War Opus:
Art, Ideology and Ontology in William T. Vollmann’s
*Europe Central*

by

Philip Gaetano Dinolfo
Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters
and with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut       April 10th, 2014
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Audacious “Truth” of William T. Vollmann</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Screaming Across the Sky: A Primer on the Great Postmodern Novel</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. General Features of the Text</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Europe Central’s Historical Ontologies</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Far and Wide My Country Stretches: The Importance of Nation</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The German Voices: A Window Into Historiographical Instability</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. The (Mythic) Ascension of Hitler</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. “What was about to happen had to happen:” The Persistence of Nazi Ideology</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Coward’s Wish: The Dismantling of the Third Reich</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Shackled Genius: The Metafictive Heroism of Dimitri Shostakovich</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Unclean Hands: Dialogically Elucidating A Matrix of Moral Action</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Alexandrov’s Art Criticism: The Biases and Voyeurism of the NKVD</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. “The Living Corpse of Music:” The Road to Opus 110</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Vollmann, “Post-Postmodernism,” and the Value of Art</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

I initially developed an interest in Vollmann and in *Europe Central* for two reasons. The first was that there is a superficial (or advertised) similarity between Vollmann and Thomas Pynchon, an author whose genius changed my conception of what the human imagination was capable of accomplishing. The second came from my understanding, even before beginning my initial reading, that *Europe Central* dedicated much to the life of Dmitri Shostakovich and his Eighth String Quartet (Opus 110). For years Opus 110 had captivated me, and not only because it remains perhaps the most terrifying piece of music I’ve ever heard. I have always sensed an unsettling narrative underpinning the music: the story of a man looking straight into a maelstrom of absolute evil, and realizing that there is a consciousness, probably manyconsciousnesses, looking back at him. I suppose it could be said that this thesis was undertaken because I was eager to see if Vollmann had read Opus 110 in a way congruent to my own. He had, as it happens.

I need to thank my family (Mom, Pop, Adie) for their unwavering support over the course of four years that have proven to be variously stressful, lonely, frightening and, occasionally, all right. I am only here in some reasonably stable capacity because I know you love me and help me wherever you can. Thank you to Professor Sean McCann for acting as my adviser over the course of this academic year. Thank you in a larger sense for being a constant source of advice, great conversation and much needed comfort in trauma, ever since I stumbled into your introductory English course as a nervous, myopic underclassman.
Thanks are due to my dearest friend Adam Zuckerman, an incredibly gifted composer in his own right, for introducing me to Shostakovich. Thanks to Zach Fischman for his help and support during the last few weeks before the deadline. Also, thank you all my professors, and to each and every member of my Colloquium in the College of Letters, in part for tolerating my digressions, outbursts and general excitability with such equanimity over the last three years. I have come to be very fond of all of you.

Thank you to Pynchon for embedding within *Gravity’s Rainbow* the story of Pökler, the greatest Faustian parable of the twentieth century. Thank you to Vollmann for, among many other things, the stunning description that opens the chapter “Airlift Idylls,” of an Iron Curtain reaching into space like a lustrous metallic barrier. Above all, thank you Shostakovich, for being brave enough to compose something that faces, and despairs, at the reach of human evil like Opus 110.
Introduction: The Audacious “Truth” of William T. Vollmann

At the time of this thesis’s writing, William T. Vollmann remains a relatively obscure author. Unlike his late friend David Foster Wallace, Vollmann’s enormous literary ambition has not garnered him a high readership, and oftentimes he is simply characterized as being merely derivative of Thomas Pynchon, the venerated author best known for the 1973 novel Gravity’s Rainbow. Vollmann’s profile rose highest (if Google’s “Trends” application is to be taken as accurate) in late 2005, when the author won a National Book Award for his novel Europe Central. A 753-page text (with upwards of 50 pages of appendices), the book was nonetheless called “his most accessible novel, possibly his best novel” in Tom LeClair’s New York Times review (LeClair 1). Europe Central is a novel about the Second World War that avoids the typical narrative of the triumph of the United States and Great Britain against the Nazis in Western Europe, a narrative that remains venerated and intrinsic to American popular culture. Vollmann’s focus is on the East—the war between Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R. in Eastern Europe, which remains to this day the most enormous, and costly, military conflict in human history. In simplest terms, the novel tells the story of Hitler vs. Stalin on the Eastern Front—of the long buildup to war, of its aftermath, and of some of the many lives the conflict warped, elevated and destroyed. It is a novel of encyclopedic scope. Over thirty-seven chapters Vollmann draws out stories of an enormous range of German and Soviet citizens caught up in the events of their age, the large majority of whom are historical personages, illustrative of the tensions between these rival, brutal totalitarian states. There is Roman Karmen, the Soviet Union’s finest propaganda filmmaker; Friedrich Paulus,
the Wehrmacht general who surrenders at Stalingrad rather than follow Hitler’s directive and commit suicide; Käthe Kollwitz, a Communist artist in Weimar Germany, coming to terms with the death of her son; Kurt Gerstein, the devout Christian who joins the SS as “a spy for God” and tries desperately to derail the progress of the Holocaust. Foremost among these figures is Dmitri Shostakovich, the brilliant, neurotic Russian composer whose work and livelihood were continually compromised by the whims of the Soviet regime. Notwithstanding a humorous cameo appearance by “the American bourgeois-romantic writer E. Hemingway,” and certain moments near the close of the text, American characters, experiences and perspectives are notably absent (Vollmann 235).” Vollmann has situated his narrative within a geopolitical context that all but announces its foreign particularities to an American reader.

In short, Vollmann presents *Europe Central* as a more nuanced alternative to the comfortingly familiar American narrative of the “Good War.” The typical hallmarks of an American treatment of the Second World War—honest American soldiers, fighting for democracy against an oppressive Fascist dictatorship—are entirely missing from this text. What Vollmann depicts instead are the ruthless actions of two totalitarian regimes, each with enormous manpower at their disposal and remarkably little regard for human life. In this “Great Patriotic War” (as the conflict is still called in Russia), men and women are sacrificed by the millions for the arbitrary, and oftentimes completely irrational, whims of Hitler and Stalin: there are

*All subsequent citations of the text of *Europe Central* will be designated by a simple V, plus page number. Citations from one of the sections of the appendices to *Europe Central* will be noted accordingly.*
scenes of young men freezing to death at Stalingrad, Jewish women gassed at Belzec, and people carted off to Siberian gulags in the backs of Black Marias. The unmistakable, brute power of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia is an omnipresent factor in determining the fates of almost every character in the novel.

*Europe Central’s* range and scope mark it as the inheritor of two overlapping literary traditions. On the one hand, Vollmann is an encyclopedic novelist, the author of a fully articulated world, worthy to be in the same rarefied company as Melville, Tolstoy, Joyce and Pynchon. Vollmann also appears to be much in keeping with the tradition of Postmodern literature as a successor to the likes of DeLillo, Barth and, again, Thomas Pynchon. *Europe Central* seems a Postmodern text in the mode of what Linda Hutcheon terms “Historiographic Metafiction,” as Vollmann makes use of a pastiche of styles, a willfully difficult structure and a large volume of paratextual addenda, such as footnotes and appendices. The absurdity typically associated with Postmodernism is also evident in *Europe Central*: real historical circumstances circumscribe fabulations, scenes that show Hitler arguing with a flesh-and-blood Wagnerian Valkyrie or an actual “Iron Curtain” partitioning Berlin like a giant wall.

Formally, Vollmann differs from Pynchon in the overall tone and voicing of his text. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon achieves a unity of voice: while the language of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is oftentimes stunningly polyphonic, the whole text makes no illusion of emanating from a single perspective, Pynchon’s. *Europe Central* is also a polyphonic text, but in a different fashion: while some chapters in the novel suggest simple Pynchonian strangeness, there are also chapters that evoke the rhetorical style of interwar Modernism, or fervent propaganda, or the messy psychological intricacies
of Dostoevsky. Vollmann’s voice emerges in his appendices to Europe Central, but overall his narrators speak in their own voices, conditioned by their particular situations. Where Pynchon’s narrative precedes as a loosely delineated ontological maelstrom, Vollmann partitions his text into distinct ontologies, chapters that showcase a large array of styles and reveal the text as a composite of prior, ideologically constituted modes of fiction. This makes Europe Central in some sense even more metafictive than Gravity’s Rainbow.

This narratological distinction animates differences in the ways Pynchon and Vollmann write characters. As Morris Dickstein point out, the characters in Pynchon have the dimensionality of cartoons, as in other Postmodern texts, and they declare “not simply their authors’ departure from realism but also their brooding sense that life is increasingly controlled by impersonal forces.” Vollmann’s characters—historical personages or else personages completely inextricable from their historical contexts—seem more illustrative of the theories of Lukács than what Dickstein locates in Pynchon. This in itself shows that Vollmann, much like David Foster Wallace, writes in a more contentious relationship to Postmodernism than might seem initially apparent. The large collection of textual ontologies in Europe Central speak to a different purpose and outlook than in Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow, still considered the definitive Postmodern treatment of World War II. Vollmann conforms to Lukács in that his overall approach seems designed to convey verisimilitude to the historical circumstances he is describing. At the same time, Vollmann articulates a drastically different outlook on the purpose of literature, and its relation to questions of moral and political efficacy, than could be found in Pynchon. Like Wallace,
Vollmann can therefore be characterized as an author who repurposes certain elements from the repertoire of Postmodernism to put forth an artistic, and moral, vision that drastically differs from that of his predecessors.

Clarifying Vollmann’s intentions with *Europe Central* may be helped by reviewing Vollmann’s strange but refreshingly transparent interviews. In conversation with Larry McCaffery, Vollmann makes a case for his own boldness, noting, “If literature is valuable in and of itself (which is something I’m not sure of) then opening windows is one of the most valuable things it can do . . . it’s a far braver step to accept the presence of dignity and beauty and most of all likeness or kinship in something that is ugly” (McCaffery and Vollmann, 8). Regarding *Europe Central*, Vollmann explains that simply vilifying Nazis and Soviets would have been antithetical to his purposes:

> You know in *Europe Central* it’s too easy just to say, “Oh, the Nazis were terrible, the Stalinists were awful.” And that’s true, but where do you go from there . . . you can realize the deeper truth, which is not only that they were terrible but if I were born in that time and place, I probably would’ve been one. And even if I resisted with all my being, I would still have characteristics of one, no matter what I did (Dushane and Vollmann 2).

In short, the war on the Eastern Front is, for Vollmann, a context through which to elucidate larger questions of moral agency and complicity. The characters of *Europe Central* are subjugated not only by the liminal projections of totalitarian state power: they (and the narrators that describe them) are enmeshed within matrixes of ideological and political fervor that distort their capacities for both action and expression. For Vollmann, Nazism and Soviet Communism are similar but distinct political movements, each with its own goals and its own unique effects upon the
psychology of its subjects. This is to be contrasted with the view of totalitarianism taken by Pynchon and his contemporaries: for these writers, a political system like the Third Reich represented the ultimate development and result of the modern state’s bureaucratization, and all political systems ultimately operated upon the same essential systems of suppression and control. For Vollmann, the Eastern Front is fundamentally distinctive from our present sociopolitical context, and fiction is the medium through which to consider the moral challenges that totalitarianism engenders. In accepting the 2005 National Book Award for *Europe Central*, Vollmann noted, “I really have tried for many years to read myself into this horrible event and imagine how anyone could have done this, whether I could have done this, and that was what that book was about. I’m very happy that it’s over and I don’t have to think about it any more” (Carnevale).

The above indicates that Vollmann is actively trying to expound upon venerable ideas about the function of literature, ideas that Pynchon and the other Postmodernists made efforts to avoid. Theophilius Savvas, one of the few scholars to have thus far undertaken any lengthy analysis of Vollmann’s body of work, notes that Vollmann’s larger artistic goals are underscored by moral concerns that significantly predate literary Postmodernism, as evident in the novelist’s position relative to the nebulous concept of truth:

For Vollmann, it seems to me, this ‘truth’ is to be equated with sincerity, and honesty, qualities allied with, but not necessarily the same as fact . . . I would suggest we understand Vollmann’s books as being less about symbolism [and more] in what Burke called ‘symbolic action.’ Here, there pertains ‘a distinction between the ‘statistically’ or ‘factually’ true and a marksman’s ‘true’ aim, which seems to fruitfully describe Vollmann’s own description of his work (Savvas 99-100).
On Savvas’s account, Vollmann is immersed in a career-long project dedicated to expanding the range of moral sympathy for his readers. Dorothy Hale points out that from the time of Henry James, “the novel’s primary ideological work turns out to be the promotion of sympathy,” although Pynchon and other Postmodern writers actively tried to interrogate this ambition (Hale 9). By contrast, in Savvas’ reading Vollmann is artistically dedicated to comprehending various forms of the “Other” in modern life, persons separated from Vollmann by enormous disparities in time, culture or ideology:

Vollmann notes in his “rules” for writing that: “we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other. *Not* the Other as a negation or eclipse of Self. Not even the Other exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist’s way of worshipping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners (Savvas 103).

Vollmann’s career as a writer predicts Savvas’ reading of his work, as Vollmann’s adventurism is enough to make Ernest Hemingway, one of his favorite authors, seem cautious by comparison. Vollmann has made two trips to Afghanistan, the first of which was to fight with the mujahedeen against the Soviets. Vollmann realized upon arriving at the front that his poor eyesight prevented him from properly aiming a rifle, although this non-contribution to the insurgency was later dramatized in *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, which won Vollmann the 1992 National Book Award for nonfiction. The novelist once smuggled an underage Thai prostitute across the border into Cambodia, and enrolled her in a rehabilitative school. “She doesn’t particularly like me,” he has said, “but she was really happy to be out of that place. She loves the school” (Smartt Bell and Vollmann 11). Vollmann spent two weeks at
an abandoned research outpost at the Magnetic North Pole, in anticipation of writing
*The Rifles*, a novel about the Eskimos. Vollmann also counts prostitutes among his
close friends, their stories furnishing a trilogy of his books, and for some time he has
enjoyed periodically smoking crack-cocaine, saying in one interview that “I like the
kind of hotel, where . . . the crack smoke kind of drifts through the walls from an
adjacent room, and you can just enjoy the fragrance” (Dushane and Vollmann 6). As
a recent Newsweek profile of the author noted, “He consorts with the voiceless . . . to
give them a voice” (Nazaryan 2). These wildly diverse experiences substantiate
Vollmann’s encyclopedic ambition and writing, while also corroborating the accuracy
of Savvas’ analysis.

Thus, this thesis takes as it foundation Savvas’s argument that empathy and
truth drive Vollmann’s writing as the basis for analyzing *Europe Central* in depth.
The first step in this analysis consists in situating Vollmann’s text relative to Pynchon
and *Gravity’s Rainbow*.
I. Screaming Across the Sky: A Primer on the Great Postmodern Novel

In many accounts, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the paradigmatic Postmodern novel. Just as *Ulysses* is commonly taken as the exemplar of Modernist writing and a metonym for any number of techniques and dialectics that characterized Modernist thought, so *Gravity’s Rainbow* may be taken as the high-water mark of Postmodern writing. Similar to how many of the most notable and ambitious English-language novels written in the decades after 1922 were written in the shade of what James Joyce accomplished in *Ulysses*, so too is much of the noteworthy literature of the last forty years inexorably part of a sort of “Post-Pynchonian” context. The influence of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is that ecumenically profound.

*Europe Central* has a more particular interrelation with *Gravity’s Rainbow* that goes beyond that novel’s enormous impact. The two texts appear quite similar to one another after a pithy summary of both: both are long, difficult novels focused on the Second World War; both texts are particularly interested in the operations of the power structures that brought about the war; both also note the psycho-social underpinnings, aftermath, and devastating impact the war has on normal citizens on both sides of the conflict.

Vollmann himself appears not to view his work as particularly indebted to Pynchon. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, Vollmann admitted that he had read Pynchon and related authors, such as Robert Coover, but claimed that he hadn’t read *Gravity’s Rainbow* until after his first novel was published, saying, “I don’t think my stuff is much like Pynchon’s” (McCaffery and Vollmann 10). Regardless, Vollmann’s text is simultaneously so different and so similar to *Gravity’s*
Rainbow that clarifying Pynchon’s intentions in the latter text will help provide a critical basis for discussing Europe Central.

Gravity’s Rainbow begins in September 1944 as “A screaming comes across the sky,” part of the German V-2 bombing campaign against Great Britain (Pynchon 3). At the “White Visitation,” an experimental organization that employs psychics, mediums and other paranormal individuals, various theories are floated to determine where the rockets might fall next. Eventually, a potential correspondence is discovered in the body of Tyrone Slothrop, a Harvard-educated American lieutenant from a wealthy New England family. Slothrop keeps a map of London covered in star stickers—“a cluster near Tower Hill, a violent density about Covent Garden”—that chart his various sexual encounters throughout the city (Pynchon 19). Unbeknownst to Slothrop, however, these stars correspond to the impact sites of the V-2 rockets with unsettling accuracy, with a rocket tending to follow the placement of a star by a period of several days. Various experiments are performed on Slothrop until Pointsman, the nervy Pavlovian head of the “White Visitation,” dispatches the American to a casino in southern France following the German surrender. There, he falls in love with the Dutch spy Katje, and uncovers a plot that sends him on the run from Pointsman and his associates.

Slothrop’s wanderings eventually lead him into “The Zone:” the amorphous non-state that is Central Europe in the period between the German surrender and Germany’s demarcation into zones of Western and Eastern influence. At a café in Zurich, Slothrop meets an Argentine anarchist named Squalidozzi explains the situation to him:
“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 had wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. Opened it” (Pynchon 268).

Squalidozzi is unknowingly articulating one of the major underlying discourses in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: the conflict between freedom and state control. The Zone is an area without boundaries, a transnational space that, according to Khachig Töölöyan, provides “a glimpse of all that can be; ironically, this vision is made possible only by the ravages of war” (Töölöyan 61). World War II results from the actions of state power, but it also creates a temporary break in state power’s advancement, allowing an alternative to be seen, however briefly. This is significant for any understanding of *Gravity’s Rainbow* because, woven into the extraordinary complexity and volubility of the text, Pynchon advances a vision of bureaucratic power encroaching upon virtually every aspect of individual life. In the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the power of the state widens as a natural and inevitable result of certain tendencies of human organization, and this bureaucratization extends, disturbingly, to the level of bodily and sexual control: in the course of his adventures Slothrop discovers that as a baby his penis was the subject of a series of experiments conducted on behalf of “The Firm,” a shadowy multinational entity that controls IG Farben, the German chemical giant that played a key role in the creation of the V-2 Rocket. Slothrop’s fate seems particularly tied into the production of a mysterious, and as yet un-launched, rocket with the serial number “00000.” Hounded by The
Firm’s agents at every turn, Slothrop tries to find the rocket and hopefully extricate himself from the influence of this corporation.

Slothrop’s efforts eventually make him a rallying point for a group of young men and women who come to call themselves the Counterforce. This diverse group—Katje, lovelorn statistical analyst Roger Mexico, horticulturalist psychic “Pirate” Prentice—attempt to stage an anarchist opposition to the methods of The Firm and the all-encompassing super-structures of influence it engenders. However, as *Gravity’s Rainbow* nears its conclusion Pynchon engineers what can best be described as a narratological shattering: the text is fragmented into disparate subsections given labels like “A MOMENT OF FUN WITH TAKESHI AND ICHIZO, THE KOMICAL KAMIKAZES” and “AN INCIDENT IN THE TRANSVESTITES’ TOILET” (Pynchon 702, 704). Meanwhile, Slothrop retreats into the countryside and disintegrates after confronting a sort of panoply of possible Slothrop’s. Ultimately the 00000 rocket is launched, only to fall towards a theater, where, while “the last image was too immediate for any eye to register,” it is insinuated that the whole preceding text has merely been a series of images projected upon a screen in the present-day 1970s. “The Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second,” plummets towards the theater as the individuals within sound a final song (Pynchon 775).

If this synopsis appears somewhat exegetically overwhelming, that is understandable. As Richard Poirier notes in his essay “The Importance of Thomas Pynchon:” “Really to read Pynchon properly you would have to be astonishingly learned not only about literature but about a vast number of other subjects belonging
to the disciplines and to popular culture, learned to the point where learning is almost a sensuous pleasure” (Poirier 51). The synopsis above does not make mention of some of the more brilliant digressive episodes and subplots in Pynchon’s text: the saga of a sentient light bulb named Byron; a death-cult of African tribesmen collaborating with Nazi rocket scientists; an almost unreasonably devastating invocation of the extinction of the Dodo Birds.

Regardless, Charles Russell provides an illuminating account of some of the larger structuring premises of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in his essay “Pynchon’s Language: Signs, Systems, and Subversion.” Russell places Pynchon within the broader contexts of modernism and post-modernism. Of the former, Russell writes:

Modernism’s determining obsession may be seen as the stark confrontation of language and consciousness with that which lies beyond them. . . . in the aesthetic consciousness’ dramatic opposition to the seeming meaninglessness of existence ever threatening humanity’s meager realm of order and meaning. The self-consciousness of great modernist literature displayed an existential faith in the heroic integrity of human action and posited meaning in an alien and nonhuman cosmos (Russell 252-253).

In Postmodernism, meanwhile:

There is no saving myth, no sustaining sacred belief, no valorization of the subconscious that can be asserted as more than a temporary expedient . . . Rather, it is entirely within the framework of socialized behavior—humankind’s self-projected semiotic systems—that postmodernism situates us. It is the manifestations of private and collective consciousness that this new literature explores. And consciousness . . . is deemed to be determined solely by language. Only that which enters into language has meaning . . . post-modernist writers recognize that literature is itself totally encapsulated within, and is a direct expression of, the reigning cultural codes of meaning . . . [Many Postmodernist writers] believe that inherited languages, and the social world built upon them, are not to be trusted. If no semiotic system can offer essential meaning, none can claim privileged or authoritative status. But it is precisely such claims that all too
frequently are made by institutions of power, manipulation, and exploitation in society . . . the limits of meaning, the internal dynamics and contradictions of the system thus become the focuses of the literary text (Russell 253-254).

For Russell, these literary movements are personified in the Firm and the Counterforce, the Firm emphasizing a certain Modernist totalizing tendency within language and the Counterforce pursuing a “much more tentative, self-deconstructive, and perhaps self-defeating play with language,” characteristic of the Postmodern aesthetic position (Russell 254). The Firm, even when it implicates real people and institutions (Friederich Kekule, who discovered the chemical structure of benzene; IG Farben) is never given a holistic enough explication by Pynchon to tie them to any identifiable power structure. Rather, the Firm is only the most discernable aspect of an implied system of interconnecting institutions working towards some final objective goal that cannot be fully apprehended by its opponents. In its sinister pervasiveness Pynchon describes the Firm as a reasonable metonym for the entirety of the military-industrial state and its cultural and ideological underpinnings. The Firm premises itself on the belief that, “Totalization of the human order is dependent on the construction of internally coherent and self-justifying systems of meaning—languages of absolute efficacy . . . it is in the final interests of the ruling orders primarily that their language systems be unambiguous, invulnerable” (Russell 260). The Firm makes an effort to solidify their power through the removal of ambiguities, the assertion of a sort of total objectivity that is as insulating to their power as it is deliberately monolithic against any sort of opposition.
While in Russell’s account Pynchon articulates a Modernist system of thought in the Firm, the novelist himself writes from a position of Postmodernism. Pynchon’s understanding of language is such that he shows that even in efforts towards “absolute regimentation,” the Firm draws attention to the incomprehensible things that fall outside its structure. “Although the Firm would prefer the movement . . . toward a self-contained system of meaning, their vision remains nonetheless fixed on what the word so comfortably placed within language systems invokes beyond them” (Russell 260). Any effort towards the establishment of an absolute epistemological order merely serves to illuminate the self-isolating impulses of the system itself. In Russell’s view, Pynchon attempts “to view all institutions and behavior as concealed languages, as systems of signification. It is necessary, in effect, to discover the ideology of everyday life, to recognize the patterns of control that we live by” (Russell 265).

This is what the Counter-Force attempt in the climactic struggle of Gravity’s Rainbow. However, the Counter-Force’s dissolution hinges on the fact that, “In order to do war with the System, the Counter-Force must itself be a system of sorts . . . but the danger of any system . . . is its own bureaucratization, its solipsistic tendency to deny what ever it defends itself against” (Russell 266). The protest to any canonization of meaning necessitates the opposing creation of another system of meaning. In attempting to avoid this outcome “the Counterforce promises randomness and improvisation,” but for this selfsame reason they falter, and cannot adequately fulfill their goal.
In his essay “War as Background in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” Khachig Tölölyan shows how attitudes that Russell identifies as being performed within the text also inform Pynchon’s vision of World War II. Through meticulous dating, Tölölyan presents the timeframe of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as encompassing almost one year exactly, from September 1944 to September 1945 (Tölölyan 33-40). This is, crucially, a time span that passes the end of World War II proper, while Pynchon avoids directly dramatizing significant events like the Holocaust, the surrender of the various Axis powers and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Implicitly, Pynchon’s aim is to make these seemingly totemic events of the war secondary to more obscure developments that he chooses to foreground: “this decisive period . . . was marked by the unveiling and use of a number of technological and military innovations, many of which are either alluded to or of central importance in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (Tölölyan 40).

One of the more surprising revelations of this essay is that the efficacy of the V-2 Rocket was not as large as a first reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* would suggest. The V-2 was enormously difficult to produce en masse, and actually caused less fewer casualties than less advanced, less flashy models of weaponry. “In London the toll was 2,340 dead and 6,000 wounded. This figure, however dreadful in human terms, is less than half the casualties caused by the V-, and shrinks into insignificance compared with the 130,000 people killed [during the Dresden firebombing]” (Tölölyan 45). “Pynchon’s vision” and his fascination with the V-2 are both predicated upon a different understanding of the rocket as “the focal point of a gristly ‘romance’ between man and technology” (Tölölyan 45). As Tölölyan points out, the
rocket is less important as a literal weapon than it is as an object that signifies larger systems of military-industrial power that interlink even the American and Nazi states. The German missile became an essential technology for the development of the postwar world:

By early 1945 the full potential of the V-2 was clear to the British, American, and Soviet governments . . . when Stalin and Churchill learned from Roosevelt that the atomic bomb was in the making and realized that the V-2 would be the perfect prototype for such a bomb (Tölölyan 48).

This realization would lead to the postwar nuclear arms race. As Tölölyan shows, Pynchon’s novel effectively places the V-2 rocket at the center of a new consideration of war not as technologically aided mass murder by two or more opposing factions but, instead, as a state of human existence that periodically results from the ongoing development of international capital and technological order. In other words, war in Pynchon is the work of the military-industrial complex. “In *Gravity’s Rainbow* there is first the suggestion that war is the continuation of peace by other means,” writes Tölölyan, “and then the reverse assertion that it is really peace that is the conduct of war by other means” (Tölölyan 60). In this reading, World War II is not a distinct historical context, but the expected result of humanity’s continuing bureaucratization.

Despite their differing emphases, both Tölölyan’s and Russell’s analyses of *Gravity’s Rainbow* are congruent, insofar as they agree with the larger critical consensus of Pynchon’s novel. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is universally agreed by critics to articulate how the modern world is held at the whims of a shadowy power-structure that transcends borders through technology and ideological control. This cabal of
interests is held responsible for the terror of World War II, but this system also drives on modern “progress” such that wars periodically, but inevitably, break out. As Russell suggests, Pynchon seems to lack faith that the novel as a form can realistically offer a challenge to worldly powers. Just as the Counterforce proves unwilling or unable to extricate itself from the apparatuses of meaning imposed by the Firm, so too is Gravity’s Rainbow unable to escape those structures of control, even if Pynchon can explain and desacralize those structures.
II. General Features of the Text

A.  *Europe Central*’s Historical Ontologies

One of the first major distinctions that a reader can discern between *Europe Central* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* is that, where Vollmann’s text is very clearly organized, *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems purposefully structured such that facile comprehension of the text’s organization is difficult. Pynchon gives no table of contents, although his novel is divided into four sections of greatly uneven length. There are also over four hundred named characters in the novel, some who appear in seemingly random circumstances and groupings and some who are confined to brief, discursive moments of the text. Even chapters are presented such that counting or distinguishing these episodes is exceedingly difficult, as they are not named or numbered but only demarcated by uniform and recurring divisions made up of blank white squares.

Vollmann, by contrast, prominently lays out the basic architecture for his text. He provides a thorough table of contents that gives each chapter a title, a primary setting (the USSR and/or Germany) and time span. Vollmann also organizes his chapters in pairs: beyond a brief introductory section (“Steel in Motion”), all of the subsequent thirty-six chapters of *Europe Central* have been grouped into eighteen pairs. This information has been reproduced in the chart below, to aid readers in understanding the relative size, placement, setting and content of each chapter in the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Setting (Time Frame)</th>
<th>Page Length</th>
<th>Pair Number</th>
<th>Overview/Focus of Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steel in Motion</td>
<td>Europe (1939-)</td>
<td>3-10 (8)</td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>An unnamed German functionary in a military office introduces the “sleepwalker” (Hitler)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and the “realist” (Stalin). The war is articulated as a series of commands and decontextualized military information given through the telephone, “the God of our Signal Corps” (V3).

A comparison of Fanya Kaplan, the young revolutionary who attempted to assassinate Lenin, and Lenin’s wife, N.K. Krupskaya. The actions of both women are described as tracing or evoking letters of the Kabbalist alphabet. The Kaiser’s declaration of war in 1914 Berlin. The winged statues of Berlin come alive at the pronouncement, as does a young Adolf Hitler.

German artist Käthe Kollwitz makes death-fixated works during the Weimar Republic. She is honored by the Soviet Union and in her travels there has brief contact with Roman Karmen, Elena Konstantinovskaya, and Comrade Alexandrov.

The Soviet narrator evokes the 12th Century Song of Igor’s Campaign to describe the buildup to the Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

Introduction to Elena Konstantinovskaya, Shostakovich’s mistress. Soviet narrator describes her lesbian love affairs (one with a German woman named Lina) and her love of rockets.

German narrator reminisces fondly on the early rocket launches of a pre-war Nazi Germany.

Hitler’s liquidation of the S.A., the early paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party, is compared to the murder of the Red Knight in the Siegfried Cycle.

Soviet narrator interprets Shostakovich’s Sonata for Piano and Cello in D Minor as reflecting his sexual encounters with Elena Konstantinovskaya.

Hitler commits support to Franco in the Spanish Civil War; naming the operation after the “Magic Fire” scene in Wagner’s Die Walküre.

Soviet narrator criticizes the avant-garde poet A.A. Akhmatova.

The excitement of multiple parties (German, Soviet, Austrian, etc.) at “Case White,” the invasion of Poland.

Shostakovich attends a soccer match, mourning his loss of Elena; loudspeakers announce the German invasion of the USSR has begun.

Hitler is described as a sort of Wagnerian composer of death, conducting various movements of men and violence, all expressed as analogues to events from Wagner’s Ring
Hitler is visited by a Valkyrie, who informs him of his imminent, necessary failure.

A biography of Shostakovich from his childhood, his first entanglements with the Soviet authorities after the performance of his *Lady Macbeth* opera, his experience of the Siege of Leningrad, and his composition of his Seventh Symphony.

Germany’s Eastern campaign is expressed as events on a clock, culminating in the destruction of the Reich “one minute before midnight” (V226).

Soviet documentarian Roman Karmen shows evident valor and empathy in his films while growing increasingly distant from his wife, Elena Konstantinovskaya.

The story of Soviet Lieutenant-General A.A. Vlasov. Vlasov disobeys Stalin’s orders at Leningrad, only to be captured by Germans and eventually seduced to accept them as a lesser of two evils. He is caught by the Soviets and hung.

The German counterpart to Vlasov, Field-Marshall Friedrich Paulus oversees the siege of Stalingrad, driven by desires for honor and glory. In the face of Hitler’s orders to commit suicide Paulus surrenders to the Soviets. He dies in Dresden in 1957.

Soviet narrator enthuses over the guerilla fighter Zoya, whose admonition that “you can’t hang all a hundred and ninety million of us” becomes a rallying cry for the Russians. She is compared to “the Motherland” itself.

Kurt Gerstein, a devout Christian, joins the SS to expose its crimes. He becomes a witness to the Holocaust and attempts to arrest its progress by any means possible. Arrested by the French for crimes against humanity, he commits suicide.

Karmen films Paulus’ surrender and is divorced from Elena shortly thereafter. With Karmen in tow the Soviets advance towards Germany, “dreaming of Nazi gold” (V475). Soviet narrator criticizes the Allies as fighting only to curtail Soviet power after the war.

A German soldier (and telephone operator) narrates the desperate last German offensive of Operation Citadel, beginning as a realistic account before shifting into hallucination.

Shostakovich fears for his family, composing his Second String Quartet as the NKVD monitors his house and phone calls.

Shostakovich experiences extraordinary joy at lending a favorite book to Elena.

“Hagen,” a character from the *Nibelungenlied*,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
<th>Volume</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hagen</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>529-531</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denazification</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>532-535</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airlift Idylls</td>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>536-573</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Red Guillotine</td>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>574-600</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’ll Never Mention It Again</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>601-610</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Wolund</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>620-621</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opus 110</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>1943-1975</td>
<td>622-727</td>
<td>(106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Pianist From Kilgore</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>728-737</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Victories</td>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>738-745</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The White Nights of Leningrad</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>746-752</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

is refigured as an official in the German military, takes the blame for every atrocity and misfortune of the Reich, even at Nuremberg. Hitler’s suicide in his bunker, presented as the retreat “into the mountain” of Teutonic mythic figures. The telephone communicates dozens of losses for the Nazis. German soldiers are transported into the Soviet Union by train as POWs, while Germany is divided into East and West Germany. Western forces recruit a German to penetrate the Iron Curtain and murder Shostakovich. A fantastical story, where the curtain is presented as an actual, physical barrier stretching into the sky, the German takes “injections” in order to go past it, and tries to assassinate Shostakovich hundreds of times. Profile of Hilde Benjamin, Walter Benjamin’s sister-in-law and a ruthless judge for the Communist regime of East Germany. Shostakovich has other extramarital trysts and grows more distant from Elena. A woman named Lina (Elena’s lover from an earlier chapter) visits her family in East Germany; she learns of the annual rape and assault of German women by Red Army veterans. A German POW murders a female overseer and escapes, having “kept a splinter of the old Reichcrown, in other words a piece of the true cross” (V621). The narrative zenith of the text, as Shostakovich continues to compose and be harassed by the Soviet authorities. Eventually he travels to Dresden to compose his Eight String Quartet, Opus 110, “the living corpse of music, perfect in its horror” (V622). Afterwards he joins the Communist Party, remarries and lives on as a functionary until 1975. Shostakovich judges a musical competition whose victor ends up being Van Cliburn, “a callow creature, an ignoramus” from Texas (V729). Shostakovich takes the young man to symbolize “the natural process of forgetting” in the postwar era (V736). A German veteran reads Erich von Manstein’s biography, reminisces, says of Hitler that, “I do respect him in a way” (V743). A reminiscence on a black and white world and the happy beginnings of Shostakovich’s love affair.
The above chart hopefully conveys the enormous diversity of perspectives and historical circumstances detailed within the text, as *Europe Central* is constructed such that each chapter is hermetically distinct from the others, presenting its own particular narrative and dialectics. Although certain chapters may be interrelated or form part of a larger narrative—this is the case with the chapters centered on Dmitri Shostakovich—this principle of autonomy remains applicable to each chapter in the text. Nevertheless, the first two chapters of *Europe Central*—“Steel in Motion,” and “The Saviors: A Kabbalistic Tale”—both articulate elements in their design that cohere or interlink the dozens of subsequent chapters in the text.

The prefatory chapter “Steel in Motion” is distinct within *Europe Central* in that, unlike every other chapter, situated in either the USSR or Germany, the Table of Contents lists the chapter as simply being located within “Europe.” In contrast to the large majority of subsequent narrators in the text, this German narrator is dismissive of the idea of the permanence of the state: he views the war not as one side against the other but as a universally interconnected experience of suffering for all the peoples of Europe Central. “According to the telephone,” he says, “Europe Central’s not a nest of countries at all, but a blank zone . . . whose accidental, endlessly contested territorial divisions . . . can be overwritten as we like” (V4). For this particular narrator at least, “Europe Central” is not dissimilar to the Zone, although in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Zone is a space briefly “wiped clean” of borders, whereas the borders of Europe Central are always present, albeit changing constantly.

The narrator of “Steel in Motion” elaborates this transnational line of thinking in two key ways. On the one hand, the chapter is brimming with what Umberto Eco
might term “transworld” elements, figures, indices and signifiers that can be situated in multiple narratives or ontologies. “Steel in Motion” references virtually every major character and event in *Europe Central*, predicting elements that will be only tenuously related to one another in the later text. Figures such as Akhmatova, Gerstein, Kollwitz, Zoya and Paulus are mentioned, as are major events such as the establishment of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Line, Operation Barbarossa, and Operation Citadel. Certain anecdotes and textual items that cross the novel—the suggestion that A.A. Vlasov was hung by a noose of piano wire, a Geco bullet, military folders stamped *GEHEIM* [Secret] that recur in the German sections—are first mentioned in “Steel in Motion.” Vollmann denotes his first chapter as the center of a referential web that will span the whole text, a progenitor narrative that introduces the major elements that intersect and cohere *Europe Central*.

The narrator of “Steel in Motion” integrates all these transworld items by means of the most pervasive metaphoric device in the whole novel: the telephone. Over the telephone, the narrator overhears the fragmented declarations and orders of both Germans (“The camp of counterrevolution...German straightforwardness...the slanders of the opposition...the soundness of the Volkish theory”) and the Soviets (“Defend the achievements of Soviet power... a severe but just punishment...”) (V6, 8). More than a machine, however, the telephone is alive, a maliciously intelligent creature with a brain composed “of two brown-and-yellow lobes filamented with fine copper wire,” and the monster through which both Hitler and Stalin perpetrate evil within Europe Central: “The sleepwalker’s [Hitler] all eyes, the realist’s [Stalin] all ears; their mating forms the telephone” (V6). The telephone, while a far humbler
weapon than Pynchon’s V-2 Rocket, poses much the same universal, existential threat: as Tölölyan takes the rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to be symbolic of the underlying reasons and interrelation for war, in “Steel in Motion” the war is a field for the extensions and substances of the telephone, as its “rubberized black tentacles spread across Europe,” manifesting as fronts, borders and troop formations (V7). This telephone is the same as that which threatens Shostakovich and other Soviet artists with surveillance, or the telephone that beams suicidal military orders to Generals Paulus and Vlasov. In short, “Steel in Motion” introduces the telephone as the foremost index in a superficially demarcated Europe Central, a unifying symbol of oppression, just as Shostakovich’s Eighth String Quartet will later be put forward as the unifier of the oppressed.

If “Steel in Motion” is a nexus for the whole text, “The Saviors” posits and exemplifies the model that each chapter of *Europe Central* will follow. The narrator of “The Saviors” claims near the outset of the chapter that the format of the parable is most apt for his purposes:

> Doesn’t the parable possess greater integrity, greater righteousness we might almost say, than any other literary form? For its many conventions weave a holy covenant between the reader, who gets the mystification he craves in a bonbon-sized dose, and the writer whose absence renders him divine. Granted, those very stringencies sometimes telescope events into dreamlike absurdity (V14).

“The Saviors” is a paradigmatic parable, the chapter that foregrounds the “typical” elements of parable to an extent not seen anywhere else in *Europe Central*. Its metaphoric framing device—the postures and situations of the characters correspond to the letters of the Kabbalistic alphabet—imparts a unique feeling of “mystical”
religiousness. The chapter climaxes as the encounter between Lenin’s wife
Krupskaya and Fanya Kaplan ends, and “the writhing Hebrew letters upon the wall
became as red as fire, and took wing,” which demonstrates the distortion to
“dreamlike absurdity” that the chapter’s narrator predicts can happen in a parable
(V29). Yet Vollmann’s comments in the text’s appendices indicate that every chapter
of Europe Central may be understood as a parable: “the goal here was to write a
series of parables about famous, infamous and anonymous European moral actors at
moments of decision” (Vollmann, “Sources,” 753). “The Saviors” demonstrates the
more liminal aspects of the form of parable, but every other chapter in the novel
might also be thought of as stories of “moral actors at moments of decision,” although
certain actors, such as Shostakovich, will prove more successful than others.

Near the close of “The Saviors.” the narrator concedes that “most literary
critics agree that fiction cannot be reduced to mere falsehood.” Fiction writing, in this
view, occurs because narrators implicitly believe that, “the pretense that life is what
we want it to be may conceivably bring about the desired condition. Hence religious
parables, socialist realism, Nazi propaganda” (V27). The opening chapters of Brian
McHale’s Postmodernist Fiction help in clarifying this statement’s significance.

McHale distinguishes between Modernist and Postmodernist literature on the basis of
their respective “dominants,” or the significant cohering element of a text. “The
dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological,” writes McHale, deploying
“strategies which engage and foreground questions such as . . . ‘How can I interpret
this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it’ (McHale 9)? Postmodernist
fiction does not discard these questions but merely de-privileges them, moving
towards an *ontological* dominant, characterized by questions in the vein of: “‘What world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it (McHale 10)?’” Postmodernist fiction creates ontologies, defined as “‘a theoretical description of a universe’” (McHale 27). For McHale, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a clear exemplar of this strategies, as in that text Pynchon “will freely exploit the artistic possibilities of the plurality of worlds, the transgression of boundaries between worlds, the ‘kiss of cosmic pool balls,’” even dissolving his text into the colorfully named, absurd sections that close *Gravity’s Rainbow* (McHale 25).

Every chapter of *Europe Central* can be considered its own historically particular ontology, intersected by certain recurrent references (as “Steel in Motion” indicates) but otherwise somewhat autonomous. However, this heterogeneity of ontological “parables” adds up to explicate the larger *epistemological* aims of Vollmann. Vollmann’s stated goals for *Europe Central* and his writing more generally—to apprehend “truth,” to make an honest reckoning of how persons in obscure circumstances would react and respond—indicate that the larger drive for his text was epistemological. Yet *Europe Central*’s epistemology is distinct from what might be found in prototypical Modernist literature, given that the text is not directly narrated in Vollmann’s own authorial voice, but by means of Vollmann’s many distinctive narrators. The narrators of these ontologies generally don’t question the operative rules of their worlds, even when those worlds distort into fantasy, as in chapters like “The Sleepwalker,” or “Airlift Idylls.” The narrators merely articulate those worlds in terms that are often biased, distorted and variable within a single chapter, in keeping with their conditioned comprehension of their ontologies. The
mention of “religious parables, socialist realism, Nazi propaganda,” is significant in this reading, as each mode of narration is present in the text, all representing differing approaches through which the narrators can describe their experience of history in a way that reflects their individual conditionings and biases. However, despite the diversity of narrative styles in *Europe Central*, the majority of narrators in the text present and conceive of their ontologies in ideological terms. The importance that Vollmann places on ideology can be clarified through the work of the great Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

B. Far and Wide My Country Stretches: The Importance of Nation

Mikhail Bakhtin (a contemporary of Shostakovich’s and fellow long-sufferer under Communism), contends that, “the novel, and artistic prose in general, has the closest genetic, family relationship to rhetorical forms” (Bakhtin 484). Rather than the stylistic or dialectical cohesion that could be argued to exist in poetry, Bakhtin contends that the novel as a form is definitively “dialogical.” In other words, a novel enacts a tension between ideologically unifying language, “language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion,” and a textual architecture encompassing “social and historical heteroglossia,” the multiplicity of discourses bounded by context, region, and social position (Bakhtin 486-487).

This conception of the novel helps to introduce one of the most pervasive dialectical differences between *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Europe Central*: Vollmann’s entire conceptualization of the Other is radically different from that found in the work of Thomas Pynchon. As indicated in the way Squalidozzi describes the Zone,
Pynchon’s conception of the Second World War is manifestly transnational. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon de-emphasizes the conflict between Allied and Axis nations and makes the central conflict of the text the struggle between The Firm and the Counterforce. Neither of these associations ties itself to any specific national agenda, and the Counterforce in particular is almost riotously multinational. As Russell points out, these two affiliations signify oppositions that transcend national divisions: order and chaos, Modernist and Postmodernist dialectics, the reification of signs and language versus an effort at play, satire and de-structuring. Portraying the war on the basis of these oppositions, Pynchon not only downplays the significance of national sentiments in the development of the war: he goes as far to suggest (as Tölölyan notes) that nationality is only a liminal, obscuring structure, and that war simply functions as one important enterprise in the furtherance and empowerment of the multinational military industrial complex.

The Firm can therefore be thought of as the culminating Other in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The Firm’s goals are not concretely apprehensible or predictable, it is presumptively omnipresent but hardly confirmable as present, and it is less a group of conceivable people than a web of interlinked processes, industries and institutions. For these reasons the Other in *Gravity’s Rainbow* can never be adequately personalized, and the reader definitively cannot empathize with the Firm. The Counterforce can be thought of as a collection of voices Pynchon adopts *contra* the Firm, un-segregated by nationality because, it is implied, the evil they struggle against is above national parameters.
This is to be contrasted with Vollmann, for whom national identity and indoctrination are hugely impactful on the style of narration throughout the text. The phrase “historically particular ontology,” conveys that Vollmann substantiates his ontologies with elements that suggest verisimilitude with the setting described: specific cultural references, military slang, and propagandistic terminology. All of these elements may be said to be textually subordinated to or contingent upon national ideology, which have profound effects on the narrative goals of both German and Soviet voices. Beyond the transnational thinking demonstrated by the narrator of “Steel in Motion,” nearly every ontology in the text has as its basis a national or nationally biased viewpoint. Nearly every narrator is German or Russian, and each and every one of their voices can be thought of as emanating from within borders: these are perspectives almost wholly inscribed within the experience of life inside one of the totalitarian nations described in the text. Vollmann does not have an answer to the Firm, as no transnational set of linkages is considered to exist between Germany and the Soviet Union. Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia themselves are the villains of Vollmann’s text, the untold death and suffering they cause being enough to justify Vollmann’s articulation of such a position.

Yet, by virtue of being historic power structures rather than something intimiated or artfully refigured as in Gravity’s Rainbow, Vollmann’s antagonistic Other can be understood more thoroughly than in Pynchon, as Nazi and Soviet thinking is ideologically contingent upon the geographic and historic existence of a country. Europe Central is a novel of how two totalitarian states butchered the interior of a continent, but by virtue of being states Vollmann can attempt to
narrativize their collective thought. There is no hypothesis of a shadowy force operating behind them to lessen the weight of totalitarianism’s violence. Several of the narrators in *Europe Central* actually articulate or near the articulation of the ideological unified language Bakhtin describes: these voices are most fervently aligned with the ideologies of either Nazism or Stalinism. Vollmann’s most ideologically rabid narrators actually seem to desire a codified means of apprehending the world not dissimilar to what Russell identifies with the Firm. However, every narrator in *Europe Central* articulates an ontology that contains abundant indices and references that convey a larger, polyphonic social reality, and these narrators interrogate each other’s positions by proximity to one another in the text. Vollmann’s discourse can therefore be said to convincingly show Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia” as well.

Vollmann’s method of writing within, rather than without, of Nazi and Soviet thinking allows for bizarre moments of commonality with its adherents. A German narrator in the chapter “Breakout,” for example, describes the “voluptuousness” of Vlasov’s Russian secretaries in Berlin, only to add the caveat, “if I may be permitted to employ that word to describe creatures of the Slavic racial type” (V286). This same bigot is nonetheless capable of sincere reminiscences on time spent with an ex-lover, a woman who had “already refused to make love with me one last time, because it would be too pitiful and she didn’t know how one ought to go about lovemaking for the last time . . . I kissed her once, desperately, then lay back with her still in my arms” (V282-283). Vollmann should be credited with recognizing the initial foreignness that the typical modern English speaker feels towards the context and
peoples of Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe, and for attempting to collapse that distance without bleaching out the ideological stances that created that distance in the first place. Vollmann, in not explicitly adopting a platform of moral or national superiority, seeks rather to “truthfully” convey the thought processes of persons inscribed within these oppressive ideologies, both those aspects of ideological thinking that are repulsive to a modern reader and those aspects that are disturbingly relatable. This technique is most prominent amongst the German narrators, an extremely diverse set of voices that collectively convey the means by which a nation can come to accept Nazism, and the ramifications this ideology has for the ways Germans come to view and express their reality.
III. The German Voices: A Window Into Historiographical Instability

*Oh, those Fascists, they’d been special individuals, all right* (V718)!

An important distinction between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union of Stalin concerns each regime’s durability. The Soviet Union not only survived the Second World War but expanded in its aftermath, and did not as a political institution until almost a half-century later. This means that if the initial history of the USSR was revolutionary and turbulent (the October Revolution and the subsequent Civil War in Russia), the Soviet Union ultimately settled into a state of general socio-ideological stability, as Lenin was succeeded by Stalin and his successors, who maintained Stalin’s particular style of authoritarianism in some fashion until the Soviet Union collapsed.

In contrast, the rule of the Third Reich constitutes a deeply unstable period in the history of Germany as a nation. In popular discourse, the unrepentant brutality of the Nazi regime tends to obscure that it endured as a state power for barely over a decade, from Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in January 1933 until the fall of Berlin to the Soviet Red Army in 1945. This brief period contained Hitler’s conquest of most of Continental Europe, the Holocaust and the death of millions as a result of these events. Additionally, Hitler’s Germany was immediately preceded by the turbulence of the Weimar Republic—a geo-political fracas between Berlin’s government, the “state-within-a-state” of the German military and various nationalist Bavarian groups—and followed by the postwar ideological vacuum after Germany’s defeat and division into East and West. In brief, the whole history of Nazi Germany is one of violently abrupt change and extraordinary political turbulence.
One means of understanding Vollmann’s treatment of these historical features in *Europe Central* is to see the text as part of a larger trend in the experimental fiction of the last couple decades, what theorist Linda Hutcheon terms “Postmodern Historiography.” For Hutcheon, many of the major Postmodern novels are also historical novels, but rather than dedicate themselves to the objective representation of historical events, these texts engage in the “‘imaginative reconstruction’ of history itself. As Hutcheon describes it, postmodern fiction is important for the ways in which it engages in a “postmodern rethinking of the problems of how we can and do come to have knowledge of the past” (Hutcheon 92). “It is historiography’s explanatory and narrative emplotments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts,” write Hutcheon, “Postmodernism returns to confront the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present” (Hutcheon 92).

Postmodern writing distinguishes itself from what Hutcheon calls conventional historiography, which hinges upon claims to objective representation of past historical facts and figures. In Postmodern fiction, however, the text “keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here—just unresolved contradiction” (Hutcheon 106). Hutcheon notes that postmodern novels oftentimes privilege multiple points of view (multiple ontologies, in McHale’s terminology), in order to emphasize that within such a discourse one cannot “find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history” (Hutcheon 117-118). More generally,
Hutcheon argues that postmodern fiction consciously draws attention to the mediation and artificiality intrinsic to any successful narrative of the past. “The process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events” (Hutcheon 121).

Vollmann’s fiction appears to exemplify several of Hutcheon’s theses. The German-narrated chapters of Europe Central constitute as a group the “problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history” described by Hutcheon, the “imaginative reconstruction” of the Third Reich. Vollmann expresses the volatility and extreme ideological shifts within Nazi Germany by means of an extraordinarily diverse range of characters, men who variously represent the origins, fervency and eventual implosion of the ideology of Nazism. The Soviet narrators are considerably more homogenized in their voice and opinions, owing to the durability of Soviet ideology, but the sheer number of German voices problematizes the representation of historical truth. Taken as a group, these narrators show how Nazi ideology could become so ingratiated into the fabric of German society that it becomes an intrinsic aspect of certain narrators’ comprehensions of the world, while their variability also situates Nazism as a unique historical phenomenon, an ideology that gained in power before self-destructing.

A. The (Mythic) Ascension of Hitler

The ascension of the Third Reich in Germany is also, in part, the story of the rise of Adolf Hitler. As a group, the early German-narrated chapters of Europe Central roughly place Hitler in a larger matrix of German culture and social developments. The chapter “Mobilization,” describes with hallucinatory vividness
how the statues of Berlin—“still the city of eagles,” the narrator informs us—come to life in an uproar over Kaiser’s Wilhelm’s declaration of the first World War: “their flesh was stone, but now the snake writhed, the warrior groaned, the goddess laughed, and the eagle shrieked” (V33, 34). While all this occurs, “a pale little man . . . with disheveled hair and a dark trapezoidal moustache” hyperactively rejoices. The narrator considers him ridiculous, “but he threw back his head to yell: Germany! And his shout drowned out the Kaiser’s; moreover, it grew louder the farther it traveled” (V34-35). This passage signals the beginning of the repeated appropriation of German myth and cultural history by Vollmann’s German narrators, and explicitly connects mythological iconography to German nationalism and military ambitions.

“Mobilization” depicts a pervasive nationalistic sentiment in Germany that Hitler will eventually exploit and domineer, although at this point he is a peripheral, if disturbingly empowered, individual.

“Women With Dead Child,” a chapter focused on the German socialist artist Kathe Kollwitz, is distinct within the text in that it depicts the Nazi movement in its infancy, as one element in the larger turbulence of interwar Germany. It is one of very few chapters in the text to feature two distinct narrators, with the first ten sections narrated by a German while the remaining five sections are narrated by a Soviet citizen. This unusual hybridized style testifies to the cultural fluidity of Weimar Germany—before the rise of the Third Reich—as much as it illustrates the contradictory position of Kollwitz, a German Communist and mother to a son who died fighting in World War I. Kollwitz is depicted as still believing, even amidst rising rightwing German nationalism, that a Communist or at least democratic
solution for her country is possible. The narrator pointedly notes that, “She’d once met Rodin. That fact alone proves how old she already was in this terrible new Europe (V36).” For this reason, the only major encounter of this antiquated woman with National Socialists is striking, as she is confronted by two men, regulars in her own neighborhood. “You know the difference between you and us, Frau Kollwitz?” one of them asks, “We’re optimists . . . This shocked her so much that she could scarcely breathe, because it was true” (V47). Here Nazism is represented as an other—and a powerful political antagonist—relative to Kollwitz rather than as an ideological super-structure she lives within. By telescoping individual Nazi party members through Kollwitz’s perspective, the chapter conveys the frightening but intriguing aspect of a nascent National Socialism within a larger context of Weimar Germany, where a women like Kollwitz can still exist uncomfortably.

All subsequent German-narrated chapters in Europe Central take place after Hitler is appointed Chancellor in 1933. Vollmann captures the response to the rise of the Nazi Reich through a number of German speakers who emphasize different aspects of National Socialism and its ideology, conveying different degrees of acceptance or embrace of Nazism. The cheerful chapter “Maiden Voyage” is a narrative attempt to embed the particularities of Nazi Germany within more general feelings of civic pride in scientific achievements. Thus, while the chapter’s narrator reminisces on the massive book burnings of the early Reich and crows, “in 1934, we purged Röhm and those scum,” his focus is on the universal joys brought by the advent of rockets: “when a rocket or anything at all rocketlike soars into the sky, there’s a beautiful inevitability to the experience” (V78, 79).
Parzival Killed the Red Knight” and “Operation Magic Fire” are more concerned with Germany’s cultural particularities under Hitler, building on “Mobilization” in providing a mythological contextualization, and justification, for Hitler’s actions. “Parzival” connects Hitler’s execution of Röhm and the “Brownshirts” with the medieval German romance of the same name: the narrator argues that this was a cruel action that nonetheless served a function (“That’s how they learn”), and assures us that, similarly, “when a certain sleepwalker liquidated the Brownshirts, don’t think he didn’t have his reasons” (V81)! The narrator approves of Hitler, saying “He derived himself as perfectly from legend as Parzival ever did,” and asking the reader rhetorically “Do you want to know how modest he is” (V82)? The narrator also retroactively posits the time of Parzival as being just as brutal as that of the Third Reich, saying, “from a practical point of view, can’t it be argued nothing has changed” (V84)? This is tantamount to an excusal of Hitler’s actions on the basis of a mythical precedent. “Magic Fire” connects Hitler not with myth but with the most myth-indebted of German composers, Richard Wagner, speculating as to how the “Magic Fire” music of Wagner’s “Die Walküre” opera came to impart its name to Operation Magic Fire, in which Hitler militarily supported Franco in the Spanish Civil War. At one point, Germany’s current (1936) military struggles are referred to as “harmonic stresses,” subtly connecting the Führer’s bellicose aims with the compositions of Wagner (V102). Thus each of the three chapters employs a different tack for situating the actions of the Nazi regime within Germany, with the narrator of “Operation Magic Fire” connecting Hitler to Wagner.
Famously, Wagner was for Hitler a composer who symbolized not only an
exceptional German artist, but an artist who renewed and revitalized major
cornerstones of German culture, such as the Siegfried myth. Vollmann develops this
notion by taking Wagner’s own social and musical theories and imparting them to
Hitler. Gesamtkunstwerk, a major element of Wagner’s theoretical writings, can be
translated as the “total work of art:” a totalizing piece of drama, such as was found in
Classical Athens, that unified the entire populace in a collective, sacral and
indoctrinating experience. “The Sleepwalker,” a chapter taking its title from
Vollmann’s diminutive for Adolf Hitler, terrifyingly posits the Nazi leader as the
craves to be another Gunnar,” a character in the Siegfried myth, and where “Gunnar
had a harp; he played the snakes to sleep . . . the sleepwalker masks himself in music”
(V138, 128). “Very interested in the directing,” of Wagner’s Ring cycle, he conducts
Germany’s armies across the continent: “at his command, liegemen launch eastward
his bride-tokens of phosphorus, lead and steel,” and he observes his forces “marching
in file down a long well of futurity” (V130, 129, 133). Like Wagner, Hitler is shown
as the figurehead of a massive, extremely bellicose composition, drawing upon the
precedents of Teutonic myth to figure his military actions and atrocities. Hitler
himself, a sleepwalker divorced from objective reality, views the actions of his Reich
as if they were mythic events, the perceived capstone in a continuity of German
cultural heritage.

Hitler, however, is not ultimately given the validation of the heritage he has
appropriated for himself. In one of Europe Central’s most remarkable scenes, the
Führer “descends into the Schalldamm” and is confronted by one of Wagner’s Valkyries. She informs Hitler of “what you’ve always known—that you were born guilty and overmastered, that the nothingness you burn for refuses to receive you, that olden treasures grow corrupted at your touch” (V134). In despair, Hitler asks his purpose:

So then, in a pleading tone, he whispers: *Why did you make me*? I never wanted to be made…

For propaganda, of course. It’s all in your own book. How can we persuade other to be good, without evil we can point to?

Mercurially calming himself, he smiles and remarks: You might as well have spared yourself the trouble. What did you think I’d do—walk sheepishly to the gallows? Do you think I’ve never been judged before?

I don’t need opinions, little man.
And you truly believe I’ll deviate one hair’s breadth from the course I’ve laid out for myself? You think you can goad me into doing anything more extreme than I would do in any case? Are you so hopeful? Why, then, *it’s well for you* (V135).

Vollmann suggests that Hitler is as much a moral actor as any of the other major characters in *Europe Central*, but he is an actor who continually and unambiguously chooses evil: here is the “moment of decision” that crystallizes Hitler’s sickening embrace of his role as evil’s figurehead. This is the apotheosis of myth in the text, where the efforts of the German narrators (up until this point) to validate the actions of the Nazis by means of myth are deconstructed and invalidated. Thus “The Sleepwalker” culminates a trend among the German narrators of metaphorically conceiving of the Third Reich’s atrocities in light of German culture’s previous triumphs, directly interrogating Hitler’s pretense to being the inheritor of such a tradition. When myth appears again later in the text, in the chapter “Operation Citadel,” it will be as a parody.
The chapters under discussion in the previous subsection demonstrated Vollmann’s way of articulating the rise of Nazism and the rhetorical methods employed to position it within larger German culture. The chapter “The Last Field Marshal” finds Vollmann attempting instead to actualize the thought process and narration of someone fully inculcated in the ideology of Nazism, while also demonstrating the historical particularity of that ideology over the course of the chapter.

“The Last Field-Marshal” is the most detailed and realistic treatment of combat on the Eastern Front in the entirety of *Europe Central*. Yet relevantly, the chapter focuses not so much on the larger experience of the Eastern Front as on the Battle of Stalingrad specifically. Stalingrad is more than just the most prominent chapter of the conflict in Eastern Europe in American popular consciousness: for Germans, the battle is where thousands of men, “fathers and sons not fanatic Nazis, became the victims of Hitler’s military folly and the dictator’s personal obsession with Stalin’s city” (Schwieger 230-231). Accordingly, the Battle of Stalingrad can be taken as both the pivotal moment in the war for Germany and the site where Hitler’s megalomaniacal arrogance and brutality were made most apparent at the expense of the Third Reich’s propaganda. This loss, and its attendant blow to the Nazi self-conception of invincibility, is focalized in the figure of Friedrich Paulus, German commanding officer at Stalingrad, who eventually surrendered and collaborated with Soviet officials.
From a narrative standpoint, the man recounting “The Last Field-Marshal” distinguishes himself by being, at least initially, an unambiguous supporter of Nazism. Hitler is referred to not as “the sleepwalker,” as in earlier chapters, but in reverential terms as “the Führer” or “our Führer.” The Soviets are “enemy vermin,” “retreating Jewish Bolsheviks” or “human vectors of the Bolshevist ideology which had the power to corrode and decompose everything” (V367, 352, 364). The Führer, meanwhile, is declared to be “a military genius,” and “whatever he described seemed to come close and embody itself into something far more alluring than our sweetest fantasy; Moscow would be captured . . . Only through the Führer could any of this come into being” (V355, 365). This assessment of Hitler is but one significant aspect of the narrator’s overconfidence and fervency: Operation Barbarossa was as “golden as the victory angel in Berlin;” Hitler’s bunker is “in a very real sense, the soul of Germany,” guarded by “happily vigilant, blue-eyed young sentries;” the narrator indulges Hitler’s visions of the eventual conquest of England and of “the wondrous crops which someday would be harvested from the experimental fields of East” (V329, 365, 334, 335). Warping the tone of some of the earlier German chapters, “The Last Field-Marshal” demonstrates what utter devotion and inculcation to Nazism reads like, and dramatizes how that would effect the narration of the atrocities of the war.

All of this foregrounds what proves to be a complicated depiction of Paulus. At one point the narrator describes the Field-Marshal, somewhat dryly, as “not a cruel man, as may be proved by the fact that the Soviets never charged him with any war crimes” (V347). Paulus is, the narrator makes the reader to understand, not an
intrinsically bloodthirsty man in the same way as others of Hitler’s subordinates: while he “agreed that the Jews needed to be excluded from our national life,” he distrusts the SS and is repulsed by what he witnesses of the Final Solution (V342). When Hitler orders the liquidation of everyone in Stalingrad following the city’s anticipated capture, “Paulus was not in sympathy with this order” (V349). He is a meticulous strategist, responsible for drafting the war plan for Operation Barbarossa, and, poignantly, he is shown to be a loving father and a smitten, devoted husband to his wife, a Romanian aristocrat named Coca. Paulus is nonetheless depicted as a careerist and a sycophant towards Hitler. In an early, one-on-one meeting with Hitler to discuss the conquest of Stalingrad, Paulus finds himself “dazzled by the Führer’s praise;” later, “he tried to repel all recollections of our Führer’s criticism…as if he were a boy again and his father the bookkeeper had caught him masturbating” (V337, 375). This devotion overlaps with, and ultimately supports, what Vollmann takes as Paulus’ intrinsic or outstanding desire to win military glory and become Field-Marshall, the military rank second only to the Führer in Nazi Germany. If he is noted to have “disapproved of several aspects of the new Germany,” Paulus seizes on his appointment to lead the Wehrmacht Sixth Army as a path to Field Marshal: “Who then was he to rebel against this opportunity (V338)?” Thus Paulus’ own ambitions, inextricable from his conditioned adoration of Hitler, lead him into the abyss of Stalingrad, where the narrator tells us, “what was about to happen had to happen” (V347).

Vollmann corroborates this notion of Paulus as patsy by connecting him to Beethoven: the first time he perceives his becoming Field-Marshall is at a
performance of Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto, and in the chapter there are no less than nine explicit references to Beethoven. Typically those references are given as part of Paulus’ strategic routine: “First Beethoven on the gramophone and then the battle array for Sixth Army,” for example (V328). The narrator explains that what Paulus “began to see was somewhat as our Führer must, which is to say not as the implementation of preconsidered operations, but as music in and of itself, pulsations of godlike creativity whose patterns are their own harmonies” (V341-342). Just as Hitler finds articulation for his warmongering ambitions in the works of Wagner, so too does Paulus appear to have a musical doppelganger or surrogate in Beethoven. By extension, Paulus is connected to Hitler as a sort of miniature or military puppet.

All of the above serves as background information for the bulk of “The Last Field-Marshel,” which describes, in excruciating detail, the slow implosion of the Wehrmacht Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Despite the narrator’s insistence (and Paulus’ apparent belief) that the Hitler is a military genius, the evidence of the text points to a cruel and irrational military commander, barely informed or aware of the situation in the city. At various points the narrator notes that “our Führer still had not responded to [Paulus’] request for reinforcements,” or that Paulus “queried Führer Headquarters, but received no answer” (V360, 370). Meanwhile, Hitler comes across as deluded and ignorant of the situation at Stalingrad, saying simply in a conference that “the Russians are finished” without waiting for recommendations from Paulus, and refusing until the very end any retreat by Paulus and his forces as situations in the Russian city grow more and more hopeless, saying in a telegram that “You must stand fast to the last soldier and the last bullet” (V394).
Paulus, in turn, remains obsequiously and irrationally loyal to Hitler’s decisions. In meetings he “longed to point out enemy tank formations” or generally express opinions on specific weaknesses and positions in the battle, but he refrains for fear of upsetting the Führer (V356). Many of Paulus’ decisions are motivated not by military expediency but by anxiety at appearing loyal to Hitler. Paulus worries that he was “liked rather than loved by the Führer,” and he cannot bring himself to defy orders and “breakout” (abandon position and flee with his army) because “the Führer had doubted his bravery” (V352, 376). At one point Paulus even answers the fears of his officers by saying that, “against your objections I speak two words: Adolf Hitler” (V372). It is only when Hitler finally promotes him Field-Marshal, expecting Paulus to commit suicide rather than turn himself in to the Red Army (no Field-Marshal having ever surrendered), that Paulus defies orders.

Evidently Vollmann means to suggest that the failure at Stalingrad results from both Hitler’s megalomania and Paulus delusional subservience to his Führer. The narrator of “The Last Field-Marshals” has a different stance. Rationally, the Nazi narrator can articulate that Hitler has lost touch with reality, that “in the world where our Führer lived, there would always be more reserves…the real Reich where everything was still possible” (V389). Yet his assessment of Paulus is notable in that it places blame for the defeat at Stalingrad not even partially with Hitler, but wholly with the Field-Marshall:

What was [Paulus], then? I see him as the central figure of a parable, and therefore apathetic in spite of himself . . . he was brought into the story of our Reich to illustrate a principle, to carry out a function, to think and suffer while things were done to him . . . The downfall of our Reich can therefore be blamed on Colonel-General Paulus (V393-394).
Florian Schwieger, citing roughly this same passage, notes: “the description offered the reader by the anonymous narrator establishes Paulus as a metafictional template that both deconstructs and distorts the historical person” (Schwieger 243). This is correct, and assuredly the above quote corroborates the notion that each chapter of *Europe Central* is a parable like “The Saviors.” There is, however, a larger narrative point to note. The narrator is a Nazi, and so even in a concluding appraisal he cannot bring himself to recognize what’s been elaborated in his own narration: Hitler’s monstrous, primary culpability in the outcome at Stalingrad and the Eastern Front in general. Vollmann chooses Paulus to exemplify how an at least partly decent person can become complicit in the Third Reich’s atrocities: Paulus “is the epitome of an entire army, maybe even an entire nation, which has lost its consciousness on the long way to the Volga” (Schwieger 243). Through the narration of Paulus’ story, Vollmann conveys at a different textual level how Hitler and the Nazi Reich could delude a person, as the narrator of “The Last Field Marshal” in effect narratively presents the thought processes that resulted in the situation at Stalingrad that he is recounting.

While Paulus’ surrender is the climax of “The Last Field-Marshal,” it is not quite the end of the chapter. Rather, the surrender marks the point at which the narrator, attuned to Paulus, becomes finally “denazified.” Paulus’ postwar years are depicted as a wan denouement: having lost both his faith in “the Führer” and his hopes for glory, Paulus becomes a functionary for the East German police, “cautious, discreet, industrious, punctual, intelligent and lacking in all personal ambition,”
before finally, “fittingly,” succumbing to “a progressive sclerosis which allowed his mind to contemplate its hopeless situation up to the last moment” (V409, 410). The Nazi narrator, however, actually follows his subject into this process of disillusionment. After Paulus’ surrender the narrator admits, in a footnote, the ultimate irony about this chapter’s title: if Hitler promised Paulus would be “the last Field-Marshal” promoted, “He kept this promise as perfectly as all the others,” and five other men ascend to the position (V402). This is arguably the first cynicism towards Hitler expressed in the whole chapter. The narrator then recounts that Paulus “now saw that national questions, if indeed they were not entirely spurious, should always be subordinated to more general social questions,” declares “any war against our Soviet Union must be a lost war,” and refers to West Germany as a “revanchist puppet state” (V403, 405, 408). This ideological transition seems to occur fluidly, and thus Vollmann can demonstrate that, for all its indoctrinating power, Nazism is historically particularized, and eventually replaced by the cultic Stalinist doctrines of East Germany. Thus Vollmann describes both the power and ultimately transitory aspects of a totalitarian doctrine.

C. The Coward’s Wish: The Dismantling of the Third Reich

“The Sleepwalker” and “The Last Field-Marshal” both posit the downfall of Hitler’s Germany in different ways. In the former chapter, Vollmann posits Hitler as a failed and warped surrogate for Germany’s mythological heritage, not a hero but a violent grotesque. In “The Last Field-Marshal,” meanwhile, a narration reflecting the rabidity of belief in the Nazi system only serves to amplify the reader’s understanding of the ultimate failure and destructiveness of Hitler’s cult of personality. In insisting
on Hitler’s heroic status, this chapter ironically conveys Hitler’s evil and the ultimate hierarchical evil of the Third Reich. “Operation Citadel,” the first and largest chapter under discussion in this subsection, exists in a definite rhetorical relationship with these two earlier sections of *Europe Central*, as the chapter’s narrator, a perceptive but ultimately naïve young soldier caught fighting in the Reich’s last major offensive in Eastern Europe, claims responsibility for the downfall of Nazi Germany.

The soldier-narrator is a telephone operator, speaks in the first person, and is ideologically situated such that he seems to have absorbed aspects of many of the German narrators in the text, both those that preceded him and those chronicling a later moment in Germany’s history. The quote that opens the chapter, from Field-Marshall Erich von Manstein, predicts the general’s lionization in “Lost Victories,” the penultimate chapter of the text. Meanwhile, the narrator opens “Operation Citadel” by describing how he and his comrades-in-arms marched out of Berlin, “passing through the Brandenburg Gate; behind us, the victory angel atop the Siegessäule cast golden light upon our helmets . . . She’s our queen of eagles” (V485). This is meant as an evident call back towards the early German chapter “Mobilization,” where the warlike statuary of Berlin was praised. The soldier initially places a great deal of faith in the Reich’s latest model of Panzer tank, declaring that “The new Tiger tanks would save us,” only to spend a majority of the chapter watching those same tanks annihilated by the Soviet T-34s (V487). From this it could be suggested that the almost juvenile faith in German military technology found in a chapter like “Maiden Voyage” is deflated over the course of “Operation Citadel.” One of the more striking elements of the chapter, however, is how it inverts much of
the sentiment of “The Last Field-Marshal.” In that chapter, the narrator sometimes seemed so confident in the destructive power of the German army that he could veritably be said to be warmongering, whereas the narrator of “Operation Citadel,” an infantryman fighting after the disaster at Stalingrad, seems familiar with that sort of rhetoric, but ultimately contradicts it in his account. The German fighters are not “blond, tanned boys,” rapaciously devouring the Russian forces, but are instead “skinny soldiers marching out of order, with cigarettes drooping in our mouths as we stared anxiously ahead” (V353, 491). The narrator of Paulus’ story predicted an Eastern Europe where the Reich’s dead “would be buried, each one under a cross, and after the final victory our subject peoples could tend all the cemeteries” (V343). The soldier of “Operation Citadel” knows that in their wake the Germans “would leave another forest of neat crosses . . . all destined to be wrenched out of the mud once the Slavs took over” (V487). Ultimately the false rhetoric of a victorious Reich provides an ironic accompaniment to the soldier’s bitter sense of imminent failure: “the orders . . . contained the words total and unparalleled,” and “Operation Citadel would set everything right,” but the soldier also notes, a little dejectedly, that “Nobody was singing ‘Erika, We Love You’ anymore” (V486, 487, 490).

The depiction of war in “Operation Citadel” begins realistically enough, but mutates into a hallucinatory depiction of one man’s experience in combat. The early sections of the chapter find the narrator populating his story with friends and superiors—Rüdiger, Volker, Corporal Dancwart, an “old cripple” maimed in an earlier offensive—but fairly quickly all of these men die in combat. Whether it is the trauma of losing respected comrades that precipitates the narrator’s descent into
hallucination is never fully clarified. The narrator merely relates how his psychoanalyst explained the tensions of the human psyche: “wherever the unconscious gets rejected, it forms battalions to counterattack somewhere else. You can reject them as much as you please; if you’re strong enough, you can even wipe them out, but it will be self-defeating. The unconscious will mobilize more battalions” (V495). This quote predicts the nightmarish imagery that the narrator describes as he advances further east: undead Soviet soldiers, “grinding worms between their teeth,” “an old lady in a hut on chicken legs,” metal golems and a “great steel eagle with Klieg lights for eyes” (V502, 507). Yet within this interzone (to appropriate a term from Burroughs) there are also encounters that indicate as much about the ideological context the young soldier has been brought up in as his own personalized responses to it. Ultimately “Operation Citadel” is a parodic refiguring of the mythological elements that characterized so many of the preceding German chapters. The narrators of chapters like “When Parzival Killed the Red Knight,” “Operation Magic Fire” and “The Sleepwalker” demonstrated an almost uncanny awareness of the specifics of Teutonic myth and how to particularly apply it to the circumstances of Nazi Germany. Meanwhile, the narrator of “Operation Citadel” while demonstrating some awareness of the Gunther mythos, is not ultimately capable of overlaying myth cleanly and satisfactorily over his own experience:

I’ll have to hang you for awhile, the cripple said. “Now I know who you are, I told him. You’re Wotan. Well, I don’t want your knowledge. Don’t you remember how Siegfried shoves Wotan out of the way? I’m Siegfried. That’s only in Wagner, he said wearily. That’s incorrect.
We started to crawl eastward. I couldn’t shake him, which was in character for me. Never would I have any chance of being Siegfried (V499)!

The maimed older soldier upends the narrator’s mythic conceptions, implying that the narrator has only a cursory comprehension of his own cultural heritage. Implicitly but more broadly, this passage also undermines notions of Wagner as a sort of unvarying or infallible intercessor for the conveyance of German myth, which supplements earlier depictions of Hitler such as that in “The Sleepwalker.”

As it stands, the soldier of “Operation Citadel” does not seek to extricate Hitler from German myth. “I remember from the fairytales that Grandmother Elsa used to tell me, that it’s necessary to follow without the slightest deviation the advice of the fox, fish, sleepwalker, raven, telephone,” which indicates that subservience to the Führer (and his principal technological organ, the telephone) has been as fully inculcated into the soldier as folktales were (V500). These elements become conflated within his hallucination. Throughout “Operation Citadel,” there is an ambivalent attitude towards Hitler, seemingly the result of what the narrator has been conditioned to think about the Führer coming up against his own views of Hitler’s failings as a leader. “It had begun to seem to me that unthinking obedience, ‘cadaver obedience’ we called it, had lost us Moscow and Stalingrad . . . my belief in the sleepwalker had died. But he believed! He held Europe Central together in his sleep” (V500)!

Furthermore, as a telephonist (this fact is repeatedly stated), the soldier has some link, real or imagined with the larger power structure of the German military. These elements are placed so as to establish context for the objectively bizarre conversation that ensues when the narrator “dialed Allfather in Berlin:”
You want me to concern myself with this very particular question? he shouted. When the Jewish wirepullers have already wormed their cables into my telephone? You scoundrel!

Yes, my Führer!

Give me your commanding officer at once. I’m going to order you to be shot!

Yes my Führer. He’s dead, my Führer.

So you’re the only one?

Yes, my Führer.

And you stand prepared to carry on the reconquest of these lost territories?

Yes, my Führer!

He lowered his voice and whispered: You’ll need to be very careful. There are Jews all around you. And the farther east you go, the closer you’ll get to those yellow Asiatics. Stalin’s one of those. Spare no one, do you hear me? Be fair, but ruthless!

Yes, my Führer! But I have no more bullets (V505)!

Hitler, the “Allfather,” is the figure who gives the soldier-narrator incentive to push onward. He is also anti-Semitic, breathtakingly paranoid and more than willing to have the narrator executed. The hallucinatory aspects of the passage actually allow for an oddly particular depiction of Hitler as mediated through rumor, propaganda, naiveté and the narrator’s undistinguished position as a common soldier. This depiction of Hitler distorts earlier depictions in the text.

The climax of “Operation Citadel” occurs not with “Allfather,” but when the narrator finally breaks through enough obstacles and finds himself confronted by “the Golden Princess.” This denotation, “Golden Princess,” is illustrative in itself: it is an extremely vague mythic-sounding term, in contrast to some definitive figure of German myth cited in another chapter, like Siegfried, Wotan, Hagen or the Red Knight. This corroborates the notion that the narrator is not extremely knowledgeable as regards the particulars of German culture, and having failed to apply Siegfried to
his own life, he can only imagine a sort of approximated or aggregated mythic female figure to confront.

That this figure is a woman is also important: all throughout the chapter there is the definite suggestion of a certain sexual naiveté on the narrator’s part. Consider the enamored and inexperienced tone shown here: “Once upon a time, a woman loved me and I loved her and everything was perfect; then she stopped wanting to sleep with me quite so much and I panicked” (V490). This woman is named Lina (a previous lover of the Russian Elena Konstantinovskaya), and she and her sister Freya are warped into LINA and FREYA, guides whom the narrator repeatedly tries to telephone for support in his journey east. Similarly, when the narrator thinks ahead to Germany after the defeat, it is in terms that suggest that the Germans have been rendered impotent by the Soviets: “two years after Operation Citadel I saw a Russian with his German girl in Berlin; they were playing with his pistol, shooting at the sun” (V490). When describing the “Golden Princess,” the soldier does not point to mythological precedent but instead invokes one Lisca Malbran, a popular German film actress during the last years of the war: “Lisca Malbran was certainly a victory goddess, a Goldelse” (V509). Thus a figure of popular, contemporary iconography becomes welded into the vaguely mythological fantasy the narrator conceives for himself. Previous German narrators legitimated Nazi power through precise invocations of myth, and legitimated the legacy of myth in the process. The narrator of “Operation Citadel” only knows that “myth” as a larger concept could be used to justify or embellish his experience. He warps the earlier efforts of the German narrators without being conscious of doing so.
With that said, the confrontation between the Golden Princess and the soldier is extremely poignant, a look at one young man’s perception of his own impotence and insufficient ability to save his country:

Well? Said the Golden Princess, with her hands on her hips. No doubt I should have asked her to give us a V-weapon so that we could end the war on our terms, preserving all victories and triumphs. At the very least I could have saved Berlin . . . any decent German would have wanted that. But I wasn’t decent . . . . . . I’d fail to live up to her; how could I be a Golden Prince? I wasn’t better or worse than everyone else, and everyone else was getting slaughtered, so how could I possibly be saved? In short, what would I do if she placed me, or I placed myself, in a position of trying to be supernaturally noble? I’d only kill myself.

So I wished my own wish, the coward’s wish, which was to be every morning sitting in a Biergarten under the trees with the old widows who didn’t have to worry because they’d already lost so much . . . that was the life I wanted. I wasn’t pushy; I didn’t even request creamcakes. Aching bones and loneliness, dead friends, the Golden Princess didn’t have to change any of that. She didn’t even have to pour coffee into my cup (V509).

The narrator of “Operation Citadel” is, in his own admission, not heroic. He is, rather, mock-heroic: the entirety of his quest serves to reiterate the inadequacy of myth and culture for justifying the actions and bloodshed of the Third Reich. The narrator’s perceived failure is thus the result of the failures of the larger social structures of understanding he has appropriated to make sense of his own experience. He kisses the Princess, and “it suddenly became true that none of this had been real, and that what I’d taken for enemy tank herds was but a grand formation of leaves scuttering all together across the sidewalks by the Siegessäule” (V510).

At the very close of the chapter, as the German troops retreat, the soldier notes “next to me a shellshocked colonel with sunken eyes,” who “kept saying over and over again: My name is Hagen. My job is to take the blame” (V511). This actually
provides a rather clean transition to the next German chapter in the text, “Operation Hagen,” a brief passage that explores the role of this odd figure. Hagen, taking his name from a character in the Nibelungenlied, does indeed have the job of taking the blame: “Hagen got classified as indispensable to the war effort . . . but in between crises he wasn’t even authorized to enter the outer checkpoint at Wolf’s Lair. That tells you how the High Command felt about him” (V525). When a cigarette girl blames shortages on “Jewish agents,” Hagen jumps to proclaim, “It’s all my fault. I’m the King of the Jews,” a statement that plays both on German anti-Semitism and, as “King of the Jews,” posits Hagen as a mocking Christ figure, a martyr for the sins of others (V526). Hagen is, in effect, a textual presence that clarifies the lack of a real-world straw man for the atrocities of Nazi Germany and its citizens; had Hagen existed he might have been quite valuable, as “Operation Hagen’s” narrator appreciatively calls him “the best friend I ever had” (V527). Hagen is an inversion of a lack, whose conspicuousness is further driven home by the statement of a judge at the Nuremberg trials (Hagen has just finished taking credit for the entirety of the Final Solution): “You don’t know who you are. Tonight you’re going to die without even knowing that much” (V528). As the Nazi regime falls, Vollmann insinuates, the complicity of the entire German nation in supporting and enabling the Nazis becomes more and more apparent.

The last few, brief German-narrated chapters of Europe Central conclude the textual process of disassembling the thought constructs of the Third Reich. The chapter “Into the Mountain” depicts Hitler’s suicide: readying for death, “Göring wanted to assure him that the Philharmonic would go under with everything else,”
effectively actualizing the destruction of the “music” of Hitler’s plans (V530). The chapter “Denazification” is divided into four subsections: the first and fourth are narrated by Russians, while the second and third are given by Germans, being taken by train to imprisonment in the USSR. This textually seems to convey how Nazi ideology becomes crushed by Soviet ideology, as the Germans for the most part concede defeat (“I was never a Nazi, we all said”) while the Soviets declare confidently, “Germany was gone forever” (V533, 535). The final German chapter, “Lost Victories,” recounts a Wehrmacht veteran’s experience reading Field-Marshal von Manstein’s biography *Lost Victories*, published in 1955. “Von Manstein’s word is gold. If he says a thing is so, case closed” (V741). The narrator, while “thoroughly denazified,” allows himself to reminisce and whitewash the actions of the Third Reich. Germans were “fighting simply for enough living-space to survive,” and of Hitler the narrator says, “I do still respect him in a way, not least for the fact that he knew what he knew, whether it was true or not” (V740, 743). This oddly sated acceptance of the Third Reich and Hitler conveys that it is now definitively a past context, something to be reminisced upon but not actively lived within. Thus the entire rise and fall of the Third Reich, from its beginnings as a social aberration on through its acceptance, dominance and implosion, is conveyed through the diverse gallery of German narrators.
As detailed at length at the start of the previous chapter, a key distinction between the authoritarian regimes of Germany and the Soviet Union is durability: Nazism immolated itself in a space of twelve years, whereas Stalin’s particular brand of state oppression would endure the “Great Patriotic War” and last for decades subsequently. The wide ontological collection of German narrators reflects the socio-political volatility of their nation-state. The Soviet narrators, however, are considerably more homogenized in their tone and style of narration. There is the sense that the novelty (or shock) of ideology has not dissipated for many of the German narrators due to how recently Nazism has risen to power, but the Soviets, while true believers in Communism, hold their ideology at a more sober rhetorical distance. For these narrators, ideology attends to their profession: these men work for the NKVD (Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, translated as the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), the forerunner institution to the KGB, and they engage in the surveillance and penalization of Soviet citizens. While the Soviet-narrated chapters are still somewhat ontologically distinct from one another, they form a sort of constellation of ontologies. Soviet propaganda promotes notions of collectivity, and so the Soviet narrators give an impression of being more homogenized in their narration, in contrast to the notable autonomy demonstrated by the German narrators. The Soviet narrators also have a different focus than do the German narrators. The Germans cannot extricate themselves from Hitler, as he himself is inextricable from the Führer-cult at the center of Nazism. For the Soviets,
the focus is not on Stalin as might be anticipated, but on aberrations to Stalinism: as NKVD agents they target those persons seen as destructive to the goals of Communism, which, in the narrative of Europe Central, primarily means artists.

Foremost among these artists is Dmitri Shostakovich. The New York Times review of Europe Central points out that sections focusing on or pertaining to the Soviet composer constitute “a suspenseful near novel about the composer and his times” (LeClair 2). Vollmann, meanwhile, calls Shostakovich “a great hero—a tragic hero,” “a person consumed by fear and regret, a person who . . . did what little he could to uphold the good—in this case, freedom of artistic creation” (Vollmann, “Love Triangle,” 808). Shostakovich’s defining moral action, and the narrative climax of Europe Central, consists in his 1960 composition of Opus 110: Shostakovich’s Eighth String Quartet, the most recorded string quartet of the century but an almost unbearably despairing piece of music for that fact (Christensen 106).

Vollmann contends that Shostakovich, in composing this Opus, has done the summative task of articulating and manifesting the horror suffered by citizens of both German and Soviet regimes. Vollmann’s narrators recurrently cite Shostakovich and Opus 110 as being of extraordinary significance. In the chapter “Clean Hands,” the memory of Europe’s “Ebbing Jewry” and the screams animating Kurt Gerstein’s heart make their way to Shostakovich, for use in his String Quartet (V434, 437). The narrator of “Airlift Idylls” relates an American theory that “the Eighth String Quartet of Shostakovich (Opus 110) is supposed to represent the Curtain’s darkness” (V536). German POWs are taken to Soviet work camps on “railroad tracks as narrow in gauge as the strange note-strung segments which begin in measure ninety-six of
Shostakovich’s Eighth Symphony” (V534). Friedrich Paulus, living out his remaining years in Dresden, stumbles upon a concert in a bombed-out hall where the musicians play Shostakovich: “he hated the dissonant harmonies, which reminded him less of melody than they did of war” (V405). All of the above quotes come from German-narrated chapters, yet Shostakovich is a figure of even greater significance among the Soviet narrators, who not only reference the composer frequently, but seem to valence all their rhetoric, and their profiles of other artists, in relation to Shostakovich.

Simply put, there is no way to discuss Soviet narration, and no way to discuss the overall themes and structure of Europe Central, without centering that analysis on Shostakovich. More than an artist, Shostakovich is undoubtedly the principal moral actor in the entire text, and to understand the significance of his action for Vollmann and Europe Central, he must be situated as thoroughly as possible: as an artist, lover, composer, and as someone positioned within a larger implicit framework of moral action.

A. Unclean Hands: Dialogically Elucidating A Matrix of Moral Action

At a certain level, every narrative in Europe Central can be said to help constitute a sort of matrix of moral action, given that Vollmann’s ostensible goal for the text is to show persons in moments of moral decision. In presenting Shostakovich, however, there are certain chapters that help in establishing an implicit framework for comprehending Shostakovich’s particular significance. To be more specific: if Vollmann posits Shostakovich as a truly successful moral actor, there are certain failed moral actors whose stories stand in contrast to that of the Russian composer. In the case of both A.A. Vlasov and Kurt Gerstein, the narratives of their respective
chapters (“Breakout” and “Clean Hands”) establish implicit parameters for the nature and efficacy of moral action within the repressive circumstances of Europe Central. These men, unfortunately, fail in ways that Shostakovich avoids, intentionally or not.

For Vollmann, Opus 110 is a text that succeeds at conveying a near-universal set of circumstances, negating geo-political divisions and borders to integrate the total experience of suffering and violence in Europe Central. Implicitly, Shostakovich has to reach the recognition that both Nazism and Stalinism are evil, and that what these regimes inflicted upon the people of Europe Central unites rather than divides the oppressed. Vlasov, the Soviet Lieutenant-General who is the focus of the chapter “Breakout,” is a character situated within a dialogical context that, more than any other part of the text, introduces the idea of a “moral equivalency” into the larger dialectic of Europe Central. As a character, Vlasov is given as a counterpoint to Friedrich Paulus: their respective chapters are paired together in the table of contents (“The Last Field-Marshal” come directly after “Breakout”) and both men are generals who famously collaborated with the opposite side against their own countries. Yet Vlasov distinguishes himself early on in “Breakout” from Paulus: where the German Field-Marshal takes the overwhelming part of his narrative to finally act against Hitler’s wishes (the better to dramatize the narcotic effect of Nazi ideology), the Russian Lieutenant-General, charged by Stalin with defending Leningrad in 1942, understands much earlier the near-suicidal implications of his superior’s order. “We’re doomed,” says Vlasov, and when “telephone communications are broken” (surely symbolic of Vlasov’s severance from the apparatus of Soviet state control), he orders his men to disband and try to escape the siege (V266). Wandering between
enemies lines and ideologies for twenty days, Vlasov happens upon a horrific massacre of some fifty Russian peasants: “each victim had been shot in the base of the skull,” and Vlasov recovers a “Geco 7.65 millimeter, of German manufacture” at the site (V267, 269).\footnote{Vlasov has escaped from the verifiable evils of Stalinism to confront apparent evidence of evil perpetrated by the Nazis. Yet, upon his eventual capture by the S.S., “Breakout” becomes a sort of Faustian tale, as Vlasov becomes gradually seduced to collaborate with the Nazi regime. The essential element of the Nazi’s appeals to Vlasov lies in their insistence upon moral equivalency, or at least upon the notion that their state represents the lesser of two evils in Europe Central. “We are human beings,” argues one Nazi officer, but “what if we are in fact monsters? Tell me why that should invalidate our critique of your monsters” (V272). Nazi officials invite Vlasov to imagine an officer corps without the threat of purges, dismissively deny the ongoing Final Solution (“They’re all partisans . . . [the Jews] ran to the pits of their own free will”), and even present evidence that it was Soviets, not Germans, who massacred the peasants (V280, 277, 304). Vlasov is intelligent enough to intuit a hidden motivation on the part of the Germans, but he accepts their statements at face value for two primary reasons. The first is Vlasov’s desperate, “rational” belief that what he infers of the Third Reich’s evil cannot possibly match the evil he has been a direct witness to in the Soviet Union: “he’d drink away his pangs, struggling through the logic (which he stubbornly defended) of Stalin is worse to overtake his ideal, his love, his eastern

\footnote{The Geco bullet is actually a recurring object throughout the text. Hitler is said to have a pistol of the same make later on in “Breakout;” the narrator of “Steel in Motion” pockets one such bullet; the agent of “Airlift Idylls” receives the same ammunition for his missions, cast in silver to injure Russian vampires.}
objective” (V290). The second reason is temptation, as Vlasov (encouraged by certain canny S.S. officers) fantasizes of leading a free Russian army alongside the Nazis to liberate Russia from Stalin’s control. Because of this, Vlasov seems willing to ingratiate himself within the Third Reich to conquer an evil that “is worse.”

Vollmann takes both of these aspects of Vlasov’s character as symptomatic of his larger moral failings. This inadequacy of Vlasov’s character is articulated viz. his relation to the his wife: Whereas Paulus’ wife Coca emerges from “The Last Field-Marshal” as a multi-dimensional character, Vlasov’s wife is left unnamed and his relationship with her is only briefly depicted. This allows Vollmann to allegorize Vlasov’s wife as the embodiment of his “integrity,” from whom he is sundered while in the boundaries of the Reich. “She was a statue now,” says the narrator, “safe from him behind that thick glass. She wanted to be his friend. Merciful and distant, she pitied him. He was free now. He must make his own way in life” (V293). This notion that Vlasov is bodily separated from his own “integrity” animates the entire chapter (that he remarries, to a blonde, dumbly Fascist German named Heidi, only underscores the notion). Used as a propaganda tool by the Nazi high command, themselves disgusted by the thought of allowing a “Slav” to command troops, Vlasov descends into depression and alcoholism, given only a meager command in 1945 as the Reich collapses.

Vlasov’s desire for glory and his belief that “Stalin is worse” abet his decision to collaborate, because these things encourage him to excuse the monstrousness of the Third Reich. As Vlasov says when one of his Nazi handlers finally reveals to him some extent of the Holocaust: “You’re still my friend … We’re all murderers”
Ultimately the vision of warfare depicted in “Breakout,” and in *Europe Central* more generally, insists on the evil perpetrated by both sides. In one of the most darkly comedic moments of the text, the narrator notes that thirty-five thousand people died in the Dresden firebombing, only to concede that, “this slightly bettered the Nazi achievement at Babi Yar, where only thirty-three thousand Jews had been machine gunned” (V321). Yet, when Shostakovich recognizes this universal moral culpability he will act differently than Vlasov. For Vlasov moral equivalency gives him license to work with evil and even excuse evil, nihilistically insisting, “we’re all murderers.” For Shostakovich, evil is not excused by quantifying one side relative to another: there is no quantification, no bifurcation of “German evil” and “Soviet evil,” and when Shostakovich composes Opus 110 it is not for personal benefit but only so that this undivided sphere of evil can be apprehended, having been brought upon all citizens of Europe Central.

If the chapter “Breakout” constitutes a dialogical presentation of how the evils of the two combatants of *Europe Central* might be compared or weighed against one another, the chapter “Clean Hands” is more metaphysical: “Clean Hands” persistently interrogates what the objective goodness of a man’s intentions means if he cannot achieve results. It is the story of Kurt Gerstein, a man who joined the S.S. to expose its crimes and then became a direct witness to the Nazi death camps, recording all he could and sabotaging operations wherever was possible. The text’s most direct treatment of the Holocaust, the chapter is presented by someone who exhibits much the same myopic devotion to Nazism that characterized the narrator of “The Last Field-Marshall.” If anything, the disjunction between the subject matter and
the narration creates an even more unsettling evocation of Nazi thinking than in Paulus’ story: there are disturbingly practical observations made about operating the gas chamber and turning a profit on haircloth shaved from the heads of Jews, and at one point an extended polemic on the difficulties of confiscating Jewish gold as the operation of the Holocaust moves east (V423, 433-434). The condescension with which the narrator approaches Gerstein, someone who expends all his efforts to save “a race whose extinction no one would even remember,” is only one way that the loneliness and desperation of Gerstein’s life is highlighted (V443).

For all his subversion Gerstein is portrayed as remarkably ineffective. He fails to persuade any outside party to take action against the Final Solution. A superior actually deigns to call him “the man who invented the gas chamber,” for introducing prussic acid to operations, and it is revealed that the amount of Zyklon B Gerstein destroys “is so negligible . . . that these interruptions don’t impede our operations” (V466, 459). Throughout the chapter Gerstein still appears an ideal Nazi: a handsome man with Aryan features, he remains polite and helpful to his despised colleagues in the S.S. and a passive witness to their crimes. “What you are under the uniform is nobody’s business,” and Gerstein’s outward appearance of agreement with the intentions of the Holocaust does seem to suggest a complicity with its actors, particularly in light of the evidence that his efforts to counteract them are insufficient (V449). Yet Gerstein insists that he is wholly free of responsibility for the Final

* There are in fact several interesting scenes in “Clean Hands” that show Gerstein helping children in the Hitler Youth, and even younger members of the S.S., attempt to understand aspects of German myth. Oftentimes the interpretation of these stories is very anti-Semitic, or otherwise distorted to support Nazi doctrine. These scenes seem, in effect, to show the pedagogic process of teaching German myth within Nazi Germany, what conditions the German narrators in the first place.
Solution: “How could he deny that with knowledge came sin and death…that he was now an accomplice until he saved the Jews?—But he had clean hands” (V435). This nearly delusional posture—Gerstein witnesses multiple gassings and mass shootings—is put up to scrutiny by multiple conversations that Gerstein has with his friends and family. Gerstein’s own father points out that intentions can never be truly discerned within actions: “If the man who suffocates his mother for love gets acquitted, then you may be sure that the man who suffocates his mother for hate will seize on that fact” (V456)! Gerstein’s friend Franz, one of the few people aware of Gerstein’s secret actions, ultimately asks him: “where’s your own evil in this, Kurt” (V467)? At the end of the chapter, Gerstein turns himself into the Allies, saying “For my part, I leave all this with clean hands and a clear conscience” (V470). Yet Gerstein is charged with crimes against humanity by the French, and found dead by suicide in his holding cell.

In his appendices Vollmann says, presumably with sincerity, that, “I firmly believe that there was nothing ambiguous about Gerstein’s good, unavailing though it proved to be. He is one of my heroes” (Vollmann, “Sources,” 784). This statement would seem to place Gerstein on the level of Shostakovitch as one of the heroes of Europe Central. Yet a character might still fail heroically: if Gerstein is far from the most reprehensible figure in the text, he is still evidently insufficient as a moral actor. His insistence that he has “clean hands” indicates that he conflates the righteousness of his intentions with his real-world actions, which prove ineffective towards achieving his ends. One might call this a sort of moral isolationism, and Gerstein’s defiance as to his position relative to evil prevents him from forestalling the Final
Solution in any meaningful fashion. Shostakovich does not delude himself as to his involvement and complicity with evil. In fact, by embracing his position in a larger matrix of oppression he is able to evoke it honestly and effectively, in the form of Opus 110.

The chapter “Airlift Idylls,” set in the early years of the Cold War, does not contend with failed moral action: where “Breakout” and “Clean Hands” explicate Shostakovich by comparison to less effective figures, the German narrator* of “Airlift Idylls” merely focuses on Shostakovich, in a positive light, to explicate aspects of the character that the Soviet narrators do not note. “Airlift Idylls” presents one of the closest things to a Western perspective in Europe Central. The narrator, living in West Berlin, perceives a Soviet bloc trapped within a literal “Iron Curtain,” stretching into the sky and made of a similar material to “those pouches of lead foil which protects film from X-rays” (V536). Entrance into this territory is like entering a dream, where the narrator can fly and cover thousands of miles in the space of hours. The vague, oneiric geography of Europe Central—wherever the narrator enters, he comes up in a seemingly random part of the bloc—reflects the isolation of East from West: after swallowing Nazism and conquering Europe Central, the Soviets effectively exist in a separate dimension from the West, albeit a dimension whose borders are still permeable.

* This narrator mentions offhandedly that a woman named Lina left him shortly before the commencement of Operation Citadel. While it does not much effect the analysis of “Airlift Idylls” to conjecture that the narrator is the same as the young soldier of “Operation Citadel,” that possible connection would explain the hallucinatory elements of both chapters as coming from a single narrative voice.
Recruited by the Gehlen Organization (an intelligence agency established in 1946 by American operatives in West Berlin), the narrator is tasked with penetrating the Curtain and murdering Shostakovich, “the one behind all this” (V544). However, as the Soviet bloc operates on dream logic in the ontology of “Airlift Idylls,” the narrator’s task proves impossible: he attempts to kill the composer hundreds of times, only to have Shostakovich reassemble himself or else absorb the bullets like they were musical notes, collecting “new despairing dissonances for Opus 110” (V554). Similar to the depiction of “Allfather” in “Operation Citadel,” this nigh-invincible dream-Shostakovich seems to have been built up or corroborated by rumor, specifically the Cold War paranoia of the West. Gradually the composer manages to make the narrator guilty for his attempted murders, and the German comes to adore Shostakovich and crave his approval. It is at this point the narrator is caught by the Communist authorities and confesses to his actions as an agent behind the curtain. The narrator is executed but only finds himself on the capitalist side of the curtain, discovering that “to die in the East is to live in the West” (V568).

This alarms the Soviets: “My confession had revealed to them the danger in which they stood. Shostakovich was their voice, and Elena their soul. If we could steal her, then we’d have a soul, and they’d have none (V568).” The Curtain is nailed to the ground and Europe Central becomes definitively impenetrable. The German perspective in “Airlift Idylls” is of an indestructible, practically undead Shostakovich, someone whom the would-be assassin comes to deeply respect. In this sense, “Airlift Idylls” advances a strange yet ultimately heroic view of Shostakovich. Moreover, Shostakovich’s status as a “voice,” understated in Soviet-narrated chapters, predicts
the composer’s significance how with Opus 110 Shostakovich will “speak” for
Europe Central. Europe Central is sealed off, but the chapter implies that its moral
purification will come from within.

B. Alexandrov’s Art Criticism: The Biases and Voyeurism of the NKVD

*In our Soviet Union we don’t give a shit about individualism anyhow* (V108).

“Airlift Idylls” is an important chapter precisely because its German narrator
comes to regard Shostakovich as a sort of hero. This runs counter to what is noted in
Soviet-narrated chapters: called at one point a “feminine mouthed prodigy” and
“grain-beetle of subversion,” Shostakovich is similar to Gerstein in that his actions
are the subject of frequent derision and contempt to the persons tasked with narrating
his life and work (V141). Yet while German narrators (such as in “Clean Hands”)sometimes expressed support for Nazi thinking and policy, there was no obvious
reference to the position and occupation of those ideologue narrators in Nazi society.
Meanwhile, in the Soviet chapters an ideological position is articulated by persons
explicitly tasked to enforce that ideology: members of the NKVD—the precursor
organization to the KGB—narrate the large majority of the narratives set in the
USSR. These narrators fondly recall afternoons trailing “subversives” like the poet
Anna Akhmatova, tapping phone lines or conducting surveillance while sprawled “on
the floor of the apartment above, watching them through a hole in the chandelier”
(V116). The NKVD is also an active presence within the narratives themselves: men
“in raspberry-colored boots” visit houses, interact with characters at state functions,
and harass and intimidate Shostakovich across the text, oftentimes entreating him to
abandon “this formalist trash you’ve subjected us to . . . why can’t you be guided by Party spirit” (V655)?

The NKVD narrators also reference each other, although any attempt to discern objectively who each NKVD agent is, how many there are and what chapters they narrate is intentionally made near-impossible by Vollmann. Some chapters reference both a “Comrade Alexandrov” and a “Pyotr Alexeev,” some chapters narrated by Alexandrov identify Alexeev, and in at least one chapter Alexandrov identifies himself as a narrator only to appear as “Comrade Alexandrov” in the action of the chapter. Ultimately the most satisfactory thing that one might say is that Alexandrov, the one NKVD agent who is clearly identified as both a narrator and character, is the metonymic figure or simply the spokesman for the illicit collection of NKVD agents, whose actions are by definition kept concealed. In any case, these narrators are very similar tonally and ideologically: as Shostakovich notes dismissively at one point, “There was an infinite supply of these characters, but the way they spoke never changed” (V633).

Alexandrov is first introduced in the latter, Soviet-narrated half of the Kollwitz chapter “Woman with Dead Child,” attending Kollwitz’s 1927 exhibition in Leningrad. A young, fervent man who identifies himself as an art critic, Alexandrov tells Kollwitz that “I wanted to live only as part of a collective,” and even escorts the German artist and her husband to a performance of Shostakovich’s Second Symphony (V53). When Kollwitz tells Alexandrov she’s somewhat “baffled” at the hellish energy of Shostakovich’s music, the “art critic” curtly replies that, “if he’s incomprehensible then he’s failed” (V54). Alexandrov personifies the notion that “art
appreciation” might be comfortably conducted within a job dedicated to enforcing Soviet ideology*: the Soviet narrators are extremely critical of “formalist” or individualist artists (Anna Akhmatova) while appreciating the propagandistic filmmaker Roman Karmen. Without perhaps intending to do so, Alexandrov and his cronies lay out a matrix of artistic action for Shostakovich similar to the “matrix of moral action” considered in the previous section.

Profiled in the chapter “And I’d Dry My Salty Hair,” Anna Akhmatova is interesting as a sort of analogue to Shostakovich, a woman who sets a small precedent for the composer’s attitude towards the Soviet state. There is a voyeuristic fascination to how the Soviet narrator describes her, though he hates her: “you can’t imagine all the filthy things I’ve seen her do . . . [A Trotskyite] admitted to drinking her urine . . . it wasn’t just her perverted lovers, it was our Soviet culture that she pissed on” (V106-107). A formalist of the old Modernist scene of St. Petersburg, Akhmatova is eventually coerced to praise the regime when the NKVD arrests her son: “We take away someone they love more than themselves,” says the narrator, “When we did this to Shostakovich, the results were excellent, In Akhmatova’s case we were also quite effective” (V113). The larger text reveals that Akhmatova’s capitulation is, if not morally comfortable, then at least acceptable in that it preserves what matters in her artistry. She is taken to be an objectively lesser artist than Shostakovich—“no one ever said her talent was as powerful as the gun of a Josef Stalin tank”—but she is also

---

* A certain “Comrade Zhdanov” is referenced in chapters such as “And I’d Dry My Salty Hair” and “The Palm Tree of Deborah,” and is depicted as personally familiar to the Soviet narrators. This is presumably the historic Andrei Zhdanov, secretary of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, who censored artists like Akhmatova and was key in codifying and rigidifying Soviet art. He was liquidated by Stalin in 1948.
narratively positioned as a precedent for Shostakovich to follow (V220). In the chapter “Opus 110,” Shostakovich’s recalls that Akhmatova’s greatest works are taken as a symbol of hope, “that they recite her poems even in the Gulag . . . But did she damage her life’s work when she wrote that other trash?” His pupil responds, “Not at all. If anything, she safeguarded it” (V670). So too will Shostakovich be excused by Vollmann to write pieces of “program music” if that ensures Opus 110 is brought to completion.

While Akhmatova is like Shostakovich in being seen as a danger to the regime, Roman Karmen is Shostakovich’s opposite: “The man’s my doppelganger! Whatever I do, he copies” (V708). Featured in the chapters “Opus 110,” “The Second Front” and most prominently in “Far and Wide My Country Stretches,” Karmen is a true believer in the work of Communism and the Soviet Union, and seemingly everything about the documentarian is posited to make him “the antithesis of the helpless, rumpled Shostakovich” (V234). Where Shostakovich is caustic and sad, Karmen is warmhearted and empathetic,* and the documentarian loves to travel and adventure into situations where, Alexandrov assure the reader, “Shostakovich would have killed himself” (V253). For Alexandrov and his comrades, Karmen is the greatest sort of propagandist, one who “sincerely tried to film not only the essence, but the hope” of the Soviet people, a genuinely brave man who inserts himself into

---

* The several conversations that Karmen and Shostakovich have over the course of the novel typify this divide: Karmen comes across as genuinely concerned for his opposite, whereas Shostakovich is condescending, pretentious and sarcastic.
sometimes remarkably dangerous situations to show “the real, the direct and heroic aspects of the struggle” against Fascism (V232, 234).*

Karmen’s shortcomings as an artist are not to be directly apprehended in his depiction by the NKVD narrators, whose appreciation seems quite genuine. One indication of his deficiencies is the fact that, in his role documenting the war, Karmen comes to hate the Germans, declaring that they “must not be regarded as human anymore” (V239)! While this isn’t unexpected, it does indicate that Karmen’s artistic and personal perspective is nationally bound, in a way that Shostakovich manages to transcend with Opus 110. Similarly, the fact that Karmen is a propagandist for a totalitarian regime—something which none of the Soviet narrators take issue with—is revealed as a failing by means of Karmen’s strained relationship with his wife: Elena Konstantinovskaya. Married after Elena’s affair with Shostakovich is ostensibly concluded, Elena veritably torments Karmen, withholding affection from him during lovemaking and deconstructing his genuine adoration of her as a way in which he tries to assert control. “Everything about him irritated her,” and the reason for this may be that Karmen is naïve (V247). Karmen’s genuine interest and joy in documenting new places and experiences leads him to fantasize about taking his wife along with him, thinking it romantic. For Elena “these fantasies struck her as either isolating . . . or frightening,” and it can be argued that Karmen’s almost childishly uncomplicated view of the world, distilled in his “romantic” notions, puts him in an unfavorable comparison to Shostakovich (V244). Extending this idea, Karmen’s 

* Karmen actually films the surrender of Field-Marshal Paulus at Stalingrad, a scene portrayed in both “The Last Field-Marshal” and “Far and Wide My Country Stretches.”
documentaries come to be regarded as espousing only a ideologically conditioned view of the Great Patriotic War, uplifting perhaps but not ultimately truthful. Shostakovich’s music, by contrast, is blatantly hopeless, but it is also the most honest invocation of the conflict of the Eastern Front in Vollmann’s view. Elena can thus be said to invert the binary that the Soviet narrators construct between her two artist-lovers, making Shostakovich the superior to Karmen.

Elena Konstantinovskaya is the second most significant character in *Europe Central* after Shostakovich. Their tumultuous romance—highlighted in chapters such as “Opus 40,” “The Telephone Rings,” “Ecstasy” and “The White Nights of Leningrad”—is one of the major unifying features of the text, and an essential element to Vollmann’s characterization of Shostakovich. But Elena is also at the center of some of the most metafictive aspects of the entire novel. There was a historic Elena Konstantinovskaya, an interpreter who married and divorced Roman Karmen and who was romantically involved with Shostakovich “for slightly more than a year, from around June 1934 until some time in 1935,” based on the evidence of her letter correspondence with him (Vollmann, “Love Triangle,” 807). Beyond these facts very little appears to be known about her, but this seems to have only given Vollmann license to turn her character into someone of almost spiritual power and reach. Vollmann not only turns what evidence indicates was a yearlong affair into a turgid, obsessive passion that consumes both Shostakovich and Konstantinovskaya until their deaths (in real life, both figures dies in 1975): “Elena” expands until she is effectively the soul and unifier of Europe Central. This was previously alluded to in the discussion of the chapter “Airlift Idylls,” but Alexandrov is the narrator who
elevates Konstantinovskaya until she takes on an almost sacral significance. In the opening lines of “Far and Wide My Country Stretches:”

Europe is Europa; Europe is a woman. Europa’s names and Berlin Liubova; Europa is Elena Ekaterinburg and Constanze Konstantinovskaya, not to mention Galina Germany, Rosa Russkaya; Europa encompasses all territory from Anna to Zoya, not omitting the critical railroad junctions Nadezhda, Nina, Fanya, Fridl, Coca (whose formal name was Elena), Katyusha, Verena, Victoria, Käthe, Katerina, Berthe Byrnhilda, Hilde and Heidi; above all Europe is Elena (V228).

This invocation names virtually every significant woman—real, fictional or mythological, German or Soviet—in the whole of Europe Central. Vollmann’s novel is structured by a highly gendered conception of action, in which men for the most part are actors and women are muses, and at several points in the text Vollmann evokes the idea that Europe Central is a woman whom men variously love, ignore or abuse. Indeed, this notion is first voiced in the “Steel in Motion,” where the narrator asks facetiously what caused the war in the first place: “What once impelled millions of manned and unmanned bullets into motion? You say Germany. They say Russia. It certainly couldn’t have been Europe herself, much less Europe Central” (V9).

Alexandrov develops this idea, evoking the myth of Europa to bring every significant woman of the text together into a category of essential femininity. If each of these women is “Europa,” than the moral actors of Europe Central are each related to the whole sphere of “Europe Central” in some intimate fashion. If “Elena” is the preeminent “Europa,” the “soul” of Europe Central (as the narrator of “Airlift Idylls” calls her), then it follows that Shostakovich is the most connected to Europe Central of all the characters in the text.
Yet this invocation of Europe only shows one facet of Alexandrov’s consideration of Konstantinovskaya: he admits that he is in love with her, and his descriptions of her frequently show an obsessive sort of erotic voyeurism. In the chapter “Elena’s Rockets” (the textual partner to the German-narrated “Maiden Voyage”), Alexandrov admits that, “in her own interest, I freely admit to altering certain details of her appearance throughout this book. For instance, Elena Konstantinovskaya was blonde . . . but to me, she will always be the darkhaired woman, or, if you prefer, the woman with the dark, dark hair” (V73). “Elena’s Rockets” has a memorably, unsettlingly pornographic element: Alexandrov recounts how, on a visit to Germany in the early 1930s, Elena has a lesbian encounter with a woman named Lina. While a certain voyeurism was apparent in describing Akhmatova, Alexandrov seems, grossly, to indulge himself as he describes Elena’s experience: “Lina would be naked with her white knees drawn up almost to her knees and her white things shining and the long white lips of her vulva as irresistible as candy to Elena, and her anus was a white star” (V71).

Vollmann himself undermines Alexandrov’s two main assertions about Elena—her bisexuality and the color of her hair—in his “Imaginary Love Triangle” essay in the novel’s appendices. “There is . . . no reason to suppose that Elena’s marriage with Karmen failed because she was still in love with Shostakovich. Moreover, Elena was blonde, not darkhaired, and I have no grounds for believing her to have been a bisexual cigarette smoker.” Her bisexuality, Vollmann muses, was predominantly motivated by the intention to “make [Elena] as infinitely lovable as I

One ramification of these statements by Vollmann is that Elena’s bisexuality, or more properly the depiction of her bisexuality, acts as a means of dramatizing the unrepentant voyeurism and libel perpetrated by the Soviet surveillance state, with its show trials and disappearances. Just as Vollmann has chosen to explicate the most problematic aspects of Nazi ideology by having rabid Nazis describe the Holocaust and the fall of Stalingrad, so too does the essential character of Stalinism emerge through Alexandrov and his method of narration. Elena’s bisexuality also allows her to connect with Lina, the lost love interest of “Operation Citadel” and the heroine of the chapter “Why We Don’t Talk About Freya Anymore,” an unflinching account of the mass rape that occurred in Germany following its conquest by the Red Army. Setting Elena in relation to this woman might make the former “infinitely lovable,” but more practically it places Elena, a Russian woman, in intimate relation to a German and, by extension, with the German experience and suffering of the war.

Finally, Elena clarifies Shostakovich: Vollmann empowers Shostakovich by imagining him in relation to a person that is, in effect, Europe Central herself. The blatantly metafictive quality of Vollmann’s characterization of Elena reflects on her love affair with Shostakovich and upon Shostakovich himself, suggesting new ways of reading the ultimate composition of the Eighth String Quartet.

C. “The Living Corpse of Music:” The Road to Opus 110

Like Elena, Opus 110 and Shostakovich can be read metafictively: both are referenced frequently throughout the text, as if their significance were taken as a
given by many of Europe Central’s narrators. This alone shows that Shostakovich and his string quartet are of considerable importance to Vollmann’s conception of his novel. Nonetheless, while the composition of Opus 110 is the defining event of Shostakovich’s life and of the text more generally, that composition comes only after hundreds of pages devoted to Shostakovich, what LeClair calls the “near novel” of Europe Central. Through these chapters the Eighth String Quartet is situated relative to other pieces of Shostakovich’s music, as Shostakovich himself is portrayed relative to many other characters in the text. The most important pieces to consider alongside Opus 110 are Opus 40 (discussed in the chapter of the same name), also known as the Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor, and Shostakovich’s 7th Symphony, or “Leningrad Symphony,” discussed at length in the chapter “The Palm Tree of Deborah.”

Opus 40 was composed in 1934, approximately within the time span where letters confirm Shostakovich and Elena Konstantinovskaya were romantically involved. Vollmann and his NKVD surrogate infer that this piece of music was written as an analogue for the young Shostakovich’s sexual experiences with Elena, which means the chapter “Opus 40” does not diverge substantively from earlier examples of the NKVD’s sexual voyeurism: “no was who has read the entire case file can deny that deny that [her] clitoris was electric . . . his kisses were the score, and her sighs the performance, the music of Opus 40 itself” (V86-88). Yet Opus 40 also provides a means for Elena and Shostakovich to go “deep down . . . down to the red

* The chapter is named after “the sixteenth-century musings of a Warsaw Kabbalist named Moses Cordovero (Vollmann 215).” Shostakovich will be more explicitly connected to Kabbalah in the chapter “Opus 110.”
core that he’d revisit alone twenty-six years later, when he composed Opus 110” (V90). Opus 40 is described as a body, animated with “life” by Elena. This can be directly contrasted with the observation that begins the chapter “Opus 110” that the Eighth String Quartet is “the living corpse of music, perfect in its horror” (V622). The Sonata enacts and demonstrates an emotional depth comparable to the Eighth String Quartet, but where Opus 40 feels intimate, an expression of Shostakovich’s love for Elena, Opus 110 articulates a lack of that same intimacy, long after Shostakovich’s affair with Elena is concluded.

If Opus 40 metaphorizes Shostakovich’s personal experiences, the Seventh Symphony, covered in the chapter “The Palm Tree of Deborah,” shows Shostakovich’s purview expanding to take in a larger Soviet social context. Possessed of prodigal talents, the young Shostakovich is cocky, libidinous and “entirely bereft of self-doubt,” not yet aware of the real danger his “formalist” tendencies place him with the Stalinist regime (V152). It is only after certain compositions are attacked as ideological failures—most notably, his Lady Macbeth opera—that Shostakovich begins to recognize the vulnerability his position, although he nonetheless feels he can approach the issue of his “formalism” in his own way. “He secretly aspired to be ideological,” says the narrator, “at least until he composed Opus 110, he would remember with haunting vividity the purity of this project: create beauty and be useful” (V159). In a similar line of reasoning, Shostakovich asks his wife Nina: “Can music attack evil? If I were to try, really sincerely, and perhaps to suffer, and to seek out the sufferings of others, or—” (V166). Shostakovich, both scared and ashamed by
the criticisms of the Soviet state, attempts to figure out a means of using his
distinctive talents to accomplish a larger social good.

This question—whether or not Shostakovich can make music that “attacks
evil”—animates his composition of the Seventh Symphony, written in the main
during Shostakovich’s time in Leningrad during its siege by the Wehrmacht.
Shostakovich is adamant that the Seventh will be used to fight evil, declaring that
“the Party’s with me,” and that, ultimately, “Nothing couldn’t be turned into music”
(V187)! In fact, Shostakovich demonstrates the uncanny ability to interpret the
sounds of suffering as music, an ability that will have repercussions on the
composition of Opus 110. To Shostakovich, “the whole process of composition is one
of straining to catch and record something compounded of harmony and sense as it is
relayed from an unknown source” (V185). Thus, “the sirens of the Stuka
divebombers” can be conveyed by woodwinds, “bombs can express all eight degrees
of the diatonic scale as they whistle down,” and the sound of mortars are
converted to
tones (V187, 195, 199). When confronted by a friend as to these methods,
Shostakovich merely replies, “that’s how I hear war” (V197). Shostakovich “wanted
to build his symphony not out of music, but out of snow and explosions,” and so the
Seventh Symphony becomes a demonstration of how Shostakovich’s “formalist”
tendencies are directed towards a form of mimesis, capturing and paraphrasing the
indices of the siege of Leningrad (V212).

For the “organs” of state power, the Leningrad Symphony is the greatest
success of Shostakovich’s career. The NKVD (Comrade Alexandrov included) will
find approving words for the piece throughout *Europe Central*, and even “Stalin
himself is said to have commented that the Seventh was of as great striking power as a squadron of bombers” (V215). However, “The Palm Tree of Deborah” gives the reader the impression that the Seventh represents an incomplete or transitional stage in Shostakovich’s development towards Opus 110. The narrator suggests that Shostakovich has spent his early career in unwitting collusion or complicity with the oppression of the Soviet regime, observing wryly: “in the years when Stalin’s acolytes were busily exterminating Ukrainian kulaks by the millions, Shostakovich did his stint at the Leningrad Workers’ Youth Theater, trying to create proletarian art” (V149). There is also Shostakovich’s longstanding friendship with Stalin’s general Tukhachevsky, a man called “the scourge of Poland, butcher of Kronstadt and Tambov (his maxim for eradicating anti-Soviet banditry: One should practice large-scale repression and employ incentives)” (V171). This “butcher,” shortly to be liquidated by Stalin, remains in Shostakovich’s estimation “an innovator who admired novelty and brilliance” (V174). Vollmann invites the reader to consider the Leningrad Symphony not as a wholly dishonest or unsuccessful piece of music, but as a compromised composition nonetheless, torn between “Shostakovich’s desire to express reality, and his need to please his masters (V215).” The Leningrad Symphony thus suffers from the same issues that mark Karmen’s films, and most works of Soviet Socialist Realism: the deficiency of being mimetic to “reality,” yet still subordinate to a social ideology that dictates what that reality signifies. Just as Opus 40 seems driven by beliefs of a young, naïve Shostakovich, so too does the Seventh emanate from the misguided belief that a propagandistic work can “do good,” in the social sense.
Opus 40 and the Seventh Symphony each aim to communicate with persons other than their composer (Elena and the Russian people, respectively). By contrast, Opus 110 is a private composition, a work of stunning moral significance that emerges from Shostakovich’s despair that he cannot enact any substantive good. The chapter “Opus 110” does not wholly invert the notion that “music can fight evil,” but it does significantly complicate the thinking that went into the Seventh Symphony.

“He’d believed then that music could be good,” the narrator says of Shostakovich, “Now he…Was he to listen to nothing then” (V665)? “All it can do is scream,” is simply how Shostakovich’s mistress considers music (V645). Most symbolically, Shostakovich has a nightmare where he is visited by Comrade Luria, a Jewish man who appears as a “charred skeleton,” stinking of ash. Luria urges Shostakovich to suffuse his work with “content,” emotional value, leading to the following exchange:

What’s your content?  
I . . . I have no content; I’m empty.  
Then say so in your music (V630).*

Opus 110 pours out from Shostakovich after he has been completely emptied of the beliefs and enthusiasms that characterized Opus 40 and the Leningrad Symphony. Significantly, the composition isn’t depicted as accidental or spontaneous, but as something the composer spends years being conditioned for as he “descends like a spinning bomb toward the tomb of Opus 110” (V632). Meanwhile, Shostakovich’s loathing for the Communists seethes unabated. Yet, Shostakovich occupies a flat paid

* Shostakovich later discovers that “Isaac Luria had been an eminent Kabbalist,” explicating the connection between “Opus 110” and “The Saviors” to an extent not seen in many other portions of the text and reestablishing the chapter as its own sort of parable.
for by Stalin himself, and even meets Nikita Khrushev, in one of the most uncomfortably hilarious scenes of the entire novel. The sense from “The Palm Tree of Deborah” of Shostakovich’s uncomfortable complicity with the Soviet state persists as the composer readies for Opus 110.

Opus 110 is ultimately composed in Dresden when Shostakovich visits in 1960, “not expecting to score any great victories on the cultural front” (V692). Shostakovich’s movement outside of Russia is crucial in order for the composer to bring Opus 110 into being, as in Dresden the evidence of the Allied firebombing is still very much apparent. Shostakovich initially views the city’s incineration as a just recompense: “That’s what you did to Leningrad. For nine hundred days! You did it” (V691). Yet, his views soften when his German translator (who looks eerily like Elena) regales him with stories of the Germans’ suffering in the war, with “dead people in all the streets . . . but I’d imagine you saw dead people too, on your side (V693).” This translator, posited as a doppelganger to Elena, allows Shostakovich to connect to another aspect of “Europa” by providing him with a glimpse of the German experience of the war. For Vollmann, Opus 110 gains its reach and universality because it originates within a context where the Soviet composer is compelled to consider the suffering inflicted upon the Soviet Union’s enemies in the war. When Shostakovich actually begins to compose the Eighth String Quartet, he opts to “refer” to Operation Citadel in the piece, on behalf of his German translator: “since her brother had fallen at Kursk, why not” (V695)?

This is but one small indication of the almost monstrous scope of Opus 110: it is a piece meant to contain, literally, everything. In a flat in Dresden, Shostakovich
considers his piece: “Operation Reinhard, that’s written in now; Operation Blau will
be present in the second movement. Can we refer to T-4 in the overture? But it’s all
got to be airless” (V694). Case White is integrated into the piece, as are “references”
to dekulakization, gulags, the Holocaust and Operation Barbarossa. Opus 110 is
animated by such a wide collection of horrific and violent circumstances that taken
together, these atrocities form a unity. Shostakovich even admits, “of course I had to
write Elena in” (V709). Yet if Elena is present in Opus 110, it is solely in her capacity
as “Europa,” the embodiment of an entire landscape (Europe Central) whose
sufferings Shostakovich documents in music. Elena is not present as Shostakovich’s
lover, and Opus 110 demonstrates how her absence leaves Shostakovich totally and
despairingly alone (asking on page 699: “Where’s Elena now? Not with me, not with me”). If Elena is present but not “with” Shostakovich in any amorous sense, then the
love that suffused Opus 40 is entirely evacuated from Opus 110, as are
Shostakovich’s claims to emotional intimacy with another person.

Opus 110’s interrelation with the Leningrad Symphony is more complicated,
for while Opus 110 certainly lacks the confidence of purpose that characterized the
Symphony, it still seems to have been assembled by much the same means, through
Shostakovich’s distinctive appropriation of the ephemera of the war. In the years
Shostakovich “falls” towards his Eighth String Quartet, material for its eventual
composition seems to be constantly drawn in, much as was the case with the Seventh:
the sound of a hammer in a gulag, the sound the wire made when Vlasov was hung,
the screams of someone interrogated by the NKVD, the “sickening compassion” of
his friends, the screech of tires from a Black Maria, taking Soviet citizens away
Shostakovich retains the ability to function as a sort of antennae of human suffering, converting these noises into music. Vollmann could simply have suggested that the two compositions differ only because the Seventh Symphony is a public work and the Eighth String Quartet a private one. Yet the narrator of the chapter is quick to note, “it’s reductionist to claim that this quartet is merely the corrective to the Seventh Symphony, the distillation of Leningrad’s agony with the propaganda decanted off. Anyhow, what is Leningrad? Forget the Germans for once. Forget external causes” (V697).

The first thing this quote suggests is that the Eighth String Quartet does entirely lack propagandistic intentions, but that this is a narrow view. “Forget the Germans” is here tantamount to saying that the Germans—despite all the evil caused on the Eastern Front by Operation Barbarossa and the German Army—should not be taken as the final source or embodiment of evil. Opus 110 is horrifying in part because it evokes evil without diminishing its origins to one particular group or nationality: Germans and Soviets are responsible for the state of Europe Central, but they are both also victims, bound together in suffering, and “Shostakovich becomes every victim” (V702). The second, less obvious difference between Opus 110 and the Seventh Symphony may be inferred within the respective intentions of both pieces of music: if the Seventh constituted a sincere attempt to “fight evil,” Opus 110 only “screams” in the presence of evil. In other words, Shostakovich’s Symphony was conceived with the idea that music can serve a readily tangible social function, whereas Opus 110 is conceived as music, in and of itself. “Not even music is real,” says Shostakovich earlier in the chapter, “That’s why I reject program music, it
pretends to be real” (V637). Opus 110 is a more effective piece of music than the Leningrad symphony because it is composed with the understanding that its abilities to combat evil are limited: “fighting” evil is almost an absurdity, and rather than fighting, the Eighth String Quartet only tries to evoke the feeling of evil as accurately as possible. This is why Opus 110 is described as “too sad even to rise from a moan into a wail at death’s uncompassed crescendo . . . on the whole the effect is of somebody drowning, his most desperate convulsions already behind him” (V696-697). The Eight String Quartet recognizes its own formal “unreality,” its “emptiness” of content, in a way that separates it from the Seventh Symphony. In communicating hopelessness Opus 110 is, counter-intuitively, a stronger clarion call against evil than the Seventh or the works of Karmen, which masquerade as social implements.

For his part, Shostakovich approaches the rest of his life after Opus 110 as if his major function has been fulfilled. His original plan is to commit suicide after the composition, and his motivation for writing so boldly is that, “it’s the last time I’ll be, so to speak, me” (V696). The composer’s remaining fifteen years are sadly dejected and un-ambitious, “as calm as the fading sound of a German bomber that has just released his load,” and the narrative counts off each year as he perfunctorily “lived on” to see it (V704). Unlike Gerstein, Shostakovich never seeks to deny his complicity with state power, but after Opus 110 the Soviet state become something he no longer makes efforts to resist: after decades of staring “levelly through his condemners,” Shostakovich finally joins the Communist Party, and the NKVD narrator notes that he becomes “one of our most reliable leading cadres” (V711). Shostakovich condemns human-rights activists, composes program music without
complaint, and loses friends, all while barely protesting (V717, 712, 725, 706). When he dies in 1975 the NKVD raids his papers in a matter of hours, but the narrator assures the reader that there was “no need to disgrace him; for that matter he’d been dead ever since he composed Opus 110” (V727).

Taking Akhmatova as a precedent, it could be argued that Vollmann excuses Shostakovich’s actions later in life because Opus 110 precedes them. Yet Shostakovich’s tragic end raises questions as to what purpose Opus 110 serves in the first place. The narrator of “Opus 110” thinks poorly of the String Quartet: “he’d brought a new evil into the world without solving an old one” (V718). However, the reader is encouraged to disagree with this statement: as with his Nazi narrators, Vollmann articulates a viewpoint by explicitly stating its ideological opposite.

Interpreting Vollmann’s consideration of Opus 110 rests on the understanding that many parts of the text around Shostakovich are metafictive. The NKVD agent depicts Opus 40 as a piece describing Shostakovich’s love affair with Konstantinovskaya, yet the chapter “Opus 40” closes with the notation that the Sonata was dedicated not to Elena, “but to his friend V. Kubatsky,” indicating that the romantic interpretation of Opus 40 might entirely be a fabrication (V98). Similarly, the notion that Opus 110 was made to contain “everything”—every military operation, every significant event and act of violence in the war—can also be taken as a fabrication, or at least an obvious exaggeration of Shostakovich’s (real world) statement that the work is “dedicated to the victims of war and fascism.” As Peter G. Christensen points out, the historic analysis of Shostakovich actually remains extremely contentious, and Vollmann’s noble depiction of the composer “contrasts with that of Laurel E. Fay,
Richard Taruskin, and Malcolm Hamrick Brown, who present Shostakovich as non-heroic and unduly submissive to the Soviet Regime” (Christensen 100). Therefore, if Vollmann sincerely believes in Shostakovich’s heroism, the author cannot definitively verify his depiction of the composer as historically accurate.

Yet if the whole story of Shostakovich is a fabrication, the very fact of Shostakovich’s fictionality still point towards Vollmann’s larger aims at “truth.” If Opus 110 and Shostakovich are metafictive—almost explicitly conveying Vollmann’s underlying aims for *Europe Central*—they seem to be metafictive for reasons other than to expose the untruthfulness of the NKVD, something that Vollmann already seems to have done successfully through the figure of Elena. Opus 110, in containing every major aspect of Europe Central’s agony, is a key metonym for Vollmann’s whole textual project in *Europe Central*. In Vollmann’s reckoning, Shostakovich’s Eighth String Quartet may be the more effective text for conveying the larger themes grappled with in *Europe Central*. As Shostakovich says: “Music is safe because nobody understand it. Only in music is everything clear” (V705). Opus 110 is made so significant to the dialectic of *Europe Central* because for Vollmann, the piece signifies the prominent points the novelist wishes to make about the value and efficacy of art.
Conclusion: Vollmann, “Post-Postmodernism,” and the Value of Art

One of the very closing chapters of Europe Central, “A Pianist From Kilgore,” depicts a 1958 international music competition for which Shostakovich acts as judge. This competition happens two years before Shostakovich’s fateful visit to Dresden, but situated in the text after “Opus 110,” “Kilgore” serves as an anticlimactic denouement to the composition of the String Quartet. This is because the competition’s winner is a young man named “Van” Cliburn, a friendly, bucolically unsophisticated Texan, both too young and too far removed from Europe to have had his life seriously impacted by World War II: “he must be an innocent. After all, he was American” (V729). For Shostakovich, this American signifies unsettling changes for the Postwar world, as the unwitting vector of a particular kind of historical amnesia:

Shostakovich remained convinced that this American was part of the natural process of forgetting. Call him a bacterium on the moldering corpse of our war-memories. Soon there’d be nothing left, not even bones…When Shostakovich was in Leipzig for the Bach festival, a German Communist, smirking, had quoted him the words of a certain General von Hartmann, commander of the Seventy-first Division of Sixth Army at Stalingrad . . . until it became apparent that the German Communist couldn’t stop thinking about Sixth Army and maybe didn’t want Sixth Army to become an indecipherable name, because the sufferings which everybody in Germany and Russia had endured had become valuable as the simple result of their own intensity; he dreaded to condemn them to the crematorium of history…And this blond bacterium from America was here on a mission to transform the death which presently characterized all Europeans, and perhaps even vivified them, back into dirt. The bacterium would win (V736-737).

Europe Central— and the actions of its main protagonist, Shostakovich—is ultimately a protest against the forgetting that threatens to cleanse Europe Central of its legacy of suffering and death during World War II. Vollmann chooses to
exemplify the “natural process of forgetting” through the vector of a young, naïve American, the first person of his nationality of any consequence in the text: this is fitting, as *Europe Central* undermines or ignores entirely the American mythos of “the Good War,” depicting instead the horrific conflict between two totalitarian regimes that annihilate and dispose of people by the millions. For Vollmann, and for Shostakovich in authoring Opus 110, the memory of such suffering must be safeguarded.

This aim contrasts with the viewpoint articulated by Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. As Tölölyan points out, Pynchon’s text “is a new kind of war novel . . . that redefines not only [war narratives] but our idea of war itself” (Tölölyan 31). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the key or totemic events of World War II are de-emphasized, because the intention is to expose a system of demands and developments that creates war, but also far outlast it. “Pynchon is unstinting in his efforts to remind us that killing is *not* the major aim of war,” Tölölyan concludes, “He insists that we must not see the desire to inflict human suffering, no matter on how appalling the scale, as a *cause* of war” (Tölölyan 63-64). For Pynchon, the Second World War is the outward manifestation or phase of the longer teleological development of human civilization towards greater bureaucratization and more pervasive structures of control: in other words, World War II should not be thought of as an historical aberration. *Europe Central* expresses an opposing, more traditional view of World War II: the war is manifestly about killing, and killing motivated by distinctive political and historical circumstances, as the competing totalitarian powers of Hitler and Stalin try to decimate one another to the point of non-existence. For Vollmann this means that the
war is foremost a moral crisis, whereas Pynchon, without suspending moral outrage, considers the war as motivated by what Tőlőlyan calls “mystical worship of the perfectibility of the inanimate,” the subsuming technological drive of modern society that produces, among other things, the V-2 Rocket (Tőlőlyan 64). In Gravity’s Rainbow, this fetishizing of technology both creates and is perpetuated by a transnational network of interests that causes the war, transcending any particular people, nation or creed. Hence the Firm, the name given to the processes behind the veil, and the Counterforce invented in opposition, both of which are explicitly transnational.

Vollmann conceives of Europe Central as an environment of national demarcations, which prove ephemeral when seen from a large enough historical or political vantage point. Yet Vollmann understands that these demarcations are nonetheless of extreme importance to the people living within those borders. Thus, the narrator of “Steel in Motion,” the novel’s first chapter, can clearly see Europe Central as a field for “accidental, endlessly contested territorial divisions,” but every narrator who comes afterwards in Europe Central thinks within borders: the rhetoric of ideologues like Comrade Alexandrov, or the deluded Nazi who narrates “The Last Field-Marshall,” is contingent upon national thinking and conditioning. This means that Vollmann offers no real equivalent to Pynchon’s Firm, because no illicit, conspiratorial network is thought to underlie the regimes of both Hitler and Stalin. Vollmann larger perspective is, as with Pynchon, transnational, but Vollmann also apparently wishes to respect historical verisimilitude: Pynchon takes the concept of the nation-state to be a façade, and while Vollmann may agree with this notion, he
still recognizes that the nation-state is perhaps the most important situating concept for virtually every person experiencing World War II. No institution in *Europe Central* manages to transcend the confines of the nation.

This, however, points towards Vollmann’s radically different consideration of art than that proposed by Pynchon. There is no Counter-Force in *Europe Central*, just individuated efforts at political or artistic resistance exemplified by the likes of Shostakovich. This isolation that marks the principal moral actors of *Europe Central* (not simply Shostakovich but Gerstein, Kollwitz and others) is what makes their efforts against evil all the more valiant, and makes the efforts of Shostakovich to produce work of art like Opus 110 of enormous significance. Tölölyan’s essay mentions that the rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow* falls in a tradition that includes the *Iliad*, *War and Peace*, and *Moby Dick*: “in each we encounter a behemoth, a gigantic object capable of violence, that can be ‘read’ as a text” (Tölölyan 52). Vollmann introduces *Europe Central* with another enormous object that seems to be its own text: the telephone. “Steel in Motion” does not merely presuppose a transnational outlook, but advances the telephone as a metaphoric object for apprehending that transnationalism: intersecting nations as it intersects the national ontologies of the novel, the telephone advances and disseminates the killing and oppression throughout Europe Central. This makes the telephone an object commensurate with a dialectic of the “perfectibility of the inanimate” that Pynchon describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, although with a key difference. While Pynchon’s Rocket (or, for that matter, Melville’s white whale) is a text that signifies everything, the telephone actively integrates every person in Europe Central into a larger system of oppression.
Yet crucially, the telephone is overwhelmed and superseded in *Europe Central* by Shostakovich’s Opus 110. A stunning work of art and pummeling facsimile for human suffering, it succeeds at “containing everything” pertinent to the victim’s experience of totalitarianism, becoming both as significative as early “mega-texts,” and as integrative as the telephone. Shostakovich can therefore be said to author a transnational text representative of Europe Central’s oppressed, in opposition to the telephone, the transnational instrument of suffering. Vollmann is contending that a great work of art can transcend nations. If the great irony that underlies *Gravity’s Rainbow* is that it is a text that posits its own futility to counteract or ulcer itself from larger sociopolitical systems of meaning, Opus 110 (and *Europe Central* itself) embody a notion that the work of art can advance an ontological means of apprehending the world that counters the world-systems posited by state ideology. If, as Russell notes, Pynchon expresses anxiety that any attempt to oppose a monopolizing system of meaning leads only to a system of counter-meaning, this anxiety is not shared with Vollmann. If anything, for Vollmann it is a good thing that the counter-meaning posited against totalitarianism is encapsulated within the work of art itself.

However, Opus 110 does not make the pretense of directly combating evil so much as it “screams” at evil. Opus 110 can therefore be contrasted with the propagandistic aims or functions implicitly active in the works of Roman Karmen or in Shostakovich’s own Seventh Symphony. M.H. Abrams identifies four overlapping “orientations” that distinguish different perspectives on the value of art, among them the mimetic, pragmatic, and expressive. The mimetic orientation encompasses “the
explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe,” whereas the pragmatic orientation argues that the preeminent value of a text lies in it effect upon an audience (Abrams 8, 14). The expressive orientation considers a text as “defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet,” considering the creative action of art its most important feature (Abrams 22).

_Europe Central_ counter-poses two hybridized “orientations” of art, the first might straightforwardly be called “pragmatic-mimetic.” This is the viewpoint that characterizes Vollmann’s ideologically motivated narrators, for whom art must serve an indoctrinating or explanatory function in order to have value. As Vollmann presents it, the rhetoric of both German and Soviet narrators is ultimately protective of the actions of totalitarianism. In contrast to this stand Shostakovich and Vollmann himself, who both work on the basis of an “expressive-mimetic” orientation towards art. Shostakovich absorbs the material or indices of his social world and context, but once that material is gathered in, it becomes subject to the personal convictions and dispositions of Shostakovich himself. Opus 110 does not attempt to be a sort of balm—it is in fact rather the opposite, a truly terrifying work of art—yet it manages to actually convey the reality and terror of life under Hitler and Stalin (the mimetic) because it is a text predominantly beholden to the subjectivity of its creator (the expressive).

If Opus 110 is a metonym for the larger artistic project of _Europe Central_, then Vollmann also follows the same “expressive-mimetic” tack that he imputes to Shostakovich. While the many ontologies of the text constitute an effort to imitate
what might have been the rationale of German and Soviet citizens, these ontologies are reflective of Vollmann’s artistic inclinations, as are his efforts to couch his stories as parables, and his periodic deployment of fantastic or surreal elements (the Valkyrie in “The Sleepwalker,” the Golden Princess in “Operation Citadel,” etc.). These are all subjective means for attempting to convey “truth” to the circumstances depicted, for invoking the reader’s moral sympathy. Ultimately, this marks Vollmann’s technique as only superficially like *Gravity’s Rainbow* and many of the works of Pynchon, DeLillo, Coover or Heller that are usually said to make up the corpus of Postmodern literature. Vollmann’s presentation of Opus 110 hinges on showing that the composition stands autonomously from the social ideologies of Shostakovich’s world, and that the work is powerful for this selfsame reason.

Yet, to a critic like McHale, Postmodern fiction was characterized by its demonstrable lack of faith in the notion of an autonomous work of art. The distinction that McHale draws between the “epistemological” dominant of Modernist literature and the “ontological” dominant in Postmodernism is illustrative of this. The oftentimes difficult formalism that characterizes the works of Modernist authors like Joyce or Stein has at its basis an epistemological perspective, an authorial desire to convey modern reality in a way that reflects how the individual actually cognized the world, independent of the obfuscations that society and social life imposed on that individual perspective. In saying that Postmodernism focused on the “ontological,” McHale says that Pynchon and his contemporaries actively worked to dismantle the formalism of Modernism. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon not only merges and juxtaposes elements from high and low art, but also appropriates the syntax and
phrasings of any number of scientific fields, experiences and social contexts. All of these are implemented within a larger technique that McHale identifies as “Metalepsis, the violation of ontological boundaries,” which destabilizes and complicates any notion of the artwork in isolation from the world (McHale 226). More than that, McHale notes that Pynchon makes frequent use of second-person address in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and that this constant deployment of “you” has a distinct “element of aggression: these passages insult and even threaten the reader” (McHale 225). Pynchon disturbs the reader: *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems to break the fourth wall, and this seeming interrogation of the reader by the text unsettles the reader’s abilities to contemplate the novel as a work of art.

Minimalism, as exemplified by the works of artists like Donald Judd and Robert Morris, also contains a certain theatrical or interrogatory tendency. When Minimalism emerged in the early 1960s, Michael Fried was a young art critic and an acolyte of the great New York critic Clement Greenberg, who privileged the works of Abstract Expressionism as representing one of the fullest realizations of “high,” or autonomous art. Fried was also a true believer in Abstract Expressionism, which lends a polemical edge to his essay “Art and Objecthood,” a critique of Minimalism or “Literalist Art.” For Fried, Minimalism emerges from a palpably desperate position, as artists came to view the possibilities for arranging form and material on a canvas as nearly exhausted. In response, Minimalists move to sculpture and advance a dialectic where there is an almost monastic emphasis on form. Fried believes this impulse has been taken to such an extreme that “the shape is the object . . . it is, I believe, that emphasis on shapes that accounts for the impression which numerous
critics have mentioned, that Judd’s and Morris’s pieces are hollow” (Fried 151).
Minimalist artwork is theatrical, “literalist,” in that it formally draws attention to its position within a physical reality, and in doing so distances the viewer by making him or her aware of the artwork’s mere “objecthood” (Fried 155-159). Fried unfavorably contrasts this dialectic to the work of Modernist art, such as Abstract Expressionism, where, “nothing short of conviction—specifically, the conviction that a particular [artwork] can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art who quality is not in doubt—matters at all” (Fried 165). For Fried, art gains purpose from cordonning itself from the world to a degree and from presuming its own value, and a text’s privileged ignorance of its relation with a viewer ironically translates to resonance, not distance, with that viewer.

“Theater” is a term that effectively inscribes the whole of Gravity’s Rainbow, “a term that recurs from the first page of the book, when the Evacuation is described as theater . . . to the last movie theater” (Tölölyan 62). The comparison between Minimalism and Postmodernism is imperfect, but Postmodernist writing like Gravity’s Rainbow is theatrical in a way similar to minimalism, in that in both cases the texts present themselves as being inextricable from the world. This tends to mean that Postmodernist fiction largely abandons the general indoctrinating or empathetic aims that characterize the traditional Jamesian novel. Pynchon and his contemporaries undermine the pretext that a text can articulate an enclosed world that speaks and communicates with the reader, focusing instead upon the text as something that could be manipulated, asking the reader to recognize that manipulation.
Postmodernism as a literary movement emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, making the styles and heuristics of Postmodernism nearly half a century old. This point bears noting because there is too often the notion (in undergraduate writing at least) that Postmodernism is as yet a pervasive, incredibly current mode of thinking, one that has not been challenged or advanced in any substantive fashion. Yet Vollmann—along with David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and others—personifies a trend in recent decades of fiction where the aim is to move beyond many of the themes and positions of the Postmodernist works. No one has as yet invented a catchall term for these authors, but to say they are authors of a “Post-Postmodernist” body of fiction in not wholly inaccurate. *Europe Central* is an exemplar of this trend: not an uncomplicated novel, Vollmann utilizes metafictive elements, extremely varied narrative voices and a net of shared references and indices to construct his text. Yet if Vollmann consciously utilizes and delineates key elements of Postmodernist literature, he does so in service of a dialectic that diverges substantively from Postmodernism. Unlike Pynchon, Vollmann privileges and places faith in the work of art that exists in its own autonomy: Opus 110 is a twenty minute long piece of music composed in three days, but in Vollmann’s interpretation this composition successfully paraphrases decades of suffering by millions of people living under two, distinctively evil totalitarian regimes. In making this chamber piece the center of *Europe Central*, Vollmann says that the work of art, in itself, can still mean something of enormous value. If *Europe Central* advances the idea of the self-contained artwork as mitigating human suffering, Vollmann is also advancing a position that Hale and others believed the Postmodernist novel was actively
attempting to counteract: the idea that the novel can and should provide the most efficacious artistic method of instilling sympathy, empathy and understanding in a reader. Vollmann, for all his complexities, reintroduces notions of moral education into the novel.
Bibliography


Tölöyan, Khachig. “War as Background in Gravity’s Rainbow.” In Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow, 31-68. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983..


