, it would often assume the form of a spherical fat fellow. This fat fellow, having become a harassing sphere, kept on expanding, expanding, and expanding and threatened to come crashing down upon him.

"Pēpp....

"Pēppovich....

"Pēpp...."

And it would burst into pieces.
 Nikolenka would start shrieking nonsensical
 things: that he too was becoming spherical, that
 he was a zero, that everything in him was zeroing--
 zeroing--zero-o-o.... (P, p. 158).

The elastic, rubber ball, dangerous in its expansion, is uncannily like the Professor's "india-rubber ball" in The Secret Agent which is connected to "an india-rubber tube, resembling a slender brown worm" (SA, p. 62) and which, when squeezed, will detonate the bomb to which he is wired.¹⁷ Conrad also shares the emphasis on bloating and swelling: Verloc is "burly in a fat-pig style"; Wurmt tells him bluntly, "You are very corpulent"; while growing nervous during his interview with Vladimir, we read that his "gross neck became crimson." Vladimir himself has a "shaven, big face"; the terrorist, Yundt, has hands "deformed by gouty swellings"; Ossipon has a "big florid face"; Michaelis, according to the Assistant Commissioner, "was marred by too much flesh," while Sir Ethelred, "the great personage" with an "egg-shaped face" "seemed an expanding man." The latter image, as mentioned in the previous chapter, alludes to Humpty-Dumpty, an allusion which creates a nursery-rhyme irony very much like the one in Nikolai's dream: behind the innocent and childlike lies an explosively dangerous, if not deathly power.

Like so many other images and motifs in Petersburg, Nikolai's nightmare image sends out its tentacles to connect an array of themes and experiences. The passage obviously portends the bomb's explosion, but it also reverses the parricide theme in the text. Nikolai's father is frequently described as a fat, "bloated" man, and we read that "in his breast

arose the sensation of a crimson sphere about to burst into pieces" (P, p. 14), the sensation of a man plagued by a heart condition. Thus, the fat, bloated, spherical fellow of Nikolai's dream signifies the father threatening the son, while in the present tense of the narrative, it is the son who threatens the father with the bomb.¹⁸ The quoted passage also contains a play on the vowel "eu," pronounced "öö," which appears in the family surname, Ableukhov, and which throughout the text portends the explosion, the blasted sphere, the broken circle and the meaninglessness of "zero-o-o."¹⁹

Similarly, the sound of "Pépp Péppovich Pépp" reappears more than once and especially as the moment of the explosion draws near. Nikolai, who has mislaid the bomb and who grows more uncertain that his friend, Sergei, has removed it, suddenly finds his ticking wrist watch very disturbing: "Just at that time an unsettling sound reached his ears: a soft tick-tick, tick-tick: the sardine tin? ... Pépp Péppovich Pépp..." (P, p. 284). Once more, in a cyclical manner, a temporal motif connects childhood experience with present experience. Internal experience (Nikolai's memory of Pépp Péppovich Pépp) becomes enmeshed with exterior experience (the ticking watch). Thus, unlike Conrad who uses the measurement of time to underline the inner agonies of his characters, Bely manipulates time to thrust his characters' experiences beyond the circled confines of individual experience to the larger cosmic circle of experience where "Time sharpens its teeth for everything--it devours body and soul and stone" (P, p. 97).

The devouring power of time is nowhere more evident than during the scene in which Sofia returns from the masquerade ball in a carriage. She falls into a half sleep, into a kind of mystical trance while the silence is punctuated by the sounds of the carriage's wheels and the horses' hooves on cobblestones.

Behind her fell away a piece of what had just been: masquerade ball, harlequins, and even, even the sad tall one. She did not know whence she had come.

.....

She moved back still further, in search of some buttress for consciousness in the impressions of the day before that, but that day too had fallen away, like the cobblestones on a paved road; and it was dashed against some dark bottom. And a cobblestone-shattering crash resounded.

The love of that fateful unhappy summer flashed by, and fell away from her memory. And a cobblestone-shattering crash resounded. There flashed by and fell away: her conversations in the spring with Nicolas Ableukhov, the years of marriage, the wedding. Thus a kind of void was tearing off and swallowing piece after piece. There echoed metallic crash after crash, shattering the cobblestones. Her whole life flashed by, her whole life fell away, and her life had not yet existed, ever, and it was as if she had not been born into life. The void began immediately behind her back (everything had collapsed there), and the void continued on into ages. In the ages only crash upon crash could be heard: pieces of lives were falling... (P, p. 120, Bely's italics).

Bely situates Sofia, here, on the precarious edge of the present, for "her life had not yet existed," but the cosmic void of the past pursues her relentlessly and shatters memory. Even the very street on which she travels seems to be collapsing since the sounds appear to be "shattering the cobblestones." Thus, Bely once again debunks the notion of linear time and history: the past is not, in Bely's vision, a stockpile or refuse

heap of memories and events; rather, it is a great chaotic void which actively pursues, consumes and fragments history. It is the same force, the absent centre, which fragments both time and space and hurls narrative pieces throughout the text.

When he fashioned the quoted passage, Bely was very conscious of continuing (or at least defining) a kind of Russian literary tradition of cab rides. He noted to Nina Berberova:

Pushkin's post chaise, Turgenev's cabriolet, Chichikov's carriage, Kostov's coach of 1812, Ableukhov's brougham--"A travers les ages."20

The tradition is not exclusively Russian. James, in The Princess Casamassima, uses Hyacinth's ride with Muniment through London streets to suggest a spatial disorientation. Travelling to see the anarchist leader, Hoffendahl, "our young man had wholly lost, in the drizzling gloom, a sense of their whereabouts" (PC, p. 246). And in The Secret Agent, Conrad, too, uses the same image when Winnie, her mother and Stevie travel to the mother's new house where she will die. Pulled by an "infirm horse," and driven by a maimed cabman, Conrad's carriage, "the Cab of Death itself" (SA, p. 142), is more rickety and grotesque than Sofia's, yet its "wobbly wheels" produce a "jolting, rattling, and jingling" which is just as disturbing as the crashing sounds that Sofia hears. And just as the abyss pursues Sofia, darkness and death pursue Winnie's mother: "Night, the early dirty night, the sinister, noisy, hopeless, and rowdy night of South London, had overtaken her on her last cab ride" (SA, p. 133). As the near past disintegrates into crashing fragments in the void behind Sofia, so in The Secret Agent, "the

fronts of the houses gliding past slowly and shakily, with a great rattling a jingling of glass, ... collapse behind the cab" (SA, p. 131). Bely stresses the loss of time in a cosmic context, but when Conrad's narrator tells us that "Later on, in the wider space of Whitehall, all visual evidences of motion became imperceptible," and that consequently "time itself seemed to stand still" (SA, p. 131), we sense that the "stall" is restricted to the perception of individual characters. Petersburg is concerned not only with matters of perception, but also with the conflict between individuals' false perceptions and a more "truthful" metaphysical and historical time.

The temporal and spatial disorientations of Petersburg are a means of fragmenting a locus-centred unity. An exploded bomb is, of course, an ideal metaphor for such disintegration, but it is also an ideal metaphor for the absent centre of the narrative structure, for an explosion leaves no unifying centre--except, of course, the principle of fragmentation itself, which would have to be called a non-centre. Bely, in addition to his special handling of time and space, also uses point of view to achieve such narrative fragmentation.

At times the narrator seems omniscient when he delves into the innermost psychologies of his characters (including two lengthy dream sequences); at other times he wanders unapologetically into the lofty Symbolist worlds of planetary spaces. He is self-effacing though arrogant, flip yet sympathetic, cynical and biting but also amusing and sensitive. Occasionally, he frustrates the reader with perspectivism, by limiting his narration to a single character's point of view. When Sofia returns to her husband after the masquerade ball, she finds herself locked out of her home. She

rings the doorbell but no one answers; she hears heavy breathing on the other side of the door, then a "tap-tap-tapping-away," a loud wail followed by running, "shuffling and moving of chairs," the tinkle of a lamp, the rumble of a table being moved and finally, silence. But the sounds resume after a moment:

... a horrifying din, as if the ceiling were collapsing and as if the plaster were raining down. In this din, Sofia Petrovna Likhutina was struck by one sound only: the falling from somewhere above of a heavy human body (P, p. 122).

The reader may make guesses, but because the point of view is so limited to Sofia's perspective, he cannot interpret the sounds with any certainty. Not until ten pages later and after several narrative interruptions is the scene replayed from Sofia's husband's perspective. Upset at Sofia's flirtations with Nikolai, and angered by her refusal to obey his command that she not go to the ball, Sergei Sergeyevich makes an earnest but bungled and utterly laughable attempt at suicide. All the preparations have been made when suddenly he hears the doorbell (Sofia's return); he listens at the door (heavy breathing), runs away screaming (loud wail), places a chair on top of a table, hangs himself to the light fixture, pushes away the chair, whereupon the fixture rips out of the ceiling, flinging plaster, rubble and his own body heavily onto the floor. The sounds, of course, are meant to suggest an explosion--this time comically ineffectual, a miniature version of the larger bomb which is about to explode and which also is not without its farcical consequences.

On one level, this perspectivist or cubist-like point of view attempts to be, like stream of consciousness, mimetic of individual perceptual frag-

mentation. Like Winnie and Heat in The Secret Agent, characters in Petersburg flail hopelessly in the confines of their limited points of view attempting to understand the whole. In Petersburg there is the added difficulty that that unity itself has been fragmented. On another level, however, the device also fragments the narrative in terms of the reader's experience, for he is as limited and flails almost as hopelessly as the characters. Had the narrator allowed himself omniscience when describing such events as Sergei's attempted suicide, then the whole would have been restored and the reader would have experienced, not perspectivism, but dramatic irony. As it is, the reader, like Sergei and Sofia, has no way of unifying the object of perception until both--or all--sides of the event have been narrated. The same holds true for Stevie's death in The Secret Agent.

Characters in Petersburg are, then, threatened by a solipsism which results from their inability to unify their immediate worlds; they are unable to control either the spatial or temporal orderings of their reality. Hyacinth faces a similar kind of solipsism when his world collapses. But whereas for James the source of solipsism lies in an incorrect view of the world to begin with, for Bely the source of solipsism is the very apocalyptic nature of the age. Thus, just as the bomb which Nikolai loses will explode his own immediate world according to its own laws of time and space, the apocalyptic age will reorder the very age in which the characters of Petersburg live. Samuel D. Cioran concurs:

The ticking bomb becomes, therefore, the arch-symbol of apocalypse not only for the characters of the novel, but indeed for Petersburg, Russia and all con-

cepts about reality of the perceived world.²¹

The only strategy available to characters faced with such a cosmic bomb is to organize, unify and systematize their lives as much as they can. That is why the city of Petersburg is such an enticing illusion; its "rectilinear prospects" offer a superficial geometry to the obscure chaos which frequently, like the fog and smoke, hangs over the city. The penchant for order and geometry also appears prominently in The Secret Agent, in the sense that Verloc and the Inspector, for example, think that they can plan and control events in a rationalistic way, though the Greenwich bomb, that sudden hole in time and space, proves them wrong. Similarly, Apollon is so fearful of Russia's cold, ice-locked landscapes and so intimidated by the disorderliness of the factory workers on the outskirts of bureaucracy, that he arranges his own life with all the geometry that he can muster. Thus, all of his personal belongings are catalogued and placed, according to compass points, on alphabetically lettered shelves. His gloves, for example, appear on shelf B-northwest. Apollon feels most secure and removed from disorder, the unwashed masses and the solipsism of apocalypse, when he rides in his cube-like carriage with its "four perpendicular walls." The cube, in fact, is for Apollon a kind of Dickensian tag:

After the line, the figure which soothed him more than all other symmetries was the square.

At times, for hours on end, he would lapse into an unthinking contemplation of pyramids, triangles, parallelepipeds, cubes, and trapezoids.

While dwelling in the center of the black, perfect satin-lined cube, Apollon Apollonovich revelled

at length in the quadrangular walls. Apollon Apollonovich was born for solitary confinement. Only his love for the plane geometry of the state had invested him in the polyhedrality of a responsible position (P, p. 11).

Nikolai is less extreme, but nonetheless, his obsession with Kant (The Critique of Pure Reason) makes him uncomfortable with disorder and fragmentation. Much of the irony in Petersburg results from the characters' ineffectual fight against the chaos of their immediate lives; this same fight functions as a kind of synecdoche for the larger fight they face with the more pervading threat of apocalyptic chaos. It is a fight for which they are, apparently, unprepared, for Nikolai, we are told, has never read the book of Revelation. And of course, it is ironic that Apollon, so obsessed with upholding the status quo, should have a name close to that of Apollyon, the King of Angels in the bottomless pit described in Revelation. The ticking bomb is a constant reminder to the reader that their frantic efforts to maintain composure in the face of the apocalyptic threat are doomed to failure.

Yet when the bomb goes off, it hurts no one; Apollon is only mildly shaken; Anna Petrovna returns to Spain, and Nikolai retreats safely to Egypt. "Someone" is questioned by the authorities but no one is arrested. We are forced by this anti-climactic undercutting of suspense, by the unexpected closure, to realize that the most spectacular explosion is the one which has been going on during the entire narrative. In a sense, the characters experience it; they fight against it unknowingly at every foiled turn they make. And as readers we certainly experience the explosion of

conventional nineteenth-century narrative line. But because the apocalyptic mover is outside the comprehension of characters' immediate experience, and because this same explosive force--the spoiler of unifying centres--governs the narrative, the text assumes its absent-centred nature. Conrad's "sudden holes in time and space" imply a kind of moth-eaten unity, destructive gaps in the moral and social fabric of society. The cloth is ragged, undoubtedly, but it is still recognizably cloth. Bely's vision of modern unity is much more complete in its disintegration. Thus, what Lippanchenko, the double agent in the novel, imagines just before his death, accurately describes the absent-centred structure of Petersburg:

The centripetal sensation has been lost; we are blown to bits; and only the consciousness of shattered sensations remains whole (P, p. 262).

Notes

- ¹ Oleg A. Maslenikov, The Frenzied Poets: Andrey Biely and the Russian Symbolists (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 84.
- ² Andrei Bely, Memoirs, as quoted in Konstantin Mochulsky, Andrei Bely: His Life and Works, translated by Nora Szalavitz (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1977), p. 147.
- ³ Samuel D. Cioran, The Apocalyptic Symbolism of Andrej Belyj (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 138. The critic quoted in Cioran's passage is Aleksandr Zakrzewskij, Religija: Psixologiceskie paralleli (Kiev, 1973), p. 111.
- ⁴ Andrei Bely, Petersburg, translated by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 163. Further citations as P. The 1959 translation of the novel by John Cournos (New York: Grove) is now generally agreed to be inadequate. I have consulted it only for comparison's sake in particularly difficult passages.
- ⁵ Sidney Monas, "Unreal City," in Chicago Review 13 (1959): 102-112, p. 111.
- ⁶ Helene Hartman-Kyer, "The Time Bomb," in Andrey Bely, A Critical Review, edited by Gerald Janacek (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1978), p. 124.
- ⁷ Nina Berberova, "A Memoir and a Comment: The 'Circle' of Petersburg," in Andrey Bely, A Critical Review, edited by Gerald Janacek (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1978), p. 116.
- ⁸ Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York: Scribner's, 1962), p. 110.
- ⁹ As quoted in Nina Berberova, "A Memoir and a Comment," p. 116.

¹⁰ Sharon Spencer's notion of the "architectonic novel" supports the notion of James's Modernist perspectivism. Indeed, her own geometry seems inspired by James:

In the center is the subject of the novel, the thing that is being observed. Each circumference about this center point may be said to represent a type of perspective, and each individual point upon that circumference designates a specific standpoint in time and space from which the center is regarded.

See: Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 87.

¹¹ As quoted in Nina Berberova, "A Memoir and a Comment," pp. 116-117.

¹² Andrey Bely, Kotik Letaev, translated by Gerald Janacek (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1971), p. 16.

¹³ John Ellsworth, "Andrei Bely's Theory of Symbolism," in Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2 (1975): 327. Ellsworth is paraphrasing Bely's Arabeski (Arabesques) Moscow, 1911.

¹⁴ Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad, "Translator's Introduction," Petersburg (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. xiv.

¹⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and In The Labyrinth, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove, 1965), p. 144.

¹⁶ The fullest treatment of Bely's Symbolist theory apart from biography is J. D. Ellsworth's "Andrei Bely's Theory of Symbolism," in Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2 (1975): 305-333.

¹⁷ Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad note the explicit allusion to Porfiry Petrovich, the interrogator in Crime and Punishment who is described as a bouncing ball. Petersburg, p. 337. And Patricia Merivale notices that Orr in Catch-22 strengthens his hands by squeezing rubber balls. "'Like one of those crazy guys you read about,' perhaps a zany tribute to the Professor." See: "Catch-22 and The Secret Agent: Mechanical Man, The Hole in the Centre, and the 'Principle of Inbuilt Chaos,'" in English Studies in Canada, 8 (1981) 4: 428.

¹⁸ Like many other themes in Petersburg, the parricide theme is prefigured in Bely's early work. See the short story, "Adam" (1908), in Andrey Bely, Complete Short Stories, translated by Ronald Peterson (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1979). In this story the son returns to kill the reactionary father and thereby ushers in a new era. He observes about his father that "He's swelling--swelling into his grave," p. 117.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad for the observation in Petersburg, p. 318.

²⁰ As quoted in Nina Berberova, "A Memoir and a Comment," p. 16. In the same way, Bely also continues the Russian literary tradition of the city of Petersburg in Pushkin, Gogol and Dostovesky. For a discussion of this tradition see: Ada Steinberg, "Fragmentary 'Prototypes' in Andrey Bely's Novel Petersburg," in The Slavonic and East European Review, 56, 4 (October, 1978): 522-45.

²¹ Samuel D. Cioran, The Apocalyptic Symbolism of Andrej Belyj, p. 138.

CHAPTER V

Joseph Heller's Catch-22: The Secret of Snowden

If the absent centre of The Secret Agent results from the indirect narration of a central event which is purposefully avoided, and if the absent centre in Petersburg results from a narrative perspectivism which is mimetic of a world view of disunity and fragmentation, then Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1955) represents an amalgam of those two strategies. The temporal and spatial structuring of Catch-22 is just as disruptive--if not more so--than in Petersburg, while at the same time, Heller relies on Conrad's device of reluctantly but inexorably returning to a centrally absented event. Thus, just as the narrative of The Secret Agent is always directed towards additional discoveries which lead to the truth concerning Stevie's death and the circumstances surrounding the explosion, so in Catch-22, the gradually expanding narrative flashbacks point to the truth of Snowden's death and its subsequent effects on Yossarian's behaviour.

But whereas characters in The Secret Agent must imagine or reconstruct Stevie's death, in Catch-22, Yossarian witnesses Snowden's death in painful proximity. Stevie's death appears distanced by virtue of the fact that the details and circumstances become increasingly vague as Verloc and Stevie travel from the house to Greenwich Park. We have a very particular, almost omniscient knowledge of what transpires in the domestic scenes of

the Verloc household, but when Stevie and Verloc leave the house, we see them only from Winnie's point of view. From a distance (and from behind), they appear to her as "father and son," the kind of relationship she wishes it to be, but which can exist only in her imagination when they are removed from the domestic reality which shows her it is otherwise. We seem to be losing touch with the pair, for after this point, we have only the fragmentary observations of people in the Maze Hill station. Then, as though Conrad is removing Stevie from the narrative focus altogether, Verloc sends Stevie alone into the park with the fatal bomb. Like the footsteps and the streetlights travelling off into eternity, Stevie, too, seems to be travelling into the void, into one of those "sudden holes in time and space."

Petersburg also fits the distancing pattern in the sense that Apollon and Nikolai imagine but never experience their own deaths by explosion, and in the sense that the explosion is "removed" because Nikolai has lost the bomb--when and where it will explode, they can only guess. In fact, they are in another part of the house when the bomb finally detonates in the dining room. Thus, the explosion which occurs is a mere shadow of the apocalyptic one they feared. Yossarian, however, meets face to face the experience of gruesome death; Snowden's very entrails "explode" into Yossarian's view. A piece of flak has "blasted out" and created a "gigantic hole in [Snowden's] ribs."¹

Yossarian was cold too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn.

Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage.
The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's
secret. Ripeness was all (C-22, pp. 457-58).

The flashbacks to this scene, interspersed throughout the text, seem to occur reluctantly, as though against Yossarian's will. He is, in the Freudian way, a victim of repression, of relegating to the subconscious a horror too disturbing to be lodged permanently in the conscious mind. So whereas characters in The Secret Agent try desperately to know about Stevie's death, Yossarian would rather forget Snowden's, especially because remembering is a painful reminder of his own vulnerability. Conrad's characters, however ineffectually, pursue knowledge which is "by accident" distanced from them; Yossarian flees an immediately experienced knowledge that is too horrible to contemplate.

Despite this difference in the narrative distancing of the absent centre, Stevie's death, when the details are finally reconstructed, is described with some important similarities to Snowden's death. The local police constable in The Secret Agent lays out Stevie's remains for Inspector Heat in a "heap of nameless fragments" that is just as shocking as the "dangling shreds of drying flesh" and "mottled quarts of Snowden" that are laid out for Yossarian:

Another waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a tablecloth with the corners turned up over a sort of mound--a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast (SA, p. 77).

Snowden's leg wound which Yossarian thinks looked like "live hamburger meat," and "the bits of stewed tomatoes" that Yossarian sees spilling with Snowden's viscera suggest Conrad's "cannibal feast."² The understandable response from both Yossarian and the keeper of the park who shovels up Stevie's remains is a revulsion that, literally, makes them sick. In both novels man is reduced to "raw material," to mere "matter" and to "garbage," to a wasteful and unnatural decomposition which illustrates how fragile and vulnerable the body is when it is victimized by the corrupt. Stevie is the victim of a cowardly and bungled plot devised by a double agent who, in the slothfulness of his moral nature, uses Stevie in an attempt to straddle the fence of duplicitous loyalties. Snowden is the victim, not of a double agent, but of a double bind, the "catch-22" which is the exemplary code of that ruthless military establishment which demands of men like Yossarian and Snowden that they contradict the human desire to live with a willingness to die in the service of bringing death to others.

The repetition of Snowden's death, then, like Stevie's, points to inanity, absurdity, futility and horror. As such, Heller is a late descendent of the liberal moralists (Dickens, James and Conrad) whose moral values are so deeply violated by crimes against the sanctity of human life, physical and spiritual. Bely, it should be noted, differs slightly here since so much of life for him exists in the symbolical world of unknowable realities.

But the temporal device of repetition, as Heller uses it, has more than a thematic function. Because the text lacks its centre (by virtue of the avoidance of Snowden's death), it disperses, like Petersburg and The Secret Agent, into narrative fragments, into temporally and spatially dis-

rupted scenes which are repeated and shifted backwards and forwards like a well-shuffled deck of playing cards. The hospital scenes, the scene in which Yossarian appears naked in a tree, Milo's numerous capitalistic ventures, and the various bombing missions all fit this pattern. The immediate effect of such a device is, of course, to disorient the reader, a serious "defamiliarization", to use the Formalist term. However, as the scenes are retold, or reshuffled, usually with additional information, the chronology and the "logical" sense of the narrative begin to reconstruct itself. The scene which helps to organize most this anarchic narrative is Snowden's death because, in the sense that the narrative is an analogue for Yossarian's consciousness, it owes its fragmentary nature to that source--just as Yossarian's antics and confusions originate from the experience of Snowden's death.

Some of the critical confusion about Catch-22 results from the reluctance of critics to give Snowden's death that prominent position. Clinton S. Burhans Jr., for example, stresses Milo as a unifying force in the novel;³ John Wain attempts to treat the novel as a realistic rendition of World War II flying experience and rather unconvincingly explains the novel's texture as an accurate picture of "the facts of a flyer's life";⁴ and James M. Mellard sees the tree scene in which Yossarian rejects Milo as

the center of gravity of the novel, for in that scene occur the keys to Heller's method, the pivotal point in Yossarian's development, and the images of death and birth that give the narrative its shape and significance.⁵

In that same article, however, Mellard also claims that

the narrative center of the novel is Yossarian's painful recognition of his own mortality and personal involvement, his acceptance of individual guilt and a need for a new set of values.⁶

Inasmuch as Yossarian's "painful recognition of his own mortality" is a direct result of Snowden's death, Mellard is closest to the mark. Here, as in other absent-centred novels, critics seem to have difficulty focusing on the controlling function of a force, scene or event which the author intentionally absents. Jan Solomon, however, chooses Snowden's death for special treatment and agrees that it is "the critical event in the novel," and Tony Tanner agrees that "It is the spectacle of Snowden's horrible death that the book circles around...."⁷ The event is both critical and central because, like the explosion which kills Stevie in The Secret Agent, the explosion of flak which kills Snowden is both a source for the fragmentary texture of the novel and the climactic end or solution to which the narrative inexorably moves. Rather like a psychotherapy patient slowly unearthing the centre or the structure of his neurosis, Catch-22 gradually approaches the "grim secret" which explains its disruptions. So too Yossarian is a kind of patient (he is very fond of hospitals), for so shattered is his psyche by Snowden's death that his perception of the war likewise assumes a shattered nature. This means that much of the narrative is really mimetic of Yossarian's consciousness, though the first person pronoun and the other textual clues which would normally place a narrative within an individual's consciousness are absent. We are compelled to situate portions of the third person narrative, espe-

cially the repeated flashbacks, within Yossarian's mind because they are so effectively coloured by a style and voice that simulates Yossarian's irreverence and desperation. Moreover, the very nature of repeated flashback seems to be that it cannot remain innocently omniscient; the reader accommodates it by treating it as a device which is descriptive of individual consciousness and of memory in particular.⁸

The repetition of Snowden's death, however, is more than simply a recurring scene employed as symbol and disrupter of chronology. Really, it is wrong to call the device repetition at all, since new information is always added when the scene is replayed. It is more accurately described as a structuring device of expansion, for the circumstances of Snowden's death are at first told only sparingly, and then gradually, as the scene is remembered, more detail and description are added until all of the facts are clear to us. At first, for example, we know only that "Snowden had been killed over Avignon when Dobbs went crazy in mid-air and seized the controls away from Huple" (C-22, p. 30). Yossarian then asks: "Where are the Snowden's of yesteryear?" No one, however, understands what Yossarian is talking about, and the conversation dissolves into inanities about Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn. Sixteen pages later we get one long paragraph describing the confusion in the plane over the intercom. At first, Dobbs, in control of the plane, thinks that "the bombardier" is dying. The bombardier is, however, Yossarian, who is still alive. The paragraph ends with the single sentence: "And Snowden lay dying in back" (C-22, p. 46). This small but important confusion as to who is actually dead or dying is not unlike the larger confusion surrounding Stevie's

death in The Secret Agent in which Ossipon and the Professor speculate from newspaper reports that it is Verloc who has been killed. In The Secret Agent the confusion, which is more extended than in Catch-22 in the service of suspense, underlines, when it is sorted out, the horror of Stevie's death. That is to say, it is "logical" or understandable that Verloc, a double agent dealing with anarchists and police, should die, but it is inexplicable and morally grotesque that a half-wit child living under his protection should be blown to bits. In Catch-22, the confusion suggests an identification or a degree of interchangeability between Yossarian and Snowden, for the lesson that Yossarian learns is that, in the randomness of war, he is especially vulnerable. Snowden's death brings powerfully home to him not only the realization that he is mortal but also the realization that his death will be neither "special" nor significant. Yossarian dead or Snowden dead--it makes no difference in the context of war. Clevinger, like Yossarian, is also puzzled by the fact that war does not distinguish when it comes to death:

Clevinger knew everything about the war except why Yossarian had to die while Corporal Snark was allowed to live, or why Corporal Snark had to die while Yossarian was allowed to live... That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance... (C-22, p. 65, Heller's emphasis).

Following the long paragraph which stresses the confusion of identities in the back of the plane, there are only a few passing references to Snowden until the scene where we learn that Yossarian moves through the crawl space to the back of the plane to help Snowden who, wounded, lies there "freezing to death" (C-22, p. 230). But the chapter quickly turns to other matters,

such as the plot to kill Cathcart and Milo's egg ventures. There are again only passing references to Snowden until pages 343-44, when we learn that Yossarian tries to bandage Snowden's "wrong wound" which is "the yawning, raw, melon-shaped hole as big as a football in the outside of his thigh." Once more, however, the matter is dropped and not until page 453 is the full scene played out in its expanded form to a powerful conclusion. The memory of the full scene is triggered by Yossarian's sensation of feeling cold as he lies in hospital, "bathed in an icy sweat" and feeling a "throbbing chill [oozing] up his legs" (C-22, p. 453). Once more, Yossarian's identification with Snowden is stressed, for Snowden's refrain as he lies dying in the plane is "I'm cold."

This death scene in Catch-22 functions, then, as an expanding symbol, not unlike the bomb in Petersburg which is described as a "rapid expansion of gases" and which signifies the ever-expanding threat of explosion. The force of the bomb's threat is the image of the hole which characters imagine it will leave when exploded, one just like Snowden's wound, a "yawning, raw, melon-shaped hole as big as a football." And Yossarian, every bit as paranoid as Nikolai, realizes that he is involved in a war which threatens to do the same to him--reduce him to nothingness, to a gaping hole.

Heller's comic yet poignant use of mushroom imagery reinforces the structural pattern of expansion, points to the apocalypse of atomic explosion, and at the same time, connects Yossarian's condition to the crucial event of Snowden's death on the Avignon mission. In the same way that Bely's narrative expanded from the topographical point of Petersburg,

infusing and reinforcing itself with echoes of that image (the bomb, Apollon's heart, dilating eyes, and Nikolai's expanding toy), so too Heller finds images which echo the narrative expansion that originates with Snowden's death. After the Bologna mission, during which Yossarian persuades Kid Simpson to turn back, Yossarian goes immediately to his tent and strips: "He felt much better as soon as he was naked." He then goes swimming, but on his way through a path in the woods, he notices that

... two of the three enlisted men stationed there lay sleeping on the circle of sand bags and the third sat eating a purple pomegranate, biting off large mouthfuls between his churning jaws and spewing the ground roughage out away from him into the bushes. When he bit, red juice ran out of his mouth. Yossarian padded ahead into the forest again, caressing his bare, tingling belly adoringly from time to time as though to reassure himself it was all still there. He rolled a piece of lint out of his navel. Along the ground suddenly, on both sides of the path, he saw dozens of new mushrooms the rain had spawned poking their nodular fingers up through the clammy earth like lifeless stalks of flesh, sprouting in such necrotic profusion everywhere he looked that they seemed to be proliferating right before his eyes. There were thousands of them swarming as far back into the underbrush as he could see, and they appeared to swell in size and multiply in number as he spied them. He hurried away from them with a shiver of eerie alarm and did not slacken his pace until the soil crumbled to dry sand beneath his feet and they had been left behind. He glanced back apprehensively, half expecting to find the limp white things crawling after him in sightless pursuit or snaking up through the treetops in a writhing and ungovernable mass (C-22, pp. 144-45).

Like the stewed tomatoes that spill with Snowden's vital organs into Yossarian's view, the "roughage" and the "red juice" spew from the pomegranate, another image of cannibalism which is parallel to ones in The Secret Agent and which functions here for Yossarian as echo of Snowden's

death but for us as portent, since we read this passage some three hundred pages before the full description of his death. Worried that a fate similar to Snowden's will befall him, Yossarian caresses his stomach to reassure himself that it has not been "exploded." (As early as page sixteen, the explosion motif is established, for "Yossarian gorged himself in the mess hall until he thought he would explode....") The mushrooms, too, are an exploding image, for they appear to "swell in size" and "multiply in number," and since they are like "nodular fingers" and "stalks of flesh," they also suggest the phallus, which Yossarian, no doubt, considers the most "vital" life-giving organ of all. But as flesh, the mushrooms are also "necrotic" and "lifeless," and so appear to Yossarian as Snowden's shattered remnants reincarnating themselves to haunt and horrify--Stevie's fragments in Winnie's imagination haunt just as powerfully. On yet another level, the mushrooms, because they signify potential explosion, also suggest the "mushrooming clusters of flak" (C-22, p. 147), mentioned during the Bologna mission. And since, for us, the "mushroom cloud" is synonymous with wartime disaster of apocalyptic proportions, Heller makes, here, a kind of anachronistic and tragi-comic joke.

It is also significant that Yossarian sees these mushrooms on his way to have a swim, for on his return from the Avignon mission, during which Snowden was killed, we know that Doc Daneeka helped Yossarian, stunned and speechless, from the plane and "washed Snowden off him with cold wet balls of absorbent cotton" (C-22, p. 268). Because Yossarian feels that he is unclean, that he has been contaminated with Snowden's mortality, he is, from this point onwards, irreparably sensitized. We

understand his disquiet, then, when during the second mission to Bologna, McWatt takes the plane on a sharp climb upwards to avoid gunshot and makes a quick turn that "sucked [Yossarian's] insides out in one enervating sniff and left him floating fleshless in mid-air" (C-22, p. 148).

Similarly, we understand why Yossarian feels threatened by a "mutative mass" of mushrooms that appear so much like the vital organs which he so preciously guards as the source of his own continued existence. Nevertheless, swimming "until he felt clean" is not satisfactory purgation, for just as he is relaxing on the beach (the same beach on which he watched McWatt's airplane kill Kid Sampson), the sound of airplane engines returning from the Bologna mission remind him that he is still trapped in the snare of catch-22, that he still must fly more missions, and that he must face death yet again.

In fact, each of the novels that we have so far discussed (and Gravity's Rainbow will not be excepted) foregrounds this prominent theme of a great fear of the obliterating power of death. Hyacinth, in The Princess Casamassima, discovers that his mother committed murder, and when he is later asked to shoot a Duke, thereby repeating the crime which has overshadowed his life, he refuses to do so and kills himself instead. Much of The Secret Agent concerns itself with various characters' obsession with the actual moment of Stevie's death, and they display a grotesque fascination for the details of his dismemberment. The Professor, to be sure, carries the obsession with death to its extreme, keeping, as he does, a bomb in his pocket. Similarly, Petersburg is flush with imagery of impending death by explosion and paranoid characters incapacitated by

thoughts of their own mortality.

So great is this fear of death that it expands to image itself in terms of apocalypse and universal death. Hyacinth, distressed and disillusioned, sees London in such a corrupt way that he asks himself "What remedy but another deluge, what alchemy but annihilation?" and wonders "for a planet overgrown with such vermin, what redemption but to be hurled against a ball of consuming fire" (PC, p. 410). In The Secret Agent, the Professor's solution for the weak is comparable: "Theirs is the kingdom of earth. Exterminate. Exterminate!" (SA, p. 243). Apocalyptic death in Conrad's novel assumes its power, not in the largeness of a single explosion or death, but in the vastness of a pervasive atmosphere of isolated deaths in the labyrinthine city. Thus, the infirm horse which carries Winnie's mother in "the cab of Death itself" is no mere nag but "the steed of apocalyptic misery" (SA, p. 139) as though pulling a grim conveyance for the numerous dead. Bely prefers the grand gesture in Petersburg, and so characters' observations, perceptions and speculations usually expand to cosmic proportions that include past, present and future. Nikolai, as he ponders the predicament of the activated bomb in his house, suddenly sees the sun casting its rays into the room:

It cast its sword-beams. The thousand-armed age-old titan illuminated spires, roofs and the sclerotic forehead pressed against the pane. The thousand-armed titan mutely lamented its solitude out there: "Come ye, come unto the age-old sun!"

But the sun seemed to him a colossal thousand-legged tarantula, flinging itself on the earth with insane passion (P, p. 157).

And later, as he wanders in the corridor, he imagines death this way:

Everything, everything, everything: this sunlit glitter, the walls, the body, the soul--everything would crash into ruins. Everything was already collapsing, collapsing, and there would be: delirium, abyss, bomb (P, p. 157).

Yossarian, also, in Catch-22, is not beyond invoking the grand gesture: he eloquently rants against the "phantasmagorical, cosmological wickedness" of air fights and describes dropped bombs with imagery that rivals the apocalyptic:

The first one fell in the yard, exactly where he had aimed, and then the rest of the bombs from his own plane and from the other planes in his flight burst open on the ground in a charge of rapid orange flashes across the tops of the buildings, which collapsed instantly in a vast, churning wave of pink and gray and coal-black smoke that went rolling out turbulently in all directions and quaked convulsively in its bowels as though from great blasts of red and white and golden sheet lightning (C-22, p. 148).

Each of these absent-centred novels assumes its apocalyptic theme because, in pondering the horror of violent death and explosion, it enlarges the question to ask what, if anything, remains after the gaping hole left by an explosion of apocalyptic proportions. This hyperbolic fear of the end, of the obliterating power of death and its ability to reduce life to nothingness--both one man's life and all man's life--is a theme which co-habits well with absent-centred structure. It gives symbolic resonance to the absent centre beyond its structuring function for particular narrative manoeuvres.

Faced with a war experience of apocalyptic proportions that promises a death as gruesome as Snowden's, Yossarian's response is avoidance. "Yossarian was the best man in the group at evasive action...." (C-22, p. 45). Thus, Yossarian finds it physically prudent to avoid the "truth" of German anti-aircraft guns, just as he finds it psychologically prudent to avoid the truth of Snowden's death. He can avoid the war itself in two ways: fly more missions, reach the quota and be discharged, or avoid flying altogether by visiting the hospital as often as possible. Of course, neither solution is satisfactory, since Colonel Cathcart keeps raising the quota of missions, and since his minor ailments are never serious enough for an extended stay in hospital. There is a third option which Yossarian discusses with Doc Daneeka:

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind (C-22, p. 41).

The Catch-22 is simultaneously an assertion and a negation which, when used as a code for military behaviour, leaves characters like Yossarian in a limbo of neurotic uncertainty. It "catches" characters in the double bind of action and non-action and leaves them contemplating its dizzying irrationality.

Yossarian's predecessor, Hyacinth, in James's The Princess Casamassima, faces his own version of Catch-22. On the one hand Hyacinth is idealistically committed to Paul Muniment's revolutionary aims, while on the other hand, he values the Princess's graceful and sophisticated world of art and manners, the very world he has vowed to destroy. Confronted with such an agonizing choice and armed with a healthy dose of well-intended introspection, Hyacinth takes what he thinks is the only honourable option--suicide, although this action can never be satisfactorily idealized because he is a character too small for tragedy. James's idealism resides not so much in Hyacinth's final choice as in the pathetic and unnecessary waste of a life rich in sensibility but impoverished by gullibility. Yossarian is not so ponderously self-conscious as Hyacinth; nevertheless, his moral conscience is sensitive enough to realize that he too must opt out of Catch-22. His decision to desert, in contrast to Hyacinth's "desertion," is generally viewed (there is some debate about Heller's ending) as responsible action. Yossarian's desertion, then, is a greater moral success than Hyacinth's suicide because it solves the double bind not by evading it, as Hyacinth does, but by refusing to accept the false premises on which the bind is constructed in the first place.

In The Secret Agent Verloc, too, finds himself nervously sweating under the pressure of a Catch-22, especially during his interview with Sir Ethelred who makes him account for his lack of diligence in carrying out the anarchist antics he has promised to perform. Verloc's double bind is largely the result of his own making, for he is, after all, a double agent by choice, a choice made to protect his own petty criminality from the notice of the police. But it is this very duplicity which eventually leads him to foolhardy and ignominious action. Unlike Hyacinth, however, he acts neither from despair nor idealism; rather, he is motivated only by a ruthless self-serving pragmatism. Thus, Stevie's uncritical loyalty, a kind of gullibility, becomes Verloc's most convenient and valuable tool when concocting his plan. Verloc's fate--seemingly slow death by Winnie's carving knife--is measure of poetic justice. Nikolai, in Petersburg, stumbles into a double bind not so much criminally as foolishly. Like Stevie and Hyacinth, he is duped and victimized as a result of his own naivety. Sworn impulsively to an anarchist act directed against his father, he finds himself no longer with the necessary conviction to carry it out; his error is to treat statements of conviction carelessly and without regard for their seriousness, and so, unlike Hyacinth who chooses passionately, Nikolai has conviction thrust upon him. His solution to the dilemma of the double bind is mere bumbling, a comic dance which proves futile, since events conspire in their own way regardless. Catch-22 differs from these others because the double bind is not reduced to a single issue or situation (to shoot or not to shoot a Duke; to explode or not to explode a bomb); rather, the double bind in Heller's novel is a vague force, an unwritten law which, while powerfully visible in effect,

is beyond inspection in the obscurity of a muddled and muddling bureaucracy. In fact, Yossarian's real triumph is to see the situation with clarity. Once he does, he can then formulate the appropriate moral response--desertion.

There is also a comparison to be drawn between these texts in regard to the spuriousness of the double bind. Often it is an illusion of the hero. Hyacinth's downfall is his own short-sightedness and his inability to make a choice. His error is to assume that he cannot renounce commitments, for he is overly stringent and idealistic about their sanctity, even when he is given the opportunity to opt out of the double bind. He weights the terms of his antithesis too symmetrically and fails to realize that both the Princess and Paul Muniment are flawed characters. For all practical purposes, the crisis of the bind ceases to exist when Paul gives up his commitment and joins the Princess. Verloc's double bind in The Secret Agent is spurious in the sense that it is foolish of Verloc to think that he can straddle the fence with duplicitous loyalties and to think that he can reap benefit, safety and protection from both. The spuriousness of Nikolai's double bind becomes evident when we realize how insignificant his dilemma really is, shrunk to microscopic proportions beneath the great shadow of transcendent reality that marches historically onwards regardless of the sordid doings of Petersburg bureaucrats and anarchists. Yossarian, in Catch-22, is much more explicit about the spuriousness of his dilemma. He comes to realize late in the narrative that it does not exist at all, that it is a mere concoction. What began as a mystifyingly irrational rule for the discharge (actually the non-discharge of bombardiers) has

grown to absolute license for a war bureaucracy to wield absolute power.

Leaving the brothel in Rome after it has been raided, we find Yossarian

... cursing Catch-22 vehemently as he descended the stairs, even though he knew there was no such thing. Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up (C-22, p. 424).

"Catch-22," then, at this point in the novel, is nothing real or solid; it is, in essence, the excuse for brute power and the rationalization for the abdication of moral responsibility. Thus, the MP's clear out the girls from the brothel, ignoring the protests of the old Madam who explains to Yossarian that "Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing" (C-22, p. 422). Yossarian asks why she didn't make them show her and the girls the Catch-22, but as the woman says, Catch-22 itself dictates that "they don't have to show us Catch-22" (C-22, p. 423).

"Catch-22" poses as law, but because it is the law of madmen and moral brutes, it leads not to order but to anarchy. It inspires in the citizens of Pianosa who live under its shadow, not reason informed by sensibility but contradiction and unpredictability. The text is similarly governed by the absent centre which disrupts order and unity into a kind of narrative fragmentation which poses as anarchy and lawlessness--"poses" because, paradoxically, it is the very principle of fragmentation--symbolized by Snowden's disembowelment--that unifies the text. Critics have not always seen it this way, especially the early reviewers of Catch-22 who seemed to be at pains to discover any structure at all beneath the surface

anarchy.⁹

What troubles readers most about Catch-22 is the severe distortion of time, more severe than in either The Secret Agent or Petersburg. For while we may lurch suddenly backwards and forwards in Conrad's dank London and in Bely's befogged Petersburg, we are never so far removed from a recognizable temporal chronology as to lose our way. And despite its fragmentation, Petersburg is remarkably unified in terms of its temporal structure, spanning as it does a neat twenty-four hour period. Conrad, and to a lesser extent, Bely, are always careful to situate us precisely in their temporal schemes even though discontinuity is used to considerable ironic effect. Heller, however, drops most of the textual clues which would help orient ourselves in the anarchy of Pianosa life. In fact, the only sure way to keep track of events, temporally, is to log carefully the number of bombing missions flown or required to be flown.¹⁰ This task critics have done in the past laboriously if, at times, slightly inaccurately.¹¹ By now, however, we can be confident that the chronological sequence in Catch-22 does hold together in an intelligible way, though this scarcely matters since Heller's themes originate not from this "deep structure" but from the principle of disunity which is made confusedly clear to us.

It is the unity of linear time, after all, that characters attempt to evade because, in Heller's war, it flies them directly to the threat of death. The only way to protect oneself in the face of such vulnerability is to fight ruthless time itself, and there are characters other than Yossarian who do precisely that. Hungry Joe, for example, states his

position on the matter quite clearly to Huple:

"Listen kid," he explained harshly to Huple very late one evening, "if you want to live in this tent, you've got to do like I do. You's got to roll your wrist watch up in a pair of wool socks every night and keep it on the bottom of your foot locker on the other side of the room" (C-22, pp. 47-48).

Like Quentin in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury when he smashes his wrist watch in an attempt to escape time, so too these characters, faced with the threat of death on each bombing mission, devise methods of evasion which, like those of Quentin and of Nikolai and Apollon in Petersburg, illustrate the absurdity of doing so. Similarly, in The Secret Agent, characters must fight a painfully prolonged time; the clock on the landing of the stairs to Verloc's bedroom counts off the seconds which seem like hours in the silences between Winnie and Verloc, and, of course, the bomb itself is intended to blow up the Greenwich meridian, the mathematical demarker of time.

The fight against time is partly a fight against the instant of death, for it can, in Pincher Martin fashion, contain an eternity of horror. Inspector Heat so imagines Stevie's death, as do Nikolai and Apollon their own. Yossarian, because of this fear, is drawn to hospitals where death is more "reasonable," where it takes "longer"; there is "none of that now-I-am-and-now-I-ain't" (C-22, p. 168). He expresses the idea more powerfully in the following passage which describes the experience of flight combat:

... hung out there in front like some goddam cantilevered goldfish in some goddam cantilevered goldfish bowl while the goddam foul black tiers of flak were bursting and booming and billowing all around and above and below him in a climbing, cracking, staggered, banging, phantasmagorical, cosmological wickedness that jarred and tossed and shivered, clattered and pierced, and threatened to annihilate them all in one splinter of a second in one vast flash of fire (C-22, pp. 44-45).

Dunbar, too, is obsessed with the moment, but he fears that the moment does not contain enough time:

"Do you know how long a year takes when it's going away?" Dunbar repeated to Clevinger. "This long." He snapped his fingers. "A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you're an old man."

"Old?" asked Clevinger with surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Old."

"I'm not old."

"You're inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age? A half minute before that you were stepping into high school, and an unhooked brassiere was as close as you ever hoped to get to Paradise. Only a fifth of a second before that you were a small kid with a ten-week summer vacation that lasted a hundred thousand years and still ended too soon. Zip! They go rocketing by so fast. How the hell else are you ever going to slow down time?" Dunbar was almost angry when he finished (C-22, p. 34).

The "how else" refers to consciously sought boredom and discomfort, Dunbar's solution to the rapid passage of time. Consequently, Dunbar lies in hospital with Yossarian "working hard at increasing his life span" by "cultivating boredom" (C-22, p. 3). And later we read that

Dunbar loved shooting skeet because he hated every minute of it and time passed so slowly. He had

figured out that a single hour on the skeet-shooting range with people like Havermeyer and Appleby could be worth as much as eleven-times-seventeen years (C-22, p. 33).

He would agree with Ossipon who, at the end of The Secret Agent, insists to the Professor: "It's time that you need. You--if you met a man who could give you for certain ten years of time, you would call him your master" (SA, p. 245). Dunbar's perception of time flitting by the present and then, once past, seeming like a moment, is not unlike Sofia's perception of time during her carriage ride through Petersburg. She experiences "pieces" of her life "falling away" into the past which is a kind of void "swallowing piece after piece." Her entire life "falls away" as though "her life had not yet existed" (P, p. 120). Paradoxically, in these novels, the moment, particularly the instant of death, can seem like an eternity, yet extended experience over a period of years can be reduced to a fraction of a second. The paradox is encapsulated in Dunbar's reaction to the Bologna mission:

Bologna should have exulted Dunbar, because the minutes dawdled and the hours dragged like centuries. Instead it tortured him, because he knew he was going to be killed (C-22, p. 110).

Dunbar's solution works only if the prolonging, boring activity is innocent--such as shooting skeet--but when the solution is dangerous--shooting at men who shoot back--then the delight of discomfort turns to sheer torture. Yossarian's solution is the only alternative.

For Dunbar, then, shooting skeet (another kind of evasive action like

Yossarian's) is his solution to the painful sensation of a distorted time, the direct result of war experience. Such distortion makes itself felt at the level of style as well as at the levels of image and narrative structure. Especially in the first half of the novel, where the chronology of events is most confused, Heller's language is conspicuous for the frequency of temporal clues. Many of his sentences begin with or contain the phrase "the time when," and the following passage contains a representative number of linguistic time markers:

On the other side of Havermeyer stood the tent
 McWatt no longer shared with Clevinger, who had
still not returned when Yossarian came out of the
 hospital. McWatt shared his tent now with Nately,
 who was away in Rome... (C-22, p. 13, italics mine).

This compact package of events makes little sense until those same events have been narrated later in the novel. On other occasions, the style turns to a kind of slapstick confusion, an absurd chain of cause and effect:

It was a night of surprises for Appleby, who was as large as Yossarian and as strong and who swung at Yossarian as hard as he could with a punch that flooded Chief White Halfoat with such joyous excitement that he turned and busted Colonel Moodus in the nose with a punch that filled General Dreedle with such mellow gratification that he had Colonel Cathcart throw the chaplain out of the officer's club ... (C-22, p. 52).

The same device works for the novel's spatial imagery which manifests itself in a house-that-Jack-built style:

Immediately alongside [Yossarian's tent] was the abandoned railroad ditch that carried the pipe that carried the aviation gasoline down to the fuel trucks at the airfield (C-22, p. 12).

This spatial line which goes directly from Yossarian's tent to the airfield is continued later in the novel by a bomb line on a map, "a narrow red ribbon tacked across the mainland" (C-22, p. 118), which visualizes the flight path from the airfield to the target area. It also, of course, is a visual symbol for the journey which brings them to the threat of death. And thus, just as the novel's linear time line goes directly to Snowden's death, so too the spatial line points to the same possibility for Yossarian and his colleagues. So powerful is this image that, as they wait for the official go-ahead for the Bologna mission, the line begins to assume ominous proportions:

For hours they stared relentlessly at the scarlet ribbon on the map and hated it because it would not move up high enough to encompass the city. When night fell, they congregated in the darkness with flashlights, continuing their macabre vigil at the bomb line in brooding entreaty as though hoping to move the ribbon up by the collective weight of their sullen prayers (C-22, p. 119).

This advancing red ribbon begins to take on some of the topographical significance of Bely's dot within a circle which signifies the expanding growth of the city and which informs the novel as a structuring principle. The bomb line is not so integral to the structure of Catch-22, but it does provide an apt topographical image for the relationship between the characters on Pianosa and the world beyond.

The geometric image, especially of the city, has, for James and Conrad, its origin in the Dickensian labyrinthine grid of streets, in the monotonous regularity of Coketown's sooty streets (Hard Times), and in the confused snarl of London's lanes and alleys (Martin Chuzzlewit). While

Heller's geometry is not so pervasive as Conrad's is in The Secret Agent, General Peckem's directive that "all tents in the Mediterranean theater of operations ... be pitched along parallel lines" (C-22, p. 21), represents, nevertheless, the absurdist culmination of Dickens's "devious mazes" and of Conrad's "interminable straight perspectives." It is also General Peckem who insists that the bombardiers fly in particular formations so that there will be an attractive pattern when the bombs explode close together, as seen from an aerial photograph. Such geometry in Petersburg, as we have seen, has numerous mystical and historical nuances; as imagery, it is an elaborate set of symbols in the Symbolist mode. Heller's imagery forgoes the nuances of the emblematic occult, yet inasmuch as his geometry is associated with the bureaucratic, overly rational mind, it functions the same way as it does in both Petersburg and The Secret Agent.

Senator Apollon Apollonovich is, after all, a slave to the "official circulars" which flow voluminously from his desk and which circulate endlessly through government offices. Bureaucracy expands similarly in Catch-22 (as it does in the Circumlocution Office of Dickens's Little Dorrit), for we read that Major Major's "simple communications swell prodigiously into huge manuscripts" (C-22, p. 91). The "Loyalty Oath" becomes a bureaucratic tangle and Wintergreen's communications get hopelessly confused. Action is just as complicated by bureaucracy in The Secret Agent in which Verloc endures the pressures of three office interviews in a bureaucratic hierarchy, and in which the Inspector's diligence is motivated by bureaucratic ladder-climbing. The bureaucratic mind in each of these novels is the overly rational mind that loses touch with effective and contingent

realities; it is thus unable to make moral distinctions. And whether this is the governmental mind (Bely's Senator) or the scientific mind (Conrad's Professor) or the military mind (Heller's Generals, Majors and Colonels), it makes little difference; they are all capable of crimes against the powerless and the weak.

While geometry provides the spatial metaphor for the particular nightmare of extreme rationality, it is, in Catch-22, the city of Rome which provides a larger metaphor for the more general nightmare of the bombardier's war experience. In a kind of Dostoevskyan dream scene,¹² Rome is imaged with spatial distortions, parallel to the temporal ones, in much the same way that London is for James and Conrad, and Petersburg for Bely. As Yossarian walks through Rome late in the novel, he could be in either London or Petersburg when he notices "the yellow bulbs at the entrance which sizzled in the dampness like wet torches. A frigid rain was falling. He began walking slowly, pushing uphill" (C-22, p. 427). Going further, he encounters a young boy, poor, sickly, and wretched; Yossarian is reminded of cripples and of cold and hungry infants and unhoused animals. He is struck by "all the shivering, stupefying misery in a world that never yet provided enough heat and food and justice for all but an ingenious and unscrupulous handful. What a lousy earth!" (C-22, p. 428). The yellow lights and the drizzling rain are very much like the imagery of The Secret Agent, but the passage allies Catch-22 more closely to The Princess Casamassima at the end of which Hyacinth bemoans, like Yossarian, a world ridden with corruption. He moves among people who "reek with gin and filth," who are "foul as lepers," and who are "saturated with alcohol

and vice, brutal, bedraggled, obscene." The entire earth, he thinks, is a "planet overgrown with such vermin" (PC, p. 410). Thus, as London is to Hyacinth, Rome is to Yossarian: a pathetic fallacy for misery and despair. Both characters, at the end of their respective novels, have reached a point of crisis, when they can no longer bear the strain of contradictory forces (Catch-22's) pulling at their moral sensibilities.

Yossarian's walk through Rome, however, is more explicitly a walk through violence than Hyacinth's. In this respect, and in the general atmosphere of the city, Catch-22 is closer to The Secret Agent. In the "shadows of the narrow winding street," Yossarian travels down a corridor of cruelties: blood, hunger, rape, robbery, corpses, and "mobs, mobs, mobs. Mobs with clubs were in control everywhere" (C-22, p. 432). Like Ossipon, he walks, it seems, interminably through a labyrinth of winding streets. And just as characters seem to appear mysteriously out of lamp-posts in Conrad's foggy London, so too the characters are distorted by Rome's streetlights which spill "gloom over half the street, throwing everything visible off balance" (C-22, p. 430). In The Secret Agent, light and shadow are melodramatic; Conrad creates a world of ominously cloaked shadows stalking aimlessly and endlessly, victims of guilt and their own moral corruption. In Petersburg, where lampposts and shadows are just as prominent, the emphasis rests mainly on the reduction of characters to mere "shades" of a more powerful and enduring reality. In Catch-22, Heller stresses the fact that everything is "off balance"; "The tops of the sheer buildings slanted in weird, surrealistic perspective, and the street seemed tilted" (C-22, p. 427). The scene, like the logic of Pianosa

life, governed as it is by Catch-22, is distorted in the style of expressionism. Like the temporal structure of the book which plays havoc with chronological time, the spatial imagery of the Rome scene creates a horrifying illogicality that suggests the distorted space of nightmare.

In yet another part of the Rome section of the novel, there is an uncanny juxtaposition of temporal and spatial imagery which hearkens back strikingly to Conrad.

The light on the next lamppost was out, too, the globe broken. Buildings and featureless shapes flowed by him [Yossarian] noiselessly as though borne past immutably on the surface of some rank and timeless tide (C-22, p. 432).

In The Secret Agent, the street lights below Verloc's bedroom window echo the steps of a passerby who "had started to pace out all eternity, from gas-lamp to gas-lamp in a night without end..." (SA, p. 55), after which Verloc hears the "drowsy ticking of the old clock." The gas-lamps here provide the spatial image which echoes the temporal images of footsteps and ticking clock. Heller's rendition is slightly different, yet the fact that the streetlights are broken and consequently that the shapes are "featureless" and, most important, that they flow "noiselessly" by on a "timeless tide," means that time and space for Yossarian, as for Conrad's passerby, go on to eternity. In a way, Heller's image is a corollary of negation. For Conrad, a visual image echoes a temporal image: gas-lamps echo the sound of footsteps. In Catch-22, the streetlights are broken and so they echo silence; shapes flow past "noiselessly."

Heller's expressionistic streets, however, are more than an image of anarchy and spiritual vacancy. Rome, we are reminded by the title of one of Heller's chapters, is the "Eternal City." Being an eternal city, it is appropriate that Yossarian should discover there not only present misery and decay but also past centuries of misery and decay. At this point, the novel amplifies its thematic outcry against the contemporary theatre of war to include the much larger historical one. It is not the large, historical panorama of Bely's Petersburg, but it is large enough, nevertheless, for Yossarian to realize within sight of the Colosseum, which has been bombed to a "dilapidated shell," that

Someone had to do something. Every victim was a culprit, every culprit a victim, and somebody had to stand up sometime to try to break the lousy chain of inherited habit that was imperiling them all (C-22, p. 421).

A few pages later, following the example of Orr who rows to Sweden, Yossarian deserts and thereby symbolically breaks this "lousy chain of inherited habit." Unlike other characters, Yossarian has the moral backbone to question the patterns of history and to devise a value system on which to act independently. Not that mankind's inanities can be halted by his action, for Heller's idealism, inherent in Yossarian's desertion, is coloured by the fatalism of the old man in the brothel in Rome. He understands history in a way that most characters do not.

"Rome was destroyed, Greece was destroyed, Persia was destroyed, Spain was destroyed. All great countries are destroyed. Why not yours? How much longer do you really think your own country [America] will last? Forever? Keep in mind that the earth

itself is destined to be destroyed by the sun in twenty-five million years or so." (C-22, p. 249).

Thus, amid the realization that destruction and despair are fixed and permanent principles, Yossarian's desertion is, at best, the action of a meliorist.

The old man's oration on history, which ends with the notion of the apocalyptic destruction of time and space, is really the grand culmination of the "destruction" of time and space which originated, for Yossarian, with Snowden's death. Thus, just as Stevie's death enlarges in characters' minds to the "damned hole" of eternity, and just as, for Nikolai and Apollon, the individual death expands, as they imagine it, to apocalyptic proportions, so too Snowden's death functions as synecdoche for the apocalyptic upheaval of time and space. The explosion which causes Snowden's death is circumscribed in the text because it is the structural metaphor that explodes the narrative spatially and temporally and which, at the same time, is defined by that same narrative.

If we accept Joseph Frank's view in The Widening Gyre that the modern novel, like modern painting, has moved away from depth and perspective where objects exist naturalistically in time and space towards a plane of spatial form where disequilibrium is made possible,¹³ then both Petersburg and Catch-22 fit neatly into the scheme. Facing the apocalyptic disequilibrium of his time and place (revolution in early twentieth-century Petersburg), Bely sought refuge in the mystical Symbolism of geometry, of line, cube and sphere, where historical depth and perspective are collapsed into a more

confined time (twenty-four hours). It is as Frank speculates--the historical imagination has been transformed into a mythic imagination for which historical time as such does not exist. Heller, too, takes the novel away from its temporal shackles towards a kind of extended horror of the moment, the kind that Inspector Heat imagines Stevie to have experienced in The Secret Agent. But while Heller's novel is, undoubtedly, temporally collapsed, the mythic dimension is not so evident as it is in Petersburg. In its place, Heller inherits the humanist moral and social sensibility of Dickens, James and Conrad. The absent centre of Catch-22 helps to illustrate how firmly rooted that tradition is, regardless of the novel's Post-modernist innovations and its forays into the absurd.

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 457. Further references to this edition follow the abbreviation C-22.
- ² Patricia Merivale draws the connection this way:
 The bits of Stevie, picked up with a shovel to furnish forth Verloc's cannibal feast, remind us, as the eviscerated Snowden does with the cannibal hints of the extruded stewed tomatoes, that "man is garbage" (C-22, p. 450).
 See: "Catch-22 and The Secret Agent: Mechanical Man, the Hole in the Centre, and the 'Principles of Inbuilt Chaos,'" English Studies in Canada 7 (December, 1981) 4: 436.
- ³ Clinton S. Burhans Jr., "Spindrift and the Sea: Structural Patterns and Unifying Elements in Catch-22," in Twentieth Century Literature 19 (October, 1973) 4: 230-50.
- ⁴ John Wain, "A New Novel about Old Troubles," in Critical Quarterly 5 (1963): 168-73.
- ⁵ James M. Mellard, "Catch-22: Déjà Vu and the Labyrinth of Memory," in A Catch-22 Casebook, edited by Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), pp. 117-118.
- ⁶ James M. Mellard, "Catch-22: Déjà Vu and the Labyrinth of Memory," p. 115.
- ⁷ Jan Solomon, "The Structure of Joseph Heller's Catch-22," in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 9 (1967) 2: 48. Tony Tanner, City of Words (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 83.
- ⁸ James M. Mellard treats the use of flashbacks as déjà vu:
 Operating within the minds of the invisible narrator ... the method of déjà vu "proclaims" the writer's absolute need of the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious creative assistance.
 "Catch-22: Déjà Vu and the Labyrinth of Memory," p. 110.

⁹ Simon Wincelberg claims: "There is almost no plot to speak of, at least until the very end, by which time practically everyone you care about, with the exception of the hero, is dead or missing." See: Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald, A "Catch-22" Casebook (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), p. 17. John J. Murray concurs: "... it's not a novel at all but a series of Overburys (and overbearing) character sketches connected loosely by the picaresque hero," Kiley and McDonald, A Casebook, p. 5. And Roger H. Smith in Daedalus 92 (Winter, 1963): 155-65 says naively: "The book tells no story"; he worries that "arbitrary mixture, formlessness and success" are duping a readership into thinking the author is "experimental and 'modern.'"

¹⁰ The observation is Patricia Merivale's in "Catch-22 and The Secret Agent," p. 431.

¹¹ Jan Solomon in "The Structure of Joseph Heller's Catch-22," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 9 (1967): 46-57, claims that Heller creates a chronological impossibility. Clinton S. Burnhans Jr., in "Spindrift and the Sea: Structural Patterns and Unifying Elements in Catch-22," Twentieth Century Literature 19 (October, 1973): 239-50, also has trouble with Heller's plot. Doug Gaukroger, however, in "Time Structure in Catch-22," A Casebook, refutes Solomon and sorts out the chronology for us accurately.

¹² There are two allusions to Raskolnikov: Yossarian sees, in Rome, a man "beating a dog with a stick like the man who was beating the horse with a whip in Raskolnikov's dream" (C-22, p. 430), and early in the novel, Clevinger accuses Yossarian by saying "You're no better than Raskolnikov--" (C-22, p. 15).

¹³ Joseph Frank, The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, Midland Books, 1968).

CHAPTER VI

Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow:The Single Root Lost

Henry Adams, the American dilettante who was so discomfited by his initiation into twentieth-century science, likened history to the curve of a cannon ball which accelerated through the ages until 1900 when, suddenly, "the continuity snapped."¹ The chaos, fragmentation and unpredictable explosion which results, presumably, from that snap of continuity, is what Thomas Pynchon explores in his reworking of the metaphor as a rocket trajectory in Gravity's Rainbow (1973).² Certainly, in Henry Adams, as an intellect displaying the triple threat of literature, science and politics, Pynchon could not find a better ancestral countryman. Gravity's Rainbow represents, by its distortions of narrative continuity, the kind of "vertiginous violence" that Adams prophesied and feared would characterize twentieth-century life. Encyclopedic in scope,³ the novel spreads before us virtually all of the themes and images--and many of the narrative strategies--which have been accumulated and developed within the Dickens-to-Heller tradition. But it is not so much the presence of these themes (anarchy, war, threatened humanism and encroaching objectivism) and corresponding images (of time, space, labyrinthine city and explosion) which is significant as it is their distortion in the narrative. It is a distortion which focuses sharply for us the Post-Modernist landscape in which Pynchon's work now occupies a comfortable and even central position..

On the most visible level, Pynchon's novel seems closer to Bely's Petersburg than to works by novelists in the English/American tradition, notwithstanding the fact that both Catch-22 and Gravity's Rainbow share a hero who is driven to extreme paranoia by the experience of war. In its handling of that character, however, and in its historical and geographic sweep, and especially in its exploitation of a complicated Symbolist gadgetry, Gravity's Rainbow displays affinity with Petersburg. Spatially, Pynchon's novel travels virtually world wide with significant scenes in England, America, France, Switzerland, Africa, Russia and Germany. Equally as wide-ranging is the sweep of historical time which moves from seventeenth-century Europe to post-war Germany to modern-day California. Bely, we recall, shifted us unapologetically from medieval invasions of Russia to the aborted revolution in 1905 and from the snow-swept expanses of Siberia to the bureaucratic centre of Petersburg and to the arid Egyptian desert. Especially in the scenes which deal with Tchitcherine's adventures in Russia, Pynchon's sense of the Russian landscape is close to Bely's. In Gravity's Rainbow, the narrator speaks of

technocratic wolves erecting settlements out of tundra,⁴
entire urban abstractions out of ice and snow

Pynchon has, no doubt, Petersburg in mind, for more than most cities, it is accurately described as an "urban abstraction," planned mathematically by Peter the Great in an inhospitable climate in an inhospitable location. The notion of the city as an abstraction and as a construct which is the result of "technocratic wolves"--that is, a rationalism which devours--fits Pynchon's thematic purpose as neatly as Bely's. For Bely, however, the image is the central source and shaper of narrative structure; for Pynchon it is only one

of many support images in the larger network of geometric and scientific imagery which is controlled ultimately by the rainbow arc of rocketry.

Bely distorts the rationalism of Russian cityscape and character with bitter irony but rarely, unlike Pynchon, with the irreverently grotesque. In Petersburg, the equestrian statue of Peter the Great comes to life and gallops through the streets of the city, illustrating visibly that the spirit of history returns. But in Gravity's Rainbow, for Galina, the severe schoolmarm isolated in remote Russia, the famous Petersburg statue becomes Tchitcherine transformed into plundering revolutionary manhood, and so she stoops, "buttocks arched skyward, awaiting the first touch of him--of it ... steel hooves, teeth, some whistling sweep of quills across her spine ... the ringing bronze of an equestrian statue in a square, and her face, pressed into the seismic earth ..." (GR, p. 399. Pynchon's italics and ellipses).

Russian themes and images also enter Gravity's Rainbow by way of Pynchon's critique of Pavlovian conditioning. Pavlov, significantly, carried out most of his research in Petersburg at the turn of the century, the precise time and location of Bely's novel. In fact, Pynchon makes specific mention of the events of 1905; the narrator, describing Pointsman's experiments on dogs at The White Visitation in England, speaks of the scale used to measure the drops of dogs' saliva:

a scale marked off in "drops"--an arbitrary unit, probably not the same as the actually fallen drops of 1905, of St. Petersburg. But the number of drops for this lab and Dog Vanya and the metronome at 80, is each time predictable (GR, p. 90).

The image is thematic, for scientific experiment, designed to control the random, is implicitly connected here to political brutality and the spillage

of human blood, the connection which Pynchon chooses to explore, in the grandest proportions, as the chief cause of "The Great Dying" of World War II. Slothrop's unclassifiable behaviour--he reverses the stimulus-response pattern--thus represents a forceful threat to Pointsman, the arch-behaviourist. One of the most prominent plot lines in Gravity's Rainbow follows the chase that ensues from that conflict and Slothrop's potential danger in the hands of experimenters.

Pavlov represents for Pynchon the quintessential scientist, the passionate devotee of a rationalistic explanation of all behaviour. B. P. Bobkin, Pavlov's biographer, noticed that Pavlov, even at the age of sixty-two, was still unwearied in his enthusiasm for students' experiments:

He looked like a happy lover, for whom nothing existed but the object of his love and to whom all else was of secondary consideration. Pavlov was a true scientist, a scientist by God's grace!⁵

Pointsman is the distorted extension of that mentality; his hands become hot and moist as he leafs through Pavlov's theory, which he calls "The Book" and which "might have been a rare work of erotica" (GR, p. 101). Pointsman, however, is not without his humanistic side, for late in the novel we learn that he was something of a poet. Pavlov, too, is not without a humanistic side; he had very respectable literary connections, for his wife was a friend of Dostoevsky's, and the Pavlovs held literary soirees attended by "all the great talent": Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Plescheev, Melnikov and others. Pavlov, according to Bobkin, was a staunch fan of Herbert Spencer (propounder of education in the sciences and of a philosophy based on Darwin), and at the same time, Pavlov was frequently heard to say that it was Shakespeare who

brought him and his wife, Sara, together.⁶

Pynchon appears to have a fascination for figures whose lives, like his own, contain the mixture of system-building (primarily scientific) and literature. In addition to Pavlov and Henry Adams, we could add at least two other influential figures to the list: Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist-lepidopterist (Pavlov also collected butterflies) and Jorge Luis Borges, the librarian and short story writer. Each of these men explores, in his own way, the dilemma of concocting systems in a seemingly chaotic world. And whether it is Pavlov diligently classifying unpredictable behaviour; Adams devising a dynamic theory of history to account for the anarchy of contemporary events; Nabokov building for his characters elaborate and often criminal schemes which are foiled by fate; or Borges structuring elegant myths to blur visible reality--the pattern is the same. Scientist, historian, lepidopterist and librarian--they all, like Pynchon, are enamored of the beautiful construct and, at the same time, are fearful that it may collapse or grow out of control.

System-building is especially evident at The White Visitation where Roger Mexico, a statistician, keeps a grid of V-2 rocket strikes during the London Blitz. The grid is Pynchon's hyperbolic version of the geometric city which we have seen in Dickens's Coketown, Conrad's London, Bely's Petersburg and Heller's Pianosa and Rome. More than these other cities, however, Pynchon's London fades behind the grid, to the extent that the system achieves a greater reality than the city itself. Mexico works from an office

dominated now by a glimmering map, a window into another landscape than winter Sussex, written names and spidering streets, an ink ghost of London, ruled

off into 576 squares, a quarter square kilometer each. Rocket strikes are represented by red circles (GR, p. 63).

The red circles on this mapped grid of spidering streets are uncannily close to the topographical image of a dot within a circle which opens and extends through Petersburg.

When Mexico overlays a map of Slothrop's sexual scores on this grid, there is a perfect correlation, for Slothrop, when an infant, was mysteriously conditioned by Laszlo Jamf to Impolex-G, an electronically sensitive plastic used in the construction of rockets. The result is that Slothrop's erections become an accurate indicator of rocket targets. In Borges's story "Of Exactitude in Science," the overlay of maps creates an equally fantastic rendition of scientific rationalism gone to the extreme. In "that Empire" cartographers become so obsessed with the accuracy of their map that they extend the scale until, when it is overlaid on the land, it matches point for point each location of the Empire. Such magnitude, of course, makes the map cumbersome, and so it is abandoned to "the Rigours of sun and Rain." Only in the western deserts of this land do remnants and tattered fragments of the map remain; "no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography."⁷

The rationalistic system, then, grows out of control and returns to open formlessness. In Gravity's Rainbow, Slothrop meets in the Zone an Argentine named Francisco Squalidozzi who expresses this same theme in regard to South American empire building:

We are all obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that openness; it is terror to us. Look at Borges. ... the Argentine heart, in its perversity

and guilt, longs for a return to that first unscribbled serenity ... that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky... (GR, p. 307. Pynchon's italics; the first ellipsis is mine).

The absent-centred nature of Gravity's Rainbow results from precisely this kind of desystemization. The post-war Zone is the kind of anarchic, unstructured world that Squalidozzi longs for.

"In ordinary times," he wants to explain, "the center always wins. Its power grows with time, and that can't be reversed, not by ordinary means. Decentralizing, back toward anarchism, needs extraordinary times ... this War--this incredible War--just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that's prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. Opened it" (GR, pp. 307-308. Pynchon's emphasis).

Such openness is a mixed blessing, for while Squalidozzi is exuberant about the German Zone because "hope is limitless," he also realizes that "so is our danger."

The metaphor, of course, works at the level of narrative structure, for at the same time that Gravity's Rainbow invites the paranoiac tendency to see connections everywhere and centralize the novel's themes, plots, characters and images into a unified artistic system, it also invites the opposite tendency of anti-paranoia which means refusing to see connections anywhere. The novel manages this not only by the use of themes and images of entropy, but also by flaunting the very largeness and multiplicity of its fictional parts, which demand to remain unsystematized and decentralized. In this sense, Gravity's Rainbow shares a narrative structure more like that of Petersburg than of The Secret Agent or Catch-22. The latter two novels achieve absent-centredness by virtue of indirectness around a central event; Gravity's

Rainbow, like Petersburg, achieves its absent-centredness by virtue of a negation of what Bely calls the "centripetal sensation." And what the narrator of Petersburg claims is the result of that negation is also an accurate description of Gravity's Rainbow: "only the consciousness of shattered sensations remains whole" (P, p. 262).

The negation of the centripetal sensation, which becomes an affirmation of absent-centredness, means that the city, like the characters who inhabit it, is spatially contorted by that negation. The special feature of Pynchon's handling of the city, however, is that no one city predominates in the novel. Both London and Berlin, for example, share the same quality of urban nightmare which has been evident in the cities from Dickens onward. In Gravity's Rainbow, it is as though the single city loses the centring function it performed in the narrative structures of previous absent-centred works and explodes into a number of city fragments. There has been a "single root lost, way back there in the May desolation" (GR, p. 605). The Russian, American and English zones in Berlin at the end of the war are the political illustration of this principle. "Separations are proceeding. Each alternative Zone speeds from all the others, in fatal acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center" (GR, p. 605). The centre or the "single root," however, is nothing that can be easily defined or regained; it exists mainly as an abstraction, as a structuring principle which gives shape to randomness.

Thus, "in the Zone after 'The Great Dying' is heard a soprano voice singing notes that never arrange themselves into a melody, that fall apart in the same way as dead proteins ..." (GR, p. 723). The image is reminiscent of the one James uses to express Hyacinth's disillusioned view of the anarchist, Hoffendahl. Like the Princess's mastery of the piano (to which

Hyacinth listens with fawning admiration), Hoffendahl's manipulation of people is like the mastery of so many notes in his great "symphonic massacre." A similar use of music is found in The Secret Agent: a mechanical roller piano executes "painfully detached notes" with an "aggressive virtuosity." In the context of wartime or anarchist disarrangement, melody, these texts tell us, is either impossible or dissonantly mechanical.

The movement towards fragmentation and decentralization in the labyrinth of the German Zone does not only destroy coherence; it also inverts existing structures. Thus, the Zone is imaged as

an inverse mapping of the white and geometric capital before the destruction--the fallow and long-strewn fields of rubble, the same weight of too much featureless concrete ... except that here everything's been turned inside out. The straight-ruled boulevards built to be marched along are now winding pathways through the waste-piles ... Inside is outside. Ceilingless rooms open to the sky ... (GR, p. 434).

This post-apocalyptic description of the city contains a veritable catalogue of the city images which have appeared in the novels so far discussed. The "rooms open to the sky" is an image reminiscent both of Conrad's "empty shells awaiting demolition" and Heller's Colosseum, a "dilapidated shell." The "straight-ruled boulevards," like Dickens's symmetrical streets in Coketown, Conrad's straight perspectives in London, and Bely's parallel prospects in Petersburg are here, in Gravity's Rainbow, reverting to "winding pathways" and "strewn fields of rubble"--to "Pampas and sky," the kind of open landscape that Squalidozzi longs for in Buenos Aires. Exploded and reduced to rubble and waste, the Zone's inorganic urbanity reverts to organic randomness.

The emptiness and "the featureless concrete" remind one especially of

Heller's expressionistic descriptions of Rome in Catch-22, and the reversal of inside and outside in Pynchon's passage shows an uncanny analogue with Snowden's death whose "insides" when brought to the "outside" so affect Yossarian and indeed govern his actions. Physical inversion also characterizes people who wander in the Zone's cityscape:

Old men with tins searching the ground for cigarette
butts wear their lungs on their breasts (GR, p. 434).

Not so vividly gruesome as Heller's image, this one does, nevertheless, illustrate forcibly that characters who inhabit post- or mid-war zones are, figuratively in Pynchon's novel and literally in Heller's, turned inside out. Man's "mortal envelope," the narrator's phrase for Verloc's corporeality in The Secret Agent, is too delicate a membrane to withstand the disproportionately powerful forces of war--twentieth-century "overkill" which destroys body and spirit alike.

The experience of war wrenches the very interior of man to the exterior, and the city becomes, once turned inside out, the analogue for this condition, which is also a condition of corruption and decay. As the narrator explains, playing on the answer to the question about the meaning of "Sacrament" in the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer, "the city can be the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual illness or health" (GR, p. 433). The city, like a character, becomes a victim, an idea which is made clear when the narrator refers to London as "this city, in all its bomb-pierced miles: this inexhaustibly knotted victim ..." (GR, p. 105). And for Roger Mexico, the red rocket circles on his maps become "red pockmarks on the pure white skin of lady London." He wonders, contemplating "disease on skin," and fearing the venereal, if she carries "the fatal infection inside herself" (GR,

p. 146). These images explain, in part at least, why so often the individual's condition and the city's condition are inseparably linked. The health of one depends on the health of the other. Northrop Frye arrives at the same theme when he says of the modern city in general that "no longer a community, it seems more like a community turned inside out."⁸ Deprived of his humanity and spiritually inverted, man is no longer capable of social or humane action, and the city, fragmented and centreless, cannot rescue him by providing an organized structure.

In fact, Pynchon's labyrinthine city is constructed to work against any chance of organization, as is illustrated by its constant shifts, changes and phantasmogoric alterations. This is due partly to the nature of the city's technology, for the Germans built a complex underground system of factories and rocket works.

Travel gets complicated--a system of buildings that move, by right angles, along grooves of the Raketen-Stadt's street-grid. You can also raise or lower the building itself, a dozen floors per second, to desired heights or levels underground, like a submarine skipper with a periscope--although certain paths aren't available to you. They are available to others, but not to you. Chess. Your objective is not the King--there is no King--but momentary targets such as the Radiant Hour (GR, p. 786).

This is the most futuristically surreal cityscape that we have seen. Heller's Rome tilted and wavered in an expressionistic way but never to the degree that we find in Gravity's Rainbow. Yet the pattern is recognizable: the buildings in the quoted passage escape designation, just as Todgers' in Martin Chuzzlewit remains inaccessible though visible, and just as the embassy in The Secret Agent seems misplaced. Here, Pynchon has extended the image to suggest a kind of mechanical film set for some science fiction

thriller, Fritz Lang's Metropolis, for example. And as befits that mode, the city labyrinth, which in the works of Pynchon's predecessors remains statically confusing, in Gravity's Rainbow becomes dynamically dislocating by virtue of war technology which permits the labyrinth to actually move. Viewed from the air, the "ceremonial city" is one in which "nothing here remains the same," and which will "always be changing" (GR, p. 846).

Like the novelists of absent-centred structure before him, Pynchon images the structuring/destructuring feature of the city in terms of the maze or labyrinth. The maze is a rigorously planned construct, but at the same time, it is a construct in which one risks becoming hopelessly lost. The structure becomes over-structured, as though, in an attempt to systematize chaos, it has turned to chaos itself. The paradox contained in that image is especially suited to Pynchon's dialectical imagination. As for James, the symmetry of opposites is for Pynchon a favourite ploy of narrative structure. The maze is also a useful image for absent-centred narrative structure because the centre of the maze, for James, Conrad, Heller and Bely, is either death-giving, hollow or exploded, while for Pynchon it is undiscoverable. Thus, Slothrop never reaches the centre of his quest; searching for Springer, who he hopes will lead him to the rocket, Slothrop "feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is." Through tangled barbed wire and "windowless mazes," he makes his way to a block of tenements

nested one inside the other--boxes of a practical joker's gift, nothing in the center but a last hollow courtyard smelling of the same cooking and garbage and piss decades old. Ha, ha! (GR, p. 509).

Pynchon expands the image here to include the third (vertical) dimension of the labyrinth; for his predecessors, the maze remains, for the most part, at street level, two-dimensional and topographical. By invoking the "practical joker," however, Pynchon invites us to inspect not only the absence at the inner centre of the maze but also the absence of the outer centre of control, the constructor above the maze. For it is not at all certain that the practical joker exists, let alone that he has constructed a joke. Such is the dilemma of the paranoid. The same principle which beleaguers Slothrop also beleaguers most of the other characters in Gravity's Rainbow, for the "Them" and the "They" who appear to govern so much of the Zone's war madness never achieve an identity beyond the pronoun--in Pynchon's world, the antecedent is permanently lost or, at best, exists only in the imagination of the paranoid.

James and Conrad do not joke about such matters. The themes which accompany the labyrinth image (moral and social alienation) are too poignantly felt to be parodied and spoofed as they are in Gravity's Rainbow. At best, the treatment of these themes is achieved with a wry smile of irony, but even then, it is an irony of the utmost seriousness. Not that Pynchon's treatment of the labyrinthine city lacks seriousness; on the contrary, his forays into absurdity and black humour are meant, by their juxtaposition with the serious, to suggest the extreme degree of distortion which besets characters in the Zone. Bely exploits the absurdist features of the labyrinth image occasionally, but the metaphysical nuances of the image are, for him, too socially significant, too interestingly and intellectually complex, to be undercut with parody. Even Heller, who is so fond of the absurd in the first sections of Catch-22, abandons that mode when he explores the labyrinth in the Rome chapter of the novel. For Pynchon, however, no subject, theme, character or

image--regardless of what conventional connotations of reverence or dignity may be attached to it--is beyond spoof. Christ-Child, motherhood, death, or Dorothy in Oz--none is immune from Pynchon's dialectical imagination which, as a matter of narrative principle, is directed to exploring grotesque opposites. Thus, while Pointsman's experiments at the laboratories in The White Visitation are fit subject matter for moral outrage, they are, nevertheless, the occasion for unreined hilarity. It is precisely because of that uncomfortable juxtaposition that the humour is painful. The narrator introduces us to Pointsman's world which he calls "Pavlovia" where the rats in the experimental mazes come to life complete with New York gangster accents. Mouse Alexi warns Lefty and Louie that Slug "waz fried" "da foist time he fucked up runnin' dat maze. A hundrit volts" (GR, p. 267). Then, in Chinese box fashion (a three-dimensional maze reminiscent of the nest of tenement boxes), the narrator turns to the behaviourist experimenters themselves:

Reinforcement for them is not a pellet of food, but a successful experiment. But who watches from above, who notes their responses? (GR, p. 267, Pynchon's emphasis)

Like these scientists, Pynchon's characters are victims in the military-industrial and scientific maze; they can never be sure that they act from volition. They must live with the painful possibility that they are merely conditioned subjects in some larger and probably hideous experiment, the design of which they can never know. They exist as crooked links in a distorted "chain of Being," like Borges's Golem, a simulacrum created by Judah Lion, a rabbi of Prague. He creates his demigod from a doll by finding the "Name" which is the archetype for Omnipotence. However, in the "permutations/

Of letters and complex variations," he must have made an error, for the creature is more sinister than benign, "For at his approach the rabbi's cat/Would hide...." The chain of being is demonstrated in the description of the Golem's eyes which are "less a man's than a dog's/And even less a dog's than a thing's--" And thus the rabbi says with regret:

Why did I decide to add to the infinite
Series one more symbol? Why, to the vain
Skein which unwinds in eternity
Did I add another cause, effect, and woe?⁹

Pynchon's characters find themselves caught in just such an "infinite series." Their response is a manic, tragi-comic dance, like the rats who dance "down the long aisles and metal apparatus, with conga drums and a peppy tropical orchestra" (GR, p. 267). Their song is blackly humorous:

It was spring in Pavlovia-a-a,
 I was lost, in a maze ...
 Lysol breezes perfumed the air,
 I'd been searching for days.
 I found you, in a cul-de-sac,
 As bewildered as I--

.....

Autumn's come, to Pavlovia-a-a,
 Once again, I'm alone--
 Finding sorrow by millivolts,
 Back to neurons and bone

.....

Nothing's left in Pavlovia,
 But the maze, and the game ... (GR, p. 267).

Unaware of the source of his Pavlovian conditioning, Slothrop is very much like one of these rats "finding sorrow by millivolts." The maze, then, operates in two ways: topographically or two-dimensionally as an image of the devastated post-war grid through which Slothrop wanders hopelessly, and three-dimensionally (boxes within boxes) as a metaphysical teaser to invite

speculation about a prime and sinister mover whose existence is either doubtful or unknowable.

While Slothrop finds only a "hollow courtyard" in the centre of his maze, Pointsman, at The White Visitation, is truer to the mythical origins of the image and finds, not an absence, but a Minotaur. Of Pynchon's predecessors, only James explicitly invokes the mythical nuances of the image. Hyacinth, we recall, finds in the first labyrinth he visits, Millbank prison, the "hollow bloodless mask" of his dying mother. Later in The Princess Casa-massima, he boasts to the Princess that he has been on the "steps of the temple" and that he has seen the "holy of holies" in the "innermost sanctuary" of the anarchist labyrinth, though he fails to heed the warning that he is no Theseus, that he is, in fact, a "sacrificial lamb." These nuances of the maze as temple and tomb remain only implicit in the works of Conrad, Bely and Heller, but Pynchon brings the myth back to vigorous life in Gravity's Rainbow. We are told that in the centre of Pointsman's "labyrinth of conditioned reflex work" is Katje, possibly a double agent--"Venus and Ariadne." Yet pursuing her is worth the risk, even though Pointsman fears that agents of the Syndicate "wait in the central chamber." "They own everything: Ariadne, the Minotaur, even, Pointsman fears, himself" (GR, p. 102). He dreams of

rushing into the last room, burnished sword at the ready, screaming like a Commando, letting it all out at last--some true marvelous peaking of life inside him for the first and last time, as the face turned his way, ancient, weary, seeing none of Pointsman's humanity, ready only to assume him in another long-routinized nudge of horn, flip of hoof (but this time there would be a struggle, Minotaur blood the fucking beast, cries from far inside himself whose manliness and violence surprise him) ... (GR, p. 166).

Solving the behaviourist puzzle of Slothrop's curious conditioning might be a success that would save him from the tyranny of the Syndicate, though there is a strong likelihood that "intermediaries" will come between "himself and his final beast." They will deny him his "little perversity of being in love with his own death ..." (GR, p. 167).

The most extreme perversity in the labyrinth, however, is reserved for Brigadier Pudding. The episode which describes his trek to the central chamber removes any vestige of the myth's pagan dignity. Pudding's freakish journey, which has been carefully planned by Pointsman, is his way of maintaining a contact with physical reality in the paralyzing atmosphere of "paper illusions and military euphemisms" at The White Visitation. He travels at midnight through anterooms and offices, and in each room (in a series of seven) lies a well-chosen symbol that reminds Pudding of the horrors and perversions of his past experiences in the first World War. In the seventh awaits a woman, "Domina Nocturna ... shining mother and last love" (GR, p. 270), his "Mistress of the Night" (GR, p. 275) who, brandishing a cane, brings Pudding back to a "rare decency," to "vertigo, nausea and pain. ... Above all, pain. The clearest poetry, the endowment of greatest worth ..." (GR, p. 273). His ritual involves not only masochism but excrement as well, which for Pudding, is "the smell of Passchendaele, of the Salient. Mixed with mud, and the putrefaction of corpses ..." (GR, p. 274). The scene, grotesquely vivid, can hardly be construed as gratuitous pornography since so much of Gravity's Rainbow explores, like Catch-22, the dialectic between man's mortality (flesh, waste, decay and rot) and the supra-rational systems he constructs to protect him from that fact. The novel opens, for example, with Pirate Prentice's rooftop garden, which grows a hardy crop of banana trees

from earth that has been layered "by the knives of the seasons" to an "impasto, feet thick" of decayed plants and trees, manure, and the waste and vomit of previous tenants. Waste and garbage is the condition of entropy from which life sprouts and to which it inevitably returns. In Catch-22, that "man is garbage" is made painfully visible to Yossarian by Snowden's exploded viscera which include the stewed tomatoes he had for lunch; so too for Inspector Heat Stevie's "raw material for a cannibal feast" illustrates the same principle. Pynchon's scene is characteristically more extreme, yet when Pudding glances at "the bottles on the table, the plates, soiled with juices of meat, Hollandaise, bits of gristle and bone" (GR, p. 273) before he eats the excrement that reminds him of "the putrefaction of corpses," he illustrates for us, however obscenely, the same theme that we find in Conrad and Heller--in the labyrinth of an overly rational system which denies the moral and spiritual self, man is little more than the meat he consumes.

Predictably, just as the city/labyrinth themes and images in Gravity's Rainbow undergo distortions by perversion and inversion, so too characters' perceptions and behaviour are wrenched and distorted by the device of reversal. It is a device which works dialectically against the forward movement of the plot towards its suspenseful apocalyptic moment (which, as in Petersburg, is never fulfilled except proleptically). Against this forward thrust of the narrative, we sense a movement away from apocalyptic disintegration back in time to coherence and origins. Slothrop's conditioning is, of course, the most visible example of reversal and reversion. Pointsman explains that Pavlov discovered that a response could be "extinguished" beyond the zero point (the idea from which the first section of the novel, "Beyond the Zero," derives its title), and this discovery, Pointsman thinks, might explain

Slothrop, who

only gets erections when the sequence happens in reverse. Explosion first, then the sound of approach: the V-2 (GR, p. 99, Pynchon's emphasis).

Slothrop is as mystified as Pointsman, and so the quest he undertakes to locate the A-4 rocket is really a return to his origins, to his infancy when, allegedly, he was conditioned by Jamf to the rocket; it becomes a parodic romantic journey to discover who he really is. But the quest also contains a larger reversion, for we learn that

There is the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present as [sic] his own assembly--perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time's assembly-- (GR, pp. 860-61, Pynchon's emphasis).

The quest fails; he never reaches his grail, "the big torpedo," and we read that "to date Slothrop has still not recorded, tagged, discovered, or liberated a single scrap of A-4 hardware or intelligence" (GR, p. 455). And this despite the fact that his quest has been active for more than two hundred pages. His success does not improve; rather, entropy-like, it takes the path of least resistance and disappears from the text--as indeed does Slothrop himself. Hero and grail never meet; "He is being broken down instead, and scattered" (GR, p. 861). His scattering is textually literal, for Slothrop, towards the end of the novel, assumes a confusing number of disguises: Pig-Hero, Rocketman, and Ian Scuffling. The quest might have failed regardless, since we read late in the novel that "There never was a Dr. Jamf"; like the rocket's trajectory which travels from "point to no point," Slothrop's quest is absent-centred in the sense that its end is un-

attainable, in Slothrop's case because its origin is spurious.

The rocket itself is a symbol of reversion because its technology allows it to defy time by exceeding the speed of sound.

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only after it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out ... a few feet of film run backwards ... the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound-- then growing out of it the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning ... a ghost in the sky ... (GR, p. 55).

Thus, to fear the sound of the rocket is futile, since the scream indicates not a potential target, but a blast which has already occurred. Like the "sudden holes in time and space" in The Secret Agent, the "piece of time neatly snipped out" in Gravity's Rainbow is a kind of vacuum of experience beyond apprehension, though it influences and even governs the action which leads up to and surrounds it. This feature of rocket technology allows Pynchon to exploit the proleptic explosion in a much more literal way than Conrad or Bely could manage with their relatively unsophisticated anarchist bombs. Despite this difference, however, the pattern is comparable: Gravity's Rainbow opens and closes with the threat of a rocket strike, yet the devastation of the war gives us a vivid impression of a landscape which has been already blown to fragments by powerful explosions. Like Conrad and Bely, Pynchon appears to give us the sound after the fury.

Pynchon tells us that this kind of reversal is like "a few feet of film run backwards." Film, of course, operates as an important thematic and structural technique in Gravity's Rainbow;¹⁰ lengthy discussions of film technology, the sprocket-like squares which frame each chapter, innumerable allusions to Hollywood kitsch and classics (westerns, horror films, Shirley

Temple films and The Wizard of Oz, to mention a few), the sets for and allusions to Fritz Lang's German expressionistic films (Metropolis, Die Frau im Mond, Der Mude Tod), and what the narrator calls the "paracinematic lives" of his characters--all of these create a narrative mode that allows Pynchon scope for parody and structural distortion. But the film of the text does not only reel forward; by equating the rocket's trajectory to a film running backwards, Pynchon creates his own version of the proverbial rewinding of one's life flashing past at the moment of death. Inspector Heat, we recall, imagined this phenomenon vividly for Stevie's death in The Secret Agent, and Sophia's past in Petersburg seemed to overtake her during her carriage ride from the ball. For Conrad the device is a means of extending the moment so that its brevity is expanded to a proportion which matches the largeness of the moral violation it contains. For Bely and Pynchon the device is a way of enlarging the moment of horror to historical and metaphysical size. The fear of this moment is, of course, expressed primarily in individual terms. Thus, listening to the "screaming" that comes across the sky in the opening line of the novel, Slothrop says, a few pages later:

I mean I'm four years overdue's what it is, it could happen any time, the next second, right, just suddenly. ... shit ... just zero, just nothing ... and ... (GR, p. 28).

The parallel here to Petersburg is suspiciously close, especially to the dream passage in which Nikolai talks to his father. Nikolai, burdened by "the invisible center, which had formerly been consciousness," experiences "chronology ... running backwards."

But Saturn, Apollon Apollonovich, roaring with laughter, replied: "None, Kolenka, none at all: the chronology, my dear boy, is--zero."

"Oh! Oh! What then is 'I am'?"

"A zero."

"And zero?"

"A bomb."

Nikolai Apollonovich understood that he himself was a bomb. And he burst with a boom (P, p. 168).

The dread of dangerous surprises is not reserved for the moment of individual or apocalyptic import; it is evident in the paranoid attitude towards even the most trivial of surprises. Early in Gravity's Rainbow, Slothrop meets Darlene, a nurse who boards with an elderly lady with the Dickensian-sounding name of Mrs. Quoad. Like Pip visiting Estelle and Miss Havisham, Slothrop sits patiently with Mrs. Quoad while Darlene makes tea. On a table is Mrs. Quoad's "crumpled chiffon handkerchief," which Slothrop notices, is marred by "feathered blots of blood in and out the convolutions like a floral pattern" (GR, p. 134).¹¹ Even Victorian decorum cannot hide the visible signs of her "antiquated diseases." The eccentric English candies she serves him are "ruddy gelatin objects" with a "dribbling liquid center," "rhubarb creams," and "marmalade Surprises"; the farce expands: his next candy is, invitingly, a hard, red raspberry one, but

Impatiently, he bites into it, and in the act knows, fucking idiot, he's been had once more, there comes pouring out onto his tongue the most godawful crystal-line concentration of Jeez it must be pure nitric acid ... (GR, p. 136).

Growing more sinister as the scene progresses, Mrs. Quoad and Darlene coax him to have more, and almost mechanically he does. Into other candies "he goes plunging, like a journey to the center of some small hostile planet, into an

enormous bonbon ..." There is a brown one which looks like "an exact quarter-scale replica of a Mills-type hand grenade," a black one which looks like a "licorice bazooka," and the most sophisticated military likeness of all, a striped one resembling a "six-ton earthquake bomb of some silver-flecked blue gelatin" (GR, p. 137). Like Yossarian who dislikes pomegranates because they spew red seeds and juices that remind him of Snowden's death,¹² Slothrop finds it increasingly difficult to tolerate these "candied bombs" because they remind him of the rocket's explosion which threatens him daily.

The dream of sudden death, the fantasy of rocket strike and bomb burst, radically alters characters' perceptions of their immediate worlds. The object of their fear and paranoia becomes a microcosm of the larger historical and apocalyptic burst. Thus, "the War," in Gravity's Rainbow, "has been re-configuring time and space in its own image" (GR, p. 299). The War with a capital "W" replaces God--that is, it remakes "in its own image." The Creator has been replaced by the Destroyer. The vertigo of the moment, then, is really a metaphor for the vertigo of history, and this experience, like Slothrop's quest, is imaged as film running backwards. Slothrop's Puritan ancestors, for example, go "avalanching back from Slothrop here, back to 1630":

--there go that Arabella and its whole fleet, sailing backward in formation, the wind sucking them east again, the creatures leaning from the margin of the unknown, sucking in their cheeks, growing crosseyed with the effort ... the old ship zooms out of Boston Harbor, back across an Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse (GR, p. 237).

The colonizers in Gravity's Rainbow return with mug-faced comedy to locate the centre from which they dispersed: Slothrop's American ancestors, Squalidozzi, the Argentine, and the African Hereros led by Enzian all mingle in the Zone.

None, of course, finds the centre, except in a distorted way, Enzian who, by reassembling an 00001 rocket, hopes to lead his people, "The Empty Ones," to a tribal death of mass suicide.

The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place ... (GR, p. 370).

For Enzian, the only escape from the distortions of time and space is in the Zone of entropy and death. "The Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement towards stillness is the same" (GR, p. 371). Enzian's method, the reassembly of the rocket from scattered fragments of knowledge and ballistic technology, follows the film metaphor of reversal; thus, the reassembly is like a "Diaspora running backwards, seeds of exile flying inward in modest view of gravitational collapse, of the Messiah gathering in fallen sparks ..." (GR, p. 860).

The rocket explosion is well-suited to the transcending of time and space, for it represents the convergence of those forces: timed to ignite at zero, its explosion is a rapid expansion that destroys space, while its trajectory becomes the path which attempts to transcend those same forces. In The Secret Agent, Conrad shows his awareness of the bomb's temporal and spatial features which are useful for creating a narrative and symbolic absence, a "sudden hole" in London's space and Greenwich time. And Bely goes to considerable trouble to situate the bomb in Petersburg in a precise spatial and temporal location: in a sardine tin in a desk drawer in the Appolonovich house on a Petersburg street surrounded by a vast Russian landscape. The bomb's ticking for the twenty-four hours of the novel's narrative time is a constant reminder that, at the zero hour, both time and space will

be nullified. In Gravity's Rainbow, the Counterforce, which includes Roger Mexico, deduces that Enzian's rocket, if it has not been fired already, will be aimed north. The Germans, they know, fired the A-4 south at Antwerp, east when testing at Peenemünde, and west at London. By calculating compass bearings, they predict that the A-4 which Enzian has reassembled will go "000°: true North. What better direction to fire the 00000?" (GR, p. 824). The pole, then, becomes the dead centre for Enzian's rocket of death. Slothrop's picaresque journey up the Swine river on The Anubis in search of Springer and the A-4 is also a journey north to the dead centre; it is partly a Conradian river journey (Springer, like Kurtz, is "the white knight of the black market"),¹³ and it is partly a Nabokovian chase (Springer, as befits both his name and the chess knight that Slothrop carries as a token for him, leaps and bounds at odd angles and directions through the Zone, with the kind of movement that frustrates the narrator in his attempt to write a biography of his dead brother in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight). Slothrop finds Springer but, unlike Marlow, he never does return to tell his story; how close he gets to the A-4, we cannot tell, for he disappears and emerges, once stories about him begin to grow, only as myth in the vast northern landscape of the Zone.¹⁴

Finding centres, then, is not easy for characters in Gravity's Rainbow. The quest invariably leads to one kind of absence or another: to vacancy, nullity, death, or, like Slothrop's, to a simple running down and trailing off without a final word. (The theme finds its expression at the level of style, for one of the most visible features of Pynchon's sentences, as a quick review of the quotations cited here will show, is the use of ellipses. Sentences are either mined with gaps or, entropy-like, fade to incompleteness.)

Often the quester and the quested miss each other or pass by silently.

Tchitcherine, who, like Slothrop, has been searching for Enzian and the A-4, meets but fails to recognize his half-brother. And, in another Zone scene, the adage about "ships that pass in the night" is technologically updated and parodied at the same time. A ship, The U.S.S. John E. Badass, picks up a U-boat on its radar screen with a "muscular post-war reflex," a phrase which could also describe Slothrop, since he too acts by post-war reflex.

The Badass Radarman tracks an incoming torpedo fired from the U-boat, a light moving fast toward "the unmoving center of the sweep." The enemy U-boat, however, has mistakenly fired at a third abandoned hulk near The Badass, and so the torpedo misses. Or, as the narrator puts it: "the two fatal courses do intersect in space, but not in time." It is a typical Pynchonesque joke (one which he could well have borrowed from Nabokov, for Pynchon was, after all, a student of Nabokov's)--a joke which illustrates that even the most sophisticated technology is prone to error and misses when Fate, the unexpected and the random, intervenes. Verloc's "best laid plans" meet the same demise, as do Nikolai's in Petersburg. The real menace in these texts is not only the malicious or foolhardy plan itself, or the sinister power of technology, or a rationally aimed and motiveless malignity; the capricious errors and fatal mistakes also pose a potentially lethal threat.

Part of the painful irony in these texts is that their heroes try so valiantly to protect their lives from such "torpedo misses": their attempts to do so are either poignantly comic or disastrously fatal. They seem, for the most part, to be ill-equipped for dangerous quests. Nikolai and Slothrop, and the other heroes of absent-centred texts, while they arrive from radically different backgrounds and move in radically different circles, do share,

nevertheless, a certain bumbling awkwardness. Hyacinth, in The Princess Casamassima, despite his prototypical Jamesian precociousness, seems to stand around, hands in pockets, gawking with a stifling sensitivity at both princesses and anarchists. Nikolai makes his political promise rashly, even more rashly forgets about it, and when he does remember and summons up the courage to carry out the plan, he has mislaid the bomb. The harlequin costume which he wears to the ball fits him much better than either his Neo-Kantian robe or his anarchist garb. Yossarian, in a manner, is the shrewdest of the lot, for we sense that his naivete and simplicity are consciously donned as a ploy to battle and frustrate the forces which are frustrating him. False simplicity proves to be the most effective weapon against a falsely complex and mindless military establishment. More than these characters, however, Slothrop (whose costume, ironically, is Rocketman's cape and whose Tarot card is The Fool) is defenceless against his enemies, mainly because he cannot even precisely identify his enemies, let alone locate them.

Not that it would make a great deal of difference, for what characterizes Slothrop's enemy most, like the bureaucracies from Dickens's Circumlocution Office to Bely's government officials to Heller's military establishment, is vagueness and incompetency. In Gravity's Rainbow, this theme finds a hyperbolically post-modern expression in Pynchon's grand network of obscure power and politics which, however, disintegrates altogether in the Zone:

There's no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made--at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-round assholery (GR, p. 788).

The problem of the quest, then, is threefold: Slothrop as a quester is incompetent, a "character juvenile" and a "dunce and drifter"; the chaotic and labyrinthine terrain for his quest provides neither shelter nor direction; and, not least, the reason for the quest in the first place is possibly spurious--by virtue of Jamf's doubtful existence.

Not surprisingly, a novel which explores such themes of absence (of direction, motive and end) will find its narrative correlative in a structuring image. We get two views of this image, one like a cross section, the rocket's rainbow arc or trajectory, and the second, a mandala which suggests a view of the rocket from underneath. Like the thematic opposites in the text (paranoia and anti-paranoia, motion and stasis, black [Enzian] and white [Blicero], system and fragmentation, and many others), the rocket's parabola is governed by two forces: the vertical force of thrust and power and its antithetical force, the force of resistance--gravity. This arc reappears uncompromisingly throughout the text from the absurd (the bananas in the opening pages--the rocket is a "steel banana"--and croissants) to the metaphysical and the sexual. Katje, for example, knows that the Germans were cognizant of the rocket's sexual qualities when they nicknamed it "Der Pfau 'Pfau Zwei'"--V and V-2 but also the peacock, and so for Katje the rocket is a "peacock, courting, fanning his tail." Especially in the flames of the rocket's lift-off she sees "scarlet, orange, iridescent green." About the trajectory, she is explicit:

Ascending, programmed in a ritual of love ... at Brennschluss it is done--the Rocket's purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted....



Katje has understood the great airless arc as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the




planet and herself, and Those who use her--over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm ... (GR, p. 260).

Philosophizing with a touch of wistful romanticism, Katje whispers to Slothrop her observation that while the rockets were descending, he was in London and while they were ascending, she was in Gravenhage. "Between you and me is not only a rocket trajectory, but also a life" (GR, p. 244). Her speculations are qualified by the narrator in the next paragraph:

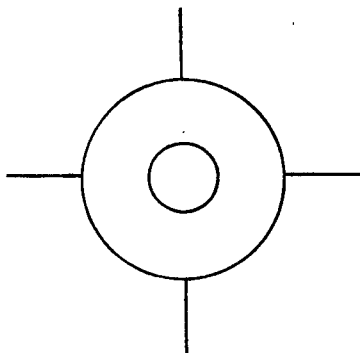
But it is a curve each of them feels, unmistakably. It is the parabola. They must have guessed, once or twice--guessed and refused to believe--that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return. Yet they do move forever under it, reserved for its own black-and-white bad news certainly as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children ... (GR, p. 244).

Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz believes in the rainbow, that somewhere over it is a trouble-free realm of bliss and easy flight. To believe in Pynchon's rainbow, however, is to believe in the certainty of nullity; thus, only by not believing, only by ignoring the "black-and-white bad news" can the trajectory be seen as a rainbow.

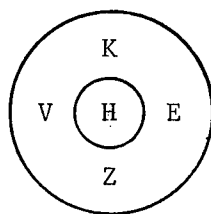
Symbols in Gravity's Rainbow, like characters, undergo transformations; they exist not as static pointers which are repeated only for the sake of pattern and motif, but as dynamic and elusive signs constantly, like the rocket's trajectory and the Zone itself, in flux. Thus, the parabola, which is the shape of the tunnel entrances to the Mittelwerke, the underground plant where the rocket is being reassembled, is transformed, by inverting one of a pair of parabolas into a sideways S:  becomes  . One inverted

sideways S overlaid on the first becomes the mathematical symbol for infinity and timelessness:  plus  becomes . Two S's form the double integer used in ballistic computation for the A-4; "to integrate here is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled ..." (GR, p. 351). The double integer is also the Nazi SS, "the double lightning stroke," two lovers curled asleep, and an "ancient rune that stands for the yew tree, or Death" (GR, p. 351). And while all of this trajectory symbolism is baroque in its intricacy, it is consistently simple in its theme: the end of the arc, be it trivial or apocalyptic, is a form of absence: "no point," "stasis," "timelessness," "openness," "terminal orgasm," "explosion," or "Death."

The nullity at the centre is more graphically illustrated by the second view of the rocket image, the mandala of a circle within a circle over cross hairs. (The circle itself can be seen as being composed of two parabolas.)



Slothrop scratches this sign on a rock and realizes afterwards that "he was really drawing ... the A4 rocket, seen from below" (GR, p. 727). The Rocketman's mandala is almost certainly inspired by a similar one which belonged to the Schwarzkommando and which Slothrop sees when he visits the remains of the German A-4 site:



Andreas Orukambe, a Zone Herero, explains its meaning to Slothrop:

"Klar," touching each letter, "Entlüftung," these are the female letters. North letters. In our villages the women lived in huts on the northern half of the circle, the men on the south. The village itself was a mandala. Klar is fertilization and birth, Entlüftung is the breath, the soul. Zündung and Vorstufe are the male signs, the activities, fire and preparation or building. And in the center, here, Hauptstufe. It is the pen where we kept the sacred cattle. The souls of the ancestors. All the same here. Birth, soul, fire, building. Male and female, together.

"The four fins of the Rocket made a cross, another mandala. Number one pointed the way it would fly. Two for pitch, three for yaw and roll, four for pitch. Each opposite pair of vanes worked together, and moved in opposite senses. Opposites together. You can see how we might feel it speak to us, even if we don't set one up on its fins and worship it" (GR, pp. 655-56).

Blicero also seems to have been struck by the sign, for a marker which designates the location of the V-2 aimed at London is described as

a red circle with a thick black cross inside, recognizable as the ancient sun-wheel from which tradition says the swastika was broken by the early Christians, to disguise their outlaw symbol" (GR, p. 117).

The mandala also suggests churchtops with "apses out to four sides like rocket fins guiding the streamlined spires" (GR, p. 728); the spreadeagled man within the circle, arms and legs like cross hairs; and, for Pirate Prentice, who

experiences other characters' dreams and fantasies, the mandala arrives like a "heretical dream" belonging to his pursuer, Frans van der Groov:

exegeses of windmills, that turned in shadow at the edges of dark fields, each arm pointing at a spot on the rim of a giant wheel that turned through the sky, stop and go, always exactly with the spinning cross: "wind" was a middle term, a convention to express what really moved the cross ... and this applied to all wind, everywhere on Earth ... each wind had its own cross-in-motion, materially there or implied, each cross a unique mandala, bringing opposites together in the spin ... (GR, p. 723. The last two ellipses are mine).

The windmill also speaks to Slothrop, for in his mock-heroic quest, he is really a Don Quixote aiming not at sinister windmills but at a dead centre.

Thus, "crosses, swastikas, Zone-mandalas, how can they not speak to Slothrop?" (GR, p. 729). Slothrop reaches stasis; his quest has failed or ceased to matter. Either he will meet with destruction or he will be "passed over." In the Puritan sense to be passed over meant to be excluded from the elect; it meant preterition. But characteristically, Pynchon has inverted the meaning; to be passed over in the Zone means to be passed over by the rocket and so escape death, while to be "selected" means to be targeted for destruction. Slothrop's father's fear of God's hand coming out of the sky has been replaced by Slothrop's fear of the A-4 missile. However, being passed over in the Zone also means being relegated to a purgatorial existence wandering through the labyrinth of devastation and eventually becoming lost altogether. And so towards the end of the novel we see Slothrop for the last time in the Zone where

he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds

into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural (GR, p. 729).

Douglas A. Mackey sees a redemptive and transcendent epiphany in this passage:

Gravity's rainbow, which represented fatality and oppression to the paranoid mentality, becomes here a fertilizing symbol. Beholding it, Slothrop empties his mind of thoughts while remaining conscious (the "I am" of Rilke) and while emptying his heart of grief through tears (the "I flow"). Here the rainbow assumes its traditional significance as a manifest emblem of God's grace. In a book where god has appeared only as the repressive Them, the vague deterministic gods of paranoia, the most consistent religious presence is found in nature.¹⁵

The rainbow may be fertilizing--though that seems already to have happened by the rain which Slothrop can't recall--but it is also, in keeping with the flippant tone of Pynchon's crude joke, "screwing" the earth. Moreover, the shift in Mackey's interpretation of the rainbow from "fertilizing symbol" to "God's grace" is uncomfortable, and to speak of the "religious presence ... found in nature" is to reduce Pynchon's vision to a romantic pantheism which itself is parodied by the rather hippie romanticism of Slothrop's "just feeling natural." The rainbow is gravity's not Heaven's.

Any epiphany that Slothrop enjoys comes not from a transcendent vision but from a mixture of exhausted searching and being searched for, which leaves him, finally, not caring or forgetting. His "naturalness" is the agonizing letting-go in defeat which is the only way that he can release himself from the terror symbolized by his mandala--a mandala that means, the narrator says bluntly, "Slothrop besieged." By fragmenting as a character, by disappearing and scattering into the realm of legend and myth, he avoids the danger of

being a target, of being at the centre of intersecting cross hairs. Thus, the centre of the mandala is both the absence of the quest--that is, one which is either false or nullifying--and, at the end of the novel, the absence of the quester.

The mandala, ultimately, belongs to the text as well. For like Slothrop, we journey on a trajectory from "point to no point," trying valiantly to line up the cross hairs of the narrative (spinning opposites) aimed at a centre of coherence that will systematize the text. Enzian foregrounds the idea for us when, attempting to decode the meaning behind the Zone's devastation and to reconstruct the dismantled rocket, he wonders if

we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop ... (GR, p. 606).

As the rocket is for Enzian, the text is for us. We search for structures, connections, echoes, and parallels attempting to unify the novel into a systematic interpreted whole. Arguably, Pynchon's view and practice of the encyclopedic novel is precisely that the text should resist such totalization. And judging from the response of critics, he has succeeded remarkably well.¹⁶ It is virtually impossible to accommodate all of the nuances, connections, parallels, sign systems, and opposites which mesh and part again in the novel. The temptation is to see paranoia, Pavlov, film, opera, or language as the biggest key which will release the biggest lock on the novel. But while these particular themes and images reveal much, the notions of obscurity, of lack of direction, of entropy, of anarchy and of absence are too powerfully present to allow for a totalizing interpretation. The ex-

ponential growth of interpretative possibilities seems designed, like a labyrinth, to seduce us to enter illusory structures and meanings which leave us stranded, like Slothrop "besieged," in a Zone without a centre--except, paradoxically, that very lack of centre itself.

Notes

¹ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (New York: Modern Library, 1931), p. 431.

² The short story "Entropy" contains, as Tony Tanner has pointed out, references to Henry Adams whose "trail" through "the thickest forests of history" inspired what Tanner sees as a "track" through "the urban wasteland" in "Entropy." Tanner also spots in that short story a parody of Adams' use of the third person in his autobiography. See City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 153-180. And Thomas H. Schaub draws implicit connections between Adams' theory of history and themes in Gravity's Rainbow. See: Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1981), p. 23.

³ I use the term "encyclopedic" as defined by Edward Mendelson in his demonstration that Gravity's Rainbow belongs to a hitherto unidentified but important tradition of encyclopedic narrative. The tradition includes: Dante's Commedia, Rabelais's five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervante's Don Quixote, Goethe's Faust, Melville's Moby-Dick, and Joyce's Ulysses. See "Gravity's Encyclopedia" in Mindful Pleasures, edited by George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 161-195.

⁴ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Bantam, 1973), pp. 399-400. Page numbers will be given in the text following the abbreviation GR.

⁵ B. P. Bobkin, Pavlov, A Biography (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 124.

⁶ B. P. Bobkin, Pavlov, p. 29.

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science" in A Universal History of Infamy (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1975), p. 131.

⁸ Northrop Frye, The Modern Century (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 37.

⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Golem," translated by Anthony Kerrigan in A Personal Anthology (London: Picador, 1972), p. 63.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the use of film in Gravity's Rainbow see: Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity, pp. 43-49, and David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 1980), pp. 31-62.

¹¹ As an illustration of Pynchon's talent for intricate and extended motif, we read, seven hundred pages later, that the boy Gottfried, who is to be sacrificed inside the rocket, is dressed in "white lace, clotted with blood or sperm" (GR, p. 875). From old age to childhood, blood is spoiler of delicate and white surfaces, visible spots of violence and mortality.

¹² At weekly briefings, Pudding gabs about recipes, such as "Ernest Pudding's Gourd Surprise." "Yes," the narrator says, "there is something sadistic about recipes with "Surprise" in the title." He continues: "A chap who's hungry ... just wants to bite into the (sigh) old potato, and be reasonably sure there's nothing inside but potato you see, certainly not ... some mashed pulp all magenta with pomegranates ..." (GR, p. 92; Pynchon's emphasis). Not improbably, the joke is borrowed from Catch-22.

¹³ The journey is also Coleridgean, for Narrisch, the old seaman, carries "by the neck an unplucked dead turkey" (GR, p. 577).

¹⁴ Thus Slothrop joins at least two other American heroes who have, as Tanner points out, affinities for the cold northern landscape, however forbidding and deathly that landscape may be: Augie March, who longs for Greenland in Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March, and Yossarian, who sets out for Sweden in Catch-22. An important addition to the list would be Nicolas in Aquin's Neige Noire (Hamlet's Twin). See: Tanner, City of Words, pp. 80-81. The novelistic archetype for northern wanderers is, of course, Frankenstein and the monster who seeks, he tells his pursuer, "the everlasting ices of the north," and who, at the end of the novel, leaves Walton's ship on "an ice raft" which will carry him to "the most northern extremity of the globe." See: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein in Three Gothic Novels (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1970), pp. 485, 496.

¹⁵ Douglas A. Mackey, The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon (San Bernadino, California: Bargo, 1980), p. 55.

¹⁶ Mark Siegel concurs:

Each critical view has tended to isolate one of the relative points of view in the novel as an objective conception of Pynchon's point of view, while actually each point of view is really a part of an entire spectrum which is the "rainbow" of possibilities encompassed by Pynchon's vision.

See: Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow" (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1978). And Douglas A. Mackey hints at the absent-centred nature of the novel when he says:

Unlike most novels, this one does not become more coherent and more unified as the end approaches. Rather, it flies apart like a rocket explosion. Points of view fragment and drift away from each other, like separate "Zones" engaged in a literary diaspora.

See: The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon, p. 38.

CONCLUSION

In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon makes it narratively and graphically clear to us that Rocketman's circle over cross hairs is the post-modernist mandala for contemporary landscape, character, and text. The crossed lines of the intricately imaged and grandly proportioned dialectic are aimed at a central nullity. The rocket is the complexly structured carrier of that nullity, though in the explosion at the end of the rainbow arc, it too is reduced to the same kind of violent absence that it transports. A similar principle is true of Conrad's and Bely's anarchist bombs: they contain, as it were, highly compressed fragmentation which bursts the restrictions of its unnatural boundaries. If we think of them anthropomorphically--as indeed Pynchon does--bombs and rockets are suicidal. That paradox, the sophisticated structure which moves or expands towards its own randomness and fragmentation, finds its most elaborate expression in Gravity's Rainbow, but it is prefigured, however fundamentally, as early as The Princess Casamassima. For James's aristocratic Princess and anarchist Muniment comprise essentially the same dialectic of structure and disconnectedness that we find in Gravity's Rainbow. And while Hyacinth's uncomfortable position in the middle of that dialectic has a characteristically Jamesian moral and psychological emphasis, it is no less dangerous than Slothrop's position at the centre of the marksman's sight. Indeed, Slothrop fares better than Hyacinth if we agree that his "scattering" in the Zone is a preferable fate to Hyacinth's violent

demise.

The different narrative responses to the hero's dangerous position, however, illustrate not only the distance between Gravity's Rainbow and The Princess Casamassima, but also the development that absent-centred narrative has undergone from its tenuous late Victorian beginning to its more confident Post-Modern realization.

James, after all, begins The Princess Casamassima as a Dickensian Bildungsroman, though after only three chapters, he abandons the arduous trek from childhood to adolescence to young manhood. Moreover, unlike the generous Dickensian sweep of childhood experience and the large canvas of influential character, James's narrative restricts Hyacinth's early years primarily to a single scene, the prison visit, which rather deterministically sets the dialectical pattern of his adult behaviour. That accomplished, it is as though James gives up the Victorian Bildungsroman form in favour of a surprisingly modern cityscape of underground anarchism, confused interminable wandering, and ineffectual action that borders on, or at least prefigures, modernist solipsism. The moral vacancies at the centres of anarchist and aristocratic worlds are arranged as a spurious antithesis which Hyacinth, no matter how cautiously or aggressively he tries, cannot resolve. James brings the drama of that dialectic to a suitably dramatic closure: Hyacinth's self-directed pistol shot. As a resolution to a moral and an ideological dilemma, the suicide invites the reader's inspection of either the needlessness or the pathos of Hyacinth's death. It also invites us to inspect the growth of his character to determine what forces, what causes and effects, led to the premature end of a hero so blessed with potential.

There is little to be gained by inspecting character, in the Jamesian

sense, in Gravity's Rainbow, for Pynchon's characters, like Nabokov's, are tautly strung puppets moved mechanically in the service of narrative structure. They are closer to symbol and emblem than they are to beings with rich inner lives. Thus, Pynchon is reluctant to allow Slothrop either a tragic or a comic end in the text. Slothrop's "scattering" and his unobtrusive exit are intended to illustrate the forces of fragmentation and incompleteness which characterize the Zone, a narrative maneuver which says little about Slothrop's character. The entropy of Slothrop as a character is achieved in a narratively literal way that the conventions of narrative completeness and coherence in Victorian realism could never allow. Thus, no matter how inviting he found the metaphor of anarchist nullity or the theme of moral vacancy, James chose not to explode his narrative structure in The Princess Casamassima in the manner or to the degree that his descendants did. The result is that the narrative absence in The Princess Casamassima is an uncertain one, never prominently situated, because it is inconsistently derived from confusing sources: from the "misplaced middle" of the anticlimax, from imagery of the urban labyrinth, from spurious antithesis, and from intentionally crafted mystery.

In The Secret Agent and Petersburg, Conrad and Bely inspect the anarchist theme more completely, and because their imaginations were captivated (and horrified) by the anarchist bomb, their narratives are more consciously arranged around the absence that that instrument of death and fragmentation inevitably creates. Nor are they content, like James, to explore those themes only in terms of the individual. Bely's mystical and metaphysical symbolism may be more elaborate than Conrad's, and it may be drawn from different sources, yet both novelists explore the apocalyptic shock waves of

the anarchist bomb which they interpret as symptomatic of the early modern condition. By contrast, the apocalyptic note in The Princess Casamassima is struck only in Hyacinth's moments of most extreme panic and despair. For both Conrad and Bely, the spatially and temporally particularized bomb is used as synecdoche for a proleptic apocalyptic explosion which they view as the largest and most threatening absence of all. Bely's Petersburg, together with Heller's Catch-22, represents an advance in the progression of absent-centred fiction because the temporal and spatial distortions which logically result from both a bomb-pierced landscape and an exploded text are more literally realized. Especially in Catch-22, the distortions of narrative chronology represent the apt condition of a hero and a text both of which seem to avoid the central event which concerns each of them the most. In this respect and in its exploration of the absurdly and blackly humorous condition of absent-centredness, Heller is an appropriate link between the late liberal moralists, James and Conrad, and the post-modern heir of that tradition, Pynchon. Catch-22 tells us that structures which lack centres are not only physically, morally, and spiritually hazardous, but, by virtue of the disconnectedness which inevitably results from absent-centredness, are lavishly absurd as well.

Gravity's Rainbow is more expansive in its use of the absurd, ranging as it does from the fantastic to the blackly humorous to the grotesque and the pornographic. Just as expansive in Gravity's Rainbow are its landscapes and cityscapes, the cast of characters, and the ballistic technology and industry which comprise most, but by no means all, of its subject matter. In these ways and in the expansive treatment of social and political structures, Pynchon's novel is the most ambitious treatment of absent-centred

structure. Pynchon's predecessors create their narrative absences by shaping them with special narrative images and strategies that fragment conventional novelistic structure; Pynchon does this too, but unlike James, Conrad, Bely, and Heller, he achieves a narrative absence, in addition to the ways mentioned, by destroying the notion of a contained structure. His predecessors arrange the fragments of their exploded narratives so that they circumscribe the absent centre. Pynchon's expansiveness allows him the added strategy of creating absence by enlarging the scale of his narrative so that a locus seems impossible. In an overly extended structure, textual or otherwise, lines of force and power, cause and effect, direction, and centrality become impracticable. Gravity's Rainbow also represents a logical extension of absent-centred structure because it tells us so. Even Catch-22, which seems as though it is always just about to drop its narrative guard, never does become self-referential. Pynchon's frequent chatter with the reader, however, not to mention the discursive passages about the Rocket as Text, directs our gaze from absent-centred quests and Zones in the novel to our own quest through the text--and invites the obvious parallel between Slothrop's experience and our own.

Absent-centredness, then, operates on a number of levels, most of which appear in Gravity's Rainbow. In terms of an individual character, the absent centre can be the non-existent grail of the quest or the zero point of cancellation, insoluble antitheses, or the "spinning opposites" of dialectics. It is also the much-feared nullity of an immediate or apocalyptic death. In terms of man's environment, the absent-centre is invariably in these texts the lack of a visible source governing or controlling the confusing and seemingly uncontrolled structure of the city. It is imaged consistently as

the urban labyrinth which is either without a central chamber, a chamber with a vacancy, or a chamber with various versions of the death-giving Minotaur. In the largest sense, in terms of the novelists' historical and philosophical vision, the absent centre becomes the expression of man's loss of order, control, and direction in his world. His moral and social structures, according to these texts, are, like the city, collapsing and fragmenting from the loss of a unifying force. That loss, which begins to appear as the release of a nineteenth-century locus-centred world view in James's The Princess Casamassima, finds a comfortable narrative expression in the absent-centred structure in the novels of Conrad's Early- and Bely's High-Modernism. Heller brings it forward vigorously into the Post-Modern era, where Pynchon, in Gravity's Rainbow, gathers most, if not all, of its features together into a kind of absent-centred encyclopedia.

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