

*Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

# THOMAS PYNCHON

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



## *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

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Alfred, Lord Tennyson	Eudora Welty	

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# THOMAS PYNCHON

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*Edited and with an introduction by*  
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 **CHELSEA HOUSE**  
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## *Editor's Note*

My Introduction concerns *Gravity's Rainbow*, with particular emphasis upon "The Story of Byron the Bulb."

Edward Mendelson traces what he considers the interplay of sacred and profane in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

To Richard Poirier, Pynchon is a great novelist of betrayal, heir of Melville and Hawthorne.

George Levine comments on Pynchon's "sado-anarchism" and its effect of disorienting us.

Catharine R. Stimpson examines the equivocal role of women as apocalyptic figures in Pynchon.

Analyzing allegorical language in Pynchon, Maureen Quilligan observes that every reader becomes her or his own allegorist.

The early story, "Entropy," is seen by David Seed as an inverted allegory of order.

Kathryn Hume bravely attempts to unravel some of Pynchon's complex mythographies.

The large question of what "paranoia" means in Pynchon is explored by Leo Bersani.

Dwight Eddins examines Pynchon's Gnosticism in his early stories.

*V.*, a reader's delight, is read by John Dugdale in terms of its prevalent ambivalences, while *Vineland*, the weakest of Pynchon's works, receives a rescue operation from N. Katherine Hayles.

Bernard Duyfhuizen returns us to *The Crying of Lot 49*, to examine its creative disruptions.



The remaining essays deal with Pynchon's late masterpiece, *Mason & Dixon*.

Michael Wood subtly praises *Mason & Dixon* for balancing completion and the truth of disorder, after which David Cowart sees Pynchon as embracing a limited idea of order. Finally, Thomas H. Schaub refreshingly expresses the element of compassion in *Mason & Dixon*.

## *Introduction*

### I

We all carry about us our personal catalog of the experiences that matters most—our own versions of what they used to call the Sublime. So far as aesthetic experience in twentieth-century America is concerned, I myself have a short list for the American Sublime: the war that concludes the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*; Faulkner's *As I lay Dying*; Wallace Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn"; nearly all of Hart Crane; Charlie Parker playing "Parker's Mood" and "I Remember You"; Bud Powell performing "Un Poco Loco"; Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*; and most recently, the story of Byron the light bulb in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I am not suggesting that there is not much more of the Sublime in *Gravity's Rainbow* than the not quite eight pages make up the story of Byron the Bulb. Pynchon is the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West, and if nothing besides Byron the Bulb in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to me quite as perfect as all of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that may be because no one could hope to write the first authentic post-Holocaust novel, and achieve a total vision without fearful cost. Yet the story of Byron the Bulb, for me, touches one of the limits of art, and I want to read it very closely here, so as to suggest what is most vital and least problematic about Pynchon's achievement as a writer, indeed as the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time. We are now, in my judgment, in the Age of John Ashbery and of Thomas Pynchon, which is not to suggest any inadequacy in such marvelous works as James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* or Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* but only to indicate one critic's conviction as to what now constitutes the Spirit of the Age.

For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System. No one is going to dispute such a conviction; reading the *New York Times* first thing every morning is sufficient to convince one that not even

Pynchon's imagination can match journalistic irreality. What is more startling about Pynchon is that he has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both impulse and its representations always are defeated. In the Zone (which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it, the *kenoma* or Great Emptiness) the force of the System, of They (whom the Gnostics called Archons), is in some sense irresistible, as all overdetermination must be irresistible. Yet there is a Counterforce, hardly distinguished in its efficacy, but it never does (or can) give up. Unfortunately, its hero is the extraordinarily ordinary Tyrone Slothrop, who is a perpetual disaster, and whose ultimate fate, being "scattered" (rather in biblical sense), is accomplished by Pynchon with dismaying literalness. And yet—Slothrop, who has not inspired much affection even in Pynchon's best critics, remains more hero than antihero, despite the critics, and despite Pynchon himself.

There are more than four hundred named characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and perhaps twenty of these have something we might want to call personality, but only Tyrone Slothrop (however negatively) could be judged a self representation (however involuntary) on the author's part. Slothrop is a Kabbalistic version of Pynchon himself, rather in the way that Scythrop the poet in Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* is intentionally a loving satire upon Peacock's friend the poet Shelley, but Kabbalistically is a representation of Peacock himself. I am not interested in adding *Nightmare Abby* to the maddening catalog of "sources" for *Gravity's Rainbow* (though Slothrop's very name probably alludes to Scythrop's, with the image of a giant sloth replacing the accuity of the Shelleyan scythe). What does concern me is the Kabbalistic winding path that is Pynchon's authentic and Gnostic image for the route through the *kelippot* or evil husks that the light must take if it is to survive in the ultimate breaking of the vessels, the Holocaust brought about by the System at its most evil, yet hardly at its most prevalent.

The not unimpressive polemic of Norman Mailer—that Fascism always lurks where plastic dominates—is in Pynchon not a polemic but a total vision. Mailer, for all his legitimate status as Representative Man, lacks invention except in *Ancient Evenings*, and there he cannot discipline his inventiveness. Pynchon surpasses every American writer since Faulkner at invention, which Dr. Samuel Johnson, greatest of Western literary critics, rightly considered to be the essence of poetry or fiction. What can be judged Pynchon's greatest talent is his vast control, a preternatural ability to order so immense an exuberance at invention. Pynchon's supreme aesthetic quality is what Hazlitt called *gusto*, or what Blake intended in his Infernal proverb: "Exuberance is Beauty."

Sadly, that is precisely what the Counterforce lacks: gusto. Slothrop never gives up; always defeated, he goes on, bloody and bowed, but has to yield to entropy, to dread scattering. Yet he lacks all exuberance; he is the American as conditioned reflex, colorless and hapless.

Nothing holds or could hold *Gravity's Rainbow* together—except Slothrop. When he is finally scattered, the book stops, and the apocalyptic rocket blasts off. Still, Slothrop is more than a Derridean dissemination, if only because he does enable Pynchon to gather together seven hundred and sixty pages. Nor is *Gravity's Rainbow* what is now called “a text.” It is a novel, with a beginning, an end, and a monstrous conglomerate of middles. This could not be if the *schlemiel* Slothrop were wholly antipathetic. Instead, he does enlist something crucial in the elitist reader, a something that is scattered when the hero, poor Plasticman or Rocketman, is apocalyptically scattered.

Pynchon, as Richard Poirier has best seen and said, is a weird blend of esoteric and insanely learned with popular or the supposed popular. Or, to follow Pynchon's own lead, he is a Kabbalistic writer, esoteric not only in his theosophical allusiveness (like Yeats) but actually in his deeper patterns (like Malcolm Lowry in *Under the Volcano*) A Kabbalistic novel is something beyond an oxymoron not because Kabbalah does not tell stories (it does) but because its stories are all exegetical, however wild and mythological. That does give a useful clue for reading Pynchon, who always seems not so much to be telling his bewildering, labyrinthine story as writing wistful commentary upon it as a story already twice-told, though it hasn't been, and truly can't be told at all.

## II

That returns us to Byron the Bulb, whose story can't be told because poor Byron the indomitable really is immortal. He can never burn out, which at least is an annoyance for the whole paranoid System, and at most is an embarrassment for them. They cannot compel Byron to submit to the law of entropy, or the death drive, and yet they can deny him any context in which his immortality will at last be anything but a provocation to his own madness. A living reminder that the System can never quite win, poor Byron the Bulb, becomes a death in life reminder that the System also can never quite lose. Byron, unlike Slothrop, cannot be scattered, but his high consciousness represents the dark fate of the Gnosis in Pynchon's vision. For all its negativity, Gnosticism remains a mode of transcendental belief. Pynchon's is



From the start, Byron is an anomaly, attempting to recruit the other Baby Bulbs in his great crusade against the Company. He is already a voice in the Zone, since he is as old as time.

Trouble with Byron's he's an old, old soul, trapped inside the glass prison of a Baby Bulb.

Like the noble Lord Byron plotting to lead the Greeks in their Revolution against the Turks, Byron the Bulb has his High-Romantic vision:

When M-Day finally does roll around, you can bet Byron's elated. He has passed the time hatching some really insane grandiose plans—he's gonna organize all the Bulbs, see, get him a power base in Berlin, he's already hep to the Strobing Tactic, all you do is develop the knack (Yogic, almost) of shutting off and on at a rate close to the human brain's alpha rhythm, and you can actually trigger an *epileptic fit!* True. Byron has had a vision against the rafters of his ward, of 20 million Bulbs, all over Europe, at a given synchronizing pulse arranged by one of his many agents in the Grid, all these bulbs beginning to strobe *together*, humans thrashing around the 20 million rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy—Attention, humans, this has been a warning to you. Next time, a few of us will *explode*. Ha-ha. Yes we'll unleash our *Kamikaze squads!* You've heard of the Kirghiz Light? Well that's the ass end of a fire fly compared to what we're gonna—oh, you haven't heard of the—oh, well, too bad. Cause a few Bulbs, say a million, a mere 5% of our number, are more than willing to flame out in one grand burst instead of patiently waiting out their design hours.... So Byron dreams of his Guerilla Strike Force, gonna get Herbert Hoover, Stanley Baldwin, all of them, right in the face with one coordinated blast.

The rhetoric of bravado here is tempered and defeated by a rhetoric of desperation. A rude awakening awaits Byron, because the System has in place already its branch, "Phoebus," the international light-bulb cartel, headquartered of course in Switzerland. Phoebus, god of light and of pestilence "determines the operational lives of all the bulbs in the world," and yet does not as yet know that Byron, rebel against the cartel's repression, is immortal. As an immortal, bearer of the Gnostic Spark or *pneuma*, Byron must acquire knowledge, initially the sadness of the knowledge of love:

One by one, over the months, the other bulbs burn out, and are gone. The first few of these hit Byron hard. He's still a new arrival, still hasn't accepted his immortality. But on through the burning hours he starts to learn about the transience of others: learns that loving them while they're here becomes easier, and also more intense—to love as if each design-hour will be the last. Byron soon enough becomes a Permanent Old-Timer. Others can recognize his immortality on sight, but it's never discussed except in a general way, when folklore comes flickering in from other parts of the Grid, tales of the Immortals, one in a kabbalist's study in Lyons who's supposed to know magic, another in Norway outside a warehouse facing arctic whiteness with a stoicism more southerly bulbs begin strobing faintly just at the thought of. If other Immortals *are* out there, they remain silent. But it is a silence with much, perhaps, everything, in it.

A silence that may have everything in it is a Gnostic concept, but falls away into the silence of impotence on the part of the other bulbs when the System eventually sends its agent to unscrew Byron:

At 800 hours—another routine precaution—a Berlin agent is sent out to the opium den to transfer Byron. She is wearing asbestos-lined kid gloves and seven-inch spike heels, no not so she can fit in with the crowd, but so that she can reach that sconce to unscrew Byron. The other bulbs watch, in barely subdued terror. The word goes out along the Grid. At something close to the speed of light, every bulb, Azos looking down the empty black Bakelite streets, Nitalampen and Wotan Gs at night soccer matches, Just-Wolframs, Monowatts and Siriuses, every bulb in Europe knows what's happened. They are silent with impotence, with surrender in the face of struggles they thought were all myth. *We can't help*, this common though humming through pastures of sleeping sheep, down Autobahns and to the bitter ends of coaling piers in the North, *there's never been anything we could do...* Anyone shows us the meanest hope of transcending and the Committee on Incandescent Anomilies comes in and takes him away. Some do protest, maybe, here and there, but it's only information, glow-modulated, harmless, nothing close to the explosions in the faces of the powerful that Byron once envisioned, back there in his Baby ward, in his innocence.

Romantics are Incandescent Anomalies, a phrase wholly appropriate to John Ashbery's belated self-illuminations also, defeated epiphanies that always ask the question: Was it information? The information that Pynchon gives us has Byron taken to a "control point," where he burns on until the committee on Incandescent Anomalies sends a hit man after him. Like the noble Lord Byron, who was more than half in love with easeful death before he went off to die in Greece, Byron the Bulb is now content to be recycled also, but he is bound upon his own wheel of fire, and so must continue as a now involuntary prophet and hero:

But here something odd happens. Yes, damned odd. The plan is to smash up Byron and send him back right there in the shop to cullet and batch—salvage the tungsten, of course—and let him be reincarnated in the glassblower's next project (a balloon setting out on a journey from the top of a white skyscraper). This wouldn't be too bad a deal for Byron—he knows as well as Phoebus does how many hours he has on him. Here in the shop he's watched enough glass being melted back into the structureless pool from which all glass forms spring and re-spring, wouldn't mind going through it himself. But he is trapped on the Karmic wheel. The glowing orange batch is a taunt, cruelty. There's no escape for Byron, he's doomed to an infinite regress of sockets and bulb-snatchers. In zips young Hansel Geschwindig, a Weimar street urchin-twirls Byron out of the ceiling into a careful pocket and Gessschhhwindig! out the door again. Darkness invades the dreams of the glassblower. Of all the unpleasantries his dreams grab in out of the night air, an extinguished light is the worst. Light, in his dreams, was always hope: the basic, mortal hope. As the contacts break helically away, hope turns to darkness, and the glassblower wakes sharply tonight crying, "Who? *Who?*"

Byron the Bulb's Promethean fire is now a taunt and a cruelty. A mad comedy, "an infinite regress of sockets and bulb snatchers," will be the poor Bulb's destiny, a repetition-compulsion akin to the entropic flight and scattering of the heroic *schlemiel* Slothrop. The stone-faced search parties of the Phoebus combine move out into the streets of Berlin. But Byron is off upon his unwilling travels: Berlin to Hamburg to Helgoland to Nürnberg, until (after many narrow escapes):



He is scavenged next day (the field now deathempty, columned, pale, streaked with long mudpuddles, morning clouds lengthening behind the gilded swastika and wreath) by a poor Jewish ragpicker, and taken on, on into another 15 years of preservation against chance and against Phoebus. He will be screwed into mother (*Mutter*) after mother, as the female threads of German light-bulb sockets are known, for some reason that escapes everybody.

Can we surmise the reason? The cartel gives up, and decides to declare Byron legally burned out, a declaration that deceives nobody.

Through his years of survival, all these various rescues of Byron happen as if by accident. Whenever he can, he tries to instruct any bulbs nearby in the evil nature of Phoebus, and in the need for solidarity against the cartel. He has come to see how Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light-energy alone. Phoebus has restricted Bulb to this one identity. “But there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band. Bulb can give heat. Bulb can provide energy for plants to grow, illegal plants, inside closets, for example. Bulb can penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men.” Some bulbs listened attentively—others thought of ways to fink to Phoebus. Some of the older anti-Byronists were able to fool with their parameters in systematic ways that would show up on the ebonite meter under the Swiss mountain: there were even a few self-immolations, hoping to draw the hit men down.

This darkness of vain treachery helps to flesh out the reason for Byron’s survival. Call it the necessity of myth, or of gossip aging productively into myth. Not that Phoebus loses any part of its profit; rather, it establishes a subtler and more intricate international cartel pattern:

Byron, as he burns on, sees more and more of this pattern. He learns how to make contact with other kinds of electric appliances, in homes, in factories and out in the streets. Each has something to tell him. The pattern gathers in his soul (*Seele*, as the core of the earlier carbon filament was known in Germany), and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron

gets. Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seems impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don't last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it.

This seems to me the saddest paragraph in all of Pynchon; at least, it hurts me the most. In it is Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah, since Byron the Bulb does achieve the Gnosis, complete knowledge, but purchases that knowledge by impotence, the loss of power. Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation. What remains is madness: limitless rage and frustration, which at last he learns to enjoy.

That ends the story of Byron the bulb, and ends something in Pynchon also. What is left is the studying of new modalities of post-Apocalyptic silence. Pynchon seems now to be where his precursor Emerson prophesied the American visionary must be:

There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,  
—*I and the Abyss.*

If at best, the *I* is an immortal but hapless light bulb and the *Abyss*, our Gnostic foremother and forefather, is the socket into which that poor *I* of a bulb is screwed, then the two absorbing facts themselves have ceased to absorb.



EDWARD MENDELSON

*The Sacred, The Profane,  
and The Crying of Lot 49*

I

Thomas Pynchon's first two novels (a third has been announced at this writing) are members of that rare and valuable class of books which, on their first appearance, were thought obscure even by their admirers, but which became increasingly accessible afterwards, without losing any of their original excitement. When *V.*, Pynchon's first novel, appeared in 1963, some of its reviewers counselled reading it twice or not at all, and even then warned that its various patterns would not fall entirely into place. Even if its formal elements were obscure, *V.* still recommended itself through its sustained explosions of verbal and imaginative energy, its immense range of knowledge and incident, its extraordinary ability to excite the emotions without ever descending into the easy paths of self-praise or self-pity that less rigorous novelists had been tracking with success for years. By now the published discussions of the book agree that its central action, repeated and articulated in dozens of variations, involves a decline, both in history broadly conceived and in the book's individual characters, from energy to stasis, and from the vital to the inanimate. *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon's second book, published in 1966, is much shorter and superficially more cohesive than the first book. Its reception, compared with *V.*'s almost universal praise, was

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From *Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction*. © 1975 by Duke University Press.

relatively muted, and it has since received less critical attention than it deserves. Yet a clear account of its total organization is now becoming possible. *Lot 49* clarified many of the issues of *V.*, by inverting and developing them; Pynchon's new novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, will probably help to sort out many of the difficulties of *Lot 49*. This paper is an attempt at an interim progress report, with new observations, on the reading of Pynchon's second novel.

Both of the novels describe a gradual revelation of order and unity within the multiplicity of experience, but the kinds of order that the two books discover are almost diametrically opposed. Despite its cosmopolitan variety of incident and character, *V.* develops around a unifying principle that is ultimately constricting and infertile. The book's central metaphor is the thermodynamic concept of entropy, which for the moment may be defined loosely as the slowing down of a system, the calcifying decay of life and available energy on a scale that may be minute or global. Entropy is the principle within irreversible processes, the principle that, in Freud's words, opposes the undoing of what has already occurred. By extending this principle one may speculate that the universe itself must eventually suffer a "heat-death," reduced and simplified to a luke-warm system in which no energy may be used for any purpose. Pynchon used "Entropy" as the title and theme of one of his first published stories,<sup>1</sup> and the concept recurs, in a significantly different form, in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In Pynchon's hands entropy serves as a metaphor of exceptional range and emotional power, and in this Pynchon is not alone. The concept of entropy, whether or not it is named as such, has informed much fiction and philosophy for centuries: it is a central motif in satire, and is the historical principle behind Plato's account of four types of unjust society in the *Republic*.

*The Crying of Lot 49*, although slighter in scale than *V.*, finds the intrusive energy that is needed to reverse the process that *V.* describes. In *Lot 49* a world of triviality and "exitlessness"<sup>2</sup> becomes infused with energy and choice, and Pynchon seems to be demonstrating that he can balance the 500 pages of decline recounted in *V.* with some 200 pages of possible recovery in *Lot 49*. The ostensible subject of the latter novel is one woman's discovery of a system of communication, but the system refers to something far larger than itself: it fosters variety and surprise, and offers a potential access to "transcendent meaning" and "a reason that mattered to the world" (181). Extend the world of *V.* beyond the book's final chapters, and you eventually intrude on the unlit, motionless world of the later Beckett. Extend *The Crying of Lot 49*, and you soon come in sight of Prospero's island and the

seacoast of Bohemia. The processes of *V.* isolate; those of *Lot 49* create community.

Almost all the incidents in *V.* enact a decline of available energy, a hardening of living beings into artificial ones, a degradation from vitality to mechanism, a transfer of sympathy from human suffering to inanimate, objective existence. In the world of *V.* there can only be few alternatives to decline, and those few are weak: some understated temporary acts of escape and love, a sudden dash into the sea as all the lights go out in a city, the reconstruction of a marriage. All the rest leads to stasis—although the book's scale and exuberance suggest that mass decline is a principle of existence in the novel but not in its creator. The central plot from which the book's various historical fantasies—Egypt in 1898, Florence in 1899, Paris in 1913, Malta in 1919 and again in the 1940s, South-West Africa in 1922, and glimpses of a score of other settings and moments—involves the search made by one Herbert Stencil for traces of the woman *V.*, who may have been Stencil's mother, as she moves through Europe and the twentieth century, becoming ever less vital and more artificial as she grows older. In her final manifestation as “the Bad Priest” at Malta during the Second World War, *V.* advises young girls to become nuns, to “avoid the sensual extremes—pleasures of intercourse, pain of childbirth”—and to prevent the creation of new life. To young boys she preaches “that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless.”<sup>3</sup> And before her death she gives up much of her own body to inanimate surrogates: a wig, artificial feet, a glass eye containing a clock, false teeth. A jewel is later found sewn in her navel. Increasingly lifeless and crystalline, finally killed by the mechanical engines of war in the sky over Malta, the woman *V.* is the most vividly realized victim of the book's pandemic processes of inanition and decline. The other victims include a ruined product of failed plastic surgery, a man with a knife-switch in his arm, a synthetic body used for radiation research, a girl reduced to a fetish, a character named Profane constantly victimized by hostile objects. The book implies a conclusion that lies beyond itself: an ending where all life and warmth have declined and disappeared, an apocalypse that arrives in total silence.

“There is more behind and inside *V.* than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she,” asks Stencil's father in his diary (*V.*, 53). The novel *V.* is an elaborate gloss on an earlier account of a woman whom history replaced with an object: the chapter on “The Dynamo and the Virgin” in *The Education of Henry Adams*. Pynchon's Stencil, who like Adams talks of himself in the third person, searches for a symbol even more inclusive than Adams's; *V.* is the virgin who *became* the dynamo. The woman *V.* is Stencil's

reconstruction of scattered and ambiguous clues and symbols, gathered into episodes told by narrators—often obviously flawed and unreliable—whom Stencil creates for the occasion. Half the novel consists of Stencil's indirect narration of the life of V., who is seldom central to the story, but slips in sideways when she is least expected. Stencil's reconstruction of V.'s fragmentary signs—an enactment in reverse of her physical disintegration—is a paradigm of Pynchon's reconstruction of twentieth-century history, a reconstruction which establishes the novel's "ground." The woman V., like Pynchon's history, is put together by design. In his Spenglerian sweep through the century (Stencil, born in 1901, is "the century's child"—*V.*, 52—as well as V.'s) Pynchon invents coincidences and patterns which suggest historical design in the novel's world. "If the coincidences are real then Stencil has never encountered history at all, but something far more appalling" (*V.*, 450).

This suggestion of will and design in history is analogous to Stencil's own "design" of V., but Pynchon makes the analogy even more complex and suggestive than a simple equation can be. To begin with, V. is not entirely a product of Stencil's reconstructions. The frame of the novel *V.* is a narrator's direct account of events in 1955 and 1956, events which include Stencil's *indirect* narrations of the life of V. (Pynchon makes certain that Stencil's narratives, compelling as they are, are taken as speculative and suspect: people speak and understand languages which they could not understand "in life," and characters in the book occasionally remark on such difficulties.) The direct framing narrative is apparently reliable, unlike Stencil's, and it gradually and increasingly provides its own, un-Stencilled, evidence of V.'s existence. "The Confessions of Fausto Maijstral," another apparently reliable narrative written by the last person who saw V. alive, has a chapter to itself, unmediated by Stencil, with a plausible account of V.'s final moments. And a relic of V., an ivory comb which in Stencil's invented narrative she had perhaps acquired decades earlier, later appears both in Maijstral's confessions and, in the hands of Maijstral's daughter, in Pynchon's direct narrative. The comb serves as a kind of optical proof that V. once existed in the world of the book. But by the time the evidence appears in the direct narrative, Stencil has gone off to Stockholm to pursue other and more tenuous threads, and the authentic clue eludes him, presumably forever. The moment when the comb reappears is a heartbreaking one, not only because the reader knows then that one neat and satisfying conclusion to the novel—a reasonably successful conclusion of Stencil's search—has been irrevocably denied, but also because the incident makes a faint and reticent suggestion about the limits of human knowledge: a suggestion that, perhaps because of its reticence, rings true.

This leads back to the matter of historical design. For the characters in the direct narration of the book, V.'s existence is never more than speculative: their evidence of her is always partial. It is only the narrator, who has no *use* for it, who has thorough knowledge of the evidence and the "truth." The characters have only partial knowledge of what in the book "in fact" exists. Now the book's Spenglerian speculation on historical design is also a reconstruction from partial evidence, for even the narrator's historical knowledge is severely limited. But by analogy with the "real" coherence of the woman V. (and the book softly but insistently presses the analogy), there may, the book suggests, be a real order and coherence to history in the world of phenomena that lies outside fiction's garden. But, as the genuine signs of V. elude Stencil—though they do exist, and Stencil has partial knowledge of some of them—so there may be a genuine transcendent coherence in the world's history, although the signs of that coherence either refuse to cooperate with our preconceptions, or elude us entirely. *V.* is finally a tragedy of human limitation, and like all tragedy it points towards the larger frame in which the tragic action occurs. The contradiction between human ignorance of the frame, and the frame itself, is tragedy's ultimate source, its mode of being.

## II

In contrast with the absconded signs of *V.*, the signs that appear throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* are not elusive at all. They intrude iteratively on the book's heroine until they entirely supplant the undemanding world with which she had once been familiar. In *Lot 49* the systems of interrelation and commonality that inform the book's world have consequences entirely different from the superficially similar systems in *V.* To participate in the processes of decadence in *V.* you have only to become passive, inanimate and selfish; history, which simplifies *V.*'s world, will do the rest. But in *The Crying of Lot 49* the revealed pattern offers "maybe even ... a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life that harrows the head of everybody American you know" (170), an alternative to physical crowding and ethical vacancy, an alternative that reveals itself quietly but persistently to the passive listener, yet will not allow that listener to remain passive for long. In this second novel, published only three years after *V.*, a hidden order reinfuses Pynchon's world with energy, adds to the world's complexity, and demands not acquiescence but conscious choice.

Described briefly, in the sort of the bare outline that makes any serious plot sound ridiculous, *The Crying of Lot 49* recounts the discovery by its



heroine, Mrs. Oedipa Maas, of an ancient and secret postal system named the Tristero. The manifestations of the Trystero (an alternate spelling), and all that accompanies it, are always associated in the book with the language of the sacred and with patterns of religious experience; the foils to the Trystero are always associated with sacrality gone wrong. As every person and event in *V.* is implicated in the general decline into the inanimate, everything in *Lot 49* participates either in the sacred or the profane. A major character in *V.* is named Benny Profane; in *Lot 49* there are wider possibilities (including someone named Grace). As Pynchon's work avoids the weightlessness of Nabokovian fantasy, so it avoids the self-important *nostalgie de la boue* of the social and psychological novels that occupy most of the fictional space in postwar America. Oedipa has "all manner of revelations," but they are not in the manner of most recent fiction, and certainly not the kind of revelations that her name might suggest: they are "hardly about ... herself" (20). Pynchon writes at the end of an era in which the Freudian interpretation of an event served as a more than adequate succedanium for the event itself: it was an act of courage to name his heroine Oedipa (I shall have more to say later about the courage to risk facetiousness), for the novel contains not even a single reference to her emotional relations with her parents or her impulses towards self-creation. The name instead refers back to the Sophoclean Oedipus who begins his search for the solution of a problem (a problem, like Oedipa's, involving a dead man) as an almost detached observer, only to discover how deeply implicated he is in what he finds. As the book opens, and Oedipa learns that she has been named executor of the estate of the "California real estate mogul" Pierce Inverarity, she "shuffl[es] back" in her memory "through a fat deckful of days which seemed ... more or less identical" (11). But as she begins to sort out the complications of Inverarity's estate she becomes aware of moments of special significance, repeated patterns of meaning, that had not previously been apparent. Driving into the town where Inverarity's interests had been centered, she looks down from the freeway upon "the ordered swirl of houses and streets" and senses the possibility of a *kind* of meaning that is, for the moment, beyond her comprehension:

she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity ... [T]here were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate ... [Now,] a revelation also trembled

just past the threshold of her understanding ... [She] seemed parked at the centre of an odd religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (24–25)

At this point Oedipa's revelations are only partly defined. In the next paragraph the narrator dismisses Oedipa's experience by placing it in distancing quotation marks: "the 'religious instant,' or whatever it might have been."

But a few pages later an "instant" of the same kind occurs, but this time more clearly defined. Oedipa sees in a television commercial a map of one of Inverarity's housing developments, and is reminded of her first glimpse of the town in which she is now: "Some immediacy was there again, some promise of hierophany" (31). This "promise of hierophany," of a manifestation of the sacred, is eventually fulfilled, and her "sense of concealed meaning" yields to her recognition of patterns that had potentially been accessible to her all along, but which only now had revealed themselves. In the prose sense, what Oedipa discovers is the Trystero, "a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty"—that is, everything profane—"for the official government delivery system" (170). But across this hidden and illegal network information is transmitted in ways that defy ordinary logic: often, the links in the system cross centuries, or move between the most unlikely combinations of sender and receiver, without anyone in the world of routine ever recognizing that something untoward has occurred. The Trystero carries with it a sense of sacred connection and relation in the world, and by doing so it manifests a way of comprehending the world. By the end of the novel Oedipa is left alone, out over seventy thousand fathoms, left to decide for herself whether the Trystero exists or if she has merely fantasized, or if she has been hoodwinked into believing in it. On that all-or-nothing decision, everything—her construing of the world, and the world's construction—depends:

how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth.... Ones and zeroes....

Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there was either some Tristero behind the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America.... (181–182)

As in all religious choices, no proof is possible: the choice of ones or zeroes presents itself “ahead ... maybe endless,” and the watcher is left alone.

Pynchon uses religious terms and hieratic language not simply as a set of metaphors from which to hang his narrative, not merely as a scaffolding (as Joyce, for example, uses Christian symbols in *Ulysses*). The religious meaning of the book does not reduce to metaphor or myth, because religious meaning is itself the central issue of the plot. This creates difficulties for criticism. The Tristero implies universal meanings, and since universal meanings are notoriously recalcitrant to analysis, it will be necessary to approach the holistic center of the book from various facets and fragments. I hope the reader will bear with an argument that may, for a number of pages, ask him to assent to resolutions of issues that have not yet been discussed.

The book refers at one point to “the secular Tristero,” which has a plausible history and a recognizable origin in ordinary human emotion and human society. During one of the few areas of the narrative in which nothing extraordinary happens—a “secular” part of the book—Oedipa compiles, with the help of one of the book’s prosier characters (an English professor, alas), a history of the system that is somewhat speculative, but more plausible than the mock-theorizing in *V*. The history of the Tristero intersects with authentic history in a manner taken from historical novels like *Henry Esmond* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, where an extraordinary, fictional pattern of events, one that almost but not quite alters the larger course of history, is presented behind the familiar, public pattern. The Tristero, then, began in sixteenth-century Holland, when an insurgent Calvinist government unseated the hereditary postmaster, a member of the Thurn and Taxis family (here Pynchon blends authentic history with novelistic fantasy—the counts of Taxis did hold the postal monopoly in the Empire), and replaced him with one Jan Hinckart, Lord of Ohain. But Hinckart’s right to the position, which he gained through political upheaval, not through inheritance, is disputed by a Spaniard, Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera, who claims to be Hinckart’s cousin and the legitimate Lord of Ohain—and therefore the legitimate postmaster. Later, after an indecisive struggle between Hinckart and Tristero, the Calvinists are overthrown, and the Thurn and Taxis line restored to postmastership. But Tristero, claiming that the postal monopoly

was Ohain's by conquest, and therefore his own by blood, sets up an alternative postal system, and proceeds to wage guerrilla war against the Thurn and Taxis system. The rallying theme of Tristero's struggle: "disinheritance" (159-160).

So far, the story, though a fantasy, is still historically plausible, requiring only a relatively slack suspension of disbelief. However the word Calavera (skull, Calvary) in Tristero's name already suggests some emblematic resonances, and the theme of disinheritance joins the Tristero's history to Oedipa's discovery of it while executing a will. Later in the history, the Tryster system takes on, *for its contemporaries*, a specifically religious meaning. Pynchon invents a severe Calvinist sect, the Scurvhamites, who tend toward the gnostic heresy and see Creation as a machine, one part of which is moved by God, the other by a soulless and automatic principle. When the Scurvhamites decide to tamper with some secular literature (specifically, the play *The Courier's Tragedy*, of which more shortly) to give it doctrinal meaning, they find that the "Tryster would symbolize the Other quite well" (156). For Thurn and Taxis itself, faced with the enmity of the anonymous and secret Tryster system, "many of them must [have] come to believe in something very like the Scurvhamite's blind, automatic anti-God. Whatever it is, it has the power to murder their riders, send landslides thundering across their roads ... disintegrate the Empire." But this belief cannot last: "over the next century and a half the paranoia recedes, [and] they come to discover the secular Tryster" (165). The Tryster returns from its symbolic meanings into a realm that is historically safe and believable. In this passage Pynchon offers an analogously safe way to read his own book: the Tryster is a symbol for a complex of events taking place on the level of a battle in heaven, but it is merely a symbol, a way of speaking that has no hieratic significance in itself. But the novel, while offering this possibility, does so in a chapter in which nothing strange happens, where the world is Aristotelian and profane, where the extraordinary concrescences of repetition and relation that inform the rest of the book briefly sort themselves out into simple, logical patterns. The book offers the possibility that its religious metaphor is only metaphor: but if the book were founded on this limited possibility, the remaining portions of the book would make no sense, and there would be little reason to write it in the first place.

The potted history near the end of the novel describes the discovery of the "secular Tryster" behind the demonic one; the book itself describes the progressive revelation of the sacred significance behind certain historical events. It should perhaps be mentioned that the frequent associations of the Tryster with the demonic do not contradict the Tryster's potentially sacred

significance: the demonic is a subclass of the sacred, and exists, like the sacred, on a plane of meaning different from the profane and the secular. When Pynchon published two chapters from the book in a magazine he gave them the title, “The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity”:<sup>4</sup> it is through Inverarity’s will that Oedipa completes this proverbial equation, and finds her own devil in the agonizing ontological choice she has to make as the novel ends. The revelation of the sacred gets underway when Oedipa sees in the map of one of Inverarity’s interests “some promise of hierophany.” The sense of the word “hierophany” is clear enough—it is a manifestation of the sacred—but the word itself has a history that is informative in this context. The word is not recorded in the dictionaries of any modern European language (the related “hierophant” is of course recorded, but “hierophany” is not), and it appears to have been invented by Mircea Eliade;<sup>5</sup> who expands most fully on the word in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* but gives a more straightforward definition in his introduction to *The Sacred and the Profane*: “Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, *i.e.*, that *something sacred shows itself to us ...* From the most elementary hierophany ... to the supreme hierophany ... there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”<sup>6</sup> This latter condition, that the objects in which the sacred manifests itself be part of the natural world, is central to *Lot 49*, because everything in the novel that points to a sacred significance in the Trystero has, potentially, a secular explanation. The pattern and the coherence may, as Oedipa reminds herself, be the product of her own fantasy or of someone else’s hoax. She is left, at every moment, to affirm or deny the sacredness of what she sees.

When, as she begins to uncover the Trystero, Oedipa decides to give, through her own efforts, some order to Inverarity’s tangled interests, she writes in her notebook, “Shall I project a world?” (82). But her plan to provide her own meanings, “to bestow life on what had persisted” of the dead man, soon confronts the anomaly that more meanings, more relationships and connections than she ever expected begin to offer themselves—manifest themselves. And these manifestations arrive without any effort on her part. When, by the middle of the book, “everything she saw, smelled, dreamed,

remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Trystero” (81), she tries to escape, to cease looking for order. “She had only to drift,” she supposes, “at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced that it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix” (104). But when she drifts that night through San Francisco she finds more extensive and more varied evidence of the Trystero’s existence—evidence far more frequent and insistent than she found when she was actually looking for it. Like the mystic whose revelation is dependent on his passivity, Oedipa’s full discovery of the Trystero depends on her refusal to search for it. In the last chapter even the most surprising events leave her only in expectant passivity: “Even a month ago, Oedipa’s next question would have been ‘Why?’ But now she kept a silence, waiting, as if to be illuminated” (152).

Recent criticism has devoted much energy to finding detective story patterns in fiction, and *The Crying of Lot 49*, with its heroine named after the first detective of them all, lends itself admirably to this method. However, Pynchon’s novel uses mechanisms borrowed from the detective story to produce results precisely the opposite of those in the model. Where the object of a detective story is to reduce a complex and disordered situation to simplicity and clarity, and in doing so to isolate in a named locus the disruptive element in the story’s world, *The Crying of Lot 49* starts with a relatively simple situation, and then lets it get out of the heroine’s control: the simple becomes complex, responsibility becomes not isolated but universal, the guilty locus turns out to be everywhere, and individual clues are unimportant because neither clues nor deduction can lead to the solution. “Suppose, God, there really was a Tristero then and that she *had* come on it by accident.... [S]he might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she’d looked” (179). What the detective in this story discovers is a way of thinking that renders detection irrelevant. “The Christian,” Chesterton writes somewhere, “has to use his brains to see the hidden good in humanity just as the detective has to use his brains to see the hidden evil.” This, in essence, describes Oedipa’s problem: she never discovers the alienation and incoherence in the world—those were evident from the start—but she stumbles instead across the hidden relationships in the world, relations effected through and manifested in the Trystero.

Near the middle of the book Oedipa stops searching. From this point on she becomes almost the only character in the novel who is *not* looking for something. While hierophanies occur all around her, almost everyone else is vainly trying to wrench an experience of the sacred out of places where it cannot possibly be found. As everyone in *V.* worries constantly about the

inanimate, everyone in *The Crying of Lot 49* suffers from some distortion of religious faith, and almost everyone in the book eventually drops away from Oedipa into some religious obsession.<sup>7</sup> Their examples demonstrate the wrong turnings that Oedipa must avoid.

Mucho Maas, for example, Oedipa's husband, who works as a disc jockey, suffers "regular crises of conscience about his profession[:] 'I just don't believe in any of it'" (12). This sounds at first like a suburban cliché, but the religious language soon develops in complexity and allusiveness. Oedipa's incomprehension during her first "religious instant" reminds her of her husband "watching one of his colleagues with a headset clamped on and cueing the next record with movements stylized as the handling of chrisms, censer, chalice might be for a holy man ... [D]id Mucho stand outside Studio A looking in, knowing that even if he could hear it, he couldn't believe in it?" (25). His previous job had been at a used car lot, where although "he had believed in the cars" he suffered from a nightmare of alienation and nothingness (which also provides Pynchon with a send-up of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"): "'We were a member of the National Automobile Dealers' Association. N.A.D.A. Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering'" (144). His escape from a nihilistic void takes him into the impregnable solipsism granted by LSD, and he leaves Oedipa behind him.

The drug had previously been urged on Oedipa herself by her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, who was conducting an experiment he called the Bridge—not a bridge across to community but "the bridge inward." Oedipa, who seems to merit her revelations through her knowledge of what does *not* lead to revelation, knows that she "would be damned if she'd take the capsules he'd given her. Literally damned" (17). Hilarius himself distorts the purpose of faith. In an attempt to atone for his Nazi past he tries to develop "a faith in the literal truth of everything [Freud] wrote.... It was ... a kind of penance.... I wanted to believe, despite everything my life had been" (134–135). The strain finally sends him into paranoia and madness: fantasies of vengeful Israelis, a wish for death.

Randolph Driblette, who directs the play in which Oedipa first hears the name Trystero, suffers from the nihilistic pride that thinks itself the only possible source of order in the universe. In the play he directs, "'the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector in the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also'" (79). (It is from Driblette that Oedipa borrows the metaphor of her notebook-question, "Shall I project a world?") In directing plays Driblette "felt hardly any responsibility toward the word,

really; but to ... its spirit, he was always intensely faithful" (152). The logical response to a world where one creates, alone, the only order—where one ignores the *data* of the word—is nihilistic despair. And the logical culmination of an exclusive devotion to the spirit is the sloughing-off of the flesh: Driblette commits suicide by walking into the sea.

John Nefastis, the inventor of a machine which joins the worlds of thermodynamics and information theory (of which more later) through the literal use of a scientific metaphor known as Maxwell's Demon is "impenetrable, calm, a believer"—in whose presence Oedipa feels "like some sort of heretic." Nefastis, the book's fundamentalist, believes his scientific metaphor is "not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true." His language recalls similar moments in the rest of the book when he refers to the visible operation of his machine as "the secular level" (105–106), and the photograph of the physicist James Clerk Maxwell that adorns the machine is, oddly enough (though the narrator does not remark on the oddity), "the familiar Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge photo" (86). Nefastis's unbalanced science is endorsed, shakily, by the language of belief.

At least one character, however, has something of the enlightenment that Oedipa is approaching. A Mexican anarchist whom Oedipa meets on her night of drifting, and whom she and Inverarity had first met in Mexico some years before, is named Jesús Arrabal. When he talks politics his language quickly shifts to the language of religion:

You know what a miracle is ... another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort.... And yet ... if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle. Like your friend [Inverarity the real-estate mogul]. He is too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight. In Mexico the privilegiado is always, to a finite percentage, redeemed, one of the people. Unmiraculous. But your friend, unless he's joking, is as terrifying to me as a Virgin appearing to an Indian. (120)

The intersection of two worlds in miracles is a theme we shall return to. For the moment, it should be noted that Arrabal admits the possibility that the "miraculous" Inverarity may be "joking"—just as Oedipa has to admit the



possibility that the miraculous Trystero may be a hoax, a joke written by Inverarity into his will.

Compared with the obsessions and confusions that surround most of the other characters, the religious language associated with Oedipa herself is on a different and clearer level. The word “God” occurs perhaps twenty times in the book (it appears hardly at all in *V.*), and on almost every occasion the word hovers near Oedipa or her discoveries. In her very first word, on the first page of the book, she “spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible.” When she first encounters the Trystero’s emblem, a drawing of a muted post horn, she copies it into her notebook, “thinking: God, hieroglyphics” (52)—a double iteration, through the prefix *hiero*, of the Trystero’s sacrality. In an early passage that anticipates the book’s later, culminating reference to “a great digital computer [with] the zeroes and ones twinned above,” Oedipa tries to elude a spray-can gone wild: “something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel” (37). When she sees the Trystero symbol in one more unexpected place she feels “as if she had been trapped at the center of some intricate crystal, and say[s], ‘My God’” (92). Faced with the choice of ones and zeroes, of meaning or nothingness, she thinks, “this, oh God, was the void” (171). And there are other examples. What would simply be a nagging cliché in another kind of novel becomes here a quiet but insistent echo, a muted but audible signal.

### III

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a book partly *about* communications and signals—Oedipa’s discovery of the Trystero involves the interpretation of ambiguous signs—and, logically enough, its central scientific metaphor involves communication theory (alternately called Information Theory). It is through information theory, in fact, that Pynchon establishes in this novel a richly imaginative logical link with the world of his first novel, *V.* The two novels share some superficial details on the level of plot—one minor character appears briefly in both, a Vivaldi concerto for which someone is searching in *V.* is heard over muzak in *Lot 49*—but their deeper connection lies in *Lot 49*’s extension and transformation of *V.*’s central metaphor. *V.* describes the thermodynamic process by which the world’s entropy increases and by which the world’s available energy declines. But the equations of thermodynamics and the term “entropy” itself were also employed, decades after their original formulation, in information theory, where they took on a wider and more

complex function than they ever had before. By using information theory as a controlling pattern of ideas in his second book, Pynchon is in one way simply extending the metaphor central to his first book: but the extension also adds immeasurably to the complexity and fertility of the original idea. Thermodynamic entropy is (to speak loosely) a measure of stagnation. As thermodynamic entropy increases in a system, and its available energy decreases, information about the system increases: the system loses some of its uncertainty, its potential. In the language of information theory, however, entropy is the measure of *uncertainty* in a system. As you *increase* thermodynamic entropy, therefore, you *decrease* information entropy.<sup>8</sup> In information theory, also, the *entropy rate* of a system is the rate at which information is transmitted. Entropy increases in *V.*, and the world slows down; in *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa receives more and more surprises, more and more rapidly, and entropy still increases—but now it is information entropy rather than thermodynamic, and the effect of the increase is invigorating rather than stagnating.

Metaphorically, then, the two meanings of the term “entropy” are in opposition, and it is precisely this opposition which John Nefastis tries to exploit in his machine. Oedipa finds Nefastis’s account of his machine confusing, but

she did gather that there were two distinct kinds of this entropy. One having to do with heat-engines, the other to do with communication. The equation for one, back in the '30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was a coincidence. The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell's Demon. As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information gained about what molecules were where.

“Communication is the key,” cried Nefastis.... (105)

When Maxwell’s hypothetical “Demon” (a received term that fits neatly into Pynchon’s hieratic language) sorts hot and cold molecules, he can apparently raise the temperature in one part of a system, and lower the temperature in the other part, without expending work—thereby *decreasing* the system’s thermodynamic entropy, in violation of the second law of thermodynamics. But the decrease of thermodynamic entropy is balanced by an *increase* in information entropy, thereby supposedly making the whole thing “possible,” when a person whom Nefastis calls a “sensitive” transmits information to the

Demon that Nefastis believes is actually in his machine.<sup>9</sup> Nefastis mixes the language of science with that of spiritualism. The “sensitive” has to receive data “at some deep psychic level” from the Demon; the “sensitive” achieves his effects by staring at the photo of Maxwell on the machine; and so forth. The whole effect is one of Blavatskian mumbo-jumbo, but Nefastis also uses the language of belief that Oedipa is learning to understand. Feeling “like some kind of heretic,” she doubts Nefastis’s enterprise: “The true sensitive is the one that can share in the man’s hallucinations, that’s all” (107). But the implied question, raised by Oedipa’s doubt, is whether Oedipa’s sensitivity to the Trystero is also the product of hallucinations.

The Nefastis machine is based on the similarity between the equations for information entropy and those of thermodynamic entropy, a similarity which Nefastis calls a “metaphor.” The machine “makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true” (106). Pynchon has much to say elsewhere in the book about the relation between truth and metaphor, but Nefastis’s error is based on the confusion of language and reality, on an attempt to make two worlds coincide. Nefastis, the “believer,” has faith in his metaphor, and believes that the truth of that faith can objectively be demonstrated and confirmed. Oedipa, on the other hand, receives no confirmation. Faith, wrote Paul to the Hebrews, is “the evidence of things *not* seen.”

Besides using the association of entropy and information theory, Pynchon also exploits the theory’s rule of concerning the relation of surprise and probability in the transmitting of data. Briefly, the rule states that the more unexpected a message is, the more information it contains: a series of repetitive messages conveys less information than a series of messages that differ from each other. (Of course there must be a balance between surprise and probability: a message in language the receiver cannot understand is very surprising, but conveys little information.) In *The Crying of Lot 49* there are *two* secret communications systems: the Trystero, and its entirely secular counterpart, the system used by the right-wing Peter Pinguid Society. Both circumvent the official government delivery system, but, unlike the Trystero, the Pinguid Society’s system cares less about transmitting information than about nose-thumbing the bureaucracy. Oedipa happens to be with a member of the Society when he receives a letter with the PPS postmark:

*Dear Mike, it said, how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The Scope [a bar].*

“That’s how it is,” [the PPS member] confessed bitterly, “most of the time.” (53)

The Pinguid Society’s letters, bearing no information, are empty and repetitive. With the Trysterero, in contrast, even the stamps are surprising:

In the 3¢ Mothers of America Issue ... the flowers to the lower left of Whistler’s Mother had been replaced by Venus’s-flytrap, belladonna, poison sumac and a few others Oedipa had never seen. In the 1947 Postage Stamp Centenary Issue, commemorating the great postal reform that had meant the beginning of the end for private carriers [of which the Trysterero is the only survivor], the head of a Pony Express rider at the lower left was set at a disturbing angle unknown among the living. The deep violet 3¢ regular issue of 1954 had a faint, menacing smile on the face of the Statue of Liberty.... (174)

This delicate balance of the familiar and the unexpected (note, for example, that there are enough surprising poisoned plants, on one of the stamps, to indicate that the even more surprising ones which “Oedipa had never seen” are also poisonous) produces a powerful sense of menace and dread—a sense no less powerful for its comic aspects—while the secular Pinguid Society messages are capable only of conventionality, of repetition without a sense of the numinous.

The unit of information in communication theory is the *bit*, abbreviated from *binary digit*. Theoretically, all information can be conveyed in a sequence of binary digits, i.e., ones and zeroes. By the end of the novel, in a passage quoted above, Oedipa perceives the dilemma presented to her by the possible existence of the Trysterero in terms of the choice between one bit and another (Pynchon always provides the possibility that the Trysterero is “only” Oedipa’s fantasy, or that the whole system is a hoax written into Inverarity’s will): “For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above ... Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (181). The signs themselves do not prove anything: the streets are “hieroglyphic”—an example of sacred carving—but behind the sacred sign *may* lie what is merely profane, “only the earth.” The religious content of the book is fixed in Oedipa’s dilemma: the choice between the *zero* of secular triviality and chaos, and the *one* that is the *ganz andere* of the sacred.

In Pynchon's novel, as in life, there are two kinds of repetition: trivial repetition, as in the monotony of the Pinguid Society letters, and repetition that may signify the timeless and unchanging sacred. In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade writes that "religious man lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of mythical present that is periodically regenerated by means of rites" (70). Oedipa's first experience (in the book, that is) of trivial repetition occurs when she encounters a debased version of Eliade's "circular time, reversible and recoverable." In the second chapter, before she has any evidence of the Trystero, she watches television in the Echo Courts motel (the name is a grace-note on the main theme), with her coexecutor Metzger—a lawyer, once a child actor. The film on the screen turns out to star Metzger as a child, and when the film-Metzger sings a song, "his aging double, over Oedipa's protests, sang harmony" (31). At the end of the book, Oedipa wonders if the Trystero system is simply a plot against her; here, at the beginning, she suspects that Metzger "bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this[:] it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*." Time, on this occasion, seems to become even more confused and circular when one reel of the film is shown in the wrong order: "Is this before or after?" she asked.

In the midst of the film Oedipa glimpses a more significant form of repetition: in a passage discussed above, a map in a television commercial reminds her of the "religious instant" she felt on looking over the town where she is now. But this significant repetition occurs in the midst of reports of other, sterile ones. For example, Metzger, an actor turned lawyer, describes the pilot film of a television series on his own life, starring a friend of his, a lawyer turned actor. The film rests isolated in its own meaningless circular time, "in an air-conditioned vault ... light can't fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly." Outside the motel room, a rock-music group called the Paranoids, who all look alike, seem to be multiplying—"others must be plugging in"—until their equipment blows a fuse.

In contrast, the reiterative evidence of the Trystero that Oedipa later discovers suggests that something complex and significant has existed almost unaltered for centuries, in Eliade's "mythical present that is periodically reintegrated." Many of the events, linked with the Trystero, that occur in the Jacobean *Courier's Tragedy* that Oedipa sees early in the book, recur in the midst of the California gold rush, and again in a battle in Italy during the Second World War. The Trystero's emblem, a muted post horn (suggesting the demonic aspect of the system: it mutes the trumpet of apocalypse), recurs in countless settings, in children's games, in postmarks, lapel pins, tattoos,

rings, scrawled on walls, doodled in notebooks—in dozens of contexts which cannot, through any secular logic, be connected. Each of these repetitions, each evidence of the Trystero's persistence, seems to Oedipa a link with another world. As the Nefastis machine futilely tried to link the "worlds" of thermodynamics and communications, Jesús Arrabal talks of a miracle as "another world's intrusion into this one" (120). Those who joined the Trystero, Oedipa thinks, must have entered some kind of community when they withdrew from the ordinary life of the Republic, and, "since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum ... there had to exist the separate, silent, unexpected world" (92). To enter the Trystero, to become aware of it, is to cross the threshold between the profane and sacred worlds. "The threshold," Eliade writes in *The Sacred and the Profane*, "is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those two worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (25). Oedipa wonders if she could have "found the Trystero ... through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations" (179).

Yet in the middle of the fifth chapter of the book the entrance ways, the alienations ("Decorating each alienation ... was somehow always the post horn"—123), suddenly disappear: the repetitions stop. For perhaps thirty pages Oedipa receives no immediate signs of the Trystero, nothing more than some historical documents and second-hand reports. Until the middle of the fifth chapter (131, to be exact) Oedipa consistently sees the post horn as a living and immediate symbol, actively present in the daily life around her. From that point on she only hears about its past existence through documents, stamps, books—always second-hand. (This distinction is nowhere mentioned in the book, but the clean break after 131 is too absolute to be accidental.) And at the same time, all her important human contacts begin to fade and disperse: "They are stripping from me, she said subvocally—feeling like a fluttering curtain, in a very high window moving ... out over the abyss.... My shrink ... has gone mad; my husband, on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of the elaborate candy house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; ... my best guide to the Trystero [Driblette] has taken a Brody. Where am I?" (152–153). Without signs, without the repetition that all signs embody, she is left to her own devices. Until now, the repetitions *told* her of the Trystero ("the repetition of symbols was to be enough ... *She was meant to remember...* Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence"—Pynchon's italics), but the simple reception of signs is insufficient for the revelation she

is approaching: “she wondered if each one of the gemlike ‘clues’ were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (118).

Pynchon’s reference to epilepsy recalls its traditional status as a sacred disease. A few pages earlier, Oedipa had encountered another repetition of one of the book’s motifs: the destruction of a cemetery for a freeway. When she hears the cemetery and freeway mentioned again, “She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to... Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers.” She had been given a glass of wine made from dandelions picked once from the destroyed cemetery. “In the space of a sip of dandelion wine it came to her that she would never know how many times such a seizure may already have visited, or how to grasp it should it visit again” (95). The “message” of the epileptic seizure, the sacramental content of the wine, the persistence of mythical time behind the profane world, becomes explicit when she receives the wine once again:

He poured her more dandelion wine.

“It’s clearer now,” he said... “A few months ago it got quite cloudy. You see, in spring, when the dandelions begin to bloom again, the wine goes through a fermentation. As if they remembered.”

No, thought Oedipa, sad. As if their home cemetery in some way still did exist, in a land where you could somehow walk, and not need the East San Narciso Freeway, and bones still could rest in peace, nourishing ghosts of dandelions, no one to plow them up. As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine. (98–99)

This splendid passage combines almost all the book’s central motifs: the alternate world “where you could somehow walk,” the persistence of the world of the sacred present, the *tristesse* of the illumination that accompanies the Trystero.

The Trystero’s illuminations are conveyed through miracles, sacred versions of what Oedipa thinks of as the “secular miracle of communication” (180). The one traditional miracle most closely involved with communication is the miracle of Pentecost:

When the day of Pentecost had come, [the Apostles] were ... all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues,

as the Spirit gave them utterance.... [T]he multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.... And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2)

Pynchon names Pentecost only once, in the play-within-the-novel *The Courier's Tragedy*, where the novel's use of the Pentecost motif is parodied darkly. The gift of tongues is perverted, amidst a scene of Jacobean horror, into the tearing out of a tongue. The torturer gloats:

*Thy pitiless unmanning is most meet,  
Thinks Ercole the zany Paraclete.  
Descended this malign, Unholy Ghost,  
Let us begin thy frightful Pentecost.* (68)

The feast of Pentecost is alternately called Whitsunday, after the tradition that on that day baptismal candidates wear white. The final scene of the book—a stamp auction held, surprisingly, on a Sunday—is a parody of Pentecost: "The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale cruel faces.... [The auctioneer] spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of Lot 49." And the book ends. The auctioneer prepares to speak; Oedipa awaits the forty-ninth lot of the sale, a lot whose purchaser "may" turn out to be from the Trystero, thus forcing the system to reveal itself. But why the *forty-ninth* lot? Because Pentecost is the Sunday seven weeks after Easter—forty-nine days. But the word Pentecost derives from the Greek for "fiftieth." The crying—the auctioneer's calling—of the forty-ninth lot is the moment before a Pentecostal revelation, the end of the period in which the miracle is in a state of potential, not yet manifest. This is why the novel ends with Oedipa waiting, with the "true" nature of the Trystero never established: a manifestation of the sacred can only be believed in; it can never be proved beyond doubt. There will always be a mocking voice, internal or external, saying "they are filled with new wine"—or, as Oedipa fears, "you are hallucinating it ... you are fantasizing some plot" (170–171).

Oedipa's constant risk lies in that nagging possibility: that the Trystero has no independent existence, but is merely her own projection on the world outside. The center of Pierce Inverarity's interests is a town named San Narciso, and the name insistently mocks Oedipa's quest. (There is a Saint



Narcissus in *The Courier's Tragedy*, so the narcissism in question is not limited to mid-century America.) The novel describes, however, Oedipa's progress away from the modes of narcissism. At the end of the first chapter Pynchon writes that Oedipa was "to have all manner of revelations[, h]ardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself." Oedipa recalls, a few lines later, a past moment with Inverarity in Mexico when she saw an emblem of solipsism to which she responded in kind. They had

somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by ... Remedios Varo; in the central painting of a triptych ... were a number of frail girls ... prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.<sup>10</sup>

(Driblette's vision of himself as director is a later version of this image.)

Oedipa ... stood in front of the painting and cried.... She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she had stood on had only been woven a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape.

The tower of isolation, though an expression of the self, is not a product of the self, but one of the conditions of this world:

Such a captive maiden ... soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are *like her ego only incidental*: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all.... If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (20–21)

With this gesture towards hopelessness the chapter ends. But to its final question, the remainder of the book—with its partial revelation of what the Trystero might stand for—offers a tentative answer.

Near the end of the novel, when Oedipa stands by the sea, “her isolation complete,” she finally breaks from the tower and from the uniqueness of San Narciso. She learns, finally, of a continuity that had been available, but hidden, from the beginning:

She stood ... her isolation complete, and tried to face toward the sea. But she'd lost her bearings. She turned, ... could find no mountains either. As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land. San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant, spherical ... ), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle. (177)

At this point the uniqueness of her experience matters less than the general truth it signifies: “There was the true continuity.... If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, and any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic ... if only she'd looked” (179). Her choice now is either to affirm the existence of the Tristero—through which continuity survives, renews, reintegrates itself over vast expanses of space and time—or to be entirely separated, isolated, an “alien ... assumed full circle into some paranoia” (182). San Narciso or America.

#### IV

Like every sophisticated work of fiction *The Crying of Lot 49* contains within itself guides to its own interpretation. The book offers synthesizing critical methods which are integral with the very material the methods propose to organize. Certainly this is a book that needs a *vade mecum*: its reader finds himself continuously in a dilemma analogous to its heroine's. Both are given a series of clues, signs, interconnecting symbols, acronyms, code words, patterns of theme and variation which never *demand* to be interpreted, but which always offer themselves as material that is available for synthesis and order.

The play-within-the-novel, *The Courier's Tragedy* “by Richard Wharfinger,” offers in concentrated and often inverted form the main concerns of the novel as a whole. The plot of the play is quite as elaborate as that of any genuine Jacobean tragedy, and any summary here would be almost as long as Pynchon's account in the novel (q.v.). One or two points,

however, call for special attention. As on every occasion when a work of art appears within another, Pynchon offers his readers the possibility that their “attendance” at the novel is analogous to Oedipa’s attendance at the Wharfinger play. In the performance that Oedipa attends, and, it later develops, *only in that performance*, the director, Driblette, alters the text to conform with the version produced by Scurvhamite tampering (as discussed above), the version which actually names the Trystero. (The other editions of the play, all discussed later in the book, omit the name altogether.) The implication of this is that the naming of the Trystero on one particular night may have been directed at Oedipa—that the production was not simply made available to whomever happened to buy a ticket. Underneath this suggestion (and the implications are developed in another passage which I shall discuss shortly) is the implied possibility that the relationship of a reader and a work of art may perhaps not be simply an aesthetic relationship—that the work has, potentially, a *purposive* effect.

In the action of the play itself one event casts special light on the meaning of the Trystero system within the rest of the novel. The eponymous hero of the tragedy, a rightful prince deposed (disinherited, like the founder of the Trystero) and now disguised as a courier at the court of his enemy, is sent by that enemy with a lying message to another court. But this enemy then sends out agents—from the Trystero, in Driblette’s production—after the disguised prince, with orders to murder him. Later, the lying message is found on the dead body, but “it is no longer the lying document ... but now, miraculously, a long confession by [the prince’s enemy] of all his crimes” (74). In an unexplained manner the Trystero has been associated with a miracle: though murderers, they have somehow produced the miraculous transformation of lies into truth. And this transformation, in which a message is miraculously different when sent and when received, is a version of the miracle of Pentecost—which the play has already named. The patterns of the novel are here sketched for the novel’s heroine.

But how is she—and by analogy the reader—to construe these patterns? Is Oedipa to interpret the signs she discovers merely as she would interpret a play in performance—or do the signs have a meaning that “mattered to the world”? The performance of *The Courier’s Tragedy* which she attended *may* have been directed specifically at her: her relationship with it was either potential or actual. Pynchon elaborates on these two possibilities in another metaphor derived from theatrical performance, this time strip-tease:

So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance

... something a little extra for whoever'd stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration ... would fall away ... ; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage ... and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked on to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear? (54)

Pynchon here uses a metaphor from performance to describe the demands that may be made by the Tristero, and the metaphor thus transfers the problem of belief to one of its analogues, the problem of literary meaning. Pynchon joins the problem posed by the novel's *content*—the meaning of the Tristero to Oedipa—to the problem posed by the book's *presentation*—the meaning of the novel to its reader's nonliterary experience. What the passage delineates, in a version of the one-zero alternative that pervades the book, are two different concepts of art. In the first, according to which art's function is *delectare*, a novel is a superior form of entertainment which never intrudes into the world of decision and action, and whose structure and texture aspire to illuminate nothing but themselves (one might think of the later Nabokov or the stories of Borges's middle period). According to the second concept, art's purpose is *monere*, and a novel offers to its reader an example of coherence and order that rebukes the confusion of life and offers an alternative example: "the dance ended," its meaning taken out of the aesthetic realm, it offers to a reader "words [he] never wanted to hear."

These two extremes suggest a scale along which any work of fiction may be placed, a scale that measures the degree to which a work illuminates (at one end of the scale) the nature of the world outside the work, or (at the other end) the nature of the work's own language and structure. At the latter extreme is that which may be called *subjunctive fiction*, works concerned with events that can occur only in language, with few or no analogues in the phenomenal world. At the other extreme is *indicative fiction* (which includes *imperative fiction*), works that transmit, through no matter how elaborate a transformation, no matter how wide or narrow a focus, information about the emotional and physical world of nonliterary experience, including, but not limited to, the experience of language. Of course all indicative fiction has subjunctive elements, or it would be formless and not "fiction"; and all

subjunctive fiction has indicative elements, otherwise it could not be understood at all.<sup>11</sup>

Read superficially, *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to fall near the subjunctive end of the scale. One often finds the book compared with Nabokov or Borges, and Pynchon's invention of an alternate "world," an alternate system of organization revealed through the Trystero, appears to justify these comparisons. If Van Veen can live in Anti-Terra, then Oedipa can find a Trystero. But a "subjunctive" reading accounts for too few of the novel's details and complexities, and is finally insufficient. Where Nabokov and Borges create a novelistic equivalent to *poésie pure*, Pynchon strives to remain as *impure* as possible. His novel insists on its indicative relation to the world of experience; and its proposal of "another mode of meaning behind the obvious" is not a tentative aesthetic proposal, but "words [one] never wanted to hear."

A story by Borges, from which Pynchon may have jumped off into the deeper themes of his novel, offers a subjunctive version of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Borges's "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," in *Ficciones*, poses as a review of a novel published in Bombay (and described with the usual Borgesian panoply of sources, analogues and scholarly commentary). The "reviewers" of the novel point out its "detective-story mechanism and its undercurrent of mysticism." The central figure of this novel, a student, goes in search of a woman whom he has heard about, vaguely, from a particularly vile thief. In the course of his search the student takes up "with the lowest class of people," and, among them, "all at once ... he becomes aware of a brief and sudden change in that world of ruthlessness—a certain tenderness, a moment of happiness, a forgiving silence." The student guesses that this sudden change cannot originate in the people he is among, but must derive from somewhere else: "somewhere on the face of the earth is a man from whom this light has emanated," someone for whom he now begins to search. "Finally, after many years, the student comes to a corridor 'at whose end is a door and a cheap beaded curtain, and behind the curtain a shining light.' The student claps his hands once or twice and asks for al-Mu'tasim [the object of the search]. A man's voice—the unimaginable voice of al-Mu'tasim—prays him to enter. The student parts the curtain and steps forward. At this point the novel comes to its end."<sup>12</sup>

The structural analogies to *The Crying of Lot 49* are clear. The hero who sets out in search of one thing, as Oedipa sets out to give order to Inverarity's legacy; the discovery of something else entirely, as Oedipa begins to be made aware of the Trystero; the revelation of happiness and forgiveness, informed by and originating from a semi-divine object; the "detective-story and [the]

undercurrent of mysticism”—all these are common to Pynchon’s novel and Borges’s novel-within-a-story. But Pynchon inverts the playful superficialities in Borges to create a pattern of greater intellectual depth and one deeper in emotional resource. In Borges, for example, the student *bears* his evidence of love and coherence amidst a scene of evil and degradation. In a corresponding episode in *Lot 49* Oedipa herself *enacts* the love and charity that Borges’s hero can only witness. Oedipa’s action occurs when she sees, on the steps of a dilapidated rooming house, an old sailor with a “wrecked face” and “eyes gloried in burst veins,” who asks her to mail a letter bearing a Trystero stamp. After a night in which she has seen scores of signs of the Trystero, she is now flooded by a vision of the old man’s whole experience of suffering, futility and isolation. She pictures to herself the mattress he sleeps on, bearing the “vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost.”

She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him... Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. (126)

Here Oedipa performs an act in which she takes personal responsibility for the patterns of correlation and coherence which she has found in the world outside. Her embrace of the old sailor is a tangible manifestation of the unlikely relations for which the Trystero is an emblem. Through the Trystero Oedipa has learned to comfort the book’s equivalent of that helpless figure to whom all successful quest-heroes must give succour.

But the Trystero is not simply a vehicle by which unseen relationships are manifested. Its name hides not only the unseen (and, to the secular world, illicit) relationship of the *tryst*, but also the *tristesse* that must accompany any sense of coherence and fullness. For if even the smallest event carries large significance, then even the smallest loss, the most remote sadness, contains more grief than a secular vision can imagine. When Oedipa helps the old sailor upstairs she imagines the enormous loss that must accompany his death (which she imagines as occurring when a spark from his cigarette will ignite his mattress):

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared

up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope ... would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. (128)

The final metaphor, borrowed from information theory and thermodynamics, here becomes a compelling metaphor of an aspect of human experience.

"She knew," Pynchon continues, "because she had held him, that he suffered DT's. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens ... " The metaphor *itself* is a delirium, a violent dissociation of what it describes. Oedipa recognizes now how deep and how complex is the indicative power of language, how much deeper than she imagined. Remembering a college boyfriend studying calculus, she forms a pun on the man's disease: "'dt,' God help this old tattooed man, meant also a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate; ... where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick." For Oedipa the possibilities of *seriousness* have now multiplied: each moment, each event, "had to be confronted at last for what it was." The movement from one element of a pun to the other is at once a comic slide and a movement towards real relation: "there was that high magic to low puns." And metaphor is at once a verbal trick and a way of talking about the truth of the world: "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was" (129). The problem of metaphor is here transferred in part to the reader. Metaphor—carrying over, across—is a way of signifying the true but not immediately accessible relations in the world of experience: "a thrust at truth." But metaphor acts this way only when one is "inside, safe," joined to the world in which moral and metaphoric connections, links of responsibility across time and among persons, endorsed by a hieratic vision, actually exist. If one is "outside, lost," damned to isolation and incoherence, then metaphor is nothing but a "lie," a yoking together by violence of heterogeneous concepts. Yet metaphor is, potentially, *both* a thrust and truth and a lie: the one-or-zero choice remains.

As metaphor can have either a subjunctive or an indicative meaning, so the Trystero will either leave Oedipa in peace or compel her to decision. Pynchon's novel points outside itself: the act of reading it (to use terms from communications and thermodynamics) can be either adiabatic or

irreversible, either locked in the unchanging garden of fiction, or open to the shifting and uncertain world of choice, emotion, and community, either a verbal spectacle that leaves its reader in peace, or words you never wanted to hear.

The achievement of *The Crying of Lot 49* is its ability to speak unwanted words without a hint of preaching or propaganda. The book's transformation of the impersonal language of science into a language of great emotional power is a breath-taking accomplishment, whose nearest rival is perhaps Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Equally remarkable is the book's ability to hover on the edge of low comedy without ever descending into the pond of the frivolous. The risks Pynchon takes in his comedy are great, but all the "bad" jokes, low puns, comic names, and moments of pure farce that punctuate the book have a serious function: the book, through its exploration of stylistic extremes, constantly raises expectations which it then refuses to fulfill. Its pattern of comic surprises, of sudden intrusions of disparate styles and manners, is entirely congruent with the thrust of its narrative. As Oedipa is caught unaware by the abrupt revelations that change her world, and is thus made attentive to significance she never recognized before, so the variations in the book's texture alert a reader to the book's complexity. High seriousness is difficult to sustain—nor, clearly, would Pynchon ever want to do so. A serious vision of relation and coherence must include comic relationships, and recognize comic varieties of attention.

Pynchon recognizes the limits of fiction—his comedy is in part a reminder of the fictional quality of his world—but he never lets his book become therefore self-reflective. Although he shares the painful knowledge wrought by modernism of the limits of art, and although he knows that no work of quotidian fiction—neither social nor psychological—can ever again persuade, he devotes himself to the effort that leads from pure fiction to a thrust at truth. The effort is difficult and complex, and most of the modes in which the effort has previously been attempted now seem exhausted. Pynchon's search for a new mode of indicative fiction is a lonely and isolated one, but it leads to a place where fiction can become less lonely, less isolated than it has been for many years.

#### POSTSCRIPT

*Gravity's Rainbow*—all 760 pages of it—has now appeared, and tends to confirm this essay's reading of Pynchon's earlier work. The themes and methods of *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* also animate this third novel, yet they



do so with far greater profundity and variety. *Gravity's Rainbow* is eight times as long as *The Crying of Lot 49*, and it includes at least three hundred characters, all joined to a plot that on a first reading appears uncontrolled, but which, on a second reading, reveals an extraordinary coherence. I have attempted elsewhere (*Yale Review*, Summer 1973) to suggest ways of reading this enormous novel, and will limit these remarks to the briefest conceivable account of the book, as well as to some further general observations on Pynchon's work as a whole.

It is now possible to state that Pynchon's subject is the response made by men and women to their recognition of the connectedness of the world. In *V.* the decline into entropy is the universal norm. But the central issue of the book is not this decline *per se*—if it were, the book would be little more than an ingeniously articulated conceit—but the possibility of a transcendent coherence and connectedness by which the same process of decline occurs in everything and at every scale. What Stencil finds “appalling” at the end of *V.* is the possibility that there is a design to history, that the world functions according to processes that lie outside the comfortable parameters of science or the humanistic arts. Similarly, in *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa recognizes the continuity that informs the apparently disconnected elements of the world, a continuity of which the Tristero is the emblem, as the woman V. was the manifestation of the earlier book's continuity. Both novels, however, oppose to their “real” connectedness the alternative possibility of false or merely mechanical relationships: in *V.*, the relations between human beings and machines, or the international conspiracies imagined or created by the people among whom V. moves; in *Lot 49*, the possibility that the Tristero is Oedipa's fantasy or an elaborate practical joke. In each case the false continuity is a symptom or cause of paranoia.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is reticulated by more systems and genuine conspiracies than one likes to imagine, ranging from an electrical grid to the bureaucracy of dead souls. Paranoia is the book's endemic disease, but Pynchon writes that paranoia “is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation.” The book's examples of debased or mechanical connections, the analogues to the possibility of conspiracy in *The Crying of Lot 49*, involve international cartels and spy rings, even the cause-and-effect networks established by behaviorists and Pavlovians. Yet the book's final coherence, like that of the earlier book, is religious. The focus of all relationships in *Gravity's Rainbow*—its V., its Tristero, its Rome to which all hidden catacombs and public highways lead—is the V-2 rocket. The process enacted throughout the book, the analogue of entropy in *V.*, is the process (described by Max Weber)

through which religious charisma yields to economic and psychological pressure to become rationalized and routinized, to become reduced to bureaucracy. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a book about origins, and, in Weber's account, charisma in its pure form exists only in the process of originating. This process Pynchon describes most vividly in terms of the first few moments of the rocket's ascent, the originating moments through which its entire trajectory is irrevocably determined. The action of the book takes place in 1944 and 1945 (it is remarkable that the finest novel yet written of the Second World War should be the work of an author whose eighth birthday occurred on V-E Day), the originating and perhaps determining moments of contemporary history. The moral center of the book is the difficult but required task of recognizing the secular connectedness of the present scientific and political world—and the even more difficult requirement to act freely on the basis of that recognition. The secular patterns of the present. Pynchon indicates, are the product of originating moments in the past, but free action must take place here and now. The book's one-or-zero choice is the choice whether to live in the contingency and risks of freedom, or to remain trapped by the same determinism that binds the inanimate (though charismatic) rocket. The V-2 is the real descendant of the woman V.

*The Crying of Lot 49* has a story by Borges as its concealed and unacknowledged source; in *Gravity's Rainbow* Borges's name at last surfaces, and it appears often. Both Borges and Pynchon write fantasies, but while Borges's fantasies are built upon curiosities of language or mathematics, Pynchon's are extensions of man's capacity for evil and for love. Borges's language is one that is triumphantly capable of delight and astonishment, but Pynchon writes from the knowledge that language can also hurt and connect. *Gravity's Rainbow* cataclysmically alters the landscape of recent fiction, and it alters the landscape of our moral knowledge as well. It is a more disturbing and less accessible book than its predecessor, and demands even more intelligent attention, but its difficulties are proportional to its rewards. *The Crying of Lot 49* is an exceptional book, *Gravity's Rainbow* an extraordinary, perhaps a great one. The enterprise of Pynchon's fiction, its range and profundity, remain unparalleled among the novelists of our time.

#### NOTES

1. In *The Kenyon Review*, 20 (Spring, 1960), 277–292.
2. *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), p. 170. Further

references to this novel are inserted parenthetically into the text. To find page references in the 1967 Bantam paperback edition, subtract 8 from the reference given and multiply the result by four-fifths.

3. *V.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), p. 340. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

4. *Esquire*, 64 (Dec., 1965), 171. This title is noted on the copyright page of the novel, while the title of another excerpt published elsewhere is pointedly omitted.

5. Reinvented, actually: the word seems to have had a technical meaning in Greek religion.

6. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959, p. 11. Eliade's italics.

7. One character who drops away from Oedipa, but without any religious significance to the action, is her coexecutor, the lawyer Metzger, who goes off to marry a sixteen-year-old girl. Metzger, who never takes the slightest interest in the other characters' preoccupations, seems to serve in the novel as the representative of the entirely profane.

8. This usage conforms to that of the founder of the theory, Claude Shannon, but is disputed by other scientists. For a full discussion see Leon Brillouin's *Science and Information Theory* (New York, 1956), to which I am deeply indebted.

9. The real scientific problem behind this fantasy is described by Brillouin (ch. 13).

10. Some critics have invented pedigrees for this painting out of English literature, but Varo was a Spanish painter, and the painting exists. For a reproduction see *Remedios Varo* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1966), plate 7.

11. This issue is related, of course, to the issue of probability and surprise in information theory. But while subjunctive fiction *apparently* has more "surprise," and indicative fiction more "probability," the matter in fact is far more complex. Information theory is not in any way concerned with the *value* of information—only with its quantity and the clarity of its transmission. Information theory and aesthetics are indeed related, but only tangentially.

12. The translation quoted here is the one by Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 45–52. An earlier translation appeared in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962). I am indebted to Professor Frank Kermode for pointing out this story.

RICHARD POIRIER

*The Importance  
of Thomas Pynchon*

One of the many distinctions between American literature and English literature, especially in the nineteenth century, is that most of the American writers whom we would call great were not, while most actively producing their best work, what we would also call popular. I'm thinking of Hawthorne, Melville, James, Eliot, Stevens. There has usually been a time lag between critical and general acclaim. Not that criticism has, by itself, kept up to the mark. There is the conspicuous case of Melville, who wasn't taken seriously until 1921, and even Faulkner had the misfortune of being popular not with his best but with his second-best novels, like *Sanctuary*. His popularity, coming before literary critics could take credit for creating it, put them in no mood to be generous when they at first got round to him. The same condition, with certain variations, has been true of Robert Frost. Serious criticism is still in Frost's case exceptionally begrudging and self-protective. Even now he is looked into as if he aspired to be Yeats or Eliot, not as someone who proposes an extraordinary alternative to them and to the dominant so-called modernist line of the twentieth century.

Among the remarkable facts about Thomas Pynchon is that if we are to believe the best-seller list, the selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the reviews, and the committee for the National Book Awards, then presumably we are to believe that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a popular book and, at

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the same time, that it ranks with *Ulysses* and *Moby-Dick* in accomplishment and possibly exceeds them in complexity. Something peculiar is happening here. A writer is received simultaneously into the first rank of the history of our literature and also as a popular novelist. Only Mark Twain has been given such praise before, unless Hemingway and Fitzgerald are counted, though not by me, as of the first order.

If what I've said is true of Pynchon's reputation, and even if it only seems to be true on the evidence of what the media and a lot of people want to believe, then we have to ask some questions about the culture in which we find ourselves, a culture which Pynchon himself seems to include within his imagination at once more abundantly and more playfully than anyone now writing. In his inclusiveness he is a kind of cultural encyclopedia. He is also, after Hawthorne, the American writer with the deepest kind of skepticism about the advantages of being "included" by the culture America has inherited and shaped. For the present he is probably less than grateful for the way the culture has decided to include him. He may regard his being "taken in" as a kind of conspiracy, a kind of plot. Not a plot against gullible readers, since they, after all, can be encouraged to own, even to like his books, without reading them, without ever encountering the dizzying and resistant complexities of his style. Rather, he might think of these developments as a plot against himself, and he might wonder what is going to happen to a writer who is hailed both as a genius and a romp, even when he knows that the mass of good amateur readers—the kind who belong to the Book-of-the-Month Club—not only don't but can't much like him. Who are They, to use one of his favorite words, who are the mysterious donors apparently with the power to create and therefore the power to perpetuate his fame? Just because his constituency is so hard to identify, its power over him must be hard to resist; he can't negotiate directly with the They who concocted and therefore control his audience, and They can force him into strange compromises, such as his reluctant acceptance of the National Book Award simply because to have turned it down, which he most likely would have done had it been given to him singly, would under the circumstances have been an insult to the co-beneficiary, Mr. Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Well, who *is* Pynchon's audience? First of all, a certain kind of educated young reader who was probably trained to read hard books during the early to mid-sixties and who is also sympathetically responsive to the cultural manifestations of the late sixties—in rock, adult comic books, drug and black styles, filmmaking; second, a number of academics, older than the first group but who nonetheless went through some of the same sequences of interest and development; third, a growing number of quite learned academic readers

who enjoy puzzles, especially costumed ones, who relish intellectual play, and who admire Pynchon's Johnsonian capacities to "work up" a subject (like the Fashoda incident or life in London during the blitz) wholly remote from his own personal experiences—Pynchon as the essential classicist; fourth, the various readers who come from these three groups, but who are also in the book business, with its hunger for a great writer, any "great writer" except Norman Mailer or the good grey champion Saul Bellow; and fifth, a lot of people who take their cue from these various groups and who are enthusiastic about a phenomenon without the capacity to understand it, intellectually turned on groupies who see in Pynchon's obscurities and his personal elusiveness—his refusal to come out of hiding in any way—a sign of radical contempt. He's a radical to whom the establishment has simply had to defer—or so it seems.

What is left out of this grouping is of course the central mass of educated general readers. And a good clue to their reactions, so far as Pynchon is concerned, can be found in what might be called the Anglo-Americans. This is a literary nation of educated general readers who can always flee from the petty tyrannies of a new interest to the thrones of literary and cultural conservatism: to the likes of *Saturday Review/World* and the journal of bully-boy arriviste gentility, *Commentary* magazine. Tepid, condescending, unwilling or unable to submit to the intense pressure of Pynchon's work, they admire (when they manage to admire him at all) only what is separably cute or charming or what is compact or economical, like *The Crying of Lot 49*, though even that, not to mention *V.*, is unavailable now, for example, in Great Britain. "Of course what I like is *The Crying of Lot 49*," is the thing to say, equivalent to saying of Henry James that "Of course, what I like is his novel *Confidence*," or of Faulkner (in French) that "What I like is your Faulkner's *Pylon*." It's an old European trick with our stuff, unfortunately imported to this country, with its large core of American Anglophilic readers. When it comes to *The Crying of Lot 49*, the verdict is assisted by the fact that it is the only one of Pynchon's three novels whose size and scope make it usable in class.

I too consider *The Crying of Lot 49* an astonishing accomplishment and the most dramatically powerful of Pynchon's works because of its focus on a single figure. But what is at issue here is something else—the *nature* of Pynchon's reputation. And generally the Anglophilic response of the good reader, of the amateur book lover to Pynchon is, measured against what is offered by his whole achievement, ironic evidence that though Pynchon may be treated with the condescension historically visited on other great American writers by the literary establishment contemporaneous with them,

he somehow appears to have escaped the consequences of this. That is, despite the dereliction of a large central core of readers and of the upper brow journals where they find reassurance, he has, again, simultaneously achieved public acclaim and enormous private respect.

I admit to a certain unfairness in these characterizations of the amateur reader, an unfairness of which I would suppose other protective admirers of Pynchon might also be guilty. Amateur readers may be unable to respond to the relentless vitality of Pynchon's writing, but professional academic readers can positively smother it. And perhaps it is better, like an amateur, to be simply oblivious to what is being offered in his books than, like a professional, to set about anxiously to pacify Pynchon's vitality by schemes, structuralist or otherwise. But to believe this, as I've tried to suggest, is to overlook the curious historical change in what it means to be an amateur reader. The trouble with amateur readers now is that they are *too* literary rather than not literary enough. They are too anxious, most simply, that the life imitated by a new novel should resemble only what old novels have taught us to recognize as life. They are not amateur in the positive sense of being open and alive; they are not able to take advantage of their freedom from those premeditations, those utilitarian impulses which necessarily corrupt most professional readers and most of us who are teachers of literature. We're in a situation where neither the amateur nor the professional reader seems capable of reading Pynchon for the fun of it, for the relish of local pleasures, for the savoring of how the sentences sound as they turn into one another, carrying with them, and creating as they go, endlessly reverberating echoes from the vast ranges of contemporary life and culture. The ideal reader of Pynchon probably would be more amateur than professional, but amateur in a positive sense—capable of unscheduled responses even while being generally learned and inquisitive. For that reason, what's happening to Pynchon, as he is moved increasingly into position for a guidebook study, is a cause not for celebration but for misgiving. This is a crucial and instructive problem which tells us a good deal about a larger cultural impasse. Pynchon really has, so far as I can see, no wholly safe constituency except one—the academy—and unless academic writers and teachers are extremely careful they will do to him the damage already done to Joyce and Eliot.

Put simply, the damage consists of looking at the writing as something to be figured out by a process of translation, a process which omits the weirdness and pleasure of the reading experience as it goes along, the kind of experience which, say, we expect from Dickens without being worried about it. The damage consists of treating each of the formal or stylistic or allusive

elements in a work as a clue to meaning, a point of possible stabilization. This is an especially inappropriate way to treat Pynchon because each of these elements is in itself highly mobile and dramatic. Each is a clue not to meaning so much as to chaos of meaning, an evidence of the impossibility of stabilization. We are confronted with what, in another context, I call a literature of waste. This is not to say that literature *is* waste but that in certain works there are demonstrations that the inherited ways of classifying experience are no longer a help but a hindrance. All of the formulas by which experience gets shaped or organized around us are themselves a part of the chaos of experience with which one has to deal. The rage to order, Pynchon seems to say, is merely a symptom of accelerating disorder.

Pynchon goes beyond his predecessors because he projects this notion of waste past literature and onto all available systems of classification. Joyce, for example, followed by Barth and Borges and doubtless others, was a great innovator in that he pushed literary parody to the point of literary self-parody, showing how the available conventions, styles, forms of literature were insufficient as a breakwater of order and elegance against the tide of life—to paraphrase Stephen Dedalus. Pynchon extends this perception from literature not only to science, to pop culture, to the traditions of analysis, but even to the orderings of the unconscious, to dreams themselves. In his works dreams are treated as so many planted messages, encoded by what he calls the “bureaucracy of the other side.” It is as if human life in all of its *recorded* manifestations is bent toward rigidification, reification, and death. Echoing Norman O. Brown, Pynchon seems to say not only that history is itself a form of repression, but so, too, is the human impulse to make or to write history.

If this is any proper reading of Pynchon then it should constitute a warning to any one of us who wishes to order or regularize his work by whatever plot, myth, symmetry or arrangement. And yet we persist in doing so, because, finally, it is nearly impossible to feel about our cultural (even, sometimes, about our biological) inheritance the way he does. We don’t know *enough* to feel as he wants us to feel. I don’t mean that it is impossible to appreciate his radical perspectives, since we can do that even if we don’t agree with him. I mean that we can’t with Pynchon—any more than with Joyce or with the Eliot of the lovably pretentious notes to *The Waste Land*—possibly claim to be as conversant as he wants us to be with the various forms of contemporary culture. He may be as theatrically enlivening and entertaining as Dickens, but a reader needs to know relatively little to appreciate Dickens. 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, something to play around with, to feel totally relaxed about, so that you can take in stride every dizzying transition from one allusive mode to another.

This means that we are in a true dilemma if we love Pynchon or any writer who resembles him. We don't want to stop the game, we don't want to get out of the rhythm, but what are we to do if we simply don't know enough to play the game, to move with the rhythm? We can't, above all, pretend that such a writer is a regular fellow, the way Anthony Burgess does with Joyce. Burgess's *Re Joyce* is both quite a bad book and an amusing object lesson. With totally false casualness, Burgess has to lay before us an immense amount of requisite learning in the effort to prove that Joyce can be read by Everyman. Burgess makes an obvious, glaring but nonetheless persistent error: he confuses Joyce's material (much of which is indeed quite ordinary and common) with what Joyce does to it (which is totally uncommon, unordinary, and elitist). Another way of answering Burgess, or anyone who says that a writer like Joyce or Pynchon is just a "good read," is to say that nobody in Joyce, and very few in Pynchon, could read the novels that have been written about them. This is particularly true of Pynchon, who loves the anonymous if he loves anyone, loves the lost ones—and writes in a way that would lose them completely. These discriminations would not even need to be made, of course, were it not for the stubborn liberal dream of literary teachers, especially in the last five years, that literature is written for the people who are in it. It makes as much sense to think that blacks should care about literature because they find black experience in it as to say that shepherds should care about pastoral poetry because there are shepherds in it. It is precisely this arrogant overvaluation of literature that the truly great works have often tried to dispel. As much in Shakespeare as in anything written now there is often some sensed resentment about the way literature is itself exploiting life for literary purposes, and Pynchon offers perhaps the most exhaustive and brilliant repudiation of this exploitation in our language.

To know just how masterfully and how feelingly Pynchon reveals the destructive powers of all systematic enterprise, however, one has first to know things about which all of us are in some measure ignorant. Not many of us know about Zap comics as well as about double integrals. Of course we are all relatively ignorant whenever we sit down to read, and notably so when we are reading works by writers who in any way resemble Pynchon, like John Barth or Borges or Burroughs, like Melville or Joyce. But with these our ignorance is usually of a different kind. We can correct it by reading more closely for internal evidence or by reading other novels or classical literature

with maybe an excursion into history or film. But we are always pretty much within the realms of fiction, and even where fictional characters are modeled, as in Joyce, on real people it matters little, if at all, that we know about these real people. At most we need to know only a bit about the literary or classical myths with which their fictional counterparts are implicated.

In Pynchon we find ourselves in a curious fictional world which is often directly referring us back to the real one. This is of course always true of novels to some degree. But in Pynchon the factuality seems willingly to participate in the fiction; it disguises itself as fiction to placate us and the characters. Fact is consciously manipulated by “They” in order to create the comforting illusion that it *is* fiction, an illusion contrived to deceive Oedipa or Slothrop into *not* believing in the reality of what is happening to them. Crazy names like Pierce Inverarity turn out, when we do a little investigation, to be a compound of a quite famous, real-life stamp collector named Pierce, and of the fact that if you should go to Mr. Pierce for the kind of flawed and peculiar stamps so important in *The Crying of Lot 49* you would ask him for an “inverse rarity.” What sound like crazy schemes turn out to have been actual experiments, such as Maxwell’s Demon, again in *The Crying of Lot 49*, or historically important institutions like Thurn and Taxis. With one very slight exception all of Pynchon’s material in *The Crying of Lot 49* about that postal service is historically verifiable, and even a cursory glance into a dictionary will show that some of the figures in *Gravity’s Rainbow* were historical, not only obvious ones like the chemist Liebig or Clerk Maxwell, or Frederick Kekulé, but also Käthe Kollwitz and Admiral Rozhdestvenski. Eventually we get to wonder at almost every point if perhaps we are being given not fiction at all, but history.

This is not simply to say that Pynchon’s fictions have historical analogues or that he allegorizes history. Rather, his fictions are often seamlessly woven into the stuff, the very factuality of history. His practices are vastly different from such allegorizations as one gets in Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*, different from Borges’s inventions of fictional conspiracies which are analogous to the historical ones of the Nazi period, and different, too, from the obsessive patternings one finds in Nabokov, which are private, local, and, while including certain aspects of American reality, never derived directly from them. In Pynchon’s novels the plots of wholly imagined fiction are inseparable from the plots of known history or science. More than that, he proposes that any effort to sort out these plots must itself depend on an analytical method which, both in its derivations and in its execution, is probably part of some systematic plot against free forms of life.

The perspectives—literary, analytic, pop cultural, philosophical, scientific—from which Pynchon operates are considerably more numerous than those available to any writer to whom he might be compared, and it is therefore especially impressive that Pynchon insists not on keeping these perspectives discrete but upon the functioning, the tributary, the literally grotesque relationship among them. All systems and technologies, in his view, partake of one another. In particular, science directs our perceptions and feelings whether we know it or not, even while, as literary people, we may like to imagine that it is literature that most effectively conditions how we feel. Other writers have of course recorded the effects, and seldom recorded them as benign, of technology and science on human lives, and the techniques of literature have in this century shown some conspicuous indebtedness to the technique of machines, as in William Gaddis, who was a most important influence on Pynchon, and in other influences like Dos Passos, Joyce and Burroughs. But again, Pynchon is doing something different, something more frighteningly inclusive.

Perhaps he is the first writer to realize Wordsworth's prediction in the Preface to the third edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Writing in 1801, Wordsworth reveals a sense of the power of poetry and the capacities of the poet to incorporate into himself and into his work all other forms of human enterprise that can only be for us now a sad illumination both of his prophetic genius and of his noble but betrayed optimism. It is as if Pynchon set out to do what Wordsworth instructed the poet to do, but to show that the results were not the transfiguration of science but the transfiguration of man.

Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of men of Science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper subjects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective Sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as

enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

“Carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself”—that alone would be a sufficiently original and remarkable accomplishment. Pynchon has had to go knowingly beyond that, however, because all of us have together gone *unknowingly* beyond it, passed *unknowingly* into a world where the effects of exposure to the implementations of science and technology are so pervasive as to have been invisible and inaudible. We have few ways, for example, of measuring the effect of the media within which we live except by the instrumentalities of the media. Pynchon does not set out to rescue us from this condition, in the manner of Lawrence. He is in fact as partial to technology and to science as he is to Rilke, Zap comics, Glen Gould, Orson Welles or Norman O. Brown. He no longer perpetuates the dream of Wordsworth that poetry or a radical esthetics derived from poetry provides a basis for understanding and resisting any of the other systematic exertions of power over human consciousness. Science, the analytical method, technology—all of these are not merely impositions upon consciousness. They are also a corporate expression of consciousness; they express us all as much as do the lyrical ballads. They express us more than does our late and befuddled resistance to them. Put another way, the visual and audible messages offered on the film called *Citizen Kane* tell us no more (and no less) about modern life than does the movie projector which shows the film or the camera which made it. These machines are a product of the human imagination which, if felt as such and studied as such, refer us to the hidden nature of human feeling and human need. In the instance of the movie projector we are referred specifically to the desire first to frame the human image—with all the slang connotations involved in the word “frame”—and then to accelerate it. The movie projector itself necessarily refers Pynchon back to “this strange connection between the German mind and the rapid flashing of successive stills to counterfeit movement, for at least two centuries—since Leibniz, in the process of inventing calculus, used the same approach to break up the trajectories of cannonballs through the air” (*GR*, 407). It refers back to historically verifiable persons and developments and forward, from the time of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to future ones, to the encapsulated trajectory of men in space.

*The Crying of Lot 49* is in many ways a novel about the effort and the consequences of “carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself.” That is precisely what Oedipa Maas does with the idea of Maxwell’s Demon, an idea proposed at the end of James Clerk Maxwell’s *Theory of Heat* (1871). Maxwell hypothesized a vessel divided into two portions, A and B, by a division in which there is a small hole. He asks us to conceive of a being, subsequently known as Maxwell’s Demon, with faculties that allow it to follow the course of every molecule in the vessel. The being is situated beside a small shutter located in the dividing wall between the two portions of the vessel and he opens and closes this shutter so as to allow only the swifter molecules to pass from A to B and only the slower ones to pass from B to A. According to Maxwell this being “will thus, without expenditure of work, raise the temperature of B and lower that of A, in contradiction to the second law of thermodynamics.”

Oedipa comes to picture herself as an equivalent of Maxwell’s Demon, only in her case she sorts out a vast array of circulating data all seeming to emerge out of the inheritance from Inverarity. She is one of the executors of his estate, and she would like to transform all of the random information that floods in on her into “stelliferous meaning,” just as the Demon operated as an agent of order in a system of random occurrences. She wishes, that is, to increase order and to decrease entropy in the system which is the life around her. By decreasing entropy, which is a measure of the unavailable energy in any system, she will forestall the drift toward death as the ultimate state of the entire system of life. However, by the end of the novel she has managed only to prove a point made by one of the later commentators on Clerk Maxwell, Leon Brillouin, in a paper published by *The Journal of Applied Physics*, entitled “Maxwell’s Demon Cannot Operate.” Brillouin contends that an intelligent being has to cause an *increase* of entropy before it can effect a reduction by a smaller amount. This increase of entropy more than balances the decrease of entropy the Demon might bring about. In the words of W. Ehrenberg in his essay on Maxwell’s Demon in *Scientific American* (November 1967), “Similar calculations appear to be applicable whenever intelligent beings propose to act as sorting demons.”

What are critics of Pynchon, like myself, but a species of sorting demon? And yet what are we to do with the random material of his books, what is Oedipa to do with the random and maddening material of her inheritance, if we do not all at some point become sorting demons? It is necessary to *know* about sorting demons before one can even know why one should break the habit. This is a way of saying that it takes a lot of work to know what’s going on in Pynchon, even though what’s going on finally lies

importantly on the other side of such knowing, such “sorting” out. Really to see and hear his concerns, we must at least sense how Pynchon *feels* about his knowledge, we must participate in his Coleridgean anxiety about knowledge, about analysis, about any kind of sorting.

Even Clerk Maxwell and the great chemist Kekulé in *Gravity's Rainbow* are imagined as themselves haunted, visited, obsessed and paranoiac in their exploration, just as much as is the fictional heroine, dear Oedipa Maas. Thus, we learn in *Gravity's Rainbow* that the Demon may not in its inception have been a model meant to demonstrate something in the physical sciences. Though it served for that, it might have been designed primarily as an encoded warning to all of us. Instead of being an example of how plots may be created from randomness, it was meant to tip us off to an on-going plot that got carried into the twentieth century, on to World War II and the present. In *Gravity's Rainbow* someone speculates—it is impossible to know who—that Liebig, a renowned professor of chemistry in the last century at the University of Geissen, was an agent whose task was to put Kekulé in a position where he could receive a dream from “the bureaucracy of the other side,” the world of the dead—a dream of the shape of the benzene ring. This shape was to be the foundation of aromatic chemistry, which, along with theories of acceleration, made possible the rocket and the nosecone for its destructive re-entry into our lives. Kekulé had entered the University of Geissen as an architectural student but he was inspired by Liebig to change his field.

So Kekulé brought the mind's eye of an architect over into chemistry. It was a critical switch. Liebig himself seems to have occupied the role of a gate, or sorting-demon such as his younger contemporary Clerk Maxwell once proposed, helping to concentrate energy into one favored room of the Creation at the expense of everything else (later witnesses have suggested that Clerk Maxwell intended his Demon not so much as a convenience in discussing a thermodynamic idea as a parable about the *actual existence* of personnel like Liebig ... we may gain an indication of how far the repression had grown by that time, in the degree to which Clerk Maxwell felt obliged to code his warnings ... indeed some theorists, usually the ones who find sinister meaning behind even *Mrs.* Clerk Maxwell's notorious “It is time to go home, James, you are beginning to enjoy yourself,” have made the extreme suggestion that the Field Equations themselves contain an ominous forewarning—they cite as

evidence the disturbing intimacy of the Equations with the behavior of the double-integrating circuit in the guidance system of the A4 rocket, the same double-summing of current densities that led architect Etzel Ölsch to design for architect Albert Speer an underground factory at Nordhausen with just that symbolic shape ... ). Young ex-architect Kekulé went looking among the molecules of the time for the hidden shapes he knew were there, shapes he did not like to think of as real physical structures, but as “rational formulas,” showing the relationships that went on in “metamorphoses,” his quaint 19th-century way of saying “chemical reactions.” But he could visualize. He *saw* the four bonds of carbon, lying in a tetrahedron—he *showed* how carbon atoms could link up, one to another, into long chains.... But he was stumped when he got to benzene. He knew there were six carbon atoms with a hydrogen attached to each one—but he could not see the shape. Not until the dream: until he was made to see it, so that others might be seduced by its physical beauty, and begin to think of it as a blueprint, a basis for new compounds, new arrangements, so that there would be a field of aromatic chemistry to ally itself with secular power, and find new methods of synthesis, so there would be a German dye industry to become the IG....(GR, 411–412)

This passage is at once portentously impressive and satirically comic. It emanates from the voice of the novel—as if Pynchon were himself a demon for sorting random sounds that pass through the cultural environment carrying information with them. And as always there is a hint of acute paranoia. In Pynchon, however, as sometimes in Mailer or even Melville, paranoia is often the pre-condition for recognizing the systematic conspiracy of reality. So much so, that to think of oneself with any pejorative sense as a paranoiac constitutes in Pynchon a kind of cop-out, a refusal to see life and reality itself as a plot, to see even dreams as an instrumentality of a bureaucracy intent on creating self-perpetuating systems.

Pynchon is a great novelist of betrayal, and everyone in his books is a betrayer who lets himself or herself be counted, who elects or who has been elected to fit into the scheme of things. But they are the worst betrayers who propose that the schemes are anything more or less than that—an effort to “frame” life in every sense—or who evade the recognition of this by calling it paranoiac. To be included in any plot is to be to that extent excluded from life and freedom. Paradoxically, one is excluded who is chosen, sorted,

categorized, schematized, and yet this is the necessary, perpetual activity of life belonging to our very biological and psychic natures.

This is a distinctly American vision, and Pynchon is the epitome of an American writer out of the great classics of the nineteenth century—Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville especially. The vision is not, as has been argued so often, one of cultural deprivation, but rather of cultural inundation, of being swamped, swept up, counted in before you could count yourself out, pursued by every bookish aspect of life even as you try to get lost in a wilderness, in a randomness where you might hope to find your true self. And it is that at last which is most deeply beautiful about Pynchon and his works. He has survived all the incursions which he documents, and he is, as I hope he will remain, a genius lost and anonymous.





GEORGE LEVINE

*Risking the Moment: Anarchy  
and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction*

I

Pynchon's novels disorient. They offer us a world we think we recognize, assimilate it to worlds that seem unreal, imply coherences and significances we can't quite hold on to. Invariably, as the surreal takes on the immediacy of experience, they make us feel the inadequacy of conventional modes of making sense—of analysis, causal explanation, logic. But Pynchon's language is so richly, sometimes so cruelly anchored in the banalities of the colloquial, the obscene, the trivial, the familiar, and it so miraculously spins from these things into high scientific and historical speculation, into melodrama, romance, and apocalyptic intensity, that the experience is not merely—if it is even primarily—intellectual. Yet critics almost invariably respond to the novels with thematic readings that reduce variety to a fairly conventional coherence.

Anticipating such readings, I'm sure, Pynchon made characters like Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas pretty good literary critics themselves. Writing about them thematically is like joining them, and that is part of the irony and experience of reading the books, too. A writer so busy implying connections, dropping allusions, thwarting conventional responses invites the sort of criticism Pynchon has been getting; and I don't pretend to stand

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From *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*. © 1976 by George Levine and David Leverenz.

outside or above it. Furthermore, any attempt to avoid the disorientation of his characters requires that we first join them in their desperate—and sometimes silly—quests.

More important than the possible resolution of the quests is the disorientation and almost visceral disturbance that come of being forced into them. Such disturbance is a condition of growth for the characters and for the readers. Pynchon evokes the terror and anxiety of the disturbance as he describes the feelings of Oedipa, in the last moments of her novel, awaiting silently the crying, the annunciation—of what rough beast?

And there I go, making comfort out of anxiety by invoking a myth and poetic variations on it to “place” Oedipa’s experience. The falsification is a serious one, even if the allusion points to something true about the novel. For if the invoked myth of annunciation is one way to talk about Oedipa’s situation, it still misses the possibility that nothing is coming, that in fact the book will never yield its secret and threatens to be an elaborate joke, or that whatever is coming is neither divine nor demonic. Even Oedipa’s sense of two possibilities—a real conspiracy or a paranoid fantasy—the binary options reminding us of the way Pynchon toys with computer mathematics, flip-flopping, ones and zeroes, misses the possibility of the now excluded middle, the “bad shit” that Oedipa had learned (probably incorrectly) “had to be avoided.”<sup>1</sup>

But no myth, no multiplication of intellectual possibilities can quite do justice to the energizing experience of sustaining uncertainty. The full significance of Pynchon’s fiction is in its styles, in its language, since the language is called upon to sustain the uncertainty it is structured to deny, to imply what cannot be articulated in language. Pynchon denies resolution into myth by wandering among all the available myths, from those of the Greeks to those of modern science, technology, film, comic books, radio. Verbal and mythic virtuosity is not, in Pynchon, show-off obscuring of what might be made clear, but, in a way, what the books are about; and, like almost everything else in Pynchon’s world, virtuosity is both a threat and a possibility.

Pynchon himself understands the connections between his own kind of virtuosity and the historical decadence with which his books are so much preoccupied. That connection is one of the dominant explicit concerns of *V.* The Whole Sick Crew, sinking into “Catatonic Expressionism,” values “technique for the sake of technique ... parodies on what other people had already done”<sup>2</sup> (*V.*, 297/277). And Victoria Wren “felt that skill or any virtù was a desirable and lovely thing purely for its own sake; and it became more effective the further divorced it was from moral intention” (*V.*,

198/182–183). The technology of Pynchon's prose parallels the technology of sex and destruction that runs through the three novels. But the recognition of this connection does not entail retreat from virtuosity, or even a conscious attempt to connect skill with moral intention. The prose requires that we make our way beyond the categories of the virtuous to strain the very limits of virtuosity. Eigenvalue, frightened, imagines the End when all the Proper Nouns have been arranged in all their possible combinations, when the last technical manipulation of finite matter has been accomplished: "the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death" (*V.*, 298/277). The Lost Ones of the Hereros are "Sold on Suicide" and attempt to renounce all the things of this world.

But the renunciation can't be complete—never quite. "The trouble with it is," says Pynchon's narrator, "that by Gödel's theorem there is bound to be some item around that one has omitted from the list, and such an item is not easy to think of off the top of one's head, so that what one does most likely is to go back over the whole thing, meantime correcting mistakes and inevitable repetitions, and putting in new items that will surely have occurred to one, and—well, it's easy to see that the 'suicide' of the title might have to be postponed indefinitely!" (*GR*, 320).<sup>3</sup> The materials of the world seem finite, but there are always surprises that will not fit the fictional structures language imposes. There is always "Murphy's Law," crucial, I think, to the unpredictability of Pynchon's prose: "*when everything has been taken care of, when nothing can go wrong, or even surprise us ... something will*" (*GR*, 275).

The virtuosity of Pynchon's prose is a confrontation with the finite, the determined world. It becomes at times a kind of litany aspiring to the infinite sequence, implying always that there's more where that comes from. And it implies that nothing is predictable in the particular, despite Pointsmanesque conditioning and pervasive paranoia. With such ambitions, the prose must also be self-consciously amoral, as though the ultimate morality is in a truly Whitmanesque embrace of everything, of coprophilia, sadism, masochism, gangbans and daisy chains, genocide, incest, sodomy, fellatio, transvestitism, torture, physical decay, murder, pie-throwing, decomposition, toilet bowls. But not only these. It is a prose that seems almost desperate in the tricks it will invent to keep from its own finitude, to find some sort of life in the very decadence and de-animation of which it is a symptom. If, as many critics propose, Pynchon not only describes but participates in paranoia, it is not the sort of selective paranoia that sustains itself by screening out the details that don't fit. It survives in the quest for the surprise or the aberration that nobody ever noticed before.

The exhaustiveness of Pynchon's catalogues of waste moves him beyond decadence because he challenges us to resist the entropic reductionism of the systems we have been trained to impose on them. The question the prose proposes for us at every moment is whether we are strong enough to accept the details as they come to us. Pynchon anticipates the risk of such acceptance. To live exclusively in and with the moment is difficult and dangerous not only for readers but for characters within the fiction; characters who do this reject relations to the past or thought of the future, lose the capacity for love. Moreover, they tend to join in the very betrayals and de-animations, within the culture, that have driven them outside into the fragmentary moment. Benny Profane thus summarizes the effect of his experiences in *V.*: "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (*V.*, 454/428). Tyrone Slothrop manages to unlearn everything his experience offers him, and betrays Bianca as Benny betrays Fina. His personality, his "temporal bandwidth," dwindles to zero as his memory goes with everything but the merest sliver of the present, and, consequently, even that. If we have to choose between facing each moment as it comes to us or making the present moment part of a pattern between past and future, we haven't, in Pynchon's world or ours, much choice.

But choices imply finality and systems, and if the terror for Pynchon's protagonists resides often in their discovering that they must make a choice, their lives remain full of unsystematic surprises. Experience belies the simplification of binary choices into which our logic and our language bind us. The strength thus required is somehow to honor *both* the moment and the memory, to allow almost any possibility while holding on to or creating a genuinely human self. But this, of course, is much easier to say than to feel. Like Oedipa, we must confront the worst possibilities, be driven to choice, if we are to avoid reduction to Tupperware and the plastic prose of a plastic culture; like her we must relearn the past, reimagine the possibilities of connection. Her husband, Mucho, is driven half mad by his power to see in the detritus of used cars whole lives of misery. Everything comes to him as intensely present and, metonymously, as ever more intensely past and future.

But unless we arrive with Oedipa at the point of taking the risk of that intensity, we are doomed to a kind of yo-yo LSD escape, or to enrollment among the members of the Firm. The effect is the same. If we do take the risk, we are driven by Pynchon's art into reconsidering our fundamental assumptions about the way things connect. The discontinuities, the surprises, the refusals of categories, the fake mythologizing—these all confront us with the possibility that art is most valuable, in a culture where power resides among the organizers, when it rejects the tradition of organic

coherence we take as a universal standard. Might not that art be best—at this moment, in this place—that constantly pushes toward the possibility of fragmentation? Might it be that not order but anarchy is the most difficult thing to achieve in this culture? The pressure toward anarchy, in a world structured to resist anarchy at any cost, might release us, ironically, into a more humane order, where the human continuities with stones and mountainsides become visible and possible and not plastic reductions to SHROUD and SHOCK or even Imipolex G; where, then, paranoia is not a mental disease but a vision, where either/or is not the option and Oedipa's "mixed shit" isn't shitty.

I'm not trying to reduce Pynchon into an "anarchist," though there are anarchists in each novel. The point is to recognize the risk-taking in his art as no mere decadent virtuosity (though it is partly that). There are thermodynamic surprises everywhere, shocks of possibility that can rip us out of our literary critical and human reductionism. The possibilities of an anarchic style and structure seem to me more centrally the "subject" of Pynchon's fictions than even entropy or charisma or the preterite and elect of Calvinism or paranoia. Thematic analysis is inescapable and essential (part of the pain of Pynchon's vision is that he does not pretend that we can escape system or language), just as anarchy is ultimately impossible in our world. But the moments are there beyond any patterns into which they may be made to fit. Pynchon can be so intellectualized that we ignore how deeply, viscerally painful, indeed nauseating, he can be; we ignore too what I regard as his most astonishing and overwhelming power, to imagine love out of the wastes of a world full of people helpless to love. These qualities live in the moments, not the patterns. For his characters and, I think, for us, the challenge is to penetrate the moments as they come and then find a way to live with them.

## II

There is, obviously, no simple way to characterize Pynchon's prose, and no selection of passages can begin to account for its varieties. It is deliberately unstable, parodic, various, encyclopedic, fragmented (what *are* all those ellipses doing in *Gravity's Rainbow*? why does the narrator, in and later out of Slothrop's consciousness, stutter on "a-and"?). Though capable of traditional decorum, it is characteristically indecorous in its refusal to be locked into a mode. It is perfectly at ease in technical scientific and mathematical analysis, historical reconstruction and documentation, evocative and ominous

descriptions, chitchat about films, metaphorical leaps from one area of discourse to another. But perhaps its most disorienting and testing quality is its almost sullen resistance to judging the various horrors it coldly narrates. It is almost impossible to locate the narrator, who refuses to protect us with his own disgust, or with ironies that don't cancel each other out.

One of the earliest completely uncomfortable moments in Pynchon's fiction is Esther's nose job, in the fourth chapter of *V*. Easy enough to talk about admiringly, the passage is physically discomfiting and unpleasant, so much so that it requires, from me at least, an act of will to keep reading through it. Insofar as the revulsion is merely from the precision with which the plastic surgery is described, we can say that we have here only a virtuoso extension of the tradition of naturalistic fiction. But the experience is very different from that of naturalism. It is not merely clinical, but clinical and vulgar, and not merely that but clinical vulgarity observed as though it were funny—which it almost becomes. As the two-inch needles are shoved up Esther's nose to administer anesthetics, she discovers pain: "nothing before in her experience had ever hurt quite so much." To be given Esther's pain in such a context is, at least, to be protected by a confirmation of our own sense of a reasonable response to the physical manipulation; it is to make us feel satisfyingly that Esther made a mistake and is learning that she did. But at the same time, she is sexually aroused, in part by Nembutal, in part by the very manipulation that causes the pain. Schoenmaker's assistant, Trench, "Kept chanting, 'Stick it in ... pull it out ... stick it in ... ooh that was good ... pull it out'" (*V*., 105/92).

The scene becomes a kind of show, but a show in which we—and Esther—are forced to participate. The brutal playfulness is combined with an efficiency complete and routinized, so that the extremity of the experience is reduced both by the play language ("That boy, you expected her to say"), and by the total professional detachment of Schoenmaker and the surgical description. Though we feel the extremity, we are not allowed by the language to come to terms with what we feel: "It was a routine operation; Schoenmaker worked quickly, neither he nor his nurse wasting any motion" (*V*., 105/93).

Schoenmaker's technical efficiency has its correspondence in the clinical textbook language used to describe it. As we begin to be impressed by the particularity and precision, then to marvel at the virtuosity, we begin to participate in the unnatural act Pynchon is forcing us to watch, to shift our focus from the human significance to the technical virtuosity. The moral enormity of the manipulation of a human being becomes routine, and the loss of normal focus is reinforced by the simile—a non-technical intrusion—

in which cutting bone is like cutting hair, and the man in the barber chair is merely a head, though belonging to a body, presumably, that gives high tips (*V.*, 105–106/93). The technical term “undermining,” describing the procedure, may have a literary-symbolic resonance, but the voice is neutral, and the moment is wrenched free of the normal social and moral context of action.

For Esther, spectator and object, the experience is sexual and then, madly and convincingly, religious. Her selfhood is lost in her transformation into an object. And the next image is of Schoenmaker looking from the plastic mask to Esther as though she were a rock, for sculpting. “Your hump is now two loose pieces of bone, attached only to the septum,” Schoenmaker tells Esther. “We have to cut that through, flush with the other two cuts.” And the narrator’s voice: “This he did with an angle-bladed pull-knife, cutting down swiftly, completing the phase with some graceful sponge-flourishing” (106/94). “Graceful” is the Pynchonian flourish, the word that forces the scene into virtuosity and releases the human subject into objecthood.

We can, of course, place this morally, and Pynchon gives us the context of the whole book to do it. We can connect Esther’s rockhood with Mildred Wren’s rock, with the rock of Malta itself, and with the progressive de-animation of *V.* and the society; we can connect Schoenmaker’s surgical skill with the skill involved in the slaughter of the Hereros, with the high technology that threatens Profane and all the characters in the book. But to read this as a document of moral outrage is to read in what Pynchon has, to our discomfort, left out. The prose participates in the brutal virtuosity it describes. It recognizes, in part by allowing Schoenmaker to adopt a mock Nazi accent, how much it all has become a subject for cynical comic distance. Esther, after all, has asked for it. And beyond this, Schoenmaker is genuinely enthusiastic about his work, his skill, his flourishes, regardless of their human uses. Pynchon doesn’t rescue us from the consequent disorientation. The narrator, like Schoenmaker, has something of the quality of the little boy showing off.

It is important to see how much Pynchon participates in the horrors he describes, how much he knows he participates, and how much, consequently, he must resist simple moral placing that allows him and us to judge, as though we were separate from what we see. Like Esther, we are separated only in that we are drugged; like Schoenmaker, we cannot help admiring the skill that happens to make victims. By giving us no easy position from which we might judge the experience, Pynchon forces us into it beyond morality. The more we admire the prose that can make us feel the pain, the more it



implicates us in it. The writer who makes us feel that something quite horrible has been routinized and socially accepted participates in the technical joys and power lust involved in the activity. Moral judgment becomes irrelevant, and the question is whether the prose, in facing the tyranny of its own skills, can release Pynchon or us from them.

The special difficulties and graces of Pynchon's art are early put to the test in the wonderful third chapter of *V.*, "in which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations." The "impersonations" are of narrators who neither know each other nor care very much about the apparent subject of the narrative. Each narrator is one of the preterite, preoccupied with a private life into which the tourists intrude themselves briefly. Since the narrators' stories seem not to be connected, we, as readers, are seduced into piecing together the tourists' story, which looks very much like an exciting Edwardian spy adventure. We teach ourselves to see the continuity of character behind flaking sunburn, suggestive nicknames, blue eyeglasses, fatness. We might say that we become Stencil, or Stenciled, in our attempt to make order out of various fragments.

We may, at first, believe that once we have pieced together the narrative, we have "made sense" of the fiction; but we must soon recognize that in exercising our deductive skills, working on conventional assumptions of continuity and cause and effect, we have been tricked into acting out our own touristic assumptions about the nature of reality. We must understand that narrative tradition itself entails the exercise of a Schoenmakerian skill in rejecting unwanted material and shaping what is wanted. To "make sense" of the narrative we must exclude most of the evidence. We become tourists, like the characters whose fate most absorbs us, and though the natives tell us the story, we read it as though their lives don't matter. Entropy is high: the expenditure of energy and the rejection of material entailed in the reading creates order at great expense. To read the story right, we must come to terms with disorder.

Aïeul, the waiter, watches Goodfellow and Porpentine disappear from his life:

... I will see neither of you again, that's the least I can wish. He fell asleep at last against the wall, made drowsy by the rain, to dream of one Maryam and tonight, and the Arab quarter ...

Low places in the square filled, the usual random sets of criss-crossing concentric circles moved across them. Near eight o'clock, the rain slackened off. (*V.*, 66/54-55)

The best we can do if we are to participate in Stencil's preoccupation with *V.* is reconstruct the story he has obviously already constructed. That is, the fullest exercise of our ingenuity in decoding the narrative from the irrelevancies of the lives of the narrators can only put us where Stencil already is. But Pynchon gives us other options, if we choose to exercise them. We can decide that Maryam, and tonight's meeting with Aïcul, are as important as Porpentine and Goodfellow. We can recognize that the Arab quarter exists beyond the experience of the English characters, beyond the prose that invokes it. We can feel the ominousness of the precise physical details (the low places in the square filled, the raindrops making crisscrossing concentric circles) but take them as the expression of physical necessities rather than as meaning something for the spy adventure. The circles in the puddles can be taken as a figure for the crisscrossing concentric circles of the narrative. But the center, we know, is Stencil, not the natives like Aïcul. Only if we take Stencil's imagination as primary can we accept the circles as figuratively concentric. Otherwise, we must live with randomness.

Randomness, of course, is what neither Stencil nor we can live with. Thus, we read the "irrelevant" details thematically, make them relevant not to the particular passage, but to the themes of the novel as a whole. There is comfort even in recognizing that the theme of tourism is important everywhere in *V.*, ironically, however, that theme justifies our ignoring Aïcul once we understand that he is there as a sign of the way tourists ignore the real life of the country, of the way empire exploits and denies the reality of what is natively there. Suppose we are left, however, with the reality of Aïcul and Maryam, whom we will never see, or with the rain flooding the Place Mohammed Ali. Suppose we refuse to connect the eight different narratives. Suppose they are juxtaposed only in Stencil's imagination. Do we know how to honor what we see but do not know?

Pynchon's prose works to make us see and to know, to know by seeing intensely, excessively. The prose has a passion for the lost and dispossessed, the preterite, as *Gravity's Rainbow* has re-taught us to call them. It entails not placing but recognition; nothing is mean enough not to be recorded, everything matters. The traditions of nineteenth-century realism implied that the ordinary was latent with the extraordinary; in the romantic program of the realists, the ordinary is endowed with wonder. Ironically, Pynchon, in rejecting the realist tradition, carries out in his prose the extreme of the realist vision, allowing the ordinary, the base, the obscene to threaten us with significances we do not, perhaps need not, understand.

Pynchon has been criticized for not creating "real" characters and, especially, for creating loveless worlds. But traditional character is an

imagination of order and structure that belies the pervasiveness of change, variety, aimlessness, waste. Character, in traditional fiction, is the clearest emblem of the elect—dominating and controlling the action of the world. And Pynchon creates character by imagining it as participating in the energies of the world created around it. He mocks (especially in the names) and uses the notions of character fiction has inherited, but, as Fausto Majjstral insists, even the self is an invention.

Character is an abstraction that allows us to see through the moment, not to experience it. Explanation of actions in terms of motives, psychoanalysis, instincts, gets us off the hook of responsibility to each lived moment. The self is unintelligible as a stable “thing,” except when it has *become* a thing; and it must be seen in relationship, or in the failure of relationship. The prose, in any case, gives us the experience of *being* before (if ever) it tries to explain it. Profane, looking into the desolation of the winter seascape “which meant nothing more than the turbulence of the screws or the snow-hiss on the water,” needs no analysis. Our capacity to accept such moments depends on our capacity to resist the coherences of narrative or even of rational expectation. We enter Pynchon’s moments, as Oedipa does, discovering new and terrifying realities behind the conventions of reality—that is, of selection and election—we have been trained to believe in.

One powerful and characteristic example of such a moment comes in Oedipa’s encounter with the ruined old man who had left his wife in Fresno: “When [Oedipa] was three steps from him the hands flew apart and his wrecked face, and the terror of eyes gloried in burst veins, stopped her” (*Lot 49*, 125/92). She imagines him as one of the lost and forgotten, living in a flop house:

What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper’s stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him, without it. Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him,

gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. She felt wetness against her breast and saw that he was crying again. He hardly breathed but tears came as if being pumped. "I can't help," she whispered, rocking him, "I can't help." It was already too many miles from Fresno. (*Lot 49*, 126/93)

Entering such a moment entails believing in the reality that nothing has taught Oedipa, or us, to see. The wreck with his wife in Fresno is recorded only in an insatiable mattress that absorbs the secret salts of the lost. Oedipa is discovering America, feeling the tenuousness of the discovery, the possibilities of despair, and the further possibility that despair is a way to avoid the responsibilities of caring.

Of course, there are more possibilities, but there remains also the inescapable experience of Oedipa and the old man. The language, whatever else it is, can only be an expression of a passionate concern, every precisely imagined detail intimating luminescent gods beyond, sad and lost lives within. It is merely a convention, and a disastrous convention within and outside of fiction, that we can care only for what we know well. The ruined old man makes only a brief appearance in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa risks caring for him.

By all this I only mean that in Pynchon's work I am far more disposed to trust the moments than any ideas I might invent to account for them. Good critics can and do assume that Pynchon is (a) paranoid or (b) mocking the traditional structures that imply paranoia; that he is (a) asserting the inevitable heat-death of the world and the futility of resisting it, even in its local manifestations, or (b) suggesting that life, in its extraordinary capacity to produce surprises, constantly resists the heat-death, as must we all; that there is nothing to be done, or that there is everything to be done; that he is on the side of the elect, or that he is on the side of the preterite; that he is asserting disorder, or that he is implying some kind of transcendent order; that choices are binary or multiple. I keep thinking that I know what I believe on these matters, and then keep discovering that I don't. Rereading Pynchon I find it surprisingly difficult to account for particular passages in particular places, and yet a condition of their power that they be difficult to account for. My uncomfortable feeling is that not knowing is an important qualification for participating imaginatively in his fictions. Only by surrendering our demands for order can we be released into the terror of the moment, as Oedipa is released, and as she grows.

## III

And what does it mean, in Pynchon, to penetrate the moment?

Leni Pökler tries it, as a matter of life and death. Somehow, however, her husband Franz has a “way of removing all the excitement from things with a few words” (*GR*, 159), and for him this is instinctive. The removal of excitement is the removal of risk and is connected with the fact that, as Leni says, Franz is “the cause-and-effect man.” Words that embody the imagination, causal explanation, participate in the large fictionalizing of experience that Walter Rathenau, speaking from the other side, calls “secular history,” “a diversionary tactic” (*GR*, 167). Secular history in Pynchon is, I think, the faithless construction of defenses that, as they justify by explanation the power of the empowered, participate in the plasticizing of life and death.

To get into the moment and experience it, it is necessary to find a way to withdraw from the secular diversions of language. Leni, of course, has no language to explain herself to Franz, nor, I think, does Pynchon. Both of them try very hard. Leni, like Pynchon, invokes the language of calculus, of “Dt approaching zero,” but is rebuked by Franz: “Not the same, Leni” (*GR*, 159). Calculus is used here as a metaphor, and Leni is putting it to uses for which it is not intended. Franz is thus not persuaded, and removes the excitement from things. Pynchon tries to put it back.

Here is how he describes the movement into the moment that Leni requires. Against Franz’s need for “security,” his language full of the fear of “consequences” that keeps us all from resisting, we have Leni:

She tried to explain to him about the level you reach, with both feet in, when you lose your fear, you lose it all, you’ve penetrated the moment, slipping perfectly into its grooves, metal-gray but soft as latex, and now the figures are dancing, each pre-choreographed exactly where it is, the flash of knees under pearl-colored frock as the girl in the babushka stoops to pick up a cobble, the man in the black suitcoat and brown sleeveless sweater grabbed by policemen one on either arm, trying to keep his head up, showing his teeth, the older liberal in the dirty beige overcoat, stepping back to avoid a careening demonstrator, looking back across his lapel how-dare-you or look-out-not-*me*, his eyeglasses filled with the glare of the winter sky. There is the moment, and its possibilities. (*GR*, 158–159)

The central implicit image of the street demonstration is exactly right for the attempt to describe the condition of passing from spectator to actor, from user of words to thrower of stones. The risk is clear for any liberal reading as for the liberal with the glare of the winter sky on his glasses (used, no doubt, for much reading, and reflecting not absorbing experience). The options—active (tossing the cobble), passive (resisting when captured and overwhelmed), or withdrawal (seeing the human demonstrator in the language of “careening” matter)—are imagined with the particularity that always offers more than can be systematized (the flash of knees, the babushka, the black suitcoat and sleeveless sweater, the dirty beige overcoat). The moment, however systematized our reading of it, suggests almost infinite possibilities and particularities, and that any verbal efforts to locate it will pass over far more than can be chosen.

This is one of those passages that resists the easy placing it tempts us to make. One feels the urgency, even the moral power, of Leni's willingness to lose her fear and penetrate the moment. But the moment remains obscure—why here, in the presence of such courage and energy to freedom, is the moment imagined as a kind of long-playing record? You slip “perfectly into its grooves, metal-gray but soft as latex,” and the dancing figures are “pre-choreographed.” Are we here, in the moment of freedom and risk, when the life of the street penetrates the hothouse of cause-and-effect history and suburban security, back in some paranoid fantasy, unreleased even as we act and choose?

Leni's is an act of faith because the primary restraining fact is the terror of what lies behind the order of secular history. “What if there's violence?” is always Franz's question when Leni tries to induce him to act. But the “if” in Pynchon's world is an absurdity: all of secular history is an act of violence, the transforming of life into waste. The possible act is, simply, acceptance of the moment on its own terms, finding one's own place, two feet in the water, moving, then, with the current and the spinning of the earth itself. But if my language makes it sound easy, Pynchon's does not. Leni hates the “street,” which “reaches in, makes itself felt everywhere.” “Rest” is impossible.

Part of the difficulty of Pynchon's fiction and of the prose from moment to moment is, I think, that he is constantly engaged in the struggle to make language, a kind of cause-and-effect hothouse constructed to resist the disorder of the street, lead us into the street, into the moment. And when we get there we may find a more terrifying order. But the risk begins in the terrifying break from Franz's kind of order. We have seen the terror in Oedipa Maas's story, and, as in that story, the release contains no assurance but the discovery of the lost. Whatever the reality, Tristero or paranoia,

Slothrop's paranoia or the dissolution of antiparanoia, "personal identity" or "impersonal salvation," as Mondaugen sees the possibilities (*GR*, 406)—each version is frightening and morally expensive.

The language describing Leni's attempt to penetrate the moment echoes the language describing the "anarchist miracle" of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In one of those wonderfully screwy Pynchonian inventions that manage to bear heavy weight despite apparent ridiculousness, Oedipa finds herself in the middle of a left-wing convention of deaf-mutes. She is dragged into a dance "by a handsome young man in a Harris tweed coat and waltzed round and round, through the rustling, shuffling hush, under a great unlit chandelier" (*Lot 49*, 131/97). Playing with sound as he plays with words, Pynchon somehow reinforces the absurdity and counters it. All those assonating, dull "u's," the softening "n's," the deliberate quiet sibilance of "rustling" and "shuffling" help make perfect the craziness of the "unlit chandelier," dull and sibilant and literally senseless. Vision without light, sound without noise, movement without direction, and the joke is translated, though remaining darkly funny, into something more than a little frightening:

Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. The only alternative was some unthinkable order in music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself. She followed her partner's lead, limp in the young mute's clasp, waiting for the collisions to begin. But none came. She was danced for half an hour before, by mysterious consensus, everybody took a break, without having felt any touch but the touch of her partner. Jesus Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized. She curtsied and fled. (*Lot 49*, 131–132/97)

All the normal empirical assurances are gone, and yet instead of chaos and disorder there seems to be a higher order.

It remains problematical for me how seriously we are to take the implicit otherworldliness, perhaps religiosity, of Pynchon's world. Oedipa's curtsy is too wonderfully funny, and yet too precisely appropriate to be unambiguous. Neither the deaf-mute's waltz nor Walter Rathenau's

discussion from the other side can be taken merely as a joke. Trying to explain why cause-and-effect thinking won't work, Leni says, "not cause. It all goes together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems, I don't know" (*GR*, 159). But whether the language is out of geometry, mathematics, literature, none of it is equal to the experienced reality, which takes metaphorical, comic and dramatic shape in Oedipa's dance and curtsy.

Leni's sense of the "pre-choreographed" experience of the moment echoes Oedipa's overwhelming feeling of "a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predestined." Oedipa, dragged into the moment where Leni, as it were, leaped in, is demoralized by this sense of mysterious order. It is as though anarchy does not free Oedipa—she will not allow herself to be freed—from the rigidly determined structure of her life. She is afraid of the freedom, terrified by the possibility that it might work, that by admitting the disorder of the street she will be released from the fake order of the suburban hothouse.

*Gravity's Rainbow*, however, is built as Leni's world is—parallel, not series, metaphor, signs and symptoms, mapping on to different coordinate systems. Leni dares the possibility of mysterious orders, and the anarchy and cacophony of the narratives and fragments of *Gravity's Rainbow* may well be an anarchist miracle of the kind Arrabal describes. But Oedipa approaches the language of *Gravity's Rainbow* just before she returns to the dance in the hotel. Watching the old man in a fit of delirium tremens, she connects the DT's with Leni's kind of dt, evoked in her attempt to describe penetrating the moment:

"dt," God help this old tattooed man, meant also a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate; where velocity dwelled in the projectile though the projectile be frozen in mid-flight, where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick. She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen if only because there was that high magic to low puns, because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright. (*Lot 49*, 129/95–96)

Moments later she will be dancing with people who seem to hear that music. A book before, Pynchon had evoked that Antarctic loneliness for old Hugh



Godolphin. A book later, Pynchon confronts the change “where velocity dwelled in the projectile” though the projectile is frozen over the heads of the audience in the Orpheus theater in L.A. In all these cases there is a connection among the terror of choice, and the possibility of change that will undermine or destroy the world we know, and the terror of a reality other than that we believe in. They all inhere in the vanishingly small instant that we must risk. The dt’s, Vheissu, the rocket are all metaphors for the moment—“a thrust at truth and a lie” (*Lot 49*, 129/95).

Pynchon’s language risks the lie, sustains the faith (like Arrabal’s in another world) of the high magic in low puns. Pynchon also seems to understand, as in Leni’s failure to make the moment present to Franz (that, we shall see, is possible only through risk and surrender, not through persuasion), as in Oedipa’s recognition that “I can’t help,” that language may suggest the possibilities it cannot present, may bring us within sight of “the pure light of zero” (*GR*, 159). This is only possible if language does not protect us with the comfort of its structure, if the word can somehow put us in the presence of “whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from” (*Lot 49*, 129/95).

The anarchists in the three novels work to get beyond words, and beyond the labyrinths words construct. The Gaucho, in *V.*, prefers to use a bomb than to assist in the absurdly elaborate, labyrinthine plans to steal the Botticelli. Arrabal believes in some spontaneous revolution, “automatic as the body itself” (*Lot 49*, 120/88–89). And most explicitly, Squalidozzi (can we take him seriously with such a squalid name?), also Argentinian, espouses spontaneity and immediacy against the Argentinian, Borgesian need for building labyrinths. As he responds instinctively—resisting his own impulse to speculate on Argentina and anarchism—to Slothrop’s hunger, Squalidozzi finds for Slothrop sausage and fondue before going on. And only then does he tell Slothrop: “Beneath the city streets, the warrens of rooms and corridors, the fences and the networks of steel track, the Argentine heart, in its perversity and guilt, longs for a return to that first unscribbled serenity ... that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky ... ” (*GR*, 264). Anarchy is the quest for a pre-verbal directness of experience, for something like Leni’s absorption—“both feet in”—in the moment. But, Squalidozzi says, such moments, such “oneness,” can only come, now, from “extraordinary times” (*GR*, 265). Squalidozzi sees the war, “this incredible War,” as a time when things might be “wiped clean” (*GR*, 265). In this anarchist vision, close, I think, to the mood of the whole labyrinthine book opposing labyrinths, the war and the rocket become a kind of last chance to penetrate to a new reality, to break through to an unscribbled, a wordless moment.

Anarchy becomes the kind of aesthetic and political program of these novels, a risk whose possibilities Pynchon doesn't know, though he tries them out on different coordinate systems, metaphors, signs. And we come back to the risk of Leni's moment. The narrative of Franz's discovery of the need to enter the moment enacts as miraculously as anything in *Gravity's Rainbow* the wonders, the risks, the achievements of Pynchon's prose and brings us to the edge of silence, the shuffling dance under unlit chandeliers.

Franz's refusal to risk what Leni risks keeps him in the intellectual hothouse of his life. Only his daughter Ilse's presence threatens to break that vacuum "in one strong rush of love" (*GR*, 407). But before Ilse can bring Franz back to the streets he had rejected with Leni, Franz "put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconvenience of caring" (*GR*, 428). Intellectual hackwork—minor contributions to the technology of the rocket—is what consumes Franz's time and concern. Engineering skill protects him from knowing what goes on in the prison camp Dora, just behind the walls where he worked. The violation of Pökler's vacuum is the intrusion of that other world, like the world of the wrecked old man Oedipa encounters, into the world of technology and cause and effect. Understanding at last that his daughter has been in Dora, "beaten, perhaps violated," Franz manages at last to risk the loss of his security. Franz's penetration of the moment becomes an act of love, a wordless engagement with the hitherto invisible and silent lost ones, almost unbearable because, as for Oedipa, there is nothing Franz can do except risk and love.

The cleverness, the labyrinthine obscurities, the obscenities are here extended into what I need to call high seriousness, despite all the Pynchonian tricks to short-circuit solemnities. The passage is evidence that all of those tricks are part of Pynchon's intense vision of the high magic of lowness, of what happens when we suddenly learn to see what lies behind the wall, within the threatening moment:

The odors of shit, death, sweat, sickness, mildew, piss, the breathing of Dora, wrapped him as he crept in staring at the naked corpses being carried out now that America was so close, to be stacked in front of the crematoriums, the men's penises hanging, their toes clustering white and round as pearls ... each face so perfect, so individual, the lips stretched back into death-grins, a whole silent audience caught at the punch line of the joke ... and the living, stacked ten to a straw mattress, the weakly crying, coughing, losers.... All his vacuums, his labyrinths, had been the other side of this. While he lived, and drew marks on

paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside ... all this time.... Pökler vomited. He cried some. The walls did not dissolve—no prison wall ever did, not from tears, not at this finding, on every pallet, in every cell, that the faces are ones he knows after all, and holds dear as himself, and cannot, then, let them return to that silence.... But what can he ever do about it? How can he ever keep them? Impotence, mirror-rotation of sorrow, works him terribly as runaway heart-beating, and with hardly any chances left him for good rage, or for turning....

Where it was darkest and smelled the worst, Pökler found a woman lying, a random woman. He sat for half an hour holding her bone hand. She was breathing. Before he left, he took off his gold wedding ring and put it on the woman's thin finger, curling her hand to keep it from sliding off. If she lived, the ring would be good for a few meals, or a blanket, or a night indoors, or a ride home.... (*GR*, 432–433)

#### IV

Such a Pynchonian moment is of the sort that Profane and Slothrop approach and retreat from. The wedding with randomness, the vision of the other side is, like the crossing of the Dt into the pure zero, an act of caring, of connection. The danger, of course, is that we will end with the “losers,” among the waste. Another danger is the dissolution of self, the entering of the moment so completely that all connections before and after are lost. Unanchored to a past which had been invented and programmed for him, increasingly losing his connection with a future that was only rocket, Slothrop finds no way to make love a part of his life beyond that instant when it happens. He cannot hold both the moment and the memory. Slothrop's orgasm with Bianca comes in the shape of a rocket; like a rocket it explodes, destroys, ends.

Of course, there is caring in Slothrop. He goes over to the preterite without willing it, and he seeks a freedom that Pointsman's world cannot allow. But the freedom is only negative, defined against the imprisonment of Pavlovian, cause-and-effect science and fiction. Yet before he dissolves into his world, Slothrop has a moment rather like Squalidozzi's “anarchic oneness of pampas and sky.” The precariousness of such moments is enacted in Slothrop's disappearance: the risk and the ambiguities remain. If Slothrop is a failure, as, in his betrayal of Bianca, we see him to be, it is nevertheless

wrong to read past the richness and sense of possibility in the language of Slothrop's last moment.

Slothrop, we are told, becomes a "crossroad." He half remembers from his youth one of those catalogues of waste, struggling not to pass over anything in the infinite series of the passed over: "rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile" (*GR*, 626). Slothrop is not quite remembering the fragments of his past: "instructing him, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper than he can explain, have been faces of children out the train windows, two bars of dance music somewhere, in some other street at night, needles and branches of a pine tree shaken clear and luminous against night clouds ... " (*GR*, 626). His life has been full of barely apprehended moments latent with the richness of other worlds. And so, in his last moment, he achieves the anarchist ideal:

and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural... (*GR*, 626)

It is difficult to mistake this language for the language of failure or of impending doom. Freed to be "simply here, simply alive," as Webley Silvernail, "guest star," wishes despairingly we all might be, Slothrop cannot survive on the terms of Pointsman's or Blicero's world. The moment becomes the enactment of the anarchic visionary ideal that animates much of Pynchon's fictions.

Since it is an ideal it must, in Pynchon's world, dissolve, but if we are willing to risk it, there may be at the center of each preterite moment a stout rainbow cock and a wet valleyed earth. It is commonplace now to talk of Pynchon as our poet of death, but like everything else we might invent to say about him—perhaps more so—it is a falsification. Certainly, he rubs our faces unsparingly in shit, as though we were all General Puddings. That, however, is the price of attempting to articulate the inarticulable, of attempting to make present to us what our language will not let us see, of attempting to disorient us so much that we will risk what each moment, unpenetrated, hides from us. There are, amid the infinite possibilities that Pynchon's virtuosity begins to suggest to us, alternatives to the way we currently imagine our lives. Pynchon's world is prepolitical; it implies that

every political program is, at best, one more warren in the labyrinths we build between us and the moments, the caring, we ignore. It is not, however, antipolitical. Like Leni Pökler, we must risk action and loss by penetrating the moment; it would be good if we could do it as Pynchon does, terrified but lovingly, for the risk is the possibility.

## NOTES

1. References to *The Crying of Lot 49* are to the Lippincott edition (New York, 1966), followed by the Bantam edition (New York, 1967). It is appropriate to indicate here that this essay is more or less consciously indebted to many of the other essays, and writers of essays, in this book. In particular, some of its initiating ideas derived both from the original essay by Richard Poirier included in this volume, and from talks with him. Some of the focus on material relating to the “delta-t” is influenced by the interesting essay of Lance Ozier, “The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 21 (May 1975), 193–210. And, though I was not conscious of it at the time, I probably was influenced in my discussion of Leni Pökler by the essay of Marjorie Kaufman. But, as in Pynchon’s worlds, connections are too many and too diffuse to be clarified in footnotes. I am grateful to all the writers of *all* the other essays in this volume and the Pynchon number of *Twentieth Century Literature* for ideas borrowed, unreflectingly stolen, or original.

2. All references to *V.* are to the original Lippincott edition (New York, 1963), followed by the Bantam edition (New York, 1964).

3. All references to *Gravity’s Rainbow* are to the original Viking edition (New York, 1973). Page numbers for the Bantam edition (New York, 1974) can be found by multiplying the Viking references by 7/6.

4. As yet another addition to the game of decoding Pynchon, I would suggest that Vheissu, usually read “*Wie heisst du?*” might also be thought of as “*veçu*,” Sartre’s term for “lived experience.” There is, I think, a lot of Sartre buried in *V.* aside from Pig Bodine’s mocking question about Sartre’s view of the nature of identity (130/118). David Leverenz further suggests that Vheissu can be read as “V. is you,” in a trilingual French-German-English version. Latin type makes “V is U” even easier to assume.

CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

*Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism:  
Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction*

*T*he place of women in apocalyptic literature is problematic. They can be ignored. They can act in the eschatological drama. As they do in *Revelation*, they can serve as polarized symbols of the corrupt and the pure, the Whore of Babylon and the Bride of Christ. The pressure of last things can even crush sexual distinctions. As some paranoids find the categories of female/male trivial in comparison to the grand precision of I/Them or Us/Them, so the apocalyptic can abandon female/male for Elect/Preterite. Yet the pre-apocalyptic fiction of Thomas Pynchon, before the splendid *Gravity's Rainbow*, grants a privileged place to women. They are actors and symbols. Their characterization—at once generous and warped, shrewd and regressive—provokes a mixture of contempt for contemporary sexuality and reverence for an atavistic mode.

To restate the orthodox, Pynchon sets the angels of possibility dancing on the pincushion of plot. Applauding the complex, he delights in asking if similar events are coincidences, correspondences, or clues to a conspiracy. *The Crying of Lot 49* mourns the contraction of America from a land of diversity to one of binary choice.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the early fiction, the first pages of the atlas of Pynchon's alternate universe, offers simplicities as plain as a needle's point. Among them is a relentless lament for the West. Its decline from the decadent through the mechanical and inanimate to annihilation compels his

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From *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*. © 1976 by George Levine and David Leverenz.

imagination.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps all secular systems—“galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever”<sup>3</sup>—wear out. They are subject to the growing randomness and terminal uniformity of entropy. The West has urged the process along. Politically, it has bred racist colonial empires. It has planted not seeds of life, but the flag. Pynchon uses and inverts sexual metaphors to picture the civilization he ferociously, inventively deplores. The coast of Deutsch-Südwestafrika is an “ash plain impregnated with a killer sea.”<sup>4</sup> The rituals and romances of the West reflect a pervasive belief that any sexuality, be it natural, human, or divine, is intertwined with death. Pynchon has taken up the burden of T. S. Eliot’s lines:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.<sup>5</sup>

Another simplicity is Pynchon’s sexual conservatism, which pervades the early fiction and which reveals itself in the conventional conviction that women, both in sacred and in secular realms, ought to be lovers and mothers. The womb is a gift to life and defiance of death. Such mediation between man and nature is a source of prestige and power. Like Mailer, Pynchon endorses a sexuality that links itself to reproduction. So doing, it may symbolize fertility itself. Part of his hostility towards homosexuality and such phenomena as sexual cross-dressing derives from the fact that they sever the libido from conception. They are barren in terms of the future of the race.

Healthy male sexuality must, at the least, promise fertility. Raunchy Pig Bodine romps towards legendary status, his raw energy that of a satyr in sailor suit. Pigs, Robert Graves says, were sacred to the Moon-goddess.<sup>6</sup> Among the vilest characters in *V.* is the German Foppl. A savage warrior, then a savage settler in Südwestafrika, he personifies virility run wild towards sterility. Domineering, sadistic, violent, he delights in the rape of the living and dead. Sun to *V.*’s moon, he is the male counterpart to her chillier excesses. Though seen as indirectly as she is, through the accounts of others, he seems to take his joy in brutality. Pynchon, however, is no feminist. In his daisy chain of victimization, a sour adaption of a slang phrase for group sex, women are as apt to hurt men as men women. Both sexes wield the whip.

A healthy female sexuality is a primary agent of biological life. Goddesses offer supernatural aid and mythological support. A theme of *V.* is imagining what a goddess ought to be. Because he often hedges the context

in which they appear, I am wary of Pynchon's explicit literary allusions. He warns readers not to confuse texts with life, one text with another, Pynchon with a predecessor. Nevertheless, even seen cautiously, Pynchon seems to use Robert Graves's *White Goddess* to help fashion a fit divinity. He mentions Graves, in one of his problematic passages, which is, on a superficial level, a description of Herbert Stencil. At the same time, Pynchon refers to J. G. Frazer, whose anthropology appears to have provided some of the raw material about Mediterranean culture for *V*.

He would dream perhaps once a week that it had all been a dream, and that now he'd awakened to discover the pursuit of *V*. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*. (*V*., 61/50)

For Graves, the *White Goddess* both generates life and inspires culture. He writes:

[T]he language of poetic myth anciently current in Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse.... [T]his remains the language of true poetry.... [T]he Moon-goddess inspired [poetic myths] and ... demanded that man should pay woman spiritual and sexual homage ... man's love was properly directed towards women.... Moira, Ilithyia and Callone—Death, Birth and Beauty—formed a triad of Goddesses who presided over all acts of generation whatsoever: physical, spiritual or intellectual. (pp. vi–viii)

To Graves, Pynchon adds a notion about goddesses that he derives from Henry Adams. (Both Stencil and Callisto in “Entropy” model themselves on Adams.) At the Great Exposition in Paris in 1900, wary of his subjectivity, Adams concludes:

The woman had once been supreme; in France she still seemed potent, not merely as a sentiment, but as a force. Why was she unknown in America? ... The trait was notorious, and often humorous, but any one brought up among Puritans knew sex was sin. In any previous age, sex was strength. Neither art nor beauty was needed. Every one, even among Puritans, knew that neither



Diana of the Ephesians nor any of the Oriental goddesses was worshipped for her beauty. She was goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund.... [S]ymbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done....<sup>7</sup>

If the two theologies, as it were, fail to cohere fully, they agree that the European past worshipped physical fertility; that the present may blaspheme.

V. bleakly follows Adams to name the American divinity: the machine. Fat Benny Profane ought to recognize a life-enhancing goddess. His pig eyes are set in "pig-pouches." However, in fantasy, his perfect woman is a robot:

Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman. Maybe her name would be Violet. Any problems with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual. Module concept: fingers' weight, heart's temperature, mouth's size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all. (V., 385/361)

Benny is usually dumb about women, an intellectual sluggishness that fails to bar him from generalizations about them. As bleakly, V. refuses to follow Adams and Graves to name explicitly the European divinity. Instead, the novel names and blames her antithesis, the polymorphous and polymorphously perverse V. If she is fecund, she spawns the forces of antilife. As Moon-goddess, she retains only the power to destroy. She is Moira, without Ilithyia and Callone to balance her.

The symbol "V" obviously has many connotations. It can refer to victory; to the stain on a plate a German barmaid is washing in a beer hall in Egypt; to two vector lines (the writer and the twentieth century?) colliding to place vessels on a white, blank page; to Vheissu, a region that symbolizes gaudy glamour dressing a void; to the dominant chord on the major scale. Picturing female sexuality, it evokes the names of Venus and of the Virgin, each of whom, in her way, manifests it. "V" must also be read in conjunction with the letters "N," a double "V," and "M" and "W," each a triple "V." Think, for example, of "Vegetation Myth." In single, double, or trinitarian form, the letter, the words it initiates, and the meanings of the words embody diametrically opposed values. They illustrate the "flip/flop" McClintic

Sphere describes. Malta is the womb of the writer (often sententious) Maijstral; the tomb of the Bad Priest.

To trace Stencil tracing V. is to watch the twentieth-century West trying to grasp its antidivinity. His search inverts older, richer mythologies. He is a male Isis hoping to recover parts of the dismembered Osiris. Stencil is also the battered child of the century seeking its parents. The father is weak. His legacy is some facts, some friends, which the son may use but not redeem. The mother is vicious, an adulteress who has abandoned him at birth. The son is sterile. His "seeds" are dossiers, the compilation of which barely keeps him alive. Possibly mad, certainly neurotic, he is the fearful archivist of the period before the apocalypse.

V. first appears as Victoria Wren in Egypt in 1898. Her name is that of England's queen, an empire's goddess and symbolic mother. She wears an ivory comb, on which five crucified English soldiers are carved. The comb connects her to the Oriental goddess Kali, who both succours and devours. (Many Tibetans saw Queen Victoria as Kali's incarnation.) Victoria, as V. figures do, succours only pain. Her sexual loyalties are dubious, her conspiratorial ploys enigmatic. Accompanying the pretty Victoria is her ugly sister Mildred. Few children appear in Pynchon's early fiction, but when they do, their presence signals the possibility of grace.<sup>8</sup> Lovers of children, like lovers of nature, treasure the animate. Though Mildred is plain, she is good. The two sisters symbolize the terrible split between beauty and humanity. Bongo-Shaftesbury, the wired man, repels the child. She also cherishes a rock, which foreshadows Malta, the rocky womb that will bring forth the spirit of survival and workable myth.

That a Victoria will dominate *V.*, while a Mildred disappears, is a clue to the moral that waits, beastlike, at the heart of the labyrinth of story. Victoria will appear as Veronica the Rat;<sup>9</sup> Vera Meroving; Veronica Manganese; and as the Bad Priest of Malta. As she changes, those features that betray the benign goddess will grow. Her body will become more and more opulently mechanical. At her machinelike worst, she will parody the dynamo Americans worship. Her costume will become more and more masculine, not a sign of freedom, but of decline. Her politics will become increasingly reactionary. Her sadism will become both rawer and more refined. If good women in Pynchon use fingernails to stimulate male lovers and to express the pleasure of orgasm, V. rakes them over male flesh. Sometimes a V. will be openly cruel. In Foppl's home in Africa, her surrogate sister sings her theme song. Hedwig Vogelsang's charming lyric also exemplifies Pynchon's ability to adapt the devices of musical comedy to fiction.

Love's a lash,  
 Kisses gall the tongue, harrow the heart;  
 Caresses tease  
 Cankered tissue apart. (*V.*, 238/220)

V. delights, not in simple sadistic activity, but in any destructive hurly-burly of the will. Pynchon's characters dabble with the notion, which they ascribe to Machiavelli, that human actions, the aggregate of which is history, are the result of the interplay of two forces: *virtú* and *fortuna*, will and fate. V., vain enough to wish to play goddess of fortune, relishes the exercise of an amoral *virtú* as well. However, V. can be a voyeur. In Florence, during a political riot:

She saw a rioter ... being bayoneted again and again.... She stood ... still ... ; her face betrayed no emotion. It was as if she saw herself embodying a feminine principle, acting as complement to all this bursting, explosive male energy. Inviolable and calm, she watched the spasms of wounded bodies, the fair of violent death, framed and staged, it seemed, for her alone in that tiny square. From her hair the heads of five crucified also looked on, no more expressive than she. (*V.*, 209/192–193)

Finally, V.'s Catholicism will become more pronounced. "Meroving" echoes the Merovingians, rulers of part of France who were Catholic converts. Pynchon treats Catholicism with some distaste.<sup>10</sup> It harms men because it tempts them towards manipulation. Offering themselves as priests of salvation, they actually seek control. Catholicism harms women because it urges them to conceptualize and to live out a tension between the natural and the supernatural; to fear the natural and to prefer the supernatural; to discharge sexuality, if they must, in a falsely romanticized motherhood. The Church tells women they can be whores or saints or earthly mothers. Pynchon says each woman can be all three. V.'s religiosity has two benefits for her: a "seedtime" for the narcissistic self-dramatization in which she expertly indulges; a chance to sublimate sexuality into role-playing as the Bride of Christ, to transform energy into repressed lasciviousness.

The section about V. in love crystallizes her nastiness. To measure her best is, in a dialectical judgment, to measure her worst. The style reflects Pynchon's ability to write about that which he dislikes, a paradox of the rhetoric of *contemptus mundi*. The site of V.'s passion is Paris during an explosion of cultural modernism, a mark of Pynchon's distrust of the street of his century. V. loves a fifteen-year-old dancer, Mélanie l'Heuremaudit

(cursed hour). *Her* last romance has been with her father. Though lesbianism is an entry in Pynchon's edition of *The Decline and Fall of the West*, he finds it less appalling than the context in which it occurs. When Mehemet, a gabby Mediterranean sailor, tells Sidney Stencil about sapphism in a Turkish harem, the tale is meant to be cute.

For V. and Mélanie are narcissists, substituting self for others as objects of love, and fetishists, substituting things for persons as objects of love. Male characters also have fetishes. Mantissa (half-weight, a trivial addition) adores Botticelli's Venus enough to steal it. But female fetishism is more sinister, if only because Pynchon assigns women that normative task of acting out and symbolizing natural fertility.<sup>11</sup> The trinity—V., Mélanie, Mélanie's image—mocks the Moon-goddess trinity—birth, death, and beauty. Mélanie's physical death, a probably suicidal impalement on a sharp pole as she dances, mirrors the Western nexus of sex, art, and fatality. V.'s own death is equally appropriate. She does not wish it. Weakly, she asks a group of children on Malta to help, not to torment her. However, the spargefication she endures at their hands, in her guise as Bad Priest, is a result of forces she has cheered. If Germans were not bombing Malta, there would be no packs of bestial children roaming through its ruins.

The "Epilogue" of *V.* is a last reminder of the penalties that may follow if the goddesses of fecundity are abandoned. In June 1919, Sidney Stencil is leaving Malta. The boat that has brought him is taking him away, another connection between a beginning and an end. A powerful waterspout suddenly appears. It is analogous to the earthquake and tidal wave of 9 July 1956 that killed forty-three persons who had "run ... afoul of the inanimate" in the Aegean (*V.*, 290/270). It lasts long enough

to lift the xebec fifty feet, whirling and creaking, Astarte's throat naked to the cloudless weather, and slam it down again into a piece of the Mediterranean whose subsequent surface phenomena—whitecaps, kelp islands, any of a million flatnesses which should catch thereafter part of the brute sun's spectrum—showed nothing at all of what came to lie beneath, that quiet June day. (*V.*, 492/463)

Syntactical ambiguity permits the reference to Astarte, one of the great fertility goddesses, to serve two functions. Throat naked, she personifies the spout. Next, she is the figurehead of the boat. The inanimate, which might once have been animate, shatters the inanimate, which might once have been

an icon of the living body of myth. A simpler reading might be that the goddess is permanent enough to exact revenge.

*V.* also concerns women who inhabit a quotidian world. Pynchon grants their behavior a degree of motivation. They lack the elusiveness of *V.* that arises from Stencil's faulty perceptions; her function as a symbol; and the inexplicability of remnants of the divine. Pynchon, though he suspects tight schemes of cause and effect, grants that culture influences personality. In "Entropy," for example, Aubade shatters the windows of the hermetic apartment in which she and Callisto live. Trying to hasten their heat-death, she longs for "the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives ... [to] revolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" (292). She is both French and "Annamese." The child of colonial mating, Pynchon suggests, will be perverse. Fortunately, *V.* avoids the tiresome satire of middleclass American women, be they housewives or government girls, that mars "Entropy" and other of the early stories.

The women in *V.* are judged according to the degree that they resemble *V.* The more like her they are, the worse they are. The novel's first scene bluntly introduces Americans who have fallen away from the good traditions of the goddesses. One Beatrice, who is a barmaid in the Sailor's Grave in Norfolk, is the sweetheart of "the destroyer U.S.S. Scaffold." Another Beatrice, who owns the bar, sets up artificial breasts to serve beer to sailors to prove her maternal care. In New York, robust Mafia Winsome, a racist Jacqueline Susann, preaches a theory of Heroic Love that reduces love to lust. She also uses contraceptives, to Pynchon less a legitimate act of self-protection than a morally and psychologically illegitimate separation of sex from love and of sex from reproduction. Her dithering husband thinks:

If she believed in Heroic Love, which is nothing really but a frequency, then obviously Winsome wasn't on the man end of half of what she was looking for. In five years of marriage all he knew was that both of them were whole selves, hardly fusing at all, with no more emotional osmosis than leakage of seed through the solid membranes of contraceptive or diaphragm that were sure to be there protecting them. (*V.*, 126/113)

Esther Harvitz, despite some self-assertion, succumbs to the ministrations of Schoenmaker, disillusioned plastic surgeon. His great love is over: a feudal, homosexual adoration for a pilot in World War I. When Esther has her nose job, Schoenmaker amputates the physical sign of the goddess.<sup>12</sup> Mehemet has described Mara, the spirit of woman, for us:

In her face is always a slight bow to the nose, a wide spacing of the eyes.... No one you'd turn to watch on the street. But she was a teacher of love after all. Only pupils of love need to be beautiful. (*V.*, 462/435)

In contrast, Rachel Owlglass has promise. Her fetishistic desire for her MG is an aspect of collegiate adolescence she will outgrow. Though kind to members of the Whole Sick Crew, she is aloof from its decadence. She opposes Esther's abortion because, she believes, it will stunt Esther's capacity for heterosexuality. Her own heterosexuality is active. She offers Benny, whom she pursues, the chance to experience the comminglings of love. She projects a physical desire stronger than ego. In one of the novel's sloppiest passages, she croons to her crotch: "... when it talks we listen" (*V.*, 384/360). If not in literal fact, then in act, she also mothers: tucking men into bed; washing their faces. Pynchon's Jewish men want to sit *shivah* for the lost of the world; his Jewish women want to nurture and feed them. What wisdom Rachel has she attributes to the more irrational lessons of prelapsarian biology. She murmurs to a seduced Benny:

"... [Women] are older than you, we lived inside you once: the fifth rib, closest to the heart. We learned all about it then. After that it had to become our game to nourish a heart you all believe is hollow though we know different. Now you all live inside us, for nine months, and when ever you decide to come back after that." (*V.*, 370/347)

Pynchon offers women another acceptable role: that of Marina, a daughter. She can inspire the tender chivalry of the good father. If Paola teaches Pappy Hod the mysterious plenitude of sex, in a surrogate daughter/father relationship that avoids incest, he reveals to her the virtue of forgiveness. Paola will also bring relics of the European goddess to America: the ivory comb. The name she has taken while pretending to be a black prostitute, Ruby, has already connected her to V. and the sapphire V. stitches into her navel. Yet Paola purifies the comb. She gives it to Pappy, an act of domestic fidelity. She will return to Pappy and live in Norfolk where, like Penelope, she will be faithful and "spin." Only the double meaning of the "yarn" she will create—fabric and fable—hints that the wife may not be wholly tamed.

A curious element of the structure of *V.* is that malign V. carries much of its symbolic weight, but the characters most often on page are male.

Sailors on leave; anarchists in exile; foreign service officers planning counterespionage; explorers on expeditions—the good old boys and the old boys dominate the action. Two wistful comments, by Rachel and by Brenda Wigglesworth, offer a partial explanation. Boys are permitted more adventures than girls, more “Diesels and dust, roadhouses, crossroads saloons” (*V.*, 27/18). Pynchon’s picaresque reflects that social truth. Brenda anticipates Oedipa Maas: banal enough to drink sloe gins and own seventy-two pairs of Bermuda shorts, she is courageous enough to drive around Europe alone and witty enough to recite and to dismiss a poem that summarizes the action of the novel itself. Pynchon deploys her as literary critic.

However, male characters do more than occupy the bulk of narrative space. Pervasively, they provide point of view, even if points of view within the novel undercut and buffalo each other. So Stencil sees Mondaugen seeing Foppl seeing a black woman. The passage is horrible.

Later, toward dusk, there was one Herero girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, for the platoon; and Firelily’s rider was last. After he’d had her he must have hesitated a moment between sidearm and bayonet. She actually smiled then; pointed to both, and began to shift her hips lazily in the dust. He used both. (*V.*, 264/246)

(When men, usually in a lurid homosexual compact, take on a “feminine role,” they impersonate such apparently voluptuous submissiveness.) At times the author himself distances us, through the tactical use of direct address, from a woman character. He writes about Rachel at a party:

You felt she’d done a thousand secret things to her eyes. They needed no haze of cigarette smoke to look at you out of sexy and fathomless, but carried their own along with them. (*V.*, 52/41)

Some men are granted moral authority as well. Dahoud and Pig both have the snappy one-liner, “Life is the most precious possession you have” (*V.*, 12/4, 361/338). McClintic Sphere cites a credo for dignified survival. A black jazz musician who plays at the V-Note, his figure points to a custom of white American male writers in the 1950s and early 1960s: the transformation of jazzmen and blacks into savants; the use of national outsiders as cosmic insiders. Within *V.* itself the race the West has sought to exterminate

provides the texts of its salvation. In his Triumph, driving in the wind, a persistent symbol of spiritual verve in the novel, McClintic thinks:

Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care. (*V.*, 365–366/342–343)

Readers reading my reading of Pynchon, in the mirror game of criticism, may justly say that *The Crying of Lot 49* reverses such structural features of *V.* An elusive, probably malign man, rich Pierce Inverarity, is a core symbol. A woman claims narrative space and the prerogatives of point of view. Oedipa Maas is a twenty-eight-year-old California housewife. Her most mythic role has been as a solipsistic Princess in the Tower. Though an unlikely candidate, she assumes the traditionally male tasks of executor of a will; interpreter of literature, a “whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts”; and questor. She sets out with only the fuzziest notion of what her job might be. She inhabits a polluted land, the urbanized California of housing tracts, factories, shopping centers, and suicide strips blithely known as “freeways.” Construction has numbed nature as much as American society since World War II has narcotized sense and sensibility. Natural language, the frame of civilization, is running down, the victim of entropy, sloth, and the media. In Vesperhaven House, old Mr. Thoth (the Egyptian god of learning and writing) is nodding out in front of Porky Pig cartoons on TV. Rulers, such as the corporate officials of Yoyodyne, are corrupt. Oedipa must ask the right question, but the lesson of earlier quest narratives and of the drama of Oedipus himself is how hard it is to ask the right question; how hard it is to interpret oracular answers; how dangerous it might be to have the answers.

Nevertheless, the sexual conservatism of *V.*, if softened, infiltrates *The Crying of Lot 49*. Pynchon sexualizes ability to give Oedipa the weapons of “gut fear and female cunning” (*Lot 49*, 21/11). That cunning exposes itself in Oedipa’s ability to respond to the sea: the symbol of a teeming, insatiable, omnipotent womb. As she drives to a picnic at a lake Pierce has built, she thinks:

Somewhere beyond the battening, urged sweep of three-bedroom houses ... lurked the sea, the unimaginable Pacific, the one to which all surfers, beach pads, sewage disposal schemes, tourist incursions, sunned homosexuality, chartered fishing are irrelevant, the hole left by the moon’s tearing-free and monument to her exile; you could not hear or even smell this but



it was there, something tidal began to reach feelers in past eyes and eardrums, perhaps to arouse fractions of brain current your most gossamer microelectrode is yet too gross for finding. Oedipa had believed ... in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California.... Perhaps it was only that notion, its arid hope, she sensed as this forenoon they made their seaward thrust, which would stop short of any sea. (*Lot 49*, 55–56/36–37)

During her quest, Oedipa discovers the Tristero. An underground mail delivery system, it works in opposition to “legitimate” authority. So doing, it includes both criminal and revolutionary; extreme right and extreme left; Mafia enforcer and saint. As she deciphers codes about the Tristero, she becomes increasingly celibate in body and isolated in spirit, but she also releases a suppressed capacity for maternal tenderness. Psychological motherhood marks her moral growth. In a scene that resembles a slum Pietà, she cradles a dirty old sailor suffering from DTs, as if he were “her own child” (*Lot 49*, 127/93).

She may become a supernatural mother as well. As revelations buffet her, she wonders if she can hold to a central truth. In a grim metaphor, Pynchon asks if we are not all like Prince Myshkin; if we are not epileptics in the confrontation with spectra beyond the known sun. Oedipa meditates:

I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike “clues” were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (*Lot 49*, 118/87)

The capitalization of “Word” is vital: it is a translation, linguistically and conceptually, of the Greek “logos,” an animating and renewing principle of reason in the cosmos. Oedipa thinks of it once again. After calling upon God, during the dark night of her soul, she remembers

drifters she had listened to, Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in.... And the voices before and after the dead man’s that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial’s ten million possibilities for that magical Other

who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word. (*Lot 49*, 180/135–136)

The Tristero may be carrying not simply letters, i.e., written communications, but Letters, pieces of the Word.

Pynchon may be going on to give “the Word” special meaning. Some theoreticians of Logos—the Stoics, the Jewish philosopher Philo, the early Christian apologist Justin Martyr—thought of the divine principle as germinating, seminal, the “*spermatikos logos*.” Justin writes of “the seed of reason ... implanted in every race of man.” He mentions the “spermatik word.”<sup>13</sup> The Tristero may be delivering it. Pynchon, exploiting the puns natural language is heir to, literalizing a sexual metaphor, may want us to think of mail as male. If so, as Oedipa succumbs to the languid, sinister attraction of the Tristero, she represents the female body being pierced and receiving some sacred seed. Towards the end of her quest:

The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk, and empty rooms that waited for her. Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with. (*Lot 49*, 175/131)

One of the novel's ambiguities is whether she is carrying the child of life or of death. The former will add to and renew this world. The meritorious chance of our redemption may prevail. Bearing it will give Oedipa a salutary public significance. The numbers 49, apparently arbitrary, may prove symbolic: 4 the number of spring, 9 of lunar wisdom. If she is bearing the child of death, it will either add to her isolation or generate disease. Her pregnancy, as it were, will either be meaningless or of morbid public significance. The odds are on this possibility. If Oedipus must marry his mother and father his own siblings, parentless Oedipa must leave her husband and mother sterility.

Oedipa never reaches the Pacific. Only one character does: Randolph Driblette, the director of a Jacobean tragedy. He drowns himself. The closest she comes to the symbol of female fertility is to stand near the shore on old railroad tracks, ties, and cinderbed. She simplifies her choices to one: does the Tristero exist or not? Making sense of her clues, has she discovered or manufactured a reality? If Oedipa has invented the Tristero, then Pynchon's

early feminine metaphor for it, a malign and pitiless stripper, is another image for her hidden self. She commits herself to the Tristero and goes to the auction at which some possibly relevant information about it will be sold. The atmosphere is grim. The room is locked; the men inside have “pale, cruel faces”; the auctioneer is like a “puppet-master,” a priest of “some remote culture,” a “descending angel.” The narrative abandons the questor in the Chapel Perilous.

In *V.*, Benny Profane experiences the loss of vital myth. The affirmation of such absence is one of the longest cries in twentieth-century literature. Sitting in Little Italy in New York, amidst the garish shoddiness of a Catholic saint’s day celebration, he tries to tell a girl about his job.

He told her about the alligators; Angel, who had a fertile imagination too, added detail, color. Together on the stoop they hammered together a myth. Because it wasn’t born from fear of thunder, dreams, astonishment at how the crops kept dying after harvest and coming up again every spring, or anything else very permanent, only a temporary interest, a spur-of-the-moment tumescence, it was a myth rickety and transient as the bandstands and the sausage-pepper of Mulberry Street. (*V.*, 142/128)

If the early Pynchon were to offer a vital myth, it would have to be flexible enough to verify urban life; radical enough to regenerate the decaying world; tough enough to withstand the testing acids of irony, burlesque, and parody. It would also respect nature. Spring, taking on the role of Paraclete, would descend with tongue of flame. Ordinary women would be fertile. Goddesses would protect the natural bounty of the womb. Like the moon, women would have a dark side that would haunt the imagination of men and remind them of their fragile mortality. However, the early fiction dramatizes the mortifying betrayal of such roles, which some women will and others resist.

#### NOTES

1. For further comment see Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters, “Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*: The Novel as Subversive Experience,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19, 1 (Spring 1973), 79–87. I will be using both editions of *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967, first published by Lippincott in 1966). Page numbers of specific citations will be given parenthetically in my text as Lippincott/Bantam.

2. The description of the three-stage process is adapted from Raymond M.

Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972, third printing 1973), p. 133.

3. Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy," *Kenyon Review*, 22, 2 (Spring 1960), 282. Page numbers of further citations will be given parenthetically in my text.

4. Thomas Pynchon, *V*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 267/248 (novel first published by Lippincott in 1963). Page numbers of other citations will be given parenthetically as Lippincott/Bantam.

5. "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 96.

6. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, amended and enlarged edition, 1959), pp. 233–235. Page numbers of subsequent citations will be given parenthetically.

7. *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, Sentry edition, 1961), pp. 384, 388–389.

8. "The Secret Integration," *Saturday Evening Post*, 237, 45 (December 19–26, 1964), 36–37, 39, 42–44, 46–49, 51, is about children. Set in the Berkshires, it shows a small gang of boys learning to conform to the corrupt, hostile, unimaginative adult world. The story also introduces the Slothrop family. "Low-Lands," *New World Writing 16* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), pp. 85–108, tells of the near-fabulous adventures of Dennis Flange. He wishes to be a son (his mother, symbolically, is the sea) and to father a child. After a visit from old pal Pig Bodine, he leaves his superrational wife Cindy and accepts the invitation of a beautiful girl, Nerissa, to live with her. Nerissa's only disadvantages are that she lives underground, beneath a garbage dump, and that she is only three feet six inches tall. One of her attractions for Dennis is the maternal kindness she shows Hyacinth, her pet rat.

9. Veronica the Rat seems a rodent echo of the goddess Venus Cloacina, "patroness of the sewage system" in Rome. See Graves, *The White Goddess*, pp. 535–536.

10. The protagonist of Pynchon's first story is, like Benny Profane, the child of a Catholic/Jewish mixed marriage. While Benny's father is Catholic, Cleanth Siegal's mother is a member (lapsed) of the Church. See Tom Pynchon (*sic*), "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," *Epoch*, 9, 4 (Spring 1959), 195–213.

11. Marjorie Kaufman, in her eloquent essay in this collection, argues that Pynchon, insofar as Fausto Maijstral is his voice, construes motherhood as accident, impersonal. Even so, mothers carry life. They simply lose the privilege of personalizing and poeticizing the chore. The scene in which the painting is stolen is a good example of Pynchon's symbolic farce. The Gaucho's excursion into art criticism reveals the discontinuity between the twentieth century and its livelier aesthetic tradition. Pynchon also connects Botticelli's Venus to V., to the latter's detriment. The shell on which the goddess stands is, in Italian, "pettine," which is the word for comb as well.

12. Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land*, p. 129, claims that the nose operation is "a comic inversion of the usual joke about men and the length of their noses, demonstrating a vaguely unhealthy reversal of role playing." A misreading, cut along the masculine bias. The surgery, if Schoenmaker can be trusted, is another example

of the flip/flop. “[C]orrection entails retreat to a diametric opposite.” The scene, not one for the squeamish, shows two features of Pynchon’s style: (1) the tendency to exhaust one episode, even at the risk of making the large fictional structure narratively asymmetrical; and (2) the competent rendering of the technical.

13. “The Second Apology of Justin,” *Justin Martyr and Athenagoras. Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. II, ed. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1867), 78, 83. The editors, in a note, call the “spermatic word” the “word (i.e. Christ) disseminated among men” (p. 83).

MAUREEN QUILLIGAN

*Twentieth-Century American Allegory*

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, as *The Crying of Lot 49* promised, is a great allegory, for it is large, as allegories must be, and finely sensitive to the genre's best possibilities. Offering a carefully global view of the state of humanity in mid-twentieth-century (characters from all continents are represented), the book searches for a means of salvation. Part of the quest is a search for the cause(s) of damnation which, at his most specific—printing an old-fashioned pointing hand in the margin—Pynchon calls a “rocket cartel,” where the operative word is not so much rocket as “cartel.” That is, our damnation derives from the operation of a businesslike multinational corporation of the “elect” whose purpose is to keep the preterite imprisoned in a dehumanizing lack of communication. This summary, to be sure, unfairly simplifies what is a vastly complex exfoliation of patterns, plots, counterplots, paranoias, and possible leaps of faith, through an interlacing web of connections between characters (hundreds of them), none of whom, even those few whom Pynchon hints are members of the “elect,” know what is going on. Pynchon, like allegorists before him, is concerned with process, not with “finalization” (Pynchon puts the ugly word in quotes), and the process he makes his reader go through is immense, dense, and confusing. Using a favorite device of allegorists before him inherited from the grail romances, Pynchon interlaces the narrative, switching back and forth

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between at first widely disparate characters, a process which, as he suggests on the first page, “is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into.” If not all the relationships are clear at the end of the book, then they are at least less blurry, and we are made to sense that there is, inescapably, a connection among them all.<sup>68</sup>

If there is one central character in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is Tyrone Slothrop whose Puritan heritage links him with the Bible-toting American past, and hence (though unintentionally) with the origins of allegory in American culture. It is not only in this context, however, that Pynchon reveals his concerns for language, although Slothrop is the character around whom hover a number of obsessively persistent metaphors about the “text.” When, for instance, Slothrop’s Russian counterpart, Tchitcherine, finds himself sent to the first plenary session of a committee on the Turkish alphabet, Pynchon focuses on a basic theory of language in mid-twentieth century, and reveals the central linguistic concerns underlying the narrative. Edward Mendelson has remarked that this episode seems at first “disproportionate and anomalous,” yet upon consideration it appears as the book’s “ideological and thematic center.”<sup>69</sup> Just as Pynchon reveals the underlying mechanism of wordplay pervading *The Crying of Lot 49* in Oedipa’s discovery about that “high magic to low puns,” so, in *Gravity's Rainbow* he also alerts the reader to the usually hidden springs of the narrative.

The conference is supposed to decide what shape a New Turkic alphabet should take to translate a previously oral language into literacy. Tchitcherine has been assigned to the °I committee, where, Pynchon tells us, °I seems to be “some kind of G, a voiced uvular plosive.” The problem is that “there is a crisis of which kind of g to use in the word ‘stenography.’” Pynchon explains:

There is a lot of emotional attachment to the word around here. Tchitcherine one morning finds all the pencils in his conference room have mysteriously vanished. In revenge, he and Radnichy sneak in Blobadjian’s conference room next night with hacksaws, files and torches, and reform the alphabet on his typewriter.<sup>70</sup>

As this comic sabotage of writing implements hints, Pynchon is concerned with what happens to language when it gets written down; through alphabetization, the means of human communication get bureaucratized and language loses (at the same time it gains another) magic power. Thus: “On sidewalks and walls the very first printed slogans start to show up, the first

Central Asian fuck you signs, the first kill-the-police-commissioner signs (and somebody does! this alphabet is really something) and so the magic that the shamans, out in the wind, have always known, begins to operate now in a political way” (pp. 355–6). The shaman’s sympathetic magic (whereby a name is as good as a toenail for casting spells) will not, however, outlast the bureaucratization of print. In the next episode, connected to the previous by an interlacing formula—“But right about now, here come Tchitcherine and Džaqqp Qulan”—Tchitcherine discovers what he has helped to do. During what in middle Scots was called a “flyting match,” a verbal battle in alternating spontaneous verse, Tchitcherine realizes that “soon someone will come out and begin to write some of these down in the New Turkic Alphabet he helped frame ... and this is how they will be lost” (p. 357). When Tchitcherine prepares to record the Aqyn’s sacred song about the Kirghiz Light, Džaqqp Qulan asks, “How are you going to get it all?” “‘In stenography,’ replies Tchitcherine, his g a little glottal.”

The Aqyn’s song is itself about wordlessness, about a place “where words are unknown”:

If the place were not so distant,  
 If words were known, and spoken,  
 Then the God might be a gold ikon,  
 Or a page in a paper book.  
 But It comes as the Kirghiz Light—  
 There is no other way to know It.

Having allowed the Kirghiz Light to take away his eyes, the Aqyn sings that “Now I sense all Earth like a baby.” The scene in which the song is sung ends with a gesture reminiscent of a grade B cowboy movie convention—“‘Got it,’ sez Tchitcherine, ‘Let’s ride, comrade.’” Pynchon tells us that later Tchitcherine will reach the Kirghiz Light, “but not his birth.” And much later in the book Pynchon tells us, drawing the line of connection between Tchitcherine and Slothrop, “Forgive him as you forgave Tchitcherine at the Kirghiz Light” (p. 510). What we have to forgive Tchitcherine for, I think, is his having assumed that he had “got it” when he wrote it down. Language, in so far as it is just another bureaucratic system, is another instrument by which “they” stop true human communication. In focusing on the Kirghiz, Pynchon chose a people who went through the process of becoming literate at the time of World War II, a process lost in the mists of history for most of western civilization. By bringing Tchitcherine into the context of a tribal, oral society, directly out of the context of a committee on the New Turkic



Alphabet, Pynchon pinpoints the loss of a primitive, holistic experience of the cosmos at the moment of original literacy. Edward Mendelson has emphasized the political operation of the alphabet; but what language gains in political power it loses in spiritual potency. The shaman magic has been translated into political action to be sure, but specifically into murder (“Kill-the-police-commissioner!”). When Tchitcherine brings the death of an oral society by bringing an alphabet, he cannot participate in the cosmic rebirth sung by the Aqyn.

The notion dramatized here, of the violence done by the letter, Pynchon probably owes to theories about oral poetry first promulgated by Millman Perry and elaborated by A. B. Lord in *Singer of Tales*.<sup>71</sup> The notion had been, of course, hotly debated at the time of Plato, so it is not necessarily new; but the theory was much debated in the 1960s and gave rise to a pervasive self-consciousness about the medium of written language. Developments in French linguistics have continued to reassert the prejudice against the written word implicit in theories of oral poetry. In perhaps the fullest summary of the complicated case against writing, Jacques Derrida lists all those developments in human culture which can be associated with the letter:

All clergies, exercising political power or not, were constituted at the same time as writing and by the disposition of graphic power; ... strategy, ballistics, diplomacy, agriculture, fiscality, and penal law are linked in their history and in their structure to the constitution of writing; ... the possibility of capitalization and of politico-administrative organization had always passed through the hands of scribes who laid down the terms of many wars and whose function was always irreducible, whoever the contending parties might be; ... the solidarity among ideological, religious, scientific-technical systems, and the systems of writing which were therefore more and other than “means of communication” or vehicles of the signified, remains indestructible; ... the very sense of power and effectiveness in general, which could appear as such, as meaning and mastery ... was always linked with the disposition of writing.<sup>72</sup>

Pynchon’s association of writing with political power is not, therefore, some idiosyncratic ideology; his attitude is of his age. Derrida is, as I understand him, trying to find a rhetoric of writing which will allow him to go beyond the epistemology of Presence, while Pynchon is firmly mired in the problems

of Presence—that is, of trying to decide how humanity can witness its own existence in relationship to itself, to the planet, and to whatever overall purpose there might (or ought to) be behind such an existence. But Pynchon would, I think, agree with Derrida's assessment of the "violence" of the letter, without, however, celebrating it. More important, what Pynchon indicates has been lost to the letter is something he attempts to reconstitute for his reader in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The details of the New Turkic Alphabet scenes, Mendelson shows, are taken from an article in a scholarly journal.<sup>73</sup> As this bit of arcane lore hints, Pynchon has done a surprising amount of homework in all areas covered by the book; how much of it is fact and not fiction will take scholars some time to discover. In the meantime, Pynchon's reader often finds himself feeling paranoid long after reading the books when he stumbles on some fact he had thought was part of the (wildly improbable) fiction. It is as if these discoveries were meant to be part of the reader's experience of the book, and the effect is more than mere satire of the contemporary scene; it becomes a process whereby the work of art reaches out to shape one's immediate response to life. The time bombs of particular historical detail comprise one method Pynchon uses to get beyond the covers of his book.

But Pynchon remains the captive of the very print he laments in the Kirghiz Light episode. His problem is to use language in such a way that it can free itself of its bureaucratizing control of experience. Part of his solution is the very bad pun. Thus Lyle Bland's lawyers are Salitieri, Poore, Nash, De Brutus, and Short; "So as the mustache waxes, Slothrop waxes his mustache" (p. 211). Macaronic as well, the puns cross cultural boundaries; hence the many references to the German lake, Bad Karma. Such idiot's delights as these can give way to more elaborate parodies of the usual methods of allegorical narrative, whereby Pynchon appears to have set up a whole story so he can make a pun; thus "hübsch räuber" can mean either "helicopter," or, without the umlauts a lady cannot pronounce, "cute robber." And this entire story appears as a mere aside in an otherwise recondite discussion of the meaning of "ass backwards" followed by an equally elaborate dissertation on the problems of translating "Shit and Shinola." One of the earliest examples of these extended, tasteless excretions of style is the long series of variations possible in the syntactic context of the sentence "you never did the Kenosha kid" (pp. 61ff.)—a sentence which "occupies" Slothrop's consciousness on one of our first introductions to it.

The sheer silliness of this kind of punning wins for Pynchon's language a few laughs which dissolve the kind of seriousness bureaucratized by formal good taste. But Pynchon also has his own seriousness about this kind of

wordplay which may have been intended partly to provide a magic talisman in the style, to ward off (however unsuccessfully) the evil eye of criticism. Just as the narrator explains of the planted puns in Brigadier General Pudding's caprophiliac exercises—"But these are not malignant puns against an intended sufferer so much as a sympathetic magic, a repetition high and low of some prevailing form" (p. 232)—Pynchon's punning indicates the magic potency of language to indicate an otherness beyond the merely mundane. Puns in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, ground the book's structure in polysemy rather than in a parallel system of metaphors. Language is less controlling when it is not controlled to mean only one thing, but many. Making a different argument about the puns, George Levine has remarked that "language may suggest the possibilities it cannot present.... This is only possible if language does not protect us with the comfort of its structure, if the word can somehow put us in the presence of 'whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from.'"<sup>74</sup> Because bad puns are in a sense anomalies of structure, they may be pointers to truth, may be initially so uncomfortable a signal of the author's medium that we are forced to see the use of language in a different way. And that way may be to accept the use of language as magic.

In the only moment of pure salvation in the book, a witch named Geli Tripping loves Tchitcherine so well that she is able to cast a spell on him to make him give up his hate and relax into love. Pynchon comments: "This is magic. Sure—but not necessarily fantasy" (p. 735). Like the gaiety of her tripping with Slothrop, her magic is sympathetic; making a doll of her lover she chants a charm so that he, blinded by love, does not recognize his African half-brother, whom he had intended to kill. Some shaman magic is not just political.

Another kind of verbal play does not provide salvation, merely escape. Trapped at a menacing upperclass dinner party, Roger Mexico and Seaman Bodine manage to nauseate the diners into not noticing their departure by offering alliterative alternates to the printed menu, such as "fart fondue" and "vegetables venereal." Again the humor is sophomoric, but sophistication in the context of the dinner party is suspect, and sophomores are closer to the baby the Aqyn had become than those who make the sounds of well-bred gagging heard throughout the dining room. If the effect of this wordplay, and of things like General Pudding's more-than-naked midnight lunches, is repellent, they at the same time are signatures in the book's style signaling that in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon attempts to escape the bad kind of bookishness that haunts Slothrop.

As a scion of an old Puritan family that ran a lumbermill in the Berkshires, which “converted acres at a clip into paper,” Slothrop is at the mercy of an ancestry that produced “toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word” (p. 28). It is the cause of his paranoia: “Did They choose him because of all those wordsmitten Puritans dangling off of Slothrop’s family tree? Were They trying to seduce his brain now, his reading eye too?” (p. 207). Yet inherited paranoia is the only road Slothrop can take:

He will learn to hear quote marks in the speech of others. It is a bookish kind of reflex, maybe he’s genetically predisposed—all those earlier Slothrops packing Bibles around the blue hilltops as part of their gear, memorizing chapter and verse, the structure of Arks, Temples, Visionary Thrones—all the materials and dimensions. Data behind which always, nearer or farther, was the numinous certainty of God. [Pp. 241–2]

Slothrop’s relationship to this ancestry is just as ambivalent as Pynchon’s use of Puritan theology. The nostalgia implicit in noting that an earlier kind of paranoia had resulted in faith in the “numinous certainty of God,” while modern day paranoia discovers a rocket cartel, marks the difficulty faced by any modern day allegorist. If, as Foucault has argued, the notion of “resemblance” empowered Renaissance thought to find linked analogies in a harmonious cosmos, then slender church steeples now resemble “white rockets about to fire” (p. 29). Unfortunately, the impotently subversive advice that Pynchon has a pine tree offer Slothrop during a hallucination late in the book—“Next time you comes across a logging operation out here, find one of their tractors that isn’t being guarded, and take its oil filter with you” (p. 553)—will no more atone for the sins of his Puritan ancestors than it will stop present exploitation of the forests. Yet Pynchon grants to one of Slothrop’s forebears the authorship of a tract on “preterition” which articulates the basic metaphor of salvation in the book. William Slothrop, a happy pig farmer in western Massachusetts, “felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite.” Slothrop wonders: “Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot?” Perhaps this heresy was the “fork in the road America never took” (p. 556)—although, with this reference to Frost, Pynchon may be implying that the other road would not have made that much difference.

Slothrop is not the only character in the novel concerned with deciphering codes; all of the characters are more or less engaged in acts of

interpretation. Foremost among those worshipping a text is Enzian, the half-Russian, half-African, half-brother of Tchitcherine who searches for the elusive 00001 Rocket, assuming it to be scripture, only to realize fairly late that not the rocket, but postwar ruined Europe is the text:

There doesn't exactly dawn, no but there *breaks*, as that light you're afraid will break some night at too deep an hour to explain away—there floods on Enzian what seems to him an extraordinary understanding. This serpentine slag-heap he is just about to ride into now, this ex-refinery, Jamf Ölfabriken Werke AG, *is not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order.* [ ... ] all right, say we *are* supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text [ ... ] well we assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket [ ... ]

But, if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now, if [ ... ] the bombing was the exact industrial process of conversion, each release of energy [ ... ] plotted in advance to bring *precisely tonight's wreck* into being thus decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text ... If it is in working order, what is it meant to do? [ ... ]

It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted ... secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology.... [Pp. 520–1]

While Pynchon carefully discounts the validity of personifying technology (later capitalized) as the force that caused the war—that causes all ills—his use of the terminology of textual interpretation here is more than mere metaphor. Enzian's moment of illumination ends with a one-sentence paragraph that belongs as much to the author as to the character: "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (p. 525); on this desperate hunch, which sounds more like an article of faith, hangs not only Enzian's but Pynchon's search for salvation.

The metaphor of the Text is so widespread throughout the book that if it does not order the kind of reading the book itself receives, then, at the very least, it makes of all the characters, readers. Natural descriptions are turned into its terms; thus ice on a building side "of varying thickness, wavy, blurred" is "a legend to be deciphered by lords of the winter, Glacists of the region, and argued over in their journals" (p. 73). But textual interpretation

is not just the province of cold scholarly journals. Of the many signs appearing throughout the red districts of Berlin during the war that read “An Army of Lovers Can Be Beaten,” Pynchon explains, “They are not slogans so much as texts, revealed in order to be thought about, expanded on, translated into action by the people” (p. 155). Like the alphabet which translates the shaman’s magic into the political sphere, a holy text not only states a truth, but incites action. The action here, of course, as in the immediate response to the New Turkic alphabet, would be killing. Yet the text is also ambiguous. Reversing the Spartan notion of comrades in arms, the text would mean that lovers would not fight wars. Language in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as in other allegories, has power to cause evil as well as good, and ambiguity can cut both ways.

Blicero, just before he debauches Enzian, discovers that the relation between action and words is the thinnest of lines: “Tonight he feels the potency of every word: words are only an eye-twitch away from the things they stand for” (p. 100). Elsewhere the narrator hints that at a similar moment, Slothrop is hovering at the threshold of some epiphany of the center—a threshold which, however, we are warned he will never cross:

Is it, then, really never to find you again? Not even in your worst times of night, with pencil words on your page only Dt from the things they stand for? And inside the victim is twitching, fingering beads, touching wood, avoiding any Operational Word. Will it really never come to take you, now? [P. 510]

That any word might be “operational” is the important point here. All of Pynchon’s antics are aimed at making the reader aware of the potent possibilities of language in the realm of action—which then become capable of leading us back to earth and our freedom. That endpoint may itself be wordlessness, but the road back can only be through the tortuous twistings of human reason, tracing all the labyrinthine systems of signs, one of which may be the key, the text.

Each plot carries its signature. Some are God’s, some masquerade as God’s. This is a very advanced kind of forgery. But still there’s the same meanness and mortality to it as a falsely made check. It is only more complex. The members have names, like the Archangels. More or less common, humanly-given names whose security can be broken, and the names learned. But those names

are not magic. That's the key, that's the difference. Spoken aloud, even with the purest magical intention, *they do not work*. [P. 464]

Such a "theory" has all the limits of the unreliable character who offers it, but Pynchon's invocation of the magic of language here recalls the shaman magic of the Kirghiz Light episode; all of his references are self-consciously primitive. Yet, if it is at basis a very learned sophistication which allows him to know word-magic as archaic anachronism, still, at the same time, Pynchon appears to suspect that self-consciousness serves humanity poorly. Whatever the road back, however, it will have to take into account this pervasive (perhaps decadent) self-consciousness, as *Gravity's Rainbow* does. So imprisoned in bookishness that raindrops appear to Slothrop as "giant asterisks on the pavement, inviting him to look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all" (p. 204), Pynchon's reader and Pynchon's communication itself are prisoners of the book; all the filmic metaphors cannot turn the print on the page into anything else.

Pynchon's drive to get to the ineffable through the anomalies of language (such as the magic correspondences indicated by puns, silly or otherwise) owes little directly, I should think, to any one theorist of language; but that texts like *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* can now be written and read derives absolutely from the context of a widely-felt concern for the being of language in the last half of the twentieth century.

This context was, of course, long in the making; Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* in particular elevated the status of the play on words to the level of a nearly "magic" key for unlocking the secrets of the psyche, was a seminal figure in its creation. But the revolution in linguistics has been most responsible for the renewed interest. While as a linguist Noam Chomsky has posited that to describe the process by which man learns language is to describe what is essentially human about human nature (turning *homo sapiens* into *homo significans*), the method of French linguistic analysis in its application to many other heretofore un verbal areas of human endeavor has made it necessary, as Foucault has put it, to ask what must language be "in order to structure in this way what is nevertheless not in itself either word or discourse." Language once again is perceived as interpenetrating the nonverbal world. Further, linguistics' insistence on structure, as an invariable relationship within a totality of elements has also, as Foucault points out, opened up "the relation of the human sciences to mathematics," and so it has helped to close the gap between language and the purer forms of semiological systems that was created in the seventeenth

century.<sup>75</sup> At the very least, language-related studies have begun to regain some of the status they lost to mathematics.

Pynchon witnesses the fact of this closed gap by scattering very complicated equations throughout his text (which have sent his illiterate—in this sense—readers scurrying for basic textbooks in thermodynamics and information theory); his characters are technicians, engineers, research psychologists, and, furthermore, they live in their work.<sup>76</sup> It is not just that the “hard” sciences offer systems of metaphors not usually found in modern novels, but that the book broaches the question of the interrelationship between disparate value systems. If church steeples look like rockets about to fire, rockets also look like church steeples. Pynchon has a sense of humor about the problem, of course. Challenged by a successful rival, the statistician Roger Mexico defensively says at one point, “Little sigma, times P of s-over-little-sigma, equals one over the square root of two pi, times e to the minus s squared over two little-sigma squared.... It is an old saying among my people” (p. 709). It would be possible to see this Gaussian formula for normal distribution as Mexico’s comment on his rival’s “normality”—it corresponds to the narrator’s general sense of Jessica’s betrayal of Mexico. If this is how we are to read it (after having checked the relevant text, or asked a friend who knows), then mathematics has been made to comment. The fundamental point about the equations, however, is that they, along with words, maps, service manuals, technical blueprints, even the flight of birds and the patterns of ice may all “also be read” (p. 673). All must be read, interpreted, and perhaps acted upon, for all these signs may be part of the “holy text,” which will inform its readers (both inside and outside the book) of the truths that make human existence meaningful.

In a sense *Gravity’s Rainbow* merely fleshes out in narrative form our concern for the Word. The plethora of questions our present culture has about language—as summarized here by Foucault—is the context which informs the shape of Pynchon’s text:

What is language? What is a sign? What is unspoken in the world, in our gestures, in the whole enigmatic heraldry of our behaviour, our dreams, our sicknesses—does all that speak, and if so in what language and in obedience to what grammar? Is everything significant, and, if not, what is, and for whom, and in accordance with what rules? What relation is there between language and being, and is it really to being that language is always addressed—at least language that speaks truly?<sup>77</sup>



Pynchon's characters are obsessed with these very questions, and the rushing answerlessness of the tone also marks Pynchon's narrative, which flips from question to question as it rushes from quest to quest. The answers, if any, are promised in the interfaces of the work itself, in its own way of redoubling back upon itself so that its own labyrinthine structure mirrors the polysemous density of what may again be merely a paranoid vision of reality. But the sheer weight of the narrative does not allow one to dismiss its vision as "mere" paranoia—which is momentarily personified in the text as an "allegorical figure ... (a grand old dame, a little wacky, but pure heart)" (p. 657). Paranoia may be dictionary-defined as insanity, but it is a "sickness" which appears to speak the only hope of salvation:

The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment [ ... ] must go on blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences [ ... ] kicking endlessly among the plastic trivia, finding in each Deeper Significance and trying to string them all together like terms of a power series hoping to zero in on the tremendous and secret Function whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken [ ... ] to bring them together [ ... ] to make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste.... [P. 590]

All of the principal characters, as interpreters or readers of signs, have a difficult task; engaged in reading not merely as an aesthetic exercise, but as a holy activity, they attempt to make sense of the world so that they can live in it.

In his description of the strange, enigmatic, and dense linguistic context of the late twentieth century, Foucault considers the position literature occupies. It is one of many different possible dispositions to language which are all, however, parallel:

For philologists, words are like so many objects formed and deposited by history; for those who wish to achieve a formalization, language must strip itself of its concrete content and leave nothing visible but those forms of discourse that are universally valid; if one's intent is to interpret, then words become a text to be broken down, so as to allow that other meaning hidden in them to emerge and become clearly visible; lastly, language may sometimes arise for its own sake in an act of writing that designates nothing other than itself.<sup>78</sup>

Literature is that language which “arises for its own sake”: having begun his whole discussion of the fluctuating *episteme* with a text from Jorge Luis Borges, Foucault implicitly makes it the paradigm for modern literature, of that species of language which “addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity, or seeks to re-apprehend the essence of all literature in the movement that brought it into being ... all its threads converge upon the finest of points ... upon the simple act of writing.” The “ludic denial” of anything extraneous to the artistry itself in such writing is more than “art for art’s sake,” it is an insistence on language which “has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being.”<sup>79</sup> But unlike Borges’ or Nabokov’s art for which Foucault’s description is quite apt, Pynchon’s language with all its self-reflexive qualities is more than self-referential. We have seen how the language of *Pale Fire* only doubles back upon itself and encapsulates, within itself, a closed system, pivoting on the solipsistic neatness of the allegorical critic. Pynchon’s readers are radically unlike Kinbote, who knows what “other meaning he is going to find in his chosen text; and they spend more time reading the world than they do books, unlike the self-consciously literary characters who dominate Borges’ stories. If Pynchon’s characters do not even know what the text is, suspecting that in fact anything may be part of the readable text, they for that very fact inhabit an allegorical cosmos—where nothing is mere ornament nor all the ludicrousness merely ludic.

The dense web of extremely self-conscious correspondences which mark fiction like Borges’ or Nabokov’s looks like what I have described allegory to be. But this fiction has a finished self-sufficiency fundamentally different from the open-endedness of allegory. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like *The Crying of Lot 49* (like Chaucer’s *House of Fame*), ends on an elliptical note, moments before the apocalyptic explosion of meaning. Christian enters the Celestial City, but, having caught only the merest glimpse through the gates, we are left behind and no longer share his viewpoint. *The Faerie Queene* fades into bitter inconsequentiality, incomplete. Melville can only promise “something further” in the Confidence Man’s masquerade. All these inconclusive conclusions are perhaps only the most awkward way of signaling what the allegorist had intended all along, that the end of the narrative is not merely to invite interpretation, but to excite belief and action. If the usual conclusion of an allegory is open-ended, if the everywhere-promised final statement is not forthcoming, then the reader, alone at the cliff’s edge, may be in a better position to make a leap for himself.

Angus Fletcher concludes his investigation of allegory as a symbolic mode by saying that “Allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology.”<sup>80</sup> And,

in fact, we usually assume that what a reader must assent to at the end of an allegory is the felicitously artful display of dogma that has underpinned the narrative. While Fletcher allows enough room in his theory for those allegories more like fun-house mirrors than direct reflections of an authoritarian reality, his basic assumption is still that the focus of allegory will be more or less directly on some preexistent superstructure of hierarchically arranged values, which the narrative gradually reveals either to celebrate or to attack.

If, however, we shift the focus only slightly, a profound change in the definition (and in the history of the genre) occurs. The thesis of this chapter has been that allegory reflects not so much the dominant assumptions about value prevailing in any cultural epoch, but rather the culture's assumptions about the ability of language to state or reveal value; that is, value conceived in an extramundane way, not mere market-place value, or the goings on in the *agora*, but something *allos*. To define the generic focus of allegory as language is to remove it from the stifling confines of service to a dogma (any dogma) which thereby emphasizes a narrative's essentially static superstructure. It frees us to see allegory's characteristic concern for process, for the complicated exfoliation of interdependent psychic, intellectual, and cultural revelations, which can all be spoken of only in terms of the force that shapes them all: language. It also frees us to see what stays the same in allegory—what marks it as a persistent genre, through all the changes in dogma. What Melville and Langland have in common is not a shared satirical approach to Christian codes of social ethics (though they are also remarkably alike in this), but a concern for the polysemous slipperiness of a shared language which can easily lie, but which is the only tool for stating the truth. In this context, Langland is no less ambiguous than Melville. By stressing this fundamental similarity, we obviate simplistic reductions (what Langland could believe, Melville could not) and we can use Langland to help us read Melville, and vice versa. Anyone armed with the experience of the Lady Meed episode in *Piers Plowman* is not going to find the Confidence Man's requests for money quite as perplexing, or miss the ambivalent ambiguity of the Confidence Man's title. Meed operates by a play on words, and so does the Confidence Man. Anyone who has suffered with the Red crosse Knight's misreadings of the landscape in which he finds himself lost will be less impatient with Oedipa Maas' fitful piecing together of signs. And no one who has chafed under Jean de Meun's obscene innuendos will find Pynchon's handling of sexuality beside the point.

If we assume that allegory is a distinct genre, sensitive above all to a culture's linguistic assumptions, then we can situate ourselves in relation to

each text more accurately. Not only will we be in a better position to place each text within its historical context, we will be able to use the experience of reading other allegories, from other periods, to locate the techniques necessary for reading works that will be quite different from their nonallegorical contemporaries, even from other titles by the same author (as is the case with Melville). Thus, for example, Pynchon's technique of interlacing various characters' experiences will be initially less confusing if we invoke Spenser's similar procedures, and the tapestrylike interconnections he is thereby able to make in his text. If we remember that a paradigmatic form of allegory is the dream vision, the opening episode of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Pirate Prentice's nightmare), will seem less arbitrary. We can also appreciate the function of this opening dream if we see it as we saw Will's initial dream in *Piers Plowman* of the fair field full of folk, as the threshold text upon which the rest of the book will comment. Thus, the initial evaluation in the dream "The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre" not only prepares for the final scene in the Orpheus Theatre on Melrose in Los Angeles (will this art retrieve us from death?), but signals the terms in which Enzian's enlightenment comes: "The politics was all theatre" (p. 521).

And most important of all, we will not be likely to slide over any kind of wordplay, that means by which allegorists consistently signal the work's primary concern with its own verbal medium; we will not tend to dismiss it as the idiosyncratic taste of the particular author in question. In short, a full comprehension of the formal elements of the genre will make us better readers of allegory, so that we can judge just how well its reading serves our humanity. Once we get past the necessary complexities of the text and have a measure of control over our response to it, we will be able to see that the proper reader of allegory has never been Frye's impatient literary critic, but someone who is willing to entertain the possibility of making a religious response to the ineffability invoked by its polysemous language.

#### NOTES

68. For "interlace," see Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), chapter 5.

69. Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 168; hereafter cited as Levine and Leverenz.

70. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 353; hereafter cited in the text.

71. A. B. Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), especially chapter 6: "The two techniques [oral and written composition] are, I submit, contradictory and mutually exclusive. Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained" (p. 129).

72. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 92–3.

73. Levine and Leverenz, p. 170.

74. Levine and Leverenz, p. 131.

75. Foucault, *Order of Things*, p. 382.

76. See Mendelson's article in Levine and Leverenz, p. 179.

77. Foucault, *Order of Things*, p. 306.

78. Foucault, p. 304.

79. Foucault, p. 300.

80. Fletcher, *Allegory*, p. 368.

DAVID SEED

*Order in Thomas Pynchon's  
"Entropy"*

Of all Thomas Pynchon's short fiction "Entropy" has attracted the most critical attention. Tony Tanner describes it roundly as "his first important short story" and other critics have paid tribute to its sophisticated structure.<sup>1</sup> In view of Pynchon's subsequent novels one interest which the story possesses is its application of a modern scientific concept to fiction. Entropy, Anne Mangel has argued, is also an important concern in *The Crying of Lot 49*.<sup>2</sup> But the story is not only important as an early treatment of subsequent themes in Pynchon's fiction; it stands in its own right as a dramatization of how the concept of entropy can be applied to human behavior.

The story is set in an apartment block in Washington, D.C. The date is February, 1957. In one flat (the lower of the two which provide the setting) a party being given by one Meatball Mulligan is about to get its second wind. People are sprawled about in various stages of drunkenness and a quartet of jazz musicians are sitting in the living-room, listening to records. Quite early in the story a man named Saul climbs into Mulligan's flat from the fire-escape and explains that he has just had a fight with his wife Miriam. Subsequently other people enter—three coeds and five enlisted men from the U.S. Navy. As the drunkenness and noise increases, a fight breaks out and the party seems to be on the verge of chaos. After due consideration Mulligan decides to calm everyone down and restore order. This he does.

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The action of “Entropy” in fact alternates between Mulligan’s party and the apartment above his where one Callisto and his companion Aubade are trying to heal a sick bird. The apartment is a kind of hot-house, a perfectly self-contained ecological system. Like Henry Adams, Callisto is obsessed with energy running down and—perhaps for posterity, but more likely as a solipsistic exercise—he is dictating his memoirs. The bird dies and, abandoning the ecological balance they have built up for the past seven years, Aubade goes to the window and smashes it. The story ends with the two waiting for the internal and external temperatures to equalize and for night to fall.

This bald summary of the action does not of course explain its relevance to the title and to understand this we must apply the various definitions of “entropy” offered by a standard modern dictionary. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* defines the concept as follows:

1. [In thermodynamics] A quantity that is the measure of the amount of energy in a system not available for doing work ...
2. [In statistical mechanics] A factor of quantity that is a function of the physical state of a mechanical system ...
3. [In communication theory] A measure of the efficiency of a system (as a code or a language) in transmitting information ...
4. The ultimate state reached in the degradation of the matter and energy of the universe: state of inert uniformity of component elements; absence of form, pattern, hierarchy, or differentiation ...<sup>3</sup>

Of these meanings the second is the least important for Pynchon’s story, being only glanced at briefly in Callisto’s dictation. If we consider the super-imposed levels of action from Callisto’s hot-house to Mulligan’s party and finally to Saul’s apartment below that, we can see that the apartments form a schematic analogue to the fourth, first and third definitions respectively. Callisto is preoccupied above all with the final run-down of energy, the “heat-death” of the universe. Mulligan’s party-goers are all characterized by apathy and inertia and so ironically exemplify energy which is unavailable for work. And lastly Saul has had an argument with his wife over communication theory and discusses with Mulligan (very inconclusively) what a high proportion of sheer “noise” human speech contains. Outside the apartment block is the street and the weather which, by implication, are also outside this multi-level metaphor.

Tony Tanner has suggested another interpretation of the building as follows:

The house ... is some sort of paradigm for modern consciousness; the lower part immersed in the noise of modern distractions and sensing the failing of significant communication, while the upper part strives to remain at the level of music, yet feels the gathering strain as dream is encroached on by life. Life, in this context, is not only the party downstairs, but the weather.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly this would explain the broad contrast between Callisto's "hothouse" and Mulligan's party. The former is dream-like and enclosed; the latter is earthy and open to newcomers. But Tanner makes evaluations which the story does not really invite. Callisto's world is like a dream but Pynchon does not ironize it by contrast with outside "life." It too is part of life, the life of the mind, and if it is inadequate to external pressures, Mulligan's party seems equally so. Pynchon does not set up a distinction between "life" and "non-life"; he dramatizes different meanings of the central concept and explores their inter-connection.

Already then it should be obvious that Pynchon is not using the term "entropy" loosely. In the same study of modern American fiction quoted above, Tanner found the concept so important that he devotes a whole chapter to it and suggests that it has become a very fashionable term, one used superficially to mean decline.<sup>5</sup> While an undergraduate at Cornell Pynchon took several courses on physics which certainly help to explain the precision of the scientific references in this story. And yet, although the basic concept is difficult to grasp, Pynchon's story requires little more technical knowledge than that offered in the dictionary definitions.

Indeed the story's epigraph, taken from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, introduces us straight away to one area of metaphor. The passage prophesies no change in the weather and asserts, with gloomy fatalism, a chaingang image for man's future: "We must get into step, a lockstep toward the prison of death."<sup>6</sup> Already we have one metaphor proposed to us—constant weather as an emblem of the lack of hope. By juxtaposing the epigraph and title Pynchon now invites us to broaden the metaphor, particularly in the direction of the fourth dictionary definition of "entropy." The passage in fact omits two sentences immediately preceding the one quoted above, namely: "Our heroes have killed themselves, or are killing themselves. The hero, then, is not Time, but Timelessness."<sup>7</sup> These lines occur at the beginning of the novel and give an opening statement of theme—the absence



of change and the deliberate stress on negative or inverted values. But it is important to recognize that Miller is summarizing Boris's views. Miller's surrogate narrator does not give in to his friend's apocalyptic gloom and even regards him as comically melodramatic. Indeed, only three lines after the summary of Boris's "prophecies," the narrator comments "I am the happiest man alive," a remarkably cheerful statement for a man preoccupied with universal decline. In Miller's novel the interchange between the narrator and Boris creates a considerable amount of humor, and, by choosing such a passage for an epigraph, Pynchon leads the unwary reader into a kind of trap. On the one hand the weather metaphor makes the abstract concept of entropy easy to grasp, on the other the prophecies lack authority even in Miller's novel. And so we should not jump to the conclusion that Pynchon is endorsing the metaphor. He is rather introducing one theme, one strand of meaning, which will be taken up in the early stages of the story.

Outside the apartment block in Washington it is raining and the weather has been very changeable. It is typical of Pynchon's scrupulous attention to fact that there *was* freak weather in early February, 1957, including widespread snowfalls and flooding.<sup>8</sup> Pynchon draws careful attention to the weather mainly for its metaphorical resonances. The time of year is a kind of false spring characterized by random weather-changes and a general feeling of depression—at least for the members of Mulligan's party. They are, Pynchon states, "inevitably and incorrigibly Romantic." He continues:

And as every good Romantic knows, the soul (*spiritus, ruach, pneuma*) is nothing, substantially, but air; it is only natural that warpings in the atmosphere should be recapitulated in those who breathe it. So that over and above the public components—holidays, tourist attractions—there are private meanderings, linked to the climate as if this spell were a *stretto* passage in the year's fugue: haphazard weather, aimless loves, unpredicted commitments: months one can easily spend *in* fugue, because oddly enough, later on, winds, rains, passions of February and March are never remembered in that city, it is as if they had never been. (278–9)

The opening clause, with its obvious implication that the narrator is not a Romantic, pushes the reader back from the text far enough to recognize that a method of ordering is being examined. The argument for a connection between soul and weather proceeds by a false logic based on etymology and

anyway suggests a passivity on the part of those who believe in this connection. They simply "recapitulate" the weather and submit to chance meanderings and random change. As the last sentence draws out its own length Pynchon shifts away from musical metaphor to a psychological meaning of "fugue" as a period of apparently rational behavior followed by amnesia.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the passage it looks as if a principle is being offered us, but, by creating detachment in the reader, by shifting the main metaphor, and by implying passivity in the people under discussion, Pynchon ironically reduces the importance even of his own story. If the events are relative to weather-change and amnesia, then their representative and psychological status is brought into question. They are simply local "warpings."

Against this notion of apparently random change Pynchon contrasts Callisto's view of the weather. He too has noted its changeability, but is far more preoccupied with the eventual general run-down of energy, the final heat-death of the universe predicted by some cosmologists following Clausius's original proposition that entropy tends toward a maximum. Accordingly Callisto pays no attention to the prosaic details of the rain and snow; he is more disturbed by the fact that the temperature outside has stayed at a constant 37°F. for three days. Like Miller's Boris he is "leery at omens of apocalypse" (280). When dictating his memoirs the combination of terms like "vision" and "oracle" with scientific information suggests that Callisto is fitting his materials into a non-scientific, quasi-religious pattern. Indeed, for all the differences between his obsession with endings and the party-goers' version of the pathetic fallacy, both outlooks could loosely be described as "Romantic."

Three times in the course of the story Callisto asks Aubade to check the external temperature, thereby paralleling a similar action in an earlier modernistic work—Beckett's *Endgame* (1958). Early in the play Hamm sends Clov to the window:

Hamm: (gesture towards window right). Have you looked?

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: Well?

Clov: Zero.

Hamm: It'd need to rain.

Clov: It won't rain.<sup>10</sup>

The relation and clipped idiom between Hamm and Clov parallels that between Callisto and Aubade. Like Callisto Hamm delivers lengthy monologues, the longest one trailing away into silence at the end of the play. It is an important difference between the two works that it is raining in Pynchon's story. Apart from the tenuous evidence of three days at a steady temperature, Callisto has only a theoretical justification for his gloom. In Beckett's play the gloom is relieved on-stage by the dialogue whose humor literally fills the time before the final end. Both works have pre-apocalyptic elements, but Pynchon confines them mainly to Callisto. Once again he suggests a significance to the weather, but does not commit himself one way or the other.

Pynchon's reservations about Callisto emerge very clearly in the description of the latter's apartment, particularly in the following lines:

Mingled with the sounds of the rain came the first tentative, guerulous morning voices of the other birds, hidden in philodendrons and small fan palms: patches of scarlet, yellow and blue laced through this Rousseau-like fantasy, this hothouse jungle it had taken him seven years to weave together. Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder. (279)

The comparison with a painting of Douanier Rousseau is hardly necessary to suggest that the scene is a kind of artifact, a grotesquely displaced jungle which may have its own internal balance, but which is also as stylized as Rousseau's works. The emphasis on defensiveness, as if outside chaos was an aggressive force, carries with it its own ironies. For Callisto's hothouse may be hermetically sealed, but it also shuts in both himself and Aubade. It is, in other words, an exotic prison. Secondly Callisto is determined to shut out chaotic elements, but the one form of energy which he cannot control is sound. The noise of the rain impinges from outside, of music from below. It seems, then, that Pynchon is swift to indicate the futility of Callisto's enterprise as soon as we see the apartment. If this is so, Aubade's final gesture of smashing the window is implied from the very start.

Pynchon makes the fragility of Callisto's hothouse explicit when presenting Aubade's anxiety about external noise. It is a kind of "leakage" which poses a clear threat to their sense of order:

The architectonic purity of her world was constantly threatened by such hints of anarchy: gaps and excrescences and skew lines, and a shifting or tilting of planes to which she had continually to readjust lest the whole structure shiver into a disarray of discreet and meaningless signals. (283)

The epithet "architectonic" is shrewdly chosen since it could refer either to architects or architecture. In this way Pynchon manages to avoid separating their "structure" from Aubade and, by implication, Callisto. Aubade even personifies the order she is trying to maintain. Its maintenance is expressed in terms of physical gesture and anxiety. She has to "readjust," but what—herself or the structure? In fact Callisto and Aubade are melodramatists of form. They think in terms of violently opposed extremes (anarchy versus order) and, although Callisto is ostensibly waiting for a run-down of energy (which would not be at all dramatic), he and Aubade are both arguably more anxious about the point of fracture when their hothouse would collapse into chaos. From their point of view this would be a virtual cataclysm.

Once Callisto starts dictating his memoirs it becomes clear that he is a parody of Henry Adams, specifically the author of *The Education*. Like Adams at the time of composing the book, Callisto is living in Washington. Both describe themselves in the third person; both are attempting to articulate the cultural implications of modern scientific theory; both are particularly impressed by Willard Gibbs who was, according to Adams, "the greatest of Americans, judged by his rank in science."<sup>11</sup> Adams, for a variety of temperamental and biographical reasons, adopts a passive stance (hence his use of the third person) and continually mocks his own ineffectuality. The key chapters in *The Education* as far as Pynchon's story is concerned, is "The Virgin and the Dynamo," where two of Adams' central symbols come into confrontation. His aesthetic idealism, which Pynchon ironically hints at in Callisto's name (i.e. "most beautiful"), gives ground before the modern embodiment of force. In trying to balance the modern scientific notion of force against religion Adams feels himself groping in labyrinths, his answer is characteristically to turn the act of writing in on itself:

In such labyrinths, the staff is a force almost more necessary than the legs; the pen becomes a sort of blind-man's dog, to keep him from falling into the gutters. The pen works for itself, and acts like a hand, modelling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best. The form is never arbitrary, but it is a sort of growth like crystallization, as any artist knows too well ...<sup>12</sup>

Adams diverts the reader away from his main impulse towards final understanding and dramatizes the automatism of writing. The variety of analogies to writing conceal—but only partly—a tendency towards self-pity on Adams' part. In the last chapters of *The Education* he constantly refers to himself as aged or infirm, and there is a hint of the same melancholy when Callisto identifies his condition as “the sad dying fall of middle age” (283). Adams calls himself “the new Teufelsdröckh” to clarify his feelings of perplexity.<sup>13</sup> If uncertainty paralyzes Adams, it is fear of possible implications from the “random factor” introduced by Gibbs' and Boltzmann's equations. Randomness is the mathematical equivalent of the chaos which terrifies Callisto. One other important parallel with Adams needs to be noted here. Struggling to understand the kinetic theory of gases, he arrives at the stark conclusions that “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.”<sup>14</sup> Adams carried his pessimism with such urbanity that a statement such as this is never allowed to generate its full emotional impact. However, this contrast between order and chaos, dream and nature, parallels Callisto's polarities, especially that between his hothouse and the outside weather.

Perhaps Callisto's main statement in his dictation is to find in entropy a metaphor for certain social phenomena which he has observed. One example is in the increasing uniformity in American consumerism:

He found himself ... restating Gibbs' prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease. (284)

The irony bends away from Callisto on to American society briefly and it is quite in keeping with the closely wrought texture of this story that prime examples of the consumerism under attack should be found in Mulligan's party, namely bottles of drink, hi-fi equipment and a refrigerator. Even in his fascination with entropy Callisto is following in Adams's footsteps. In “A Letter to American Teachers of History” (1910), Adams develops implications in Clausius's propositions and speculates that, although historians don't know physics

... they cannot help feeling curiosity to know whether Ostwald's line of reasoning would logically end in subjecting both psychical and physico-chemical energies to the natural and obvious analogy of heat, and extending the Law of Entropy over all.<sup>15</sup>

His argument is exactly like Callisto's in being based on an analogy and, in an essay of one year earlier—"The Rule of Phase Applied to History," Adams had similarly predicted an end-point where the limits of human thought would be reached.<sup>16</sup>

In order to pinpoint what exactly is Pynchon's attitude towards Callisto and Adams it would be helpful to turn at this point to an intermediary text—Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950). Wiener is doing more or less what Adams and Callisto are attempting: to relate diverse fields of modern American culture to each other. But he has a great advantage over them in being primarily a scientist and mathematician. Accordingly, when discussing the notion of heat-death, he cautions: "it is necessary to keep these cosmic values well separated from any human system of valuation."<sup>17</sup> This is exactly the mistake which Adams makes in *The Education* and essays of 1909–10, and which Callisto repeats. Their use of metaphor and analogy leads them to draw hasty inferences from badly digested scientific theory, and results in a not completely unpleasant sense of pessimism and inertia.

In view of the scientific references in *The Crying of Lot 49* and the intellectual scope of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we can safely assume that Callisto's enterprise would be congenial to Pynchon. However, the various ways in which he limits his commitment to Callisto's viewpoint suggest that Pynchon has accepted Wiener's caution. Firstly, Callisto's is only one viewpoint within the story. Secondly, the story is too humorous in tone to underwrite his apocalyptic gloom. Thirdly, Pynchon's use of musical references and form, which will be examined later, suggests a detachment from Callisto. And there are enough ironies to indicate that in some ways Callisto *embodies* entropy rather than examines it. His dictation ends on the verb "cease," but it has stopped, not concluded. His dictation is a kind of monologue as if he were thinking aloud. Once the dictation has stopped we follow his line of thought in his search for "correspondences," and in ransacking literature for parallels he once again follows Adams. He variously notes De Sade (for libertinage, perhaps), the last scene from Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, where the exhausted and apathetic Temple Drake is listening to music with his father in the Jardin de Luxembourg, and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, again perhaps for its presentation of moral and physical decline. Decline does seem to be the theme linking these works. Callisto also pays particular attention to Stravinsky's *L'Histoire de'un Soldat* (1918) whose tango section communicates the same inter-war exhaustion:

And how many musicians were left after Passchendaele, after the Marne? It came down in this case to seven: violin, double-bass.

Clarinet, bassoon. Cornet, trombone. Tympani. Almost as if any tiny group of *saltinbanques* had set about conveying the same information as a full pit-orchestra.<sup>18</sup> (288)

The neatly organized sentences of his dictation have now begun to give way to questions and fragmentary phrases as if the more Callisto hunts for meaning, the more it eludes him. This uncertainty grows with his failed attempts to recapture the spirit of pre-World War II France and his words trail off completely when the bird he has been holding finally dies: “‘what has happened? Has the transfer of heat ceased to work? Is there no more ... ’ He did not finish” (292). Verbal communication could be regarded as a kind of transfer (cf. definition 3 of “entropy”), and as Callisto’s uncertainty grows he in turn becomes more rambling and incoherent. As a means of self-examination or as a means of communicating with Aubade, his words become useless. With the death of the bird, like Beckett’s Hamm, he lapses into silence.

Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire* is a comparatively little-known piece to choose and it contains a number of elements which bear on the story but which are not brought out in Callisto’s thoughts. The passage quoted above indicates that the First World War is seen as a cultural watershed by Callisto. Stravinsky’s work for him exemplifies a general feeling of exhaustion, but this feeling is stimulated by works of art. Although he pats himself on the back for being “strong enough not to drift into the graceful decadence of an enervated fatalism” (283), Callisto seems to be suffering from a hand-me-down pessimism, an ersatz gloom without any roots in his own experience. Despite its deep personal significance for Stravinsky, *L’Histoire* takes its place along with Callisto’s other pessimistic works.<sup>19</sup> *L’Histoire* was a revolutionary work in getting rid of the piano and in reducing the number of performers to a minimum. Add to that the influence of jazz and we shall see obvious parallels with the later discussion of Gerry Mulligan. In thematic terms these two musical references bring the party and Callisto’s memoirs closer together.

The last important point about *L’Histoire* concerns Aubade. Callisto remembers the tango particularly as culturally significant and remembers the dance generally for its repeated automatic movements. There is a variety of dance tempi in *L’Histoire*, notably the tango, waltz and ragtime. When Aubade moves around the apartment her movements are stylized and balletic, as if she is taking part in some kind of dance. Further she describes her love-making in the following way:

Even in the brief periods when Callisto made love to her, soaring above the bowing of taut nerves in haphazard double-stops would be the one singing string of her determination. (283)

Of course the metaphor conveys tension. But double-stopping on the violin was one of the noticeable features in *L'Histoire*. And in one scene (11.5) the soldier enters a room where a princess lies sleeping. He wakes her and woos her with his violin playing.<sup>20</sup> Unconsciously, then, Callisto and Aubade are partly miming out actions which repeat *L'Histoire* and which supply yet another reason why Callisto is "helpless in the past" (292).

The choice of a piece of music which contains a number of then current dance rhythms suggests a preoccupation with the Lost Generation. Callisto, like Scott Fitzgerald, went to Princeton; and he tries to put the clock back by returning to France after the war, taking with him a Henry Miller novel as a substitute Baedeker.<sup>21</sup> He fails, however, to recapture the past and here we meet yet another common element between himself and the other characters of "Entropy." The second paragraph of the story gives us the following description:

This was in early February of '57 and back then there were a lot of American expatriates around Washington, D.C., who would talk, every time they met you, about how someday they were going to go over to Europe for real but right now it seemed they were working for the government. Everyone saw a fine irony in this. They would stage, for instance, polyglot parties where the newcomer was sort of ignored if he couldn't carry on simultaneous conversations in three or four languages. They would haunt Armenian delicatessens for weeks at a stretch and invite you over for bulghour and lamb in tiny kitchens whose walls were covered with bullfight posters. They would have affairs with sultry girls from Andalucia or the Midi who studied economics at Georgetown. Their Dome was a collegiate Rathskeller out on Wisconsin Avenue called the Old Heidelberg and they had to settle for cherry blossoms instead of lime trees when spring came, but in its lethargic way their life provided, as they said, kicks. (279–80)

Here certain European elements are displaced, as incongruous in a Washington context as Callisto's hothouse. The references deliberately evoke memories of the Lost Generation but reduce the notion of "Europe"



to a fashionably cosmopolitan style, a matter of exotic dishes and wall-posters. The main irony grows out of a contradiction between stated intention (going to Europe for good) and actuality, especially as they are working for the government. The epigraph from Miller, who begins his narration in the Villa Vorghese, has already reminded the reader that at least the main members of the Lost Generation did go to Europe. Pynchon's scorn rises as the paragraph proceeds and ends on an open sneer at the fashionable pursuit of 'kicks'. Of this passage Peter Bishoff has commented:

Durch die Parodierung einer bekannten literarischen Tradition deutet Pynchon an, dass die *Beat*-Bewegung in Gegensatz zur *Lost Generation* lediglich eine Modeerscheinung der *popular culture* ist.<sup>22</sup>

He is certainly right that the contrast between the two periods is reductive as far as the present is concerned, but the description offers a pastiche not a parody, since it is the imitators of the Lost Generation who are being made the butt of the irony.

Bischof is the only critic to date who has spotted the stereotyped nature of the story's characters. Mulligan's part-goers use the same fashionable jargon that Pynchon mocks in the description above. Callisto is a "romantic" in the Fitzgerald sense, and Saul and Miriam parody middle-class intellectuals who brandish slogans like "togetherness."<sup>23</sup> Mulligan's guests, at the beginning of the story, are lying around in drunken stupors or simply sitting and listening to music. As more guests arrive, or as they wake up, lethargy gradually shifts into chaotic movement. The ironic implication of pointlessness runs throughout Pynchon's presentation of these scenes and looks forward to his satire of the Whole Sick Crew in *V*.

William M. Plater sees the party differently, as an attempted flight from death:

The party is a community act in which people come together—one of the least complex manifestations of eros. However, the party is simultaneously a demonstration of the social equivalent of entropy and a transformation toward death, as the party disintegrates and disorder increases.<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly, in view of this paradox, he later states that the party embodies an "affirmation of life and union." He suggests in effect that it is almost a sacramental act where all the willing performers come together. This sort of

moralistic reading is only possible if one ignores the ironies levelled against the members of the party, which is exactly what Plater does. He misses the sarcasm at their imitation of the Lost Generation and understates the chaos and absence of communication in the party. "Death" is a portentous word to use here, and rather too grand for the level Pynchon strikes. The party-goers are not desperately staving off dread. They are simply bored, lethargic and superficial; their main concern is filling their time, but with the least effort on their part.

Apart from social ironies the party dramatizes one strand of meaning in "entropy," namely that it measures the amount of energy unavailable for conversion to work in a system. Tony Tanner has described the party as a closed system, but surely this is not so since people are arriving continuously.<sup>25</sup> The real closed system, in intention if not in practice, must be Callisto's hothouse. As movement increases at Mulligan's party, so does its randomness. Mulligan himself wakes up and goes to fix himself a drink which he can only manage by cutting himself. Of course this was by accident, and so forms one random detail. He tries to "arrange" the guests, but ineffectually since he moves a girl from the sink to the shower, where she almost drowns. Other guests arrive and add to the bustle, the most chaotic being the five sailors who imagine it is a brothel. The disorder and noise reaches a climax where we could also say that the entropy within the party has approached its maximum.

Mulligan's reaction to this situation is both important and surprising:

Meatball stood and watched, scratching himself lazily. The way he figured, there were only about two ways he could cope: (a) lock himself in the closet and maybe eventually they would all go away, or (b) try to calm everybody down, one by one. (a) was certainly the more attractive alternative. But then he started thinking about that closet. (291)

Faced with a comparable situation at the end of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," Siegel just walks away, leaving the party to the tender mercies of a berserk Ojibwa.<sup>26</sup> Mulligan here is tempted to do something like that. He watches the others; he too is lazy. But eventually he decides to restore order which he then proceeds to do. Partly from the sheer amount of space devoted to Mulligan's moment of decision, Pynchon is highlighting his choice. The closet offers an attractive alternative and in effect repeats a smaller scale Callisto's retreat into a hothouse. The very fact that Mulligan can choose to restore order and does so, contradicts a superficial fatalism which the notion

of entropy might create. In an examination of the relation between entropy and general culture, Rudolf Arnheim has pinpointed this superficial application, specifically to the arts:

Surely the popular use of the notion of entropy has changed. If during the last century it served to diagnose, explain, and deplore the degradation of culture, it now provides a positive rationale for “minimal” art and the pleasures of chaos.<sup>27</sup>

The intricacies of Pynchon’s story demonstrate conclusively that he has no interest in minimalist art and Mulligan’s final actions reverse a trend toward chaos in his party. The party anyway is neither the universe nor a microcosm and once again Pynchon is being true to a scientific theory. Wiener asserts that “in the non-isolated parts of an isolated system there will be regions in which the entropy.... may well be seen to decrease.”<sup>28</sup> One such island is the party and its entropy apparently *does* decrease.

So far we have considered the representational significance of Mulligan’s party and Callisto’s hothouse. The third area of meaning in “entropy” is introduced when Saul climbs into Mulligan’s apartment from the fire-escape. John Simons has pointed out that Pynchon is here parodying the biblical narrative of Paul’s visit to Ephesus. *Acts* 20. 9–11 recounts how a young man named Eutychos (i.e. “lucky”) fell asleep while Paul was preaching and fell down from a loft. Paul embraced him and thereby restored him to life. He then continued his discussions until daybreak. Simons argues that

Saul is an ironic parody of Paul in Pynchon’s story, and ... appears not as an apostle of the new Christian religion, but rather as a spokesman for the new science of decline and decay in the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

Saul parodies Paul in having had a slanging match with his wife, not a proselytizing discussion; and he saves only the book which she threw at him, not a human being.

Before examining Saul further we need to consider the broader implications of the Pauline text. It centres on a quasi-miraculous act, Paul’s life-giving embrace. When we first see Mulligan and Callisto they are both asleep and embracing objects, the one an empty magnum of champagne, the other a sick bird. In other words they combine elements of Eutychos and a parody of Paul. But the embraces are the opposite of life-giving. Obviously

the champagne bottle offers no possibilities, but Callisto strokes the bird in an attempt to revive it. The gloomiest point in the story comes when the bird finally expires. Simons argues that Pynchon's recurring use of threes in the story is also biblical in the sense that it arouses expectations of resurrection, but reverses them into death.<sup>30</sup> Certainly the resurrection offers one kind of end-point, the reverse side of the coin from catastrophe. But the whole point of Pynchon's examination of entropy is to undermine an apocalyptic gloom arising from it.

Saul himself is denied any of the stature of his biblical counterpart. He is like a "big rag doll" (284) and combines professional arrogance with violence. He tells Mulligan with an air of pride "I slugged her," and obviously brings only words not *the* Word with him. Ironically, despite his claims to be a communications expert, he cannot understand why his wife flared into anger. His stumbling-block appears to be love:

"Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit."  
(285)

Here the biblical ironies shade into communication theory. Paul revived Eutychos by an act of love, but this word becomes a serious problem for Saul. It is so elusive, it disturbs his "signal" so much that it becomes a positive obscenity (a "four-letter word"). Like Callisto and Aubade, Saul is a believer in order. He is concerned to rule out any kind of interference to technical perfection. But one again we return to a crude analogy—that between an electronic signal and a speech act. Despite his theoretical expertise, Saul has lost his argument with Miriam (about cybernetics). He himself uses a disjointed language full of slang and technical jargon and, when Mulligan casts around for something to say, he too demonstrates a very high proportion of "noise" (i.e. hesitation-words, fillers, etc.).

Entropy grows in the conversation between the two men as their exclamations increase until finally Saul cuts off Mulligan with an abrupt "the hell with it." It is of course comical to witness a communications theorist break down into cliché and exclamation, and finally lapse into silence. But this episode carries ironic implications which spread through the whole story. Entropy in communications theory is a measure of the inefficiency of a signal.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly the more noise, or the less coherence speech-acts

contain, the more their entropy will increase. In fact none of the characters in Pynchon's story demonstrate any sustained capacity to engage in dialogue. Callisto and Aubade speak in short, clipped phrases, as if they are cautiously husbanding their meaning. Mulligan's guests use short phrases containing in-jokes or jargon (like "tea time, man"). Krinkles' story to the girl about a pianist is absurd. The sailor's shouts are more noise and misapply even that, since the apartment is not, in the technical sense at least, a brothel. Apart from Mulligan's discussion with Saul, which breaks down into silence, there is only one other conversation in the story of any length. This occurs near the end where Duke puts forward a theory about modern jazz. On the face of it perfectly rational, the theory leads to absurd results when the musicians start playing silently. So, the ironies which Pynchon directs against Saul specifically, undermine yet another attempt to impose order, and suggest a broad scepticism about dialogue's capacity for meaningful communication.

In the course of his story Pynchon examines three levels of meaning in the central concept of entropy and uses a variety of ironic methods to criticize the implications or applicability of these levels. The first definition supplies a weapon for attacking the fashionable lethargy of the party guests. The third gives Pynchon an opportunity to satirize dialogue. The fourth allows him to examine Callisto's enervated intellectualism. He too is just as inert as the party guests and it is Aubade who makes the decisive gesture of smashing the window at the end. John Simons has described the story's theme as "the supplanting of universal order by universal chaos" but this makes "Entropy" sound like a work of cosmic proportions.<sup>32</sup> Pynchon never allows an apocalyptic tone to be sustained and even at the end leaves a deliberate ambiguity. By Simon's account, Aubade's final action would be a gesture of despair, but only viewed from her perspective. It could equally well be seen as a liberating gesture which has the immediate result of freeing herself and Callisto from their hothouse.

The discussion of the story so far has concentrated on relatively traditional techniques such as allusion, contrast, parallelism and narrative irony. By devoting a story to a scientific concept, and by examining different meanings, Pynchon in effect alerts the reader to the fact that he must pay attention to different ways of ordering. Indeed order could be the ultimate theme of the story. Apart from any local satirical purposes, the narrative methods examined so far tend to carry a general expectation of intelligent detached scrutiny on the reader's part. Accordingly it is not surprising that Pynchon's most extensive narrative method should stand out, particularly as another artistic medium is being applied to literature. That medium is music.

"Entropy" contains a large number of references to musicians and musical technique. It begins with information about records and proceeds with allusions to Lili Marlene, Sarah Vaughan, *Don Giovanni* (Pynchon quotes the catalogue aria to satirize Sandor Rojas' lubricity), Krinkles' story is possibly a sick joke at Dave Brubeck's expense, and Chet Baker and Mingus are named among others. Music, on a simple verbal level, fills the texture of the story. Two musical topics are examined in some depth. Stravinsky's *L'Histoire* has already been discussed. The second in Duke's theory arising out of Gerry Mulligan's "Love for Sale." In fact it is Mulligan's experimental technique which fascinates Duke. In 1952 Mulligan began using a piano-less quartet, comprising baritone saxophone, trumpet, drums and bass.<sup>35</sup> It was startling for the absence of a piano, a feature which links this method strongly to Stravinsky's *L'Histoire*. Jazz is anyway common to both since Stravinsky's work contained a ragtime section. In Pynchon's story Duke argues that one has to think the root chords when improvising. So far his theory sounds plausible. But then he pushes it to an extreme by arguing that ultimately one must think everything. When the quartet try to put this into practice the result is an absurd spectacle of silent "performance" which anyway breaks down into chaos once because they get out of step, once because they are playing in different keys! Just as Callisto and Aubade unconsciously perform parts of *L'Histoire*, so the Duke di Angelis quartet follow absurdly in the steps of Gerry Mulligan's experimentalism. And once again an ideal of order (or form) has been proposed only to be found unworkable.

Apart from specific applications of musical topics, the structure of "Entropy" draws extensively on the techniques of the fugue, a term which actually occurs in the text several times. One of the distinguishing characteristics of fugue is the use of counterpoint which in fictional terms can emerge as a rhythmic contrast.<sup>34</sup> The contrast is basically between the two apartments—Mulligan's and Callisto's—and the narrative moves to and fro in such a way that differences and similarities emerge clearly. For instance both Mulligan and Callisto awake from "rest" in the same posture, but the electronic noise downstairs contrasts strongly with the natural sounds in Callisto's hothouse. Even the physical positioning of the apartments, corresponds, as Redfield and Hays point out, to the printed arrangement of musical staves.<sup>35</sup> Callisto, Mulligan and Saul offer us three possible voices and, after they have been introduced in turn, Pynchon is free to weave the voices together. Callisto, for instance, delivers a long monologue which contrasts sharply with the chaotic and fragmented speech of the party. But then "noise" creeps into his ruminations as they wander further and further

from his single purpose, until, like Saul, he lapses into silence. Callisto's dictation, Saul's conversation and Duke's theory provide clear equivalents of exposition, so that the different dimensions of entropy are quite literally orchestrated together. Between the various themes occur other noises from the rain outside, from the arrival of other characters, and from the record being played at the party. These correspond to the invented passages in a fugue, as well as posing a threat to Pynchon's superimposed order.

If the basic theme of the story is the contrast order/disorder, then obviously Callisto's apartment represents the first. All the elements are synchronized into harmony, a harmony which Aubade personifies. Her very name refers to a musical form and her identity is defined in "terms of sound" (280). When she is stroking a plant in the apartment, Pynchon similarly articulates it in musical terminology:

In the hothouse Aubade stood absently caressing the branches of a young mimosa, hearing the *motif* of sap-rising, the rough and *unresolved* anticipatory *theme* of those fragile pink blossoms which, it is said, insure fertility. That *music* rose in a tangled tracery: arabesques of order competing *fugally* with the *improvised discords* of the party downstairs, which peaked sometimes in cusps and ogees of noise. (287) [my emphasis]

The third word takes its departure from a homophone in the preceding paragraph ("hoorhouse") which cuts across the broad contrast between harmony and discord. The two sentences actually mime out their lyrical subject through participial phrases, again contrasting with the fragments of speech in the preceding paragraph. It is as if disorder would literally stop Aubade's existence.

By contrast the noise in Mulligan's party approaches a crescendo but the crescendo never comes since he reimposes a kind of order. This returns the revellers to their initial posture (prostration) and yet does not resolve the story. The party, we are told, "trembled on the threshold of its third day" (292). The final resolution rests with Aubade. She breaks the window and, following this burst of sound, returns to Callisto to

wait with him until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion. (292)

As the clauses fade away in diminuendo, the ending appeals to the reader's sense of form in resolving the story, although in fact the moment of resolution is in the future, and will only occur after the work has finished, as in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The musical metaphor cuts across various interrelated fields of sensation—of balance, temperature and light which will disappear. Above all, however, the metaphor plays on the notion of rest. Formally speaking the story has begun from rest and comes back to it at the end. In that sense it seems satisfyingly symmetrical. But, because music is a non-conceptual medium, the use of music to create form in the story does not carry with it any epistemological implications. Plater and other critics notwithstanding, the story affirms nothing.

"Entropy" examines various notions of order and disorder in such a way as to make it very difficult to locate Pynchon's own view-point. Music is of course non-verbal and so an ideal means of binding his story together without committing himself to any one view-point. Pynchon ironizes all the theories which are proposed with a bewildering thoroughness, so that at times his method appears to be purely negative. A comment made by Saul, however, suggests a way out of this dilemma. Miriam is disturbed by the way computers act like people, but Saul simply reverses the analogy and suggests that people act like computers. In a story which focuses so much on analogy and implication, Pynchon in effect suggests a caution about drawing conclusions. Callisto's intellectual enterprise forms potentially the most solemn area of subject-matter in the story and in this connection a proposition by Norbert Wiener is directly relevant. Answering the question whether the second law of thermodynamics leads to pessimism, he states that the solution

depends on the importance we give to the universe at large, on the one hand, and to the islands of locally decreasing entropy which we find in it, on the other.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, it is a matter of perspective. Similarly Pynchon's story forces a relativistic view-point on to the reader, which acts against a final resolving certainty, or one definite moral direction. The various aspects of form illuminate and examine different meanings of "entropy," while the different meanings of "entropy" illuminate the various aspects of form.



## NOTES

1. Tony Tanner, *City of Words. A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1971 p. 153.
2. Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Tri-Quarterly* 20 (Winter, 1971) pp. 194–208.
3. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 2 vols. Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1971 Vol. I p. 759b.
4. *City of Words* p. 154.
5. "Everything Running Down," *City of Words*, pp. 141–152.
6. "Entropy," *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 22 (Spring, 1960) p. 277. All subsequent page references incorporated in text.
7. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, London: Calder, 1963 p. 1.
8. Cf. *Newsweek* (February 11, 1957) p. 14.
9. This is pointed out in Robert Redfield and Peter L. Hays, "Fugue as Structure in Pynchon's 'Entropy'," *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 12 (1977) p. 55.
10. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, London: Faber, 1964 p. 13.
11. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Modern Library Edition, New York: Random House, 1931 p. 377.
12. *The Education* p. 389.
13. *The Education* p. 414.
14. *The Education* p. 451.
15. *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, New York: Peter Smith, 1949 p. 236.
16. *The Degradation* p. 308.
17. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950 p. 22. Wiener's book is virtually a compendium of Pynchon's fictional themes, including cybernetics which is discussed by Saul and Mulligan.
18. As usual Pynchon's details about the instruments are precise and are summarized from Stravinsky's own memoirs; v. Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1962 p. 72.
19. Cf. Stravinsky, *Autobiography* p. 70.
20. E. W. White, *Stravinsky. A Critical Survey*, London: John Lehmann, 1947 pp. 81, 79, 78.
21. Fitzgerald mentions the tango in his discussion of music in 'Echoes of the Jazz Age'.
22. Peter Bischoff, "Thomas Pynchon, 'Entropy'," in P. L. Freese, Ed., *Die Amerikanische Short Story der Gegenwart*, Berlin: Schmidt, 1976 p. 228.
23. Bischoff pp. 228–229.
24. William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix, Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978 p. 139.
25. *City of Words* p. 153.
26. Cf. Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974 p. 38.

27. Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art. An Essay on Disorder and Order*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974 pp. 11–12.

28. *The Human Use* p. 23.

29. John Simons, "Third Story Man: Biblical Irony in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* Vol. 14 (1977) p. 92.

30. Simons, p. 92. He also examines possible parallels between Miriam and the Virgin Mary, but far less convincingly.

31. Arnheim has criticized the application of entropy to information theory as being full of internal contradictions (*Entropy and Art* pp. 19–20). Pynchon seems to be using the simple notion of inefficiency in this story.

32. Simons p. 89.

33. Leonard Feather, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*, London: Quartet Books, 1978 pp. 344b–345a.

34. Technical details are from Willi Apel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, London: Heinemann, 1944 p. 285.

35. Redfield and Hays, p. 51. Throughout my examination of the story's fugal structure I am indebted to their article.

36. *The Human Use* p. 25.



KATHRYN HUME

*Pynchon's Mythological Histories*

*G* *Gravity's Rainbow* has been described as dramatizing “two related assemblings and disassemblings—of the rocket, and of the character or figure named Slothrop. Slothrop is engaged in trying to find out the secret of how the rocket is assembled, but in the process he himself is disassembled. Similarly the book both assembles and disassembles itself as we try to read it.”<sup>3</sup> If we double these terms, we get a more complete picture: the rocket and Slothrop make up one such pairing, but technology and Western humankind constitute the other. The latter two terms are the grand movements, of which the former two are individual examples.

The commonplaces of a mythic cycle are most clearly seen in Pynchon's history of modern Western culture. The constituent parts of this cycle are the initial paradise, the fall, the central symbolic action, and the predicted apocalypse. Paradise was America as virgin continent. Pynchon does not argue that it was an actual, historical paradise, only that it represented an immense potential for new beginnings, an alternative to Europe's culture of “Analysis and Death.” The potential, however, was never realized; Europeans brought along their death culture. Slothrop, as he drifts through the Zone, comes to value rural landscapes and their denizens—cows, storks, rabbits, and trees—and starts to sense what has been lost in the development of technological America. Slothrop's ancestor William sensed

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From *Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow*. © 1987 by the Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University.

some of this grace in creatures and land. Driving his pigs to Boston for slaughter, “William came to love their nobility and personal freedom, their gift for finding comfort in the mud on a hot day—pigs out on the road, in company together, were everything Boston wasn’t” (p. 555). The dream of this unrealized America—vital, unassuming, nonrighteous and nonjudgmental, colors William’s memories of America late in life:

the blue hills, green maizefields, get-togethers over hemp and tobacco with the Indians, young women in upper rooms with their aprons lifted, pretty faces, hair spilling on the wood floors while underneath in the stables horses kicked and drunks hollered, the starts in the very early mornings when the backs of his herd glowed like pearl, the long, stony and surprising road to Boston, the rain on the Connecticut River, the snuffling good-nights of a hundred pigs among the new stars and long grass still warm from the sun, settling down to sleep.... (p. 556)

Weissmann too saw this incredible potential for new beginnings implicit in the New World: “America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it [...] Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered” (p. 722).

Slothrop wonders whether his ancestor William might have represented “the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from” (p. 556). Since Pynchon virtually ignores the presence of Native Americans, this new beginning for Europeans may be “mythical” in more than one sense. However, as Pynchon establishes it in his fictive universe, people like William Slothrop might have produced a culture capable of living more or less within the natural cycles, unlike the culture of energy addiction that has resulted from the Puritan reflexes. Taking the wrong fork in the road is the American fall. People with the Yankee drive and ingenuity portrayed by Mark Twain in *Connecticut Yankee* were all too eager to welcome Kekulé’s serpent into what had become the already “ruinous garden” (p. 413).

History between the American fall and the central symbolic action is projected through varied fragments. Stories of Tyrone Slothrop’s ancestors suggest American parts of the mosaic; the world picture emerges in vignettes concerning characters like Katje’s ancestor in Mauritius, or Brigadier Pudding in World War I, or Weissmann in Southwest Africa, or Tchitcherine in Russia. We learn nothing of China or the countries that escaped the expansion of the Western way of life. In addition to the major historical

actions, we get some popular culture. The allusions to Dillinger and Dorothy, to figures from movies, radio, and comics (like the Shadow and Plasticman and the Lone Ranger), fill in the popular cultural tradition in America, while references to Hansel and Gretel and Alice and Rilke remind us of European cultural traditions. Pynchon's *mélange* of materials high and low keeps us from oversimplifying our concept of Western culture. As in the Old Testament, the variety and contrast in styles and forms creates a complex—even a perplexed—sense of the reality being sketched in.

The next major myth after paradise and fall is immachination. This corresponds in Jewish thought to Abraham's offering of Isaac and in the Christian structure to the crucifixion; it is symbolized in *Gravity's Rainbow* by the wedding between Gottfried and a rocket. Humanity and machine mating in order to become a new form of life is central to *Gravity's Rainbow*, even as we find in *V.* a related concern, namely the process by which the animate turns into the inanimate.<sup>4</sup> Immachination is not identical to inanimation; it represents a more threatening, more novel development, the evolution of a new, symbiotic life.

Pynchon names this development in a vision of Rocket-City. Slothrop fantasizes the space-suit fashion show, whose helmets look like titanic skulls, and the wearing of which is one such form of immachination: "The eye-sockets are fitted with quartz lenses. Filters may be slipped in. Nasal bone and upper teeth have been replaced by a metal breathing apparatus, full of slots and grating. Corresponding to the jaw is a built-up section, almost a facial codpiece, of iron and ebonite, perhaps housing a radio unit, thrusting forward in black fatality" (p. 297). Such Darth Vader suits will be worn in the high-tech future, in a city or space station that is governed by The Articles of Immachination (p. 297). Lest that word "immachination" slide by us, we are exposed to various kinds of union between human and machine. In the same paragraph, we learn that "Enzian had his Illumination in the course of a wet dream where he coupled with a slender white rocket." On the next page, human controllers and machines apparently interact telepathically in order to monitor the thoughts of individuals in a crowd. Shortly thereafter (p. 301), Pynchon discusses in purely technical terms the equation for determining Brennschluss via capacitor. Later (pp. 517–18), Närrisch faces what he is sure will be his death and muses on that Brennschluss equation, where time ( $B_{iW}$ ) moves toward the angle ( $A_{iW}$ ) such that B for "B-sub-N-for-Närrisch, is nearly here—nearly about to burn the last whispering veil to equal 'A.'" Närrisch thus identifies psychologically with a rocket and will burn out according to mechanical determinations. The rocket limericks also couple man and machine, often with gruesome results. Slothrop fantasizes a

scene with his father, in which he is an electrofreak who dreams that “maybe there is a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us out through the electrodes out of the skull ‘n’ into the Machine and live there forever [...] *W*e can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld” (p. 699).

The synthesis of people and machines may be fantasized, psychological, or metaphoric at times, but in the central image of Pynchon’s mythology, the wedding is made as literal as possible, with “white lace,” “bridal costume,” and “white satin slippers with white bows.” Gottfried’s “nipples are erect”; “he fits well. They are mated to each other”; “one pressure-switch is the right one, the true clitoris”; there is a “zone of love” and so forth (pp. 750–51). Gottfried and the rocket become one flesh. Which is the groom and which the bride? The symbols designating sex roles shift back and forth, making this a marriage in which not even sexual identity survives.

Insofar as Gottfried represents the fate of humankind in such a union with machine, we note that his married life will be ominously brief. Similarly, the protagonists of several rocket limericks meet sticky ends:

- “Wrecked Hector’s hydraulic connector” (p. 306);
- “What was left of his cock, / Was all slimy and sloppy and spattery” (p. 311);
- “It shrivelled his cock, / Which fell off in his sock” (p. 334);
- “His balls and his prick / Froze solid real quick” (p. 335).

Flesh is reduced to protoplasmal jelly through the electrified orgasms offered by the machine. Admittedly not everyone is so unlucky, and all the men mentioned in the lyrics obviously entered such relationships with the expectation of fulfillment. The mythic pattern brought into focus by Gottfried, however, suggests that such satisfactions for the race, if not for all individuals, will be tragic.

The futures made possible by immachination correspond to the biblical predictions of apocalypse in both senses—as revelation of the new and as warning of destruction. Pynchon seems to face the future much as does the Dragon in John Gardner’s *Grendel*: “Pick an apocalypse, any apocalypse.”<sup>5</sup> It won’t matter unduly which we pick. In any of them, humanity seems to have lost its freedom to the machine.

One of the possible futures involves simple space travel—with humankind obviously wedded indissolubly to its machines. Another produces the rocket-falls of total war. A third future that Pynchon alludes to is more or less realistic; indeed, we may be entering it already:

Pynchon's international scope implies the existence of a new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets. Pynchon implies that the contemporary era has developed the first common international culture since medieval Latin Europe separated into the national cultures of the Renaissance. The distinguishing character of Pynchon's new internationalism is its substitution of data for goods: "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane," somebody asks in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?"<sup>6</sup>

Tchitcherine senses one version of this coming world: "*A Rocket-cartel*. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper [...] a state that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul" (p. 566). Roger senses the existence of such a state when he tells Jessica that the peace is just "another bit of propaganda" and that "Their enterprise goes on" (p. 628). The many factual references to industrial and technological entities operating without regard for wars or national boundaries testify to the existence of an international force. Father Rapiere assumes such a "Them" when he preaches that "once the technological means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good" (p. 539). This economically united world is much like that of Orwell's *1984*, a world of control and of continuing suffering among the hopeless preterite. Pynchon seems to consider this future very probable.

But then again, a fourth future posited in Pynchon's novel is analogous to Huxley's *Brave New World*. This future is sketchily invoked in a description of The City (pp. 735–36), a living complex based on verticality, with elevators whose interiors, with their flowersellers and fountains, are more like courtyards. There, uniformed, good-looking young women, "well-tutored in all kinds of elevator lore," refuse to answer questions about such taboo subjects as the rocket. This vision of the future is followed by recollections of a Hitler Youth Glee Club, reminding us of the polished orderliness that was one of the hitlerian ideals, and which is a powerful force in *Brave New World*. Pynchon develops this future so fleetingly that I may be overemphasizing a minor digression, but this image of The City echoes such dystopic visions as those in *We*, *Player Piano*, and *This Perfect Day*, all of which show worlds in which poverty and material suffering have been reduced to negligible levels, only to leave other, more hopeless suffering: the more complete damnation of the preterite because they are inferior to machines.



Such worlds find people acceptable only to the degree that they can imitate machines.

Pynchon suggests these possible futures, none of which is the way back to the potential represented by early America. Indeed, none of them offers humankind any freedom. In one way or another, they each rest on an unholy union between people and their machines. In Christian symbolism, Christ's death paradoxically proclaims, "Death thou shalt die." In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gottfried's wedding negates life rather than death, and the bonds that bind him betoken the control that will rule all the inhabitants of an immachinate culture. The myth, as Pynchon lays it out for Western civilization, is opened but not optimistic. Such hope as he allows us emerges not at the level of mythological action but can be discerned in his binary oppositions and mediations. Before turning to those, however, let us look more briefly at the three other strands of this mythology: those concerned with Tyrone Slothrop, with the rocket, and with the history of technology.

We might have expected Slothrop to ascend in the 00000. As the most prominent among the major characters, he enjoys a quasi-hero status. His infant conditioning by Jamf would seem the ideal symbolic training for the rocket's lover. Because of his American background, however, Slothrop becomes The American, inheritor of the Western cultural tradition. What happens to him as an individual turns out to be something like a paradigm for the possible fate of Western humanity.

The first two stages of the mythological cycle—those of paradise and fall—are played out by Slothrop's ancestors. Like the biblical patriarchs, they established the patterns *in illo tempore* that guide the lives of their descendants. Aside from William Slothrop, the Slothrops were not people to rise above their culture. Their gravestones are a clutter of clichés: "round-faced angels with the long noses of dogs, toothy and deep-socketed death's heads, Masonic emblems, flowery urns, feathery willows upright and broken, exhausted hourglasses, sunfaces about to rise or set with eyes peeking Kilroy-style over their horizon, and memorial verse" (p. 27). These ancestors started working fairly close to nature, processing raw materials to goods that would mostly have been used within their own communities, but they quickly evolved into purveyors of less basic services and goods: "They began as fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon, went on into glassmaking, became selectmen, builders of tanneries, quarriers of marble" (p. 27). Most of them are "Bible-packing" and "word-smitten."

One characteristic they apparently all share is "a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky" (p. 26). In a passage employing a standard Christian icon for God speaking, Pynchon shows Constant Slothrop seeing,

“and not only with his heart, that stone hand pointing out of the secular clouds, pointing directly at him, its edges traced in unbearable light” (p. 27). His descendants, including Tyrone Slothrop, inherit this sensitivity to things descending from the sky.

What we gather about his immediate parents is filtered through Tyrone's oedipal paranoia. His father made a deal that would ensure Tyrone a Harvard education, but Tyrone's interpretation is wholly negative: “I've been sold, Jesus Christ, I've been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef” (p. 286). Later, his father, Broderick, figures as the villain in daydreams of the Floundering Four and makes foolish-sounding remarks when trying to talk man-to-man (pp. 698–99). Slothrop would agree with Weissmann that “fathers are carriers of the virus of Death, and sons are the infected” (p. 723). When offered the chance of atonement with his father in a dream, Slothrop cannot make the gesture of forgiveness (p. 444). Broderick is thus the oedipal patriarch, and Tyrone would be only too glad to kill this archetypal monster. Nor does he find respite with his mother. She is the maenad, martini in hand, presiding over the dismemberment of her orphic son (p. 712).

His more distant ancestors bequeath to Tyrone his basic mediocrity, his sensitivity to revelation from the sky, and his awareness of words; they also give him their division of the world into the elect and preterite. His parents ensure his sense of being preterite. One of Pynchon's basic images, in fact, is that of Western parents killing their own and other people's children.<sup>7</sup> Margherita Erdmann tries to kill a Jewish boy and may have murdered her daughter, Bianca. Conservative audiences of Rossini operas plot against children (p. 441). In arranging Gottfried's wedding-death, Weissmann stresses their father-son relationship. The children at Zwolfkinder are “sentenced” children (p. 430), and Otto Gnahn describes the Mother Conspiracy to destroy children (p. 505). Innocence has no chance; it is unacceptable to Them and must be corrupted or killed before a youth is allowed to join the adult world. Tyrone's unhappy relationships with his parents thus tie in to a much broader phenomenon, one bearing on our culture's drive to destroy itself.

In Slothrop's own adventures, we find a development that echoes the immachination of Gottfried with the rocket. Säure Bummer removes the horns from a wagnerian helmet, caps Slothrop with this nosecone, and names him Rocketman (p. 366). Slothrop has been amusing himself with Plasticman comicbooks, “Plas” also being a hybrid of human and plastic. As Rocketman, Slothrop becomes a funnies-style hero like Plasticman and roams the Zone, instantly a legendary figure. When he penetrates Peenemünde, Tchitcherine greets him as Rocketman. When on the run and wearing a pig costume, the

name of Rocketman gets him aid. Slothrop is a fairly ineffectual person, so the successes he enjoys in his rocket-persona make that human/machine blend attractive to him.

But having become Rocketman, what happens? Slothrop disintegrates. His past selves become independent (p. 624). The albatross of self is plucked, then stripped. He turns into a different kind of figure, the harmonica Orpheus of the Zone. He enjoys his rainbow vision and listens to the Other Side—both of which are forms of revelation from the sky—but then, gradually, loses his material reality. Bodine is the last to be able to see him, and even Bodine has to let him go. Slothrop ultimately just dissolves into “the hostile light of the sky, the darkness of the sea” (p. 742).

This scattering is partly explained earlier; according to Kurt Mondaugen, personal density is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth, and “‘Temporal band-width’ is the width of your present, your *now*. It is the familiar ‘Dt’ considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are” (p. 509). Slothrop’s vision is limited to the here and now, so he loses personality, individuality, planning ability. His head empties. Some of these losses may have their good aspects, for Pynchon treats the albatross of self, the ego, as “bad shit” and marks as positive the flexibility resulting from not trying to plan the future and the openness to the Other Side that results from plucking the albatross. But Slothrop’s *modus vivendi* is no longer social, no longer a way that society might try in its search for improving itself while still remaining a society, so even if his fragmentation is not all bad, it is not viable as a model for others. Fragmentation signifies loss of much of what by our definition makes us human. This is what threatens individuals within that society in which humankind mates with machine. As the two mythic actions—that of Western culture and that of Tyrone Slothrop—unfold in parallel, Slothrop’s fate echoes that of society. As control tightens and the machine dominates, one of the few possible ways of preserving freedom is to disintegrate. But even those who do not wish thus to fade out may be deprived of their identities anyway, as machines become the standard of measurement and humans are found wanting.

Pynchon’s mythology involves both humanity and its inventions, so we find equivalents to Slothrop as individual in the V-2 and to humankind in technology. The mythological histories of the V-2 and of technology in its general sense do not cover as wide a chronological span as do Pynchon’s human mythologies, but the complexity of Pynchon’s technical allusions makes up for the loss of scope.

Nothing is said about American or Russian rocket experiments. Pynchon confines himself to German rocketry and to the Verein für Raumschiffahrt, particularly as seen by Franz Pökler. By chance, Pökler stumbles onto an early firing and is nearly killed by the explosion of this “tiny silver egg, with a flame, pure and steady, issuing from beneath” (p. 161). Despite the violence of his introduction, he is excited and enthusiastic, overwhelmingly attracted to this new creation. The paradisaical, amateur stage of rocket development gives way, however, once the army becomes interested in the VfR records. Franz resists Leni's accusation (“They're using you to kill people”) and counters with his own vision: “We'll all use *it*, someday to leave the earth. To transcend” (p. 400). The choice, however, “was between building what the Army wanted—practical hardware—or pushing on in chronic poverty, dreaming of expeditions to Venus” (pp. 400–401), so he pragmatically serves the army.

Pökler is witness and participant through the early stages of the *Aggregat* or *Vergeltungswaffen*, and the problems bedeviling these big rockets have not changed from those confronting the rocket “egg”:

Problem was just to get something off the ground without having it blow up. There were minor disasters—aluminum motor casings would burn through, some injector designs would set up resonant combustion, in which the burning motor would try to shriek itself to pieces—and then, in '34, a major one. Dr. Wahnke decided to mix peroxide and alcohol together *before* injection into the thrust chamber, to see what would happen. The ignition flame backed up through the conduit into the tank. The blast demolished the test stand, killing Dr. Wahnke and two others. First blood, first sacrifice. (p. 403)

The rocket takes on a kind of solidity through what individuals give to it: Wahnke's life, Pökler's submission (“Pökler was an extension of the Rocket, long before it was ever built” [p. 402]). As the effort progresses from the A-3 to the A-4, Pökler is detailed to sit in a trench precisely at Ground Zero, the target, to observe the premature fall.<sup>8</sup>

The latter history of the rocket comes to us mostly through Slothrop (for technical details) and from various Londoners who witness rocket strikes. While on the Riviera, British Intelligence crams Slothrop with every piece of information gathered on the V-2, hoping that the knowledge will strengthen his uncanny affinity for these rockets and enable him to be drawn to their source. And, indeed, in his own wanderings, he is drawn to the

Mittelwerke and to Peenemünde. The egg image of Pökler's first vision of a rocket recurs:

Here he is, scaling the walls of an honest ceremonial plexus [...] But oh, Egg the flying Rocket hatched from, navel of the 50-meter radio sky, all proper ghosts of place—forgive him his numbness, his glozing neutrality. Forgive the fist that doesn't tighten in his chest, the heart that can't stiffen in any greeting.... Forgive him as you forgave Tchitcherine at the Kirghiz Light....” (pp. 509-10)

The rocket's history is further added to by Enzian and his rocket troops, who not only assemble their own but also live lives devoted to the rocket, taking it for their Holy Text. This devotion started with Enzian's initiation into technology by Weissmann:

It began when Weissmann brought him to Europe: a discovery that love, among these men, once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing. Demanded, in his own case, that he enter the service of the Rocket.... Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature. (p. 324)

The Hereros have adapted the ignition insignia to their tribal mandala (p. 563), thus assimilating themselves to their machine. The rocket acquires a range of further resonances at the crucial launching, when the narrative voice invokes the Kabbalah, sephirotic tree symbolism, tarot arcana, and human sacrifice, both Germanic and biblical. Besides being thus linked to these disparate concerns, the rocket is also yoked to movies (*Die Frau im Mond*) and to radio heroes, who gather about the launching. And its own magic is hymned at least briefly when it defies gravity.

If the history of early rockets corresponds to Slothrop's ancestors and to the settling of America, the launch has the same crucial significance in this thread of the mythology that it does in the history of humankind. Humanity and machine coalesce. For the rocket's next mythological phase, after origins and marriage, the apocalyptic possibilities are limited to two: rockets falling with warheads upon cities, or rockets heading for space—the moon, Venus, and beyond. Of the two, the latter better extends the dream of

immachination. On the moon and in space, humankind will have no choice but be wedded to machinery, since it cannot survive their hostile atmospheres without it. However, total destruction is another form of immachination, a Liebestod.

The rocket “engorges energy and information in its ‘fearful assembly’: thus its ‘order’ is obtained at the cost of an increase in disorder in the world around it, through which so many of the characters stumble.” And as Tanner and others have stressed, the rocket, “in its fixity and metallic destructive inhumanity ... is an order of death—a *negative* parallel to the process of nature, since its disintegration presages no consequent renewal and growth.”<sup>9</sup> In this, it is opposed to the dream of living within the cycle of nature half-sensed by William Slothrop and reached at disastrous cost to self by Tyrone Slothrop. The rocket works against the natural cycle,<sup>10</sup> and its order disorders and fragments the lives of those drawn into its orbit. Its power is measured by the lives it absorbs. Some are taken completely; some give themselves willingly; some maintain a shred of independence. Pökler best embodies this dilemma of attraction and resistance: “so he hunted, as a servo valve with a noisy input will, across the Zero, between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation” (p. 406). This is another version of immachination, one in which humanity will be consumed by the rocket if it continues to serve the machine.

The fourth strand of mythological history traces the progress of technology in general. Though this strand is not a myth in the sense of being unreal or fabulous, it takes on mythic qualities in Pynchon's hands as he isolates certain sequences and connects them, putting discoveries into an end-determined structure with the rocket serving as that symbolic end. The development Pynchon chooses to stress is that of organic chemistry, especially the benzene chemistry of Kekulé and the coaltar chemistry of the dye industry. Offshoots of color chemistry were pharmaceuticals (including psychoactive drugs), fertilizers, coal-gas and other fuel industries, the rubber and synthetic rubber industry, and plastics. Pynchon sticks mostly to the coal-tar dyes and to plastics, in part because they created products not found in nature, and indeed products that sometimes transcend the cycles of life and decay in this world.

Although Pynchon describes many byways of technology, he brings this history to life with two key figures: Kekulé and Jamf. Kekulé is the shadowy founder, the patriarch *in illo tempore* who may not quite have walked and talked with God, but who was visited by a higher revelation in his 1865 dream of an ouroboric serpent, which “revolutionized chemistry and made the IG possible” (p. 410). Much is made of this dream and of its “cosmic

serpent, in the violet splendor of its scales, shining that is definitely *not* human” (p. 411); the history of technology is then mythologized in terms of this snake (p. 412).

The history of coal-tar dyes is sketched by the spirit of Walther Rathenau at the Berlin séance: dyes, their discoverers, and drugs emerge in his pronouncement as strands leading toward something, as a succession. On the surface, this end product is “the growing, organic Kartell. But it’s only another illusion. A very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows.” He ends, however, by warning in sybilline obscurity about “Death the impersonator” and about “the real nature of control” (p. 167). In the succession he is outlining, these are apparently its real final terms.

The development of plastics mostly emerges as Slothrop gathers information about the fictional Laszlo Jamf, Pökler’s old teacher, a polymath who contributed to behavioral psychology, polymer plastics, film emulsions, psychoactive drugs, oil, and invisible ink (activated by semen).

Pynchon graphically illustrates the ways in which all these technologies—rocket, plastics, and coal-tar derivatives—are used to control the preterite.<sup>11</sup> Plastic serves as stimulus to condition Infant Tyrone. Jamf’s film emulsion, which can see beneath the human skin, will be used to manipulate audience response to a film of a quarrel between a black man and a white. In order for messages in the invisible ink to be legible, a pornographic picture, elaborately tailored to fit the psychosexual profile of the recipient, is sent along with the message to elicit the semen needed for bringing up the script. The drug sodium amytal is used to force Slothrop to expose parts of his mind he would probably rather keep to himself. And the rocket affects the lives of nearly everyone in the book. It draws Slothrop, Tchitcherine, Enzian, and Pökler. It even exerts control over the lives of people who have no direct connection to it, when it is given priority over the hungry for the potato harvest or over cocaine traffickers in the matter of potassium permanganate.

Despite the potential danger of this technological world and its obvious curtailments of freedom, Pynchon makes plain that it has virtues and attractions. Pökler, for instance, enjoys its democracy: “It was a corporate intelligence at work, specialization hardly mattered, class lines even less. The social spectrum ran from von Braun, the Prussian aristocrat, down to the likes of Pökler, who would eat an apple in the street—yet they were all equally at the Rocket’s mercy” (p. 402). Pökler cannot accept Mondaugen’s electro-mysticism, but longs for the sense of certainty such a rocket religion could give him.

The various futures Pynchon sketches for his history of technology all show humanity and machine inseparable, but beyond this likeness are the same variants shown in the other strands of the mythology: space exploration, nuclear holocaust, the world of *1984*, or the superficially attractive dystopia of *Brave New World*. Raketten-Stadt was a wartime nickname for Peenemünde and is applied by Pynchon to various versions of the technological future. In addition, he mentions the possible future in which we would run out of energy. Technology may emerge as in some sense the superior partner in the human marriage, but it too may fragment for lack of energy. Pynchon does not specify the most likely future here any more than in the other strands.

These then are the basic mythic actions: Western culture, an individual, the V-2, and technology. In various ways, they all explore the development of symbiosis between humanity and its technological creations. This story is mythic in one sense because it tries to fill in the gap between absent origins and our present condition. It is mythological in another sense because the technologies become quasi-animate, to the point that critics grouse about Pynchon's paranoia.<sup>12</sup> These strands are also mythic in the accumulation of myth-like stories: paradise, the fall (complete with serpent), the symbolic marriage between Gottfried and the rocket, the glimpses of a future city not so unlike the New Jerusalem with its symmetries, its metals and precious stones as architectural members. Or, alternatively, the holocaust that will end life. Pynchon has chosen to focus on the V-2, but in the background—outside his mythological history—are the atomic bombs whose debris create such vivid sunsets. Pynchon establishes so many “Kute Korrespondences,” as we shall soon see, that he hardly needs to emphasize this most important one. When a colonel asks “Is the sun's everyday spectrum being modulated? Not at random, but systematically, by this unknown debris in the prevailing winds? Is there information for us?” (p. 642) we can answer in the affirmative without being prompted by the narrator.

#### NOTES

3. Tanner, 81—82.

4. This theme is emphasized by V.'s acquiring more and more prosthetic replacements for flesh and blood, until she seems more clockwork than human. Another character in the novel, Bongo-Shaftesbury, has a mechanical arm and frightens Victoria Wren's younger sister with it. “The Rock,” ultimate emblem of the inanimate in the novel, is the pervasive spiritual trap for humans; men and women give up their animation and become rocklike in order to escape suffering. The



transformation of bodies into electromechanisms is treated as a form of creeping petrification. *V.*, Pynchon's first novel, was published in 1963. In his disquisition on the Luddites, Pynchon makes the following m/antic prediction: "If our world survives, the next great challenge to watch out for will come—you heard it here first—when the curves of research and development in artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics all converge" ("Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?" *New York Times Book Review*, 28 October 1984, 41).

5. John Gardner, *Grendel* (1971; reprint, New York: Ballantine, 1972), 61.

6. Mendelson, 164–65. Mendelson thus emphasizes the creation of a new culture; Mark R. Siegel emphasizes instead that Pynchon's apocalypse is the destruction of culture (rather than of the world). See Siegel, "Creative Paranoia: Understanding the System of *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Critique* 18 (1976–77): 39–54. Jean-François Lyotard comments on our information society: Where "knowledge is and will be produced, in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production.... Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value'" (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 4–5).

7. Russell Hoban, another novelist interested in how we create our myths, emphasizes this image of infanticide as appropriate to our era in *Riddley Walker* (1980). He replaces our story of Cain's fratricide (the first major action after the fall) with the story of parents eating their child just after the nuclear holocaust that corresponds to the fall in his new world.

8. Pynchon is not inventing this: both Dornberger and von Braun describe having occupied the target. See Tölölyan's citation of Wernher von Braun and Alan J. Friedman's citation of Walter Dornberger in their respective essays in *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, 47, 99.

9. Tanner, 82. In its symbolic centrality and complexity, the rocket has been likened to Henry Adams's dynamo by Speer Morgan, in "*Gravity's Rainbow*: What's the Big Idea?" in *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, 84–85.

10. For discussion of the natural cycle and Western technology's violation of this cycle, see Marjorie Kaufman, "Brünnhilde and the Chemists: Women in *Gravity's Rainbow*," in *Mindful Pleasures*, 197–227; Raymond M. Olderman, "Thomas Pynchon," *Contemporary Literature* 20 (1979): 500–507; Joseph W. Slade, "Escaping Rationalization: Options for the Self in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Critique* 18 (1976–77): 27–38; and le Vot.

11. Pynchon's concern with control has been likened to the arguments of Michel Foucault and Norman Mailer by Khachig Tölölyan in "Prodigious Pynchon and His Progeny," *Studies in the Novel* II (1979): 224–34, and in "Criticism as Symptom: Thomas Pynchon and the Crisis of the Humanities," *New Orleans Review* 5 (1979): 314–18.

12. See, for instance, Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History," in *Mindful Pleasures*, 139–59, and Louis Mackey, "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," *Sub-Stance*, no. 30 (1981): 16–30.

LEO BERSANI

*Pynchon, Paranoia,  
and Literature*

Any novel that uses the word *paranoia* as frequently as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* does is likely to make the reader somewhat paranoid about the very frequency of its use. Not only is it the narrator's most cherished word and concept (the word even gives birth to a new English verb: Tyrone Slothrop "paranoids from door to door" in a Nice hotel);<sup>1</sup> the characters in Pynchon's work also repeatedly refer to themselves as paranoid. There, of course, is the hitch: since when do paranoids label themselves as paranoid? When they do, they are of course speaking *for others*, using the label for themselves before it can be used against them. "You must think I'm really paranoid about people's opinion of what I write" can be given to us as: "I'm really paranoid about people's opinion of what I write," but the judgment of that anxiety *as paranoid* can only come from others. These others can of course also exist in me, and I can make a clinical joke of my own worries, but I would not have them if I were not also convinced of their rightness. "I" can never be the subject of "I am paranoid" as an uncontested, undivided judgment.

The word *paranoia* has had an extraordinarily complex medical, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic history. I have been using it (as, in fact, Pynchon also tends to use it) as if it were merely synonymous with something like unfounded suspicions about a hostile environment, but the fear of

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persecution is only one aspect of a symptomatological picture that, at various moments and as it has been drawn by different thinkers, has included such things as delusions of grandeur, schizophrenic dissociation, and erotomania. The concept has been at the center of considerable classificatory turbulence, especially with respect to the question of whether or not it should be counted as one of the schizophrenic psychoses. More than any other psychoanalytic term, *paranoia* has been the focus of a nosological disarray not unlike the symptomatic panic of paranoia itself. There is, in both cases, interpretative distress. Freud explained paranoia as a defense against a desired homosexual “attack,” a defense that depends to a great extent on the success of a strenuous interpretative effort. The potential benefits of interpretative control are dramatically illustrated by the ease with which Dr. Schreber, the subject of Freud’s most celebrated analysis of paranoia, transcends his paranoid anxiety and even changes a plot of cosmic hostility into an epic of cosmic self-centering. God’s desire to use Schreber as a “wife” in order to engender a new race rewrites catastrophe as apotheosis; the dreaded attack will still take place, but in its idealized, divine form it can finally be recognized as an object of desire. Schreber ends exactly where he began: in anticipating the pleasure of being destroyed as a result of taking a “passive” homosexual role. But he must first analyze the components of “I love him” in ways that will allow a homosexual desire to be satisfied without danger. In the paranoid’s case, “I love him” is equivalent to “I love being attacked by him”; only if this is reformulated as something like “I hate being attacked by a hostile world” can a megalomaniacal defense against persecution become powerful enough to make Schreber desirable to God Himself. It is as if a defensive self-love were contagious or perhaps even operated as an argument that “convinced” God of Schreber’s irresistible appeal. The paranoid stage of Schreber’s illness allows the original masochistic wish to become conscious by creating the conditions in which it can be reformulated as a triumphant narcissism. The original (and repressed) interpretation of a “feminine” passivity as self-annihilation is—in a move that a biological realism perversely authorizes—reinterpreted as self-perpetuation.

More interesting to us is Freud’s recognition of Schreber’s interpretative acuity. At the end of his analysis of the case, Freud notes a striking similarity between Schreber’s delusions and Freud’s theory about those delusions. The *Senatspräsident’s* “rays of God,” for example, “which are made up of a condensation of the sun’s rays, of nerve-fibers, and of spermatozoa, are in reality nothing else than a concrete representation and projection outward of libidinal cathexes”; they may be what Freud calls “endopsychic perceptions” of the very processes that he himself has proposed

in order to explain paranoia. With just a hint of paranoia about the possibility that he may be accused of having lifted his theory of paranoia from Schreber's book, Freud protests, in advance of any such accusation, that he can "call a friend and fellow-specialist to witness that [he] had developed [his] theory of paranoia before [he] became acquainted with the contents of Schreber's book. It remains for the future," Freud concludes, "to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory that I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe."<sup>2</sup>

The delusion, however, may be inherent in the move that predicts some future sorting out of truth from delusion in either Schreber's fantasies or Freud's theories. What else *could* the truth of paranoia be than a replication, on a different discursive register, of the paranoid's delusions? Freud's concluding remarks bizarrely suggest that there is some ordering truth of paranoia—of paranoia as distinct from the classificatory and theoretical discourse that in fact constitutes it—different from both paranoid ravings and theories of paranoia. This is precisely how Pynchon defines paranoia itself: it is the "reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (219). The paranoid restlessness in the theory of paranoia—evidenced in Freud's insistence that he had the theory before studying the case as well as in his uneasy perception of the specular relation between the case and the theory—is expressed as a mistrust of the symptomatic language of paranoia. The theoretician distrusts the theorizing activity *of* paranoia—as if the "truth" of paranoia might turn out to be that theory is always a paranoid symptom. But Freud has perhaps already accepted that conclusion in continuing to hope for a truth by which the value of theory can be measured, a truth that would finally rescue psychoanalytic discourse from the theorizing which, it is feared, may be nothing more than a manifestation of paranoid behavior. The theoretician's distrust of theory—the sense that what theory seeks to signify is hidden somewhere behind it—repeats the paranoid's distrust of the visible.

The Schreber case also points, however, to a wholly different alternative: the embrace of theory as final and the renunciation of any hope that "truth" will finally render theory obsolete. The customary distinction between delusions and truth *too accurately* replicates the illusionary structures we may wish to understand. If nonparanoid theorizing is a contradiction in terms, there may be—and Pynchon will help us with this—a way to crack the replicative mirror so that the theory of paranoia will send back a partially unrecognizable image of paranoia. Knowledge—but do we even need that word?—would then have to be redefined in terms of the inaccuracy of a replication.

For all the shifts of interpretative perspective on paranoia, the word, faithful to its etymology (*paranoia* is a Greek word designating a distracted or deranged mind), has always designated a mental disorder. At least until *Gravity's Rainbow*. All the paranoid thinking in the novel is probably justified, and therefore—at least in the traditional sense of the word—really not paranoid at all. I say “probably” because Pynchon is less interested in vindicating his characters’ suspicions of plots than in universalizing and, in a sense, depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought. Were he content to certify that all the plots they imagine are real plots, he would be making merely a political point, a point for which he has frequently been credited and that undoubtedly helps to explain the popularity of his immensely difficult work. This is what we might call the sixties side of Pynchon, Pynchon as defender of such lovable slobs as Slothrop and, in *V.*, Benny Profane the schlemiel against the impersonal efficiency of information systems and international cartels. The narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it's true, lends his authority to his characters' paranoid suspicions; in fact, he frequently passes on information that justifies their worst fears. Thus the wildest paranoid imagination would probably not come up with the incredible but true story of IG Farben's surveillance of Slothrop right back to his infancy. The Pavlovian Laszlo Jamf's conditioning of baby Tyrone's hard-ons (more on this later) has to be seen in the light of Jamf's complex business deals between the two World Wars, business deals involving supercartels that were themselves perhaps involved in efforts to ruin the mark as part of a strategy to get Germany out of paying its war debts. Was Slothrop “sold to IG Farben like a side of beef,” did they finance Jamf's experiments on him, has he been “under their observation—m-maybe since he was born? Yaahhh ... ” (333). None of this is absolutely certain (except for Jamf's work with Slothrop's infant hard-on, which has been described much earlier in the novel as historical fact), and the business deals and connections elliptically referred to are mind-boggling in their intricate interconnectedness. But if IG Farben's sinister interest in Slothrop is not unambiguously confirmed, Pynchon, at the very least, clearly does not expect us to find Slothrop's most paranoid scenarios implausible. Pynchon himself certainly has no problem with the cartel-conspiracy ideas. War, he writes, is just a cover-up, a “spectacle” or “diversion from the real movements of the War.” “The true war is a celebration of markets,” as its “real business ... is buying and selling, the murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals” (122). An “outfit like Shell” has “no real country, no side in any war, no specific face or heritage: tapping instead out

of that global stratum, most deeply laid, from which all the appearances of corporate ownership really spring” (283).

The paranoid reflex, we remember, seeks “other orders behind the visible”; speaking, in another passage, of the paranoia often noted under the hallucinatory drug Oneirine, Pynchon writes: “Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, or the discovery [note: the “discovery,” not the “suspicion”] that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation” (820). And, as the Jesuit Father Rapiere preaches during some undefined Convention in the Zone, “Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good” (627). The paranoid intuition is, then, one of an *invisible interconnectedness*. Technology can collect the information necessary to draw connecting lines among the most disparate data, and the very drawing of those lines depends on what might be called a conspirational interconnectedness among those interested in data collection. To put things into relation with one another is already a conspirational move, or at the very least a gesture of control. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the discovery of connections is identical to the discovery of plots. The plotters get together—they “connect”—in order to plot the connections that will give them power over others.

The “orders behind the visible” are not necessarily—are, perhaps, not essentially—orders *different from* the visible; rather, they are the visible *repeated as structure*. Paranoid thinking hesitates between the suspicion that the truth is wholly obscured by the visible, and the equally disturbing sense that the truth may be a sinister, invisible design *in* the visible. To have “a paranoid structure worthy of the name,” you have not only to “show some interlock” among individuals, events, and companies you assumed were unrelated, but also to establish different or parallel lines of connectedness” (678). Paranoia repeats phenomena as design. What you thought was a chance juxtaposition may turn out to be a deliberate coupling. If that possibility inspires panic, it is also desired. Would we ever want a life without paranoid terror? “If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (506). Not only that: to escape from paranoia would be to escape from the movement that is life. Slothrop, on the run in the Zone, thinks how nice it would be “to lie still” for a while with the heartbeat of the young woman who shelters him one night; “Isn’t that every paranoid’s wish; to perfect methods of immobility?” (667). Only by freezing things can we prevent them from connecting, from coming together to form those invisible designs that may

include us within them without our knowing it. For all the paranoid scares in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it would be even scarier, Pynchon suggests, if we began to *stop* suspecting “hidden orders behind the visible.” “Either they have put him here for a reason,” Slothrop speculates during “the anti-paranoid part of his cycle,” “or he’s just here. He isn’t sure that he wouldn’t, actually, rather have that *reason*” (506).

Not that there’s much danger of running short of reasons—or, to put this in other terms, of imagining that our being anywhere can be a wholly plotless event. Paranoia is a necessary and desired structure of thought. It is also a permanent one, which means that there is nothing substantially new in the latest version of it. To put this in the contemporary jargon with which *Gravity's Rainbow* is obsessed: paranoia is a necessary product of all information systems. The Pynchonian opposition between They (IG Farben, etc.) and We (Slothrop, Roger Mexico, Pirate Prentice, etc.) is a replay of the opposition of Slothrop’s Puritan forefather’s polarity of the Elect and the Preterite. Information control is the contemporary version of God’s eternal knowledge of each individual’s ultimate damnation or salvation, and both theology and computer technology naturally produce paranoid fears about how we are hooked into the System, about the connections it has in store for us.

Can we escape being manipulated—perhaps even destroyed—by such systems? Familiar tactics of protest and subversion create local disturbances that are easily forgotten and leave the most menacing paranoid structures perfectly intact. We should be suspicious of some of the most appealing alternatives that *Gravity's Rainbow* offers to its own paranoically conceived apocalypses. I’m thinking especially of love, anarchy, and randomness, all of which bring us back to Pynchon’s credentials as a hero of the counter-culture. Perhaps nothing is treated with a more tender seriousness in *Gravity's Rainbow* than Roger Mexico’s love for Jessica Swanlake. Simply by existing, that love opposes the war (“They are in love. Fuck the war”; 47), but the opposition, as the parenthetical quote suggests, is more rhetorical protest than anything else. Their love is the idealized version of Roger’s pissing on the shiny table and on all the bigwigs sitting around it in Mossmoon’s office (an act reminiscent of such engaging antics of the early seventies as Jerry Rubin’s “occupation” of the New York Stock Exchange). Pynchon’s work generously, and ambiguously, recapitulates the saintly assumptions of Rubinesque subversion: profound social change will not result from head-on assaults (terror is ineffective and unacceptable, revolution is unthinkable in the West, and even revolutionary regimes have shown themselves to be

changes of personnel unaccompanied by changes in assumptions about the legitimacy of power), but rather from a kind of aggressively seductive subversion of the *seriousness* with which networks of power conduct their business. But, as we shall see, oppressive seriousness can be corrupted only if it is recognized that paranoid thought itself is inherently unserious, and not by violent *or* nonviolent opposition to the plots of power. The counter-culture style of the sixties can provide nothing more than the (always appealing) historical inspiration for more complex models of nonoppositional resistance. Roger and Jessica's love is both venerated and discredited in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The love is a kind of "secession" from war, "the beginnings of gentle withdrawal ... both know, clearly, it's better together, snuggled in, than back out in the paper, fires, khaki, steel of the Home Front. That, indeed, the Home Front is something of a fiction and lie, designed, not too subtly, to draw them apart, to subvert love in favor of work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death" (47). On the contrary: their "snuggled" state, their "gentle withdrawal" is the fiction (with its sentimental apotheosis on the evening their hearts are "buoyed" as they listen to Christmas songs in a church somewhere in Kent; 151), a marginal, harmless fiction that Jessica will drop in order to return to her husband and the securities of "work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death."

Is randomness a more effective route of escape? Power depends on the control of information, on the ordering of data; what happens when data resist the ordering process? This is presented as a particularly seductive possibility in *Gravity's Rainbow* (as in anarchy, the political corollary of unprogrammed events and acts), although Pynchon also presents the random as nothing more than a momentary malfunctioning of the cybernetic machine, one that the machine is fully equipped to take account of. Thus the fucked-up pinball machines sent by Chicago gangsters to "one Alfonso Tracy, Princeton '06, St. Louis Country Club, moving into petro-chemicals in a big way" and stored in a gigantic Masonic Hall in "the green little river town of Mouthorgan, Missouri" (678–79): has it happened "at real random, preserving at least our faith in Malfunctioning as still something beyond their grasp," or is there somewhere "in the wood file cabinets ... a set of real blueprints telling exactly how all these pinball machines were rewired—a randomness deliberately simulated?" (683). The control of randomness has been mentioned before, and not merely as a possibility. Rocket-City "is set up deliberately To Avoid Symmetry, Allow Complexity, Introduce Terror (from the Preamble to the Articles of Immachination)—but tourists have to connect the look of it back to things they remember from their times and



planet—back to the wine bottle smashed in the basin, the bristlecone pines outracing Death for millennia, concrete roads abandoned years ago, hairdos of the late 1930s” (346). The random itself can easily be programmed.

There is, however, something else—something more sinister, but perhaps also more promising—in the passage just quoted. As part of an “immachinating” strategy, They duplicate mnemonic images originally outside Their control. The novel is full of references to enigmatic and frequently eerie replications. Lyle Bland comes back from his “transmural” voyages through space and time “raving about the presences he has found out there, members of an astral IG, whose mission ... is past secular good and evil: distinctions like that are meaningless out there” (187). Or: people who get hit by lightning are carried off by bareback dwarves to places that look like the world they left, “but it’ll be different. Between congruent and identical there seems to be another class of look-alike that only finds the lightning heads. Another world laid down on the previous one and to all appearances no different. Ha-*ha!* But the lightning-struck know, all right!” (774). Slothrop, walking with Katje on the esplanade along the beach at Nice, suddenly feels that the brilliant whitecaps can’t be getting their light from the real sky above them. “Here it is again, that identical-looking Other World—is he gonna have *this* to worry about, now? What th’—lookit those *trees*—each long frond hanging, stung, dizzying, in laborious drypoint against the sky, each *so perfectly placed*” (262). Finally, the entire Zone may be a spectral double of the real world, a collection of images simulating scenes from all over the universe:

In the Zone, in these days, there is endless simulation—standing waves in the water, large drone-birds, so well-known as to have nicknames among the operators, wayward balloons, flotsam from other theatres of war (Brazilian oildrums, whisky cases stenciled for Fort-Lammy), observers from other galaxies, episodes of smoke, moments of high albedo—your real targets are hard to come by. (570)

How are we to understand all these references to simulations and to doubling? The hidden double can inspire the most panicky paranoid suspicions. Am I being given the real thing, or an ontological look-alike? Thus doubling would seem to be merely one aspect of the pattern of events in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that gives rise to the paranoid compulsion or “reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible.” But we should look at that reflex more closely in order to determine if it is an appropriate response to

phenomena of doubling and simulation. Enzian, the leader of the Southwest African natives transplanted by the Germans to Europe and now in pursuit of the rocket's secret and site, comes to wonder if he's pursuing the wrong object. Are the Herreros "supposed to be the Kabbalists out here ... the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop"? They had of course assumed that the Rocket was "this holy Text," their Torah. "What else? Its symmetries, its latencies, the *cuteness* of it enchanted and seduced us while the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness" (606).

Is the rocket the real Text? This question is an urgent one not only for Pynchon's characters but also for us. What if, as Enzian suggests, the rocket-text seduced us and blinded us to an even more important text, something in the work that it is even more necessary to read correctly than the rocket, something that would be the *real key* to its sense? Indeed, as we have seen, Pynchon teases us with this possibility in more than one way. The rocket and the war for which it was built are just "cover-ups," a "spectacle" or "diversion" from "the true war," which is "a celebration of markets" and whose "real business ... is buying and selling." But if something like international cartels is the real text that the paranoid imagination should be reading, then we, like Enzian, are being deceived by all the prime time and space being given to the rocket. We can't resolve the issue simply by saying that Pynchon's "real" subject is how his characters are victimized by that deception, and that in order to read *that* text the reader has to be set straight about the true center of historical power. For in fact the presumed real historical text is as obscure to us as it is to Enzian. Pynchon outlines some of the extraordinarily complex moves of international "buying and selling," the durable financial connectedness among nations from which wars would merely "divert" us, but he also raises the possibility of a plot for which "the cartelized state" itself is merely a screen. The use of war to establish "neither Red communism nor an unhindered Right, but a rational structure in which business would be the true, the rightful authority" would, in comparison with *that* plot, be nothing more than "a damned parlor game," stuff that "even the masses believe." *Are* cartels the ultimate plotters? International business interests may be providing just another front, behind which lie still "other orders," orders that might involve ("if one were paranoid enough" to believe this) a collaboration between the living and the dead, "between both sides of the Wall, matter and spirit" (192–93). But is it even necessary to go that far, to evoke, as Lyle Bland does after his "transmural" voyage, "an astral IG"? What, exactly, are the earthly Shell and IG Farben? How are we to

understand the historical referentiality of those names when, in the novel, they refer to cartels obsessed with the predictive power of Slothrop's erections? Is there an actual place—on earth or in space, in life or in death—where paranoid suspicion can finally be satisfied, put to rest?

If such a place exists, the reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* will certainly never enjoy its comforts. Compared to Pynchon's novel, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for all the arduous work it requires, is play for a child-detective. Certainly, Joyce wants us to suffer, but there will also be a term to our suffering. The puzzles of *Ulysses* are like Stations of the Cross; they are ritual agonies through which we must pass in order, finally, to be at one, far above the consciousness of any character in the novel, with Joyce's remarkably cohesive cultural consciousness. *Ulysses* promises a critical Utopia: the final elucidation of its sense, the day when all the connections will have been discovered and collected in a critical Book that would objectively repeat *Ulysses*, which, in being the exegetical double of its source, would express the *quidditas* of Joyce's novel, would be, finally, *Ulysses* replayed as the whole truth of *Ulysses*. Nothing could be more different from *Gravity's Rainbow*. Far from holding out the promise of a postexegetical superiority to the world that it represents, Pynchon's work permanently infects us with the paranoid anxieties of its characters. Just keeping track of all the plots—and their incredible interconnectedness—is a near impossibility. The most important facts about the rocket, and the technology that made it impossible, are either shrouded in impenetrable secrecy or simply ignored. What exactly is the Schwarzgerät? Were the infant Tyrone's hard-ons conditioned by the smell of Imipolex G (even though the experiments took place years before Jamf developed that plastic for IG Farben), a smell that somehow precedes the arrival of the rockets themselves over London? More importantly, what does this casualness mean? Is it or isn't it important to get all the information straight?

Such questions can generate the most extreme anxieties, and yet the information we do get—such as the account of Jamf's experiments with little Tyrone—do little to allay them. *For the major anxiety provoked by Gravity's Rainbow is ontological rather than epistemological.* The characters themselves frequently worry about what they know and don't know, but they too, as we have seen in Slothrop's uneasiness about the scene on the esplanade at Nice, can begin to wonder about their world's identity. Is the Zone a part of Europe, and if not what is it? For the reader, the characters themselves become part of the question. We have enough information about Slothrop to say who he is, but as the novel progresses, especially as he begins "to thin" and to scatter into the Zone, the much more disturbing question is raised of

what he is. More generally, more or less realistic passages are casually juxtaposed with such surrealist tidbits as Slothrop's excursion into, among other things, a kind of homosexual Western when he follows his mouthharp down a toilet, and the by now celebrated adventures of Byron the Bulb. Is *Gravity's Rainbow* serious about history? Are the categories of serious and nonserious even relevant to it? *What is Gravity's Rainbow?*

And whose side is Pynchon on? Could he be one of Them? To the extent that such questions are justified, they testify to Pynchon's success in making us move on the same field of paranoid anxiety as his characters. Pynchon willingly accepts, and accentuates, a writer's unavoidable complicity with the plots that torture his characters. If literature is to have a potential for political resistance, that potential will have to be disengaged from literature's very collaboration with the systems it would oppose. In making literature continuous with both the creation and suspicion of orders in other areas of life—in "systems" as diverse as Puritan theology, Captain Marvel comics, international cartels, and computer technology—Pynchon both denies literature its status as a privileged form-maker *and* insists on its inescapable complicity with the most sinister plot-making activities and strategies of control. By taunting us with the secrets of its own hidden (or inexistent ... ) orders, *Gravity's Rainbow* places us in a predicament not too different from Slothrop's. To say this is to see how far we are from the more comforting image of Pynchon the good guy (a sort of authorial version of Roger Mexico), anxious to work out, for and with the reader, some humane alternative to the impersonal and dehumanizing technique of control made available to the unscrupulous few by modern technology. Such alternatives can be nothing more than fantasy resting points within paranoid trains of thought. And it is not only because Pynchon is a plot-making novelist that we are bound to suspect that he is working against us. While it is obviously not a question of Pynchon being "on the side of" the oppressors in the sense of sympathizing with their ambitions, he is on their side in a sense that is true for all of us. We cannot, that is, help but be an object of suspicion for others. To inspire interest is to be guaranteed a paranoid reading, just as we must inevitably be suspicious of the interpretations we inspire. Paranoia is an inescapable interpretative doubling of presence.

If, then, there is no escape from the paranoid structure of thought, there may also be no escape from the murderous opposition generated by that structure. The polarity of We and They in *Gravity's Rainbow* is a paranoid polarity, and They are all the more threatening in that We can "know" them only through our suspicions about them. And, as I have suggested, that polarity may even be repeated in the relation between the

reader and the text. The latter mystifies us not so much because of the information it may be hiding, but above all because of the success with which it hides its own nature. It is as if we could know everything and still not know what kind of a text *Gravity's Rainbow* is. It would not exactly be a question of something missing, but rather of the text's "real" nature as a kind of superior intelligible double of the text we read. Pynchon's novel would signify nothing but itself, without, however, letting us move beyond the opaque surface of the signifying narrative itself. And that opacity would constitute Thomas Pynchon as the reader's They; he *is* the enemy text.

There may, however, be another way to think about this. It is a peculiarity of the paranoid structure to combine opposition with doubling; the former is, in fact, a function of the latter. The paranoid sees the visible as a simulated double of the real; it deceptively repeats the real. Or, more accurately, it deceitfully repeats the real: as if such doubleness would not occur if there were not an intention to deceive. Otherwise, so paranoia reasons, we would have the Real Text. Thus the paranoid imagination operates on precisely that assumption which its enemies—if *they existed*—would wish it to operate on: the assumption that simulations belong to the other side, that doubles have no reason to appear or to exist except to prevent us from seeing the original. The self-protective suspicions of paranoia are, therefore, already a defeat. The paranoid *We must* lose out to the enemy They, and this by virtue of the fact that it authorizes, or creates, the condition of possibility of They-ness by a primary, founding faith in the unicity of the Real. On the basis of that faith, or conviction, all appearances risk being seen as treacherous simulations and other people have merely to fill the slot, or take the structural position of a dissimulating They, in order to have us, at once, in a position characterized by anxiety-ridden suspicions and permanent subordination. In paranoia, the primary function of the enemy is to provide a definition of the real that makes paranoia necessary. We must therefore begin to suspect the paranoid structure itself as a device by which consciousness maintains the polarity of self and nonself, thus preserving the concept of identity. In paranoia, two Real Texts confront one another: subjective being and a world of monolithic otherness. This opposition can be broken down only if we renounce the comforting (if also dangerous) faith in locatable identities. *Only then, perhaps, can the simulated doubles of paranoid vision destroy the very oppositions that they appear to support.*

It is, then, only within the paranoid structure itself—and not in some extraparanoic myth such as love or anarchic randomness—that we can begin to resist the persecutions which paranoia both imagines and, more subtly, authorizes. Paranoid doubles dissimulate their source; could they also be

thought of as *eliminating origins by disseminating targets*? Let's consider the mysterious relation between Slothrop's hard-ons and the V-2. Slothrop's penile sensitivity to the rocket is an object of both military and scientific interest. His erections seem to be a response to an imminent rocket attack, a "response," however, that happens from two to ten days before its presumed stimulus. That this *is* a stimulus-response relation between the penis and the rocket is strongly suggested to Pointsman the Pavlovian and his colleagues by the amazing identity between the patterns on the map of London that Slothrop uses to mark (and to date) his sexual conquests and those that record rocket strikes on Roger Mexico's map of the city. But how is this possible? Slothrop is, apparently, responding to a stimulus before it is presented. Furthermore, the normal order of the stimuli themselves is reversed with the V-2 rocket, which hits *before* the sound of its coming in can be heard. Pointsman speculates that Laszlo Jamf originally conditioned tiny Tyrone's hard-ons to occur in response to a loud noise. Having failed to extinguish Slothrop's hard-on reflex at the end of the experiment, Jamf guaranteed the survival of the reflex right up to the present. There wouldn't be any problem if Slothrop were reacting to the V-1 rocket, whose sound precedes its strike: then, Pointsman reasons,

Any doodle close enough to make him jump ought to be giving him an erection: the sound of the motor razzing louder and louder, then the cutoff and silence, suspense building up—then the explosion. Boing a hardon. But oh, no. Slothrop instead only gets erections when this sequence happens *in reverse*. Explosion first, then the sound of the approach: the V-2. (99)

In other words, Slothrop's hard-on is separated from its (presumed) stimulus by an event that has not yet taken place at the moment of the hard-on, which, so to speak, makes his hard-on a logical impossibility. Unless, Pointsman wonders, Slothrop has his predictive erections in what Pavlov called a "transmarginal" or "ultraparadoxical" phase, that is, a phase in which the idea of the opposite has been radically weakened. A dog in the ultraparadoxical phase, for example, responds to a food stimulus when it is not there, just, perhaps, as Slothrop no longer recognizes the binary opposition between the presence and the absence of his hard-on stimuli, thus making possible the apparent reversal of normal cause-and-effect sequence. But, with what may be less than ideal consistency, Pointsman also holds on to a modified version of a strictly Pavlovian theory of cause and effect, "the true mechanical explanation" that Pavlov believed to be "the ideal, the end

we all struggle toward in science” (102). Slothrop is perhaps responding to “‘a sensory cue we just aren’t paying attention to.’ Something that’s been there all along, something we could be looking at but no one is” (56). Everyone has a theory for Slothrop’s penile anomalies (Roger thinks it’s “a statistical oddity,” Rollo Groast calls it “precognition,” and the Freudian Edwin Treacle calls Slothrop’s gift “psychokinesis”: he *makes* the rockets fall where they do, thus satisfying a subconscious need “‘to abolish all trace of the sexual Other’”; 98), but in a way the most intriguing one remains the orthodox Pavlovian reading, which the narrator reformulates in the following terms:

But the stimulus, somehow, *must* be the rocket, some precursor wraith, some rocket’s double present for Slothrop in the percentage of smiles on a bus, menstrual cycles being operated upon in some mysterious way—what *does* make the little doxies do it for free? Are there fluctuations in the sexual market, in pornography or prostitutes, perhaps tying into prices on the Stock Exchange itself, that we clean-living lot know nothing about? Does news from the front affect the itch between their pretty thighs, does desire grow directly or inversely as the real chance of sudden death—damn it, what cue, right in front of our eyes, that we haven’t the subtlety of heart to see? (99)

By the time we get to these speculations, we may be prepared to find them rather plausible; we have been made ready for a state of interpretative raving. The crazy story of Jamf’s experiment has been told in such a matter-of-fact way that we are inclined to accept it as the realistic underpinning of Slothrop’s current penile behavior. The problem can then seem to be to figure out where the stimuli are to which he is responding: rocket preparations across the channel may affect menstrual cycles in a way that increases women’s sexual receptivity to Slothrop, just before each rocket strike, or desire may grow when death is imminent ... All this is not *just* a joke, but it would be a joke *on us* if we read its seriousness in terms of the cause-and-effect sequences that Pointsman hesitates to give up. Let’s try to define that “seriousness” (without knowing what this word will now mean) in terms that have nothing at all to do with cause-and-effect narrativity, or with the realistic probabilities that such narrative lines tend to produce.

We can take our cue from the phrase “some rocket’s double.” What Slothrop responds to is a climate of being, a rocketness that manifests itself in different ways, at about the same time in Germany and in London. And

Slothrop's response is a further manifestation: his erections are replicative mutations of the rocket. *Gravity's Rainbow* can be very explicit about the rocket's phallic significance (Katje, for example, "has understood the great airless are [followed by the rocket] as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet and herself, and Those who use her—over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm"; 260), but I don't think that the rocket is meant merely to symbolize repressed sexuality. The "secret lusts that drive the planet" can't be reduced to psychological lusts, although they can certainly *recur* as psychology. No single reoccurrence, however, should be given priority as the founder of the series. Rockets are not fired *because of* unsatisfied phallic lusts, and we must remember that if the rocket is a double of the phallus, it also doubles—and is doubled by—the rainbow. On the day Slothrop becomes a crossroad in the Zone, he "sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth" (729). The series rocket-cock-rainbow may be intelligible mainly in graphic terms: the rocket's rise and fall, the line from the base of the erect cock to the place on the ground where its semen might fall, and the curve of the rainbow all trace a parabola, a figure that can itself be taken to chart a kind of erotic relation of resistance and abandonment to gravity. The rocket's murderous power is, then, somewhat deemphasized by the way it replicates itself inaccurately (but the only *accurate* replications are fantasy—denials of the simulations that constitute the real) as exuberant phallic sexuality and a visual spectacle of radiant calm in nature. This is not to say that the novel denies, or is indifferent to the rocket's destructiveness; rather, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon subordinates political and historical seriousness to certain deployments of being that can in turn affect the way we think about history and conceive our resistances to power.

Rocket power is everywhere, and its violence can take many forms, including the appeased violence of the rainbow's stilled parabolic curve. Slothrop, with his replicative hard-ons and his vision of a "rainbow cock" (after which he "stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural"; 729), is the principal carrier of this cracked ontological mirror in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Consequently, he is therefore also the principal threat to a projected They-ness that would reserve rockets for destruction *or* allow us to analyze them, with incurable melancholy, as merely substitutive versions of an equally destructive phallic drive. Slothrop must be pursued, and he will "fight back" by disappearing into roles that are themselves simulations of comic-book stereotypes and folkloric heroes. He wanders through the Zone as Rocketman and in the suit of Plechazunga the Pig-Hero "who, sometime back in the 10th century, routed a Viking invasion, appearing suddenly out



of a thunderbolt and chasing a score of screaming Norsemen back into the sea" (661). Slothrop loses his "personal density," he begins "to thin, to scatter" (593), thus becoming *unfindable*. But at the same time the rocket itself loses some of its awesome prestige by virtue of its debilitating repetition in Slothrop as both his comical horniness and his metamorphosis into the rocket's legend. I of course don't mean that such replications prevent real rockets from being fired in historical time. But *Gravity's Rainbow*, as we should now realize, takes place in a different kind of "time," a nonhistorical time in which the rockets and the murderous forces behind them are denied the ontological privileges that make them possible. Slothrop as a novelistic personality is, we might say, sacrificed to this operation, and the extraordinary poignancy of his robust yet menaced presence in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the premonitory sign that he is condemned to be lost. Through Slothrop we mourn the loss of personal presence, of a myth of personality that may, after all, be the only way in which our civilization has taught us to think about ourselves (to think our selves), a loss that, however, must be sustained if we are also to disappear as targets, and therefore as conditions of possibility, of rockets and cartels.<sup>3</sup>

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the paranoid double—the Real Text behind the visible orders—is inaccurately and subversively replicated as serial doubles that ruin the very notion of Real Texts. The story of Slothrop narrativizes a more general process of replicative positioning throughout the novel. If we have such trouble keeping track of what's going on in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is perhaps less because of the multiplicity of characters and events than because so much of what happens has almost happened already. When Thanatz is quizzed by Herreros about the Schwarzgerät, is it the realization of Närrisch's fearful anticipation, much earlier in the novel, that *he* will be interrogated about the S-Gerät by the Russians? Psychological and dramatic particularities are blurred by parallelisms. Pökler loses Ilse. Thamatz loses Gottfried and then Bianca, and Slothrop loses Bianca. The thematic depth that such repetitions might create—say, an obsession with the loss of a young girl—is forestalled by the psychologically thinning effect that they have in *Gravity's Rainbow*. For the repetition works here not to open up depths, but to cast doubt on the singularity of character. Thanatz comes to realize that "the two children, Gottfried and Bianca, *are the same*" (783). And Slothrop, having lost Bianca, understands, while listening to Pökler, that "Ilse, fathered on Greta Erdmann's silver and passive image, Bianca, conceived during the filming of the very scene that was in his thoughts as Pökler pumped in the fatal charge of sperm [into Leni]—how could they not be the same child?" (672). And even before Slothrop begins to "thin" and "scatter," he is already

difficult to locate. Who, or what, is Pirate Prentice, with his talent “for getting inside the fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of *managing* them” (13)—a talent that will be made nothing of in the novel, except as an anticipatory double, an annunciation of Slothrop and *his* special divining talent? Finally, Slothrop learns that Roosevelt died when he, Slothrop, “was living on the Riviera, or in Switzerland someplace, only half aware of being extinguished himself.” After he gets the news, “the wide necropolis” of Berlin “begins now to draw inward, to neck down and stretchout into a Corridor, one known to Slothrop though not by name, a deformation of space that lurks inside his life, latent as a hereditary disease.” In that space, Roosevelt’s doctors move toward the man who—if indeed they were the same—in his black cape at Yalta, “conveyed beautifully the sense of Death’s wings” and prepared a nation “for the passing of Roosevelt, a being They assembled, a being They would dismantle” (435). But what is Slothrop himself if not an assembled and then dismantled being, “extinguished” at the same instant as the President whose last moments he relives in that strange Corridor outside historical space and time? Is Slothrop FDR?

No matter how much we work on *Gravity’s Rainbow*, our most important interpretative discovery will be that it resists analysis—that is, being broken down into distinct units of meaning. To talk about Bianca is to talk about Ilse and Gottfried; to describe the Zone is to enumerate all the images of *other* times and places that are repeated there. Pynchon’s novel is a dazzling argument for shared or collective being—or, more precisely, for *the originally replicative nature of being*. Singularity is inconceivable; the “original” of a personality has to be counted among its simulations. Being in Pynchon is therefore not a question of substance but rather of distribution and collection. Slothrop is consecrated (and sacrificed) as a collectible of sense the day he becomes a crossroads. “At last, lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, at the edge of one of the ancient Plague towns he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon” (728). Before the hanging, Slothrop takes the criminal’s place, is “executed” for him, or rather merely before and with him, since there is no redemptive sacrifice in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that might become the Ultimate Sacrifice exempting the rest of us from a similar fate. Slothrop is immolated to his own lack of originality, to his “thinning” or “scattered” nature, to his being, for example, an anticipatory replay of a common criminal’s execution.

And *nothing* is original here. The very scene in which the sacrifice is enacted is itself a serial element: the cross that his spread-eagled body makes is also the cross made by all the churches he passes on his wanderings, which

in turn repeats the shape of the A4 rocket (“apses out to four sides like rocket fins guiding the streamlined spires”)—to which we must also add “other fourfold expressions” such as “swastikas, gymnastic symbols FFFF in a circle symmetrically upside down and backward, Frisch Fromm Frohlich Frei over neat doorways in quiet streets, and crossroads,” and, finally, the mandala shape of Herrero villages in Südwest. All these images “speak to” Slothrop, as do the heterogeneous images from his own American past that also seem to cross his mind—to make him by crossing through him—now that he had been “consecrated” as a crossroads:

Crosses, swastikas, Zone-mandalas, how can they not speak to Slothrop? He’s sat in Saure Bummer’s kitchen, the air streaming with kif moires, reading soup recipes and finding in every bone and cabbage leaf paraphrases of himself ... news flashes, names of wheel-horses that will pay him off for a certain getaway... He used to pick and shovel at the spring roads of Berkshire, April afternoons he’s lost, “Chapter 81 work,” they called it, following the scraper that clears the winter’s crystal attack-from-within, its white necropolizing ... picking up rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile, days when in superstition and fright he could *make it all fit*, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history: his own, his winter’s, his country’s ... instructing him, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper than he can explain, have been faces of children out the train windows, two bars of dance music somewhere, in some other street at night, needles and branches of a pine tree shaken clear and luminous against night clouds, one circuit diagram out of hundreds in a smudged yellowing sheaf, laughter out of a cornfield in the early morning as he was walking to school, the idling of a motorcycle at one dusk-heavy hour of the summer ... and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. (729)

Slothrop is, then, a sacrificial condensation of the scattered nature of sense. And nothing is stranger than that feeling of naturalness at the very

moment of his own disappearance. Not only does Slothrop's sacrificial pose make him a mere replication of numerous other crosses; his most personal history is a collection of scenes from the outside, of imprints made by the human and natural landscape of his New England home. Slothrop is so glutted with otherness as to render superfluous the very notion of otherness. Slothrop *is* no one; he is a certain position on—to use another favorite Pynchonian term—the “interface” between himself and the world (“Could Outsider and Insider be part of the same field?” Pointsman wonders; 168), or between his individual existence and his doubles (between his erections and the V-2, between his cross[road] state and “other fourfold expressions”). Or rather, Slothrop *moves* in that “space” between inside and outside, between one simulation and another, which defeats polarities. Seen from the interface, the loci of oppositions have become vaguely delimited, even blurred marginal areas; they can no longer organize relations. Thus the very replications that characterize paranoid doubling in *Gravity's Rainbow* attack the binary paranoid structure of We opposed to They. *There is no escape* from that doubling, no alternatives that would put to rest once and for all our paranoid suspicion of invisible repetitions of what we see. But there is, so to speak, a horizontalizing of the replicative process, a displacement of the hidden double from its privileged position as the original reality behind the deceptive appearance to serial positions along phenomenal “lines” that have neither terminal points nor points of departure. Rather than Real Texts imperfectly designated by ontologically inferior signs, we have a replicative series of underived simulacra.

Resistance must therefore be thought of as an inaccurate synonym for conformity. Not only is paranoid terror defeated by replicative processes that both conform to paranoid structures and yet eliminate the They and the We that give rise to terror; the very excessiveness with which images are appropriated and duplicated may also work to defeat networks of power. Paranoid terror asks: how can we escape incorporating the images by which They could define—and control—us? A paranoid resistance, far from confronting apparatuses of control with the impenetrable fortress of a unique selfhood, opens the subject up, makes of the subject a helplessly passive recipient of alien images. And in this apparently docile doubling or reflection of the multitudinous forms of information by which a self might be programmed, the subject can perhaps also disappear as a target of the program.

The most striking aspect of Slothrop's apotheosis as an intersection of identities is the reappearance of the random as an effect of (and not in opposition to) his having been so massively programmed. Slothrop is now

everything but an interiority: a swastika, the fins of a rocket, a Herrero village, snot-filled wads of Kleenex, a pine tree luminous against night clouds, the idling of a motorcycle, variations on Franz van der Groov's cosmic windmill ... But, to articulate still another inaccurate replication: just as the effects of Jamf's experiments far exceed the purpose of his original work with tiny Tyrone's hard-ons, Slothrop is reconstituted as, perhaps, a free if unlocatable subject by the incommensurability of the images stored within him with any controlling designs. If modern technology has made it possible for human beings to be bombarded with more types of information than ever before in the world's history, and if this means that we are mainly constituted not as private selves but as collections of alien images and discourses, it is also true that *we are thereby conditioned beyond any uses which such conditioning might be made to serve*. In his absolute—indeed mythic—otherness, Slothrop manifests the constitutive (and not merely reflective) nature of his massive absorptions. By the very extravagance of his acquiescence in the plots that surround him, the paranoid is thus saved—at least intermittently—from his conviction that his interpretative suspicions about the real merely correspond to designs already there. In the paranoid's reenactment of given plots, he constitutes a kind of shallow subjectivity that exceeds them.

This peculiar, self-less freedom depends on both the richness and the triteness of plots in the modern world. Pynchon is especially sensitive to the media that vehicle such plots: comic books, the encapsulated romances on billboard posters, and above all, movies. More than any other literary work I know, *Gravity's Rainbow* receives and somewhat ironically replicates the alluringly corny plots of popular culture. Unlike the orders of high culture, the comic-book and movie plots that Pynchon's work lovingly quotes can never seduce us into accepting them as reflections of our Real Nature. The very aspect of popular culture that perhaps most offends its detractors—its superficial and frivolous images of human character—allow for mobile self-identifications perhaps too slippery to be coerced into any fixed psychological or moral positions. More exactly, the plots of popular culture are overwhelmingly coercive without constituting anything more definite than a readiness to be seduced by other plots. Comic books and movies provide the mode of *Gravity's Rainbow's* seriousness, which is the mode of ontological comedy.

The novel's ungraspability is both a resistance to our attempts to take possession of it and a model of freedom that it invites us to emulate. *Gravity's Rainbow* moves us from a world of measurably effective action on human and natural environments—a world that we recognize, and that is perhaps made

possible, by relatively stable identifications of its actors—to a world of ontological play. It allegorizes a substratum in personal and historical narratives, a substratum where the human and the nonhuman are no longer related as subject and object, but rather in the mysterious and non-narrative “unity” of inaccurate replications. If it is both natural and inevitable that we should center an idea (and an ideal) of human rationality in the narratives that organize the real for us, Pynchon’s work—while occasionally paying nostalgic tribute to such ideas and ideals—restructures the relation between human beings, their artifacts, and the natural world in which they live in terms of doubles, parallelisms, and simulacra. The forms of being constitute a planetary community in which rockets are parallels of erections and rainbows. From this perspective, the privilege of the human extends no further than its perception or consciousness of a relational mode that ignores the *hierarchical* privileges of humanity. The contribution of popular culture to this perspective is its preciously reductive view of the human; as Rocketman, Slothrop has the paradoxical freedom of a cardboard being, a being no longer constrained by the targetlike singleness of a rich and unique selfhood.

We must, however, not exaggerate these benefits. I have been suggesting that *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not merely refer to such things as the heroes of comic-book adventure, but that its own nature cannot help but be affected by the cultural forms that it incorporates. At the same time, Pynchon’s novel signals its distance from those forms by its worried complicity with paranoid suspicions about the Real Text. Not only that: literature, far from saving us from the controlling designs served by information systems, is itself an information system that threatens its readers’ freedom by the very elusiveness of the demands which it makes on them. The unreadability that is the sign of the novel’s escape from the excessively readable oppositions of plotters and victims (of They and We) cannot help—however perversely—but reconstitute an opposition between Pynchon the plotter and his reader-victims. Literature is never merely an agent of resistance against networks of power-serving knowledge; rather, it is one of that network’s most seductive manifestations. It can never stand outside the oppressive manipulations of social reality and negate those manipulations by a willed alienation from history. Literature is on a continuum with those forces by which it has habitually proclaimed itself to be menaced.

If there is a menace, it is not to literature as a guardian of cultural and ethical values but rather to literature as a *preeminent* plot-maker. Social history has probably always been made by forces that, if they took the trouble, could easily demonstrate how little they need literature.

Encyclopedism has frequently been literature's defense against its exclusion from (or its marginal place in) the information systems; the political, economic, and scientific networks of power; and even the symbolic orders by which a society defines itself. Thus, the encyclopedic work in the modern period would demonstrate, first of all, that even in a culture saturated with scientific knowledge, art can reassert its claim to be thought of as the privileged medium that processes and "humanizes" that knowledge—that is, which integrates it into those symbolic discourses where, from the beginnings of history, human beings have ordered and sought to master their experience. At the same time, in a technological world whose ordering capacities seem to owe even less to art than (at least in our possibly pastoral fantasies) did prescientific cultures, a world in which the work of art is no longer epistemologically central but merely the occasion for epistemological leisure, art can aspire toward what we might call a redemptively dismissive encyclopedism, an annihilative absorption of its culture's most ambitious projects into the superior "atmosphere" of art. Such redemptive intentions naturally leave history intact (thus even more radically marginalizing art), while art itself becomes the sublime We in paranoid opposition to a dehumanizing They, denying its own perennial if largely unnoticed participation in the exciting uses of knowledge for purposes of mastery. Nothing could be further from Pynchon's fiction, which participates—even exuberantly participates—in an insanely industrious plotting that is also the object of his characters' anxious—and probably justified—suspicions. The exuberance is perhaps the sign of that participation—as if we could not help but be thrilled by our interpretative ingenuities, however little they may correspond to that which exists outside of them and in spite of the violence with which they reinvent the lives of others.

Slothrop, who is both the central agent of suspicion in *Gravity's Rainbow* and the major victim of its plots, follows a course curiously similar to that of Oedipus. Like Sophocles' hero, he learns with astonishment of all the connections in his past, and that his life has, since infancy, in all likelihood been plotted by those modern agents of inexorable and malevolent fate, Shell and IG Farben. Also like Oedipus, he assumes the plots he has been in terror of living, although, unlike his ancient counterpart, Pynchon never offers *us* a cathartically maneuvered exemption from his hero's fate as an awesome scapegoat for the crimes of our paranoid imagination. Slothrop assumes his fate by disappearing into a pop version of the (already pop) role created for him, and his annunciatory virtue with regard to the rocket is erased by his very assumption of his Rocketman identity, by a sacrificial similitude in which the cause-and-effect logic of military planning is

inoperative. No wonder Shell is furious when Slothrop gives them the slip and gets lost in the Zone. Far from coercing him into self-knowledge (as Oedipus is coerced by his inexorable fate), Their designs allow Slothrop to slip into an identity so parodistically clear as to be unreadable. But he is of course on the run from us too, from the interpretative babbling that he sets off and never satisfies and that is so hard to stop. But why should we stop? In our paranoid criticism we will, after all, be running parallel to Slothrop, thus providing, if we are lucky enough, another model of unreadability, a convincing failure of self-knowledge, a defiant act of Slothropian Oedipalism.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York, 1973), 295. All references to *Gravity's Rainbow* will be to this edition, and page numbers are given in the text.

2. "Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 12:78–79.

3. Pynchon's attachment to that myth, and to the presumed obligation of the novelist "to develop plot and characters," is evident in the astonishing introduction he wrote for the recent publication of his early short stories, *Slow Learner* (New York, 1984), xxviii.





DWIGHT EDDINS

*Probing the Nihil:  
Existential Gnosticism in Pynchon's Stories*

When Pynchon entitled his collected short stories *Slow Learner*, he had in mind chiefly those gaucheries of style that make these beginner's efforts—in his own words—"juvenile and delinquent too."<sup>1</sup> If we examine these stories for evidence of insight into gnostic paradigms, however, we discover that he was a quick study indeed. His characteristic concern with what we might call the cosmic context is already present in persistent intimations that the characters and plots of earth must somehow answer to a mysterious teleology of extrahuman forces. In a succession of six stories—written in as many years—climate and geography become signifiers of metaphysical oppression, demonic urges threaten the psyche's integrity, entropy makes its nihilistic debut, and a malignant cabal seeks to negate humanity itself. The dimension that will lend Pynchon's work the tone of a major inquiry is thus established from the beginning, whatever the artistic flaws that mar its first embodiments.

Preoccupied with these flaws, the author's preface to *Slow Learner* alternates between reticence and apology when it comes to recognizing the embracing themes of his juvenilia. Pynchon's remarks on the earliest of the stories, "The Small Rain," focus primarily on the younger self who wrote it and on the story's more or less unconscious insights into the American class structure. Other than the linkage with the preterite/elect dichotomy that

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From *The Gnostic Pynchon*. © 1990 by Dwight Eddins.

these insights suggest, there is no attempt on the author's part to place the story in the thematic context of his more mature work; indeed, he seems to suggest that this early exercise lies beyond the pale, and should perhaps be granted leniency under some Youthful Offender Act. It is the perverse nature of a thematic study, however, to overlook such apprehensions—no matter how well-placed—and to trace a conceptual continuity that transcends radical changes in style.

In "The Small Rain" this continuity is signaled, ironically, by points of stylistic disjuncture—the very points where the now-accomplished Pynchon detects an incongruous admixture of sophomoric "literary" (p. 4) allusions to *The Waste Land* and *A Farewell to Arms*. What he now thinks of as "a whole extra overlay" of borrowed images mistakenly designed to give the characters and their story some satisfying fullness can more usefully be seen as the apprentice's instinctual groping for a metaphysical dimension—however derivative—that corresponds to his story's larger context as he vaguely perceives it. The "literary" seems that still show here, to Pynchon's chagrin, prefigure the world-historical inquiry that will later be given an original formulation and integrated into the actual artistic fabric of his mature work.

That Pynchon's particular instinct leads him at the very beginning to the early Eliot and to Hemingway as touchstones for this inquiry indicates the *a priori* nature of both his modernist orientation and his gnostic vision, as well as the link between the two. Although neither Eliot nor Hemingway appears to have drawn any traceable sustenance from the modern gnostic philosophers cited by Jonas and Voegelin, the world that each delineates is recognizably the realm of existential gnosticism, with its isolation, alienation, and fragmentation, and its persistent negation of transcendental values. When cosmic forces do manifest themselves, they seem to represent in the first instance the use of animism as an artistic strategy, the nightmarish projection of a massive, indifferent chaos that is nonetheless experienced as something antihuman.

Douglas Fowler, linking Pynchon and Eliot as "Gothic sensationalists," finds in the latter a sense of human consciousness "chained into nature" and forced to "witness ... its own exquisite torturing."<sup>2</sup> In section five of *The Waste Land* the sustaining order of existence collapses into a surrealist confusion demonically animated by "bats with baby faces" and "voices singing out of empty cisterns" (ll. 380, 385). The cosmos of *A Farewell to Arms* is at the mercy of random destructive forces vaguely personified as "they" and thus—despite their mainly heuristic function—anticipatory of the "They" who weave the web of Control in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Hemingway's shadowy plexus of malignity appears vigilant in rendering hope absurd; if you

“stay around” at all, “they” will gratuitously “kill you.”<sup>3</sup> At best, “they” act in the fashion of a halfhearted, blundering “messiah” (p. 328) who ends up destroying the objects of his casual concern.

But these apparently supernatural intrusions inevitably transcend their dramatic functions and change the ontological chemistry of the works in which they occur. They suggest that we have edged into a cabalistic modality and that the authors to whom the young Pynchon is drawn tend—in the actual practice of their art—to destabilize the opposition between the two varieties of gnosticism. This ambiguity reflects not only the dramatic uses of animism but also modernist despair over metaxic collapse. The memory of a sustaining transcendental framework may not be quite as immediate to Eliot and Hemingway, writing in the Twenties, as it was to Henry Adams; but it is still strong enough to evoke an analogous nostalgia. In the two later writers, however, the poignance of despair is tempered by a rebellious, sometimes sardonic stoicism. They inculcate in us a constant awareness of the void that must be filled—or at least dealt with—but also of the enormous loss that the void marks. The human thrown back upon its own resources both laments and attacks the collapsing systems that have condemned man to this peculiar existential heroism; and in the process the unacceptably indifferent cosmos is reanimated by the imagination with hostile demiurgic figures. To understand this nostalgic and reactive creativity in Eliot and Hemingway is to understand it in the century's later child, Pynchon, and to approach the springs of his oddly animistic cosmology.

“The Small Rain,” set on and around an army base in the Louisiana bayous, is focused on the aftermath of a hurricane in which hundreds of people have drowned, and on the sterile amours of a soldier named “Lardass” Levine. The traces of Pynchon's cosmology in “The Small Rain” are to be sought mainly in the suggestiveness of his settings and in the self-conscious literary jokes of Levine and Rizzo—this latter a reminder that even the ironic throwaways of this author carry in them the seeds of an unironic metaphysic. When Levine expresses his hatred of rain, Rizzo retorts, “You and Hemingway.... Funny, ain't it. T. S. Eliot likes rain” (p. 51).

The Hemingway allusion is, of course, to *A Farewell to Arms*, where rain suggests a malevolence deep in the scheme of things, a negation so pervasive that no human construct can escape it. The rain is as inseparable from that novel's scenes of carnage—both public and private—as it is from the mass hurricane deaths of Pynchon's story, where it functions as both cause and integral atmosphere. A soggy landscape dotted with the corpses of the drowned and threatened by massive rain clouds becomes the backdrop

for Levine's desolate lovemaking, and for his futile ruminations on the direction of his life. The sexual encounter with Little Buttercup recalls the copulation of the typist and the "young man carbuncular" in *The Waste Land* (l.231), with its mechanical lust and desecrating indifference, while the inability of a soldier nicknamed "Lardass" to find any destiny other than aimless drifting anticipates the "schlemihl" Benny Profane in *V*. The gnostic paradigm of gradual entropic exhaustion under desolate and vaguely hostile heavens is already in place.

This cosmic hostility is, of course, given a perverse twist by T. S. Eliot's alleged predilection for rain, a complication of symbolism that points beyond Rizzo's humorous contrasts to ambiguities deep in Pynchon's early metaphysic—ambiguities that will ripen into gnostic paradox. Levine admits that the rain can be life-affirming in its ability to "stir dull roots"—a direct echo of Eliot's "stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (ll. 3–4). When Levine stands under the dormitory shower, cleansing himself of the smell of death, it feels like "summer and spring rain" (p. 48).

In *The Waste Land* the entropic malaise is symbolized by a sort of heat-induced inertia and sterility that set the tone for Pynchon's opening: "Outside, the company area broiled slowly under the sun. The air was soggy, hanging motionless. The sun glared yellow off the sand" (p. 27). This infernal stasis is peopled by an "orderly leaning drowsy against the wall" and "an inert figure in fatigues lying on a bunk." We are not far from the "heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter" (l. 22–23) or from zombielike figures who are "neither / Living nor dead" and know "nothing" (l. 40). Eliot's language, charged with figuration and allusion, expands more easily into a metaphysical dimension; but it is precisely this language that reverberates in Pynchon's description, lending it a significance beyond its immediate function. Some such amplitude of reference, replete with enigma, is suggested by Little Buttercup's suspicion that what is "hazarding" Levine is "deeper than any problem of seasonal change or doubtful fertility" (p. 50).

If we accept that Pynchon's rain/sun symbolism hints at questions of an enveloping context for human existence and perhaps even at questions of cosmic governance, it becomes worthwhile to probe the ambiguities and contradictions involved. Since both the rain's flooding and the sun's drought can create the wasteland of sterility and negation, the cosmos is figured as a double bind in which opposing principles of Control both present themselves in structures inimical to human fulfillment. It is the paradigm, at least in prototype, of gnostic slippage, the no-win situation of the preterite.

The paradigm is further realized—and complicated—by the fact that both rain and sun are necessary, in proper balance, if there is to be fruition. The elementals of beneficence are also the elementals of destruction, and only a precarious equilibrium analogous to the *metaxy* prevents the collapse of the former into the latter. The life-affirming blurs into the life-negating, all within the framework of another unstable polarity, and echoes—in the context of natural process—the moral confusion of the gnostic dialectics: salvation/damnation within victim/oppressor. When we recall that natural process was, for the ancient Gnostics, demiurgic process, the leap from Pynchon's weather to cosmic hostility does not seem so far-fetched; and the same recollection will make clear why Pynchon must eventually revise this devaluation of nature if he is to escape the gnostic cul-de-sac.

For his earliest character, Levine, there is no such escape; he must function amid a chaos of values and sardonic echoes of metaxic collapse. The ceremonies of renewal slip automatically into parody, as in the aftermath of sex with Little Buttercup: “assailed still by stupid frog cries they lay not touching. ‘In the midst of great death,’ Levine said, ‘the little death.’ And later, ‘Ha. It sounds like a caption in *Life*. In the midst of *Life*. We are in death. Oh god’” (p. 50). As often in Pynchon, the divinity as casual expletive expands to suggest the vacuum of the *deus absconditus* or the crucible of the demiurge.

Unable to find a definitive locus of value, Levine is a displaced person in the gnostic sense. If earth is the arena of an alienation too profound to be alleviated by earthly means, he must wonder in any given place “what the hell” he is “doing there” and whether he will be “wondering this” wherever he goes: “He had a momentary, ludicrous vision of himself, Lardass Levine the Wandering Jew, debating on weekday evenings in strange and nameless towns with other Wandering Jews the essential problems of identity—not of the self so much as an identity of place and what right you really had to be any place” (p. 49). In the universe of Lurianic cabalism, of course, all men are “Wandering Jews,” the victims of a cosmic diaspora that has made homelessness a norm and “home” the stuff of prophetic fantasy, the Return to the Center. Denied the doctrine on which to base even a dream of reconciliation, Levine exemplifies the *Geworfenheit* of existential gnosticism in Pynchon's desolate century.

Since the introduction to *Slow Learner* is principally a humorous *mea culpa* for the collection's contents, one has to wonder whether “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” lies outside the range of the repentable. Pynchon omits it from the collection without explanation or even mention, a mystery enhanced by the conflict between *Epoch's* claim that this is Pynchon's “first

published” story,<sup>4</sup> and Pynchon’s own claim that this priority belongs to “The Small Rain.”<sup>5</sup> At any rate, the near-simultaneity of their appearance (Spring 1959) makes it likely that Pynchon saw fit to let only one twin live because the same genetic defects were grossly magnified in the other. The network of literary allusions that now brings him chagrin in rereading “The Small Rain” is vastly enhanced in “Mortality” by a metastructure explicitly drawn from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—a modernist classic of epistemological ambiguity—and buttressed with the modernist likes of Santayana, T. S. Eliot (once more), Hemingway, and Lorca. But here again, what can be condemned as artistic *gaucherie* can also be lauded as the beginning writer’s ambition to achieve a thematic dimension beyond melodrama; and once again, this dimension reveals itself as a complex frame of gnostic preoccupations.

It is necessary to gloss Conrad’s story at some length because “Mortality and Mercy” is so intricately articulated with it. *Heart of Darkness* offers an almost perfect paradigm of metaxic collapse in the face of apeirontic energies, and thus an invaluable model for the atavistic apocalypse that builds and explodes in Pynchon’s story. A nineteenth-century amalgam of European *noblesse oblige* and Christian responsibilities constitutes the transcendental imperative that defines humanity for the likes of Marlow and Kurtz and lays out its path of edification. Their imperial mission is also, in theory, a civilizing one, the cultivation of social ideals and spiritual orderings in realms of what they consider to be a subhuman disorder.

Faced with a primordial chaos that seems not only intractable but aggressive, the taut religio-ethical structures of the Europeans begin to slacken and degenerate, metamorphosing into grotesque simulacra of their earlier forms. In the merciless heat of the Congo, an accountant wears “starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts” even as he complains that the groans of a dying native are a hindrance to clerical accuracy.<sup>6</sup> This desperate obsession with sartorial order constitutes the same ludicrous parody of moral order as does the basing of the station manager’s leadership on the accident of superior health. In both cases, vital spiritual principles are distorted into gratuitous physical constructs, as a “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil” (p. 17) erodes metaxic tension with the temptation of petty rapacity. A typical creation of this “devil” is the “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” (p. 26)—actually, the station brickmaker—who accuses Marlow of being part of the “gang of virtue” that includes Kurtz. This “gang,” it seems, consists of those who consider themselves emissaries of “pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else” (p. 25).

The demonic imagery here—even the seemingly gratuitous “devil knows”—opens into vistas of demiurgic evil when we move to the case of Kurtz. The radical metamorphosis of the loftiest human idealism, Kurtz’s transcendental calling, into an amoral empire of totalitarian exploitation, is the classical gnostic transformation delineated by Voegelin. Kurtz’s practice of Control, with the presumption of godlike license, recalls the Rosicrucian maxim “*Demon Est Deus Inversus*” and brings us to the core of gnostic religiosity.<sup>7</sup> With transcendence jettisoned, the demiurgic arbiter is free to redefine the meaning of earth in terms of an absolutely dehumanizing and self-serving gnosis (recall the Russian sailor’s belief in Kurtz’s omniscience), and to demarcate his Center with the staked heads of the enemies of “Truth.”

The atmosphere in which these horrific transvaluations occur, which in a profound sense leads to them, is one of spiritual desolation, traumatic unfamiliarity, and constant menace. The archetype of the nineteenth-century Congo is the realm of gnostic victimage, a place where ubiquitous cruelty and hostile vistas suggest the malignity of nature and of the powers that originally shaped it. Marlow experiences what Kurtz had presumably experienced before him—the “stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.... with a vengeful aspect” (p. 34) on an earth that “seemed unearthly” (p. 36). It is easy enough to image the transformation of Kurtz as a sensitive, enlightened victim of all this into an oppressor who is both reflection and avatar of the very “horror” in which he had once found his spiritual antithesis.

This slippage is mirrored, inversely, in the native “brutes” whom Kurtz wishes to see exterminated (p. 51) and who attack Marlow and his “pilgrims.” Although they seem to be, at first, mere projections of an apeirontic savagery, Marlow comes to realize the “remote kinship” (p. 37) of a common humanity with them and to admire the moral “restraint” (p. 42) of the cannibals in his crew. Even at this primitive level, there is differentiation between the human and the nonhuman, and it has occurred within a natural matrix. It takes the gnostic arrogance of Kurtz and his more ignoble compatriots, denigrating nature and ignoring its implicit boundaries, to deny these aboriginals any spiritual status and to turn them into preterite victims.

This ironic reversal, whereby a perversion of the civilizing mission’s noetic thrust enforces a spiritual obscurity denser than that of nature, brings us directly to Pynchon’s twentieth-century Washington as an urban heart of darkness. When the enigmatic Lupescu, host of the bizarre party-to-be, hands over his duties to Siegal, he tells the latter that he is going “outside ... out of the jungle” (p. 199). His last announcement to Siegal is the famous announcement to Marlow: “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.” This quotation



conjures up not only Conrad's story but also—as Joseph Slade has noted—T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," to which it is prefixed as an epigraph that serves the purpose of illuminating one gnostic vision with another.<sup>8</sup> Eliot's Kurtz was, presumably, one of the "lost / Violent souls" of that poem, a man who actively courted (and abetted) "death's other Kingdom" in contrast to the passive human scarecrows who have turned their society into a "dead land" of cactus and broken glass, a place of "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion." This is a vision of spiritual entropy, of available psychic energies dissipating to a "whimper" like Kurtz's final "cry that was no more than a breath."

Pynchon's dead souls are the party crew at Lupescu's, the prototype of the Whole Rotten Crew that sets the tone of cultural malaise in *V.* Their drunken boorishness and desperate hedonism, shot through with the pseudointellectual chatter of dilettantes and "Freudian cant" (pp. 210–211), are the symptoms of wretched lives that are little more than a gratuitous series of petty betrayals and vendettas and resultant bouts of guilt. Forced to listen to their confessions in his role as Lupescu's successor, Siegal realizes that Lupescu was beginning to experience a Kurtz-like contamination from the living death around him:

He wondered how his predecessor had managed to remain as father confessor for as long as he had. It occurred to him now that Lupescu's parting comment had been no drunken witticism; but the man really had, like some Kurtz, been possessed by the heart of a darkness in which no ivory was ever sent out from the interior, but instead hoarded jealously by each of its gatherers to build painfully, fragment by fragment, temples to the glory of some imago or obsession, and decorated inside with the art work of dream and nightmare, and locked finally against a hostile forest, each "agent" in his own ivory tower, having no windows to look out of, turning further and further inward and cherishing a small flame behind the altar. And Kurtz too had been in his way a father confessor. (p. 212)

Although Pynchon articulates no humanizing value system as explicit as that of Conrad's "gang of virtue," it is clear that we are dealing here with the collapse of such a system and with the wasteland as aftermath. If ivory is the currency of worship and reverence, or religious commitment, it must be "sent out from the interior" in vital interchange with some exterior ideal in order to achieve a transcendence of solipsistic sterility. Ignoring this

imperative of communion and reciprocity, the crew at Lupescu's have deified their swollen self-images and carefully husbanded idiosyncrasies, and have achieved only the enervating stagnation of the closed system and the nightmarish claustrophobia that attends it. The "hostile forest," the alien earth that impounds the demiurge's anxiety-ridden victims, is glossed in an earlier passage as a psychological landscape:

the badlands of the heart, in which shadows, and crisscrossed threads of inaccurate self-analysis and Freudian fallacy, and *passages* where the light and perspective were tricky, all threw you into that heightened hysterical edginess of the sort of nightmare it is possible to have where your eyes are open and everything in the scene is familiar, yet where, flickering behind the edge of the closet door, hidden under the chair in the corner, is this *je ne sais quois de sinistre* which sends you shouting into wakefulness. (p. 205)

This is the first description in Pynchon of the gnostic paranoia that will become his hallmark, and it illustrates vividly the pervasive and insidious nature of the infiltration. The familiar is, in a flash, the demonic. Debby Considine, who has lived her life in "terror of the unfamiliar" (p. 210) invading the everyday, tells Siegal that she would "lie awake nights, thinking of him [Paul] crouched up in that tree, like some evil spirit, *waiting* for me" (p. 209). Pynchon very clearly, in this early story, finds the provenance of alienation and paranoia in the diseased psyche of individuals—but individuals who have certain psychological and religious assumptions in common. It is in light of this commonality that he will eventually expand his sense of the malaise and its origins to the course of history itself, and even the course of nature.

The association of "the badlands of the heart," in the passage above, with "Freudian fallacy" (following an earlier reference to "Freudian cant") gives the allusion to Vienna in the story's title a significance quite other than that it derives from its source in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. As Joseph Slade has pointed out (TP, p. 20), Pynchon obviously intends a parallel between Angelo's charge to clean up a corrupt Vienna—whatever "mortality" he must inflict in doing so—and Siegal's decision to let the corrupt bacchanals of Washington find "mercy" in sudden death. But Freudian psychology, as Pynchon construes it, is part of the problem, not of the solution. In his view, it is actually *psychopathology*, a perverse enhancing and supplementation of the very sickness it is supposed to cure. This reactionary

attitude brings Pynchon once again into line with the thought of Eric Voegelin and reminds us that their diagnoses of modernity are linked in some very basic ways.

Voegelin also locates a psychopathology (or, in its metaphysical mode, “pneumapathology”) in Freud’s analysis of human experience. In *Anamnesis* he includes Freud in a catalogue of gnosticizing thinkers—Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss—who distort, in various ways, the notion of a transcendental ground of being. “A Freud,” he asserts, “diagnoses the openness toward the ground as an ‘illusion,’ a ‘neurotic relict,’ and a ‘infantilism’” (p. 102). For Voegelin, Freud is a representative of “the modern *agnoia ptoides*” [ignorant aggressors] who “claim for their mental disease the status of mental health.” He goes on to define this “disease” as a disturbance of the balance between *apeiron* and *nous* that constitutes the realm of the authentically human:

Phenomena in the *metaxy*, of [a] psychological nature, are rashly fused in an act of libidinous transgression with the apeirontic depth in ... the Freudian symbol of the libido, with the declared purpose of mobilizing the authority of the acheronta against the authority of reason. As the symbol of this revolt, furthermore, the unconscious appears in such variegated contexts as Freud’s psychoanalysis [and] Breton’s surrealism. (A, p. 108)

Voegelin takes the term *acheronta* from Freud’s Latin epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*”—“If I cannot alter the higher realm, I will move the Acheron.” As the river of the dead, of the underworld, in Roman mythology, the Acheron serves Freud as a resonant symbol of the unconscious that in so many ways controls the “higher realm” of reason and upon which he can hope to have—as he cannot upon reason—some therapeutic effect. For Voegelin this analysis amounts to a gnostic transvaluation, a privileging of the infernal, the apeirontic depth, over the supernal phenomena of higher consciousness. He sees in the liberation of the unconscious the threat of a contaminating deluge—a psychical analogue to what Virgil’s Aeneas sees as he approaches the Acheron: “A whirlpool thick / With sludge, its giant eddy seething, vomits / all of its swirling sand.”<sup>9</sup> It is easy to comprehend, in light of Voegelin’s interpretation, how Freud’s Acheron flows into Conrad’s Congo and how this confluence becomes the Potomac of Pynchon’s story. The voyage into the primordial license of the libido, away from all spiritual restraint,

provokes the psychic demons that destroy not only the humanity of Kurtz, but also that of the crew at Lupescu's.

The reader approaching this early story from the later perspective of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where primordial energies are closely identified with the Orphic norm, must wonder how they can be part of the abnormality against which the story's cathartic denouement is directed. The same ambiguity is present in Pynchon's treatment of the wilderness background of Irving Loon, the Ojibwa Indian whom Debby Considine has "collected" in Canada. Having inverted his *Heart of Darkness* paradigm to find the apeironic "jungle" in the heart of Washington, Pynchon might be expected to locate in the wilderness some redemptive ordering analogous to Conrad's European ethic.<sup>10</sup> This he does to some extent in his characterization of Irving; but the fuller implications of the Ojibwa's spiritual make-up suggest that the wilderness also contains the dark psychopathogens that make this ordering necessary.

The explanation for these mixed signals seems to lie in the undifferentiated character of Pynchon's early gnostic vision. He is as yet unable to separate his sense that a generalized malaise exists from the possibility that it somehow has its origins in primal nature. One factor in this inability is the value structures inherent in the models he takes over from Eliot and Conrad, both of which privilege quasi-Platonic ideals of civilization over the realm of natural law. Moving instinctively toward the moral rehabilitation of nature, a process which must be completed before the Orphic norm can serve as a counterpoise to gnostic alienation from nature's order, Pynchon makes the wilderness of "Mortality and Mercy" normative as a foil to "civilized" decadence; but it still retains aspects of a hostile, quasi-demonic environment.

The Ojibwa was, if we can believe Debby, "happy back in Ontario" (p. 207), where a life of harvest festivals, "puberty rituals," and other ceremonies produced exactly the sort of cultural-religious communion lacking in the isolate, egocentric "temples" of the Lupescu group. We have here an anticipation of the Herero tribal life described in *Gravity's Rainbow*—a life of (for Pynchon) normative solidarity before the depredations of General von Trotha.<sup>11</sup> That Debby would see in this rich community life only "wonderful local color" for her notebooks is a symptom of the spiritual anemia to which that life provides an alternative. Her dilettantish fondness for his "divine melancholia" and his "poetic, religious quality" (p. 210) is complexly ironic in its reflection of her own inner darkness and its dim perception of the spiritual crisis that she has precipitated in him—a crisis that has some gnostic

commonality with her own even as it engenders the hostile “act of god” that she has feared.

Pynchon’s description of the perceptions that lead to the “Windigo psychosis” could easily have been written by Jonas or Scholem in their dealings with gnostic antiquity: “for the Ojibwa hunter, feeling as he does at bay, feeling a concentration of obscure cosmic forces against him and him alone, cynical terrorists, savage and amoral deities ... which are bent on his destruction, the identification [with the Windigo] may become complete” (p. 208). The Ojibwa, not surprisingly, have a harmonious relation with nature during the plenitude of harvest and an adversarial one in times of hardship. In the latter instance, oppressed by “an austere and bleak existence,” they turn upon each other with a cannibalistic ferocity that is the ultimate dehumanization and at the same time the ultimate identification with the “savage and amoral deities” that have oppressed them. Conrad’s references in *Heart of Darkness* to “the gnawing devils of hunger” and “the devilry of lingering starvation” (p. 42) are given another demonic embodiment in the projection of the Windigo, “a mile-high skeleton made of ice, roaring and crashing through the Canadian wilderness, grabbing up humans by the handful and feeding on their flesh” (p. 208). The point in “Mortality and Mercy” is that Debbie and her crew themselves image the savage and amoral forces that oppress Irving and starve him of his spiritual sustenance—thus, the gnostic reversal by which the victim turns avenger and oppressor, denying the humanity in whose name he had suffered. His mass murder and cannibalism are a barbaric thrust from the heart of nature’s darkness against the artificial darkness fashioned by a decadent civilization.

As “father confessor” (p. 212) to these neurotic bacchanals, Siegal grants this carnage the status of ritual purification, compounding the religious ironies already present with an admixture of Christian heresy. The “still small Jesuit voice” (p. 213) in his head—a voice that he associates with Machiavellian *Realpolitik*—urges him to go ahead with the “miracle” that is now “in his hands” by acquiescing in the slaughter. Through a grotesque—and essentially gnostic—reversal of values, he will be bringing “these parishioners ... a very tangible salvation. A miracle involving a host, true, but like no holy eucharist” (p. 212). This parody of Christian terminology has the same purport of moral confusion as will the parody in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the descent of a “malign, Unholy Ghost”<sup>12</sup> inaugurates a ritualistic orgy of torture and death. The consecration of the crew as “host” is, of course, a desecration in the name of a religion that unleashes savage forces rather than containing them, and that locates “salvation” in a kingdom of death. Mercy, in this realm of value distortion, consists of engineering

mortality among those who inhabit a living hell of compulsive, quasi-Freudian self-analysis. It is necessary to destroy the Greenwich-type village in order to save it.

This conceptual melange of oppressor and oppressed, salvation and retribution, compromises Siegal's attempt to escape the barbarization that destroyed Kurtz, an earlier "father confessor" in his own right. Lupescu, according to Lucy, was already in the process of "going native" (p. 201) when he abandoned his role as the auditor of spirit-subverting confessions. Visible evidence of his atavism is provided when he tacks a pig fetus up by its umbilical cord and glosses the bizarre display as "'Dada exhibit in Paris on Christmas eve, 1919 ... used ... in place of mistletoe'" (p. 198). This dilettantish mockery of natural process is given extra force if we look ahead to Pynchon's droll use of pigs as symbols of preterite innocence in *Gravity's Rainbow* and the identification in *V.* of Parisian avant-garde decadence and the gnostic Kingdom of Death. The Dadaists were dedicated emissaries of randomness, consciously practicing an "anti-art" that aimed at the destruction of meaning and order.

Voegelin, in a passage quoted above (p. 35), identifies the Surrealist movement to which Dada eventually led as a gnostic attempt to lend the "apeirontic depth" ascendancy over the higher human faculties. Their substitution of a dead embryo for an evergreen symbol of regeneration suggests an existence perversely enamored of its *degeneration* toward inanimate matter. Thus Kurtz, occupying the radical reaches of decadence, can scrawl "Exterminate the brutes" across a manuscript that had outlined a metaxic enterprise of exalting the human; and thus Siegal, fleeing a dehumanizing gnosis, can acquiesce in a gnostic extermination. Pynchon's degree of approval, or disapproval, is unclear. In the paranoid confusion that gnostic slippage breeds, retribution against the forces of darkness is itself compromised by this darkness. The cosmos seems engineered with a perverse ingenuity in which exits from oppression and malaise become reentries.

A year later, in "Low-lands," Pynchon seems preoccupied with locating some still point of refuge and vital connection on an Earth that the first two stories had sketched as an alien and menacing arena—a sign that he is already searching for a way to found a norm in natural process. The menace here does not consist of anything so overtly destructive as hurricanes or Windigoes, but rather of an enervating exposure to cold rationality, bourgeois dullness, and the rarefied air of disillusionment. All of these suggest, in the story's context, an impersonal and antiseptic systemization at odds with the labyrinthine, life-sustaining sprawl of the various "Low-lands"

inhabited by the protagonist, Dennis Flange. If we cast this opposition in basic Freudian terms, it turns out to be a conflict between the repressive superego and the irrepressible id—a conflict in which Pynchon, like the early Auden, quite explicitly sides with the latter because it represents subversion in the name of life.

This valuation would seem to represent at least a tentative reevaluation on Pynchon's part, a moving away from the Voegelin-Conrad suspicion of the subconscious as a source of apeironic nihilism and toward a valorizing of natural impulse. Nonetheless, the story embodies a basic ambivalence about the forces that inhabit the depths of the psyche, especially when these forces are construed via Freudian grids. Dennis Flange is under the care of a psychiatrist, Geronimo Diaz, who is himself subject to spells of demonic (if entertaining) insanity. Sympathetic with the goal of psychotherapy, the liberation of human consciousness from life-denying repressions, Pynchon still finds the terminology and approach of "cure" hopelessly tainted with the alienation it is supposed to overcome. Once again, the mode of restoration is eerily inseparable from the mode of corruption, and we are dealing with a form of gnostic slippage analogous to that by which "mercy" is dispensed in the form of "mortality."

The first of Flange's "Low-lands" is his Long Island House:

[It] rose in a big mossy tumulus out of the earth, its color that of one of the shaggier prehistoric beasts. Inside were priest-holes and concealed passageways and oddly angled rooms; and in the cellar, leading from the rumpus room, innumerable tunnels, which writhed away radically like the tentacles of a spastic octopus into dead ends, storm drains, abandoned sewers and occasionally a wine cellar. (p. 56)

Flange feels attached to this "womb with a view" by "an umbilical cord woven of lichen and sedge" (p. 57). Behind the defensive humor of the Freudian parody lies a significant antignostic affirmation—Pynchon's early projection of primordial Earth as beneficent origin rather than neutral (or demiurgic) wasteland. The mystery, multiplicity, and fecundity of this subterranean maze serve as forces of opposition to the sterile, reductive schemes that threaten to make Earth's surface uninhabitable.

The antithesis here anticipates that made by Fausto Maijstral in *V.* as he contemplates his wife and child seeking shelter from German air raids in the sewers of Malta: "But in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life."<sup>13</sup> By the time of

*Gravity's Rainbow*, this search for the "kingdom ... of life" will take Pynchon to the very core of an animate Earth as the planet's surface becomes the charnel domain of Control. The threat is more humorous than apocalyptic in "Low-lands," but the "austere and logical" (p. 61) compulsions of Flange's wife, Cindy, coupled with her suburbanite antisepsis, are serious enough to spoil his fetal contentment and drive him out. Her frenzied animus against Rocco the garbageman and against Pig Bodine—the latter not without its justification—looks toward the antipreterite mentality that forms an altogether more ominous strain of gnostic elitism.

The sea that crashes and slops beneath his bedroom window forms another more or less contiguous lowland for Flange. The psychiatrist Geronimo suggests that it constitutes an even truer mother image than the Earth because life began as sea-dwelling protozoa, and salt water originally served the function of blood. This demonstration that the sea is "quite literally in our blood" (p. 59) has a function more profound than its evident sophistry might suggest. We are led to the sense of a living intimacy between man and the planet of which the sea is an integral part—a marriage so basic that its rupture in forms ranging from urban indifference to environmental rapine also amounts to an assault on the very concept of humanity. This incredibly complex chain of vital organic connections will be central to the valorizing of nature in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and it is possible to find an anticipation of that naturalism's sustaining *metaxy* in the "sustaining plasma or medium" (p. 72) of the sea as it figures in the most vital memories of sailors. This is precisely the medium that supports Flange's cherished imago, the memory of himself as a lusty sea dog in a time before marital decline and suburban compromise. The Pacific, in particular, answers to this edifying function and enjoys a peculiarly cosmic mystique as "the chasm the moon left when it tore loose from the earth" (p. 59)—a mystical connection that will be reiterated, with normative force, in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In "Low-lands," however, this valuation is compromised by the undifferentiated character of the symbol. The sea is also the converse of the mother, "a gray or glaucous desert, a waste land which stretches away to the horizon.... a minimum and dimensionless point, a unique crossing of parallel and meridian, an assurance of perfect, passionless uniformity" (pp. 65–66). This is the vacant, quite literally dispirited cosmos of existential gnosticism, a neutral and neutralizing realm that voids the possibility of a spiritual quest. It is thus the counterpart to the quasi-demonic wilderness of "Mortality and Mercy." It is significant that Flange also finds value in this apparently entropic state of zero energy. One part of him seeks an equilibrium so peaceful, secure, and absolute that it seems indistinguishable from the stasis



of gnostic perfectionism. This stasis thus reveals yet another form of conceptual slippage in a complex semiotic of harmony and death, a web of ironic ambiguities inherent in gnostic conceptions of paradise. We will see a similar slippage in *Gravity's Rainbow* when Enzian and the Schwarzkommandos seek the Zero Point, but there the ambiguities are explicitly orchestrated within a differentiated value system. Flange's sea remains a contradictory melange of spiritualized nature and still-point mysticism as Pynchon struggles to achieve a critique of gnostic values from inside a network of gnostic assumptions.

A third lowland, the junkyard, is explicitly paralleled with the sea of the "passionless uniformity" exposition: "in the spiralling descent of Rocco's truck he had felt that this spot at which they finally came to rest was the dead center, the single point which implied an entire low country" (p. 66). The parallel implies that this lowland partakes of the same slippage, between a sustaining idyll that suggests a norm and a deadening stasis that violates that norm; but the normative element is enhanced by some new and seemingly unidyllic positives: detritus and the preterite. Wittily privileging the rejected and discarded in various forms from old tires to human beings, Pynchon projects value from gnostic negations of value. The failure to recycle wastes issues from the same arrogant exploitativeness that relegates human beings to the status of refuse. The garbageman Rocco, the reject Flange, the misfit Bodine, and Bolingbroke—black "king" of the dumpsite—exhibit great human warmth and solidarity in their sea-story communion as they restore to use what society's controllers had cast out. The gnostic wasteland of the later novels, together with its victim-inhabitants, receives a humorously literal anticipation here.

Beneath this lowland is the ultimate lowland, the labyrinth of gypsy tunnels inherited from a group of would-be revolutionaries who styled themselves "Sons of the Red Apocalypse" (p. 75). This humorous suggestion of subversion aimed at a goal of postapocalyptic perfection exactly fits a gnostic paradigm: the thirst of the alienated for the cosmic violence that must precede Return. That dream is quashed almost immediately by the prevailing social structure, but the preterite gypsies continue in a more literal and tenacious mode of subversion. Himself a refugee, Flange finds the goal of his descending quest, at least provisionally, in the subterranean room of the gypsy Nerissa. At three and a half feet tall, she is clearly an indigenous lowlander and also—as Flange's sudden perception reveals—the incarnation of the sea as spiritual center: "Whitecaps danced across her eyes; sea creatures, he knew, would be cruising about in the submarine green of her heart" (p. 77).

Her nurturing attitude, indicative of Flange's successful return to the womb, is grotesquely dramatized by her cradling of the rat Hyacinth. The name, of course, evokes—as Slade observes (TP, p. 30)—the “hyacinth girl” episode of *The Waste Land* (II. 35–42), with its suggestion of failed fertility rituals. Since some degree of fertility is presumably realized in Nerissa's boudoir, the humor of Eliotic parody and grotesque “motherhood” acquires an ironically positive thrust. Pynchon is able, on the one hand, to distance himself from the stereotypical aspect of his fertility symbols, and on the other, to suggest the seriocomic poignance of a preterite community that links an outcast people to an outcast species. It is a theme to which he will return in *V.* with the conversion of the sewer rats and in *Gravity's Rainbow* with the conversion of the dodoes. The *V.* episode is intricately related to “Low-lands” in that it takes place in an “under-the-street” world of tunnels that provide refuge for the alienated and oppressed.

Malaise, as I have argued, is the given in Pynchon's cosmos. The search for its name, its causes, and the symbols to dramatize it is the larger concern of the stories we have examined so far. Drawing heavily upon such earlier diagnosticians as Conrad, Eliot, Hemingway, and Freud, Pynchon finds a pervasive cultural anomie threatening the fabric of human relations and the integrity of the individual psyche. In turn, the degeneration of the psyche feeds anomie; but there remains a larger cause, some enervating vector in the very climate of being. Climatic and geographic extremes—heat, flood, the Washington “jungle”—become metaphors that suggest this shadowy but potent animus, even as they mirror the resultant decline. On the level of social and psychic pathology, a similar function is filled by decadent, inanizing parties, sterile relationships, and hermetic retreat. The relation between the two levels, however, the cosmic and the human, remains vague and problematical.

Pynchon's next story, “Entropy,” undertakes to bring these metaphors and levels together in a sort of “unified field” concept that not only explains and symbolizes degenerative malaise, but in a profound sense *is* that malaise. We are speaking, of course, of entropy as it is anatomized by Henry Adams, the pathologist of culture to whom Pynchon turns after Eliot and company. This natural phenomenon is, for both writers, so elemental in character and cosmic in scope that it becomes a negative reflection of the transcendentals that its scientific provenance has helped to dethrone. Through it, Pynchon is able to extend his causal nexus back beyond psyche, culture, and climate of being to the primordial dynamics of nature. If entropy, the measure of disorder, constantly increases in an isolated system, and if—as Callisto postulates in the story—“galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever” (p.

87) constitute isolated systems, then existence must culminate in a universal stasis: “He ... envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease” (pp. 88–89).

This comprehensive rationale of decline has complex implications for Pynchon’s gnostic framework. If we have essentially no control over the descent of our societies and of our universe into silent chaos, if this descent is the result of inexorable physical law, existential gnosticism is the readiest of metaphysical responses. Its gnosis entails a pessimistic denial of transcendence in the face of apeirontic apocalypse. As we have seen, however, this gnosis tends to mutate into the cabalistic strain. The very fierceness of the human thirst *for* some sort of transcendental referent, together with the apparition of entropy as a sort of grotesque Final Cause, encourages such a mutation. The impersonal cosmic death urge becomes in effect the demiurge of a savage religion, an orgiastic worship of chaos and death.

This is the strain to be elaborated in the novels, as is its antithesis: a set of transcendental possibilities that incorporate entropy into a larger, life-affirming scheme. But already, at the point we have reached in the early stories, the central dichotomy of Pynchon’s ethic is emerging: the opposition between those who serve entropy and those who oppose it. As definitive as this distinction would seem to be, it nonetheless blurs in Pynchon’s early gnostic matrix, which—as we have seen—tends to subvert differentiation. Those who accelerate the drain of energy and those who attempt to stem it both place themselves in opposition to natural process and in alliance with decadent artifice. The perversity of the enveloping system is such that the means taken to combat negating forces become part of the negative polarity. What we see here is gnostic slippage accounting for the multiple and ostensibly incompatible implications of entropy, and being itself accounted for by the parameters inherent in a larger systemic unity. The rationale thus established goes at least part of the way toward rebutting David Seed’s assertion, aimed at demonstrating the postmodern indeterminacy of Pynchon’s fiction, that “‘Entropy’ remains ultimately non-committal about the applicability of its eponymous central concept.”<sup>14</sup>

The story is prefaced by an epigraph from Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* that sets the tone of apocalyptic stasis:

Boris has just given me a summary of his views. He is a weather prophet. The weather will continue bad, he says. There will be

more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere.... We must-get into step, a lockstep toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change. (p. 81)

Aside from establishing the totality and hopelessness of entropic malaise, this passage suggests at least two other motifs that figure in Pynchon's vision of universal decline. One of these is the notion of Paris—the setting of *Tropic*—as the plexus of twentieth-century decadence, the paradigm site of inhuman transformations. The other is the derivation of a moral (or immoral) imperative from the inevitability of decline. That we must get into a “lockstep” implies ritual acquiescence in a sanctioned morbidity, an acceptance of negation that somehow puts us right with the cosmos. The “prison of death” is the grotesque promised land at the end of this prisoner's-progress.

The will to entropy takes the form here, as so often in Pynchon's work, of a wild party characterized by various manifestations of physical and spiritual disorder and by a miasma of emotional sterility. The connotations of triviality normally attached to “party” are misleading in this instance. The symptoms exhibited by the assembled bacchanti are ominously important as an indication of entropy's cultural dimension; and the fact that such an assembly is entirely dedicated to the trivial is itself a sign of how far degeneration has proceeded. Alcohol, drugs, and general neurosis induce an alternation between frenzy and coma that suggests entropic chaos and its consequent stasis.

The music at the party reflects both stages of degeneration: the decline into chaos and the fall into silence. As a complexly ordered system of sound energies subtly tied to a wide range of human emotions, music makes the perfect vehicle for dramatizing the processes and penalties of growing disorganization. *The Heroes' Gate at Kiev*, Mussorgsky's sonorous war-horse, is played at top volume (“27 watts' worth”) over a “15-inch speaker which had been bolted into the top of a wastepaper basket” (p. 81). Its auditors are the terminally stoned musical group who produced *Songs of Outer Space*: “From time to time one of them would flick the ashes from his cigarette into the speaker cone to watch them dance around.” Music here becomes mere vibration, a mindless aural immersion that is also the impetus for the random dance of waste particles. It is, in fact, intended as part of a sound assault that belongs to the “lease-breaking” function of the party. The irony of the music's title is rendered transparent by the sentences from *Tropic of Cancer* that fill the hiatus of Pynchon's epigraph: “The cancer of time is eating us

away. Our heroes have killed themselves, or are killing themselves.”<sup>15</sup> Meatball Mulligan’s guests are clearly associated with cancerous erosion and not with its heroic victims.

It is ultimately silence toward which entropy’s declensions tend, corrupted music giving way to no music. Pushing the horizontal logic of jazz to its illogical conclusion, the Duke di Angelis quartet arrives at the conception of an entirely imaginary music. A soundless pseudoensemble moving its fingers on nonexistent instruments becomes a vivid parody of the harmony, lyricism, and rhythm that somehow mirror our larger orderings. What is finally parodied here is the transcendental pole suggested by the “unheard” melodies of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”<sup>16</sup> Beauty in its idealized projection plays directly “to the spirit,” in Keats’s phrase, providing the patterns of metaxic balance. Krinkles, Duke, et al., lost in an anarchy of private musical whim, symbolize the loss of order in the name of gaining it. When Meatball suggests that they reconstruct their notion—“Back to the old drawing board”—Duke replies, “No, man ... back to the airless void” (p. 96). The dedicated production of nothing, in its most profound sense, could not be more clearly attested.

Reflecting on an earlier, larger arena—Europe after World War I—Callisto finds the prelude to this *nada* in the tango from Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat*. This “sad sick dance” (p. 93) with its minimalist scoring seems to incarnate the decadence of an order irreparably undone by carnage. The “exhaustion” and “airlessness” of the music are the qualities of entropic collapse, and recall the “airless void” that Duke prefers to inhabit. There is also an ironic echo of the nineteenth-century *Heroes’ Gate* in the effeteness of this twentieth-century *Soldat*. The dancers themselves anticipate the mechanistic nightmare of *V.*, especially in its Paris manifestation (chap. 14): “what meanings had he missed in all the stately coupled automatons in the *cafés-dansants*, or in the metronomes which had ticked behind the eyes of his own partners?” (p. 93).

Meatball’s friend Saul, a partisan of this automatism, cannot figure out why his wife grew upset over his comparison of human behavior to “a program fed into an IBM machine,” and vehemently denies the suggestion that it may have been because he himself was “acting like a cold, dehumanized amoral scientist type” (p. 90). At its most ominous and presumptuous, technological gnosis holds that mechanical intelligence can bridge the gap between humanity and the machine, and that to perfect is to dehumanize. Stravinsky’s tango suggests that this reductive intuition has infiltrated the modern consciousness to produce a perverted rapport with the

realm of the inanimate. This concept of perversion becomes ambiguous, however, in the framework of entropic decline, where it is "natural" to experience the loss of differentiating energies, including those that define the realm of the human.

In this ironic light, it is Callisto and Aubade upstairs, the would-be reversers of entropy, who are unnatural in their attempt to achieve a recycling of energy. Callisto's "hothouse jungle," replete with exotic birds and plants from the tropics, is the essence of artificiality and isolation: "Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder" (pp. 83–84). Its equilibrium is an explicitly "artistic" one, the movements of its flora and fauna "all as integral as the rhythms of a perfectly-executed mobile." The vision of a beleaguered enclave in the midst of alienation and disorder is as quintessentially gnostic as the response centered around a sterile and artificial perfectionism. Paranoia combines with privileged gnosis to produce an elitist scheme of salvation from hostile cosmic forces.

It is also a futile scheme. Callisto's failure to revive a sick bird with his body warmth leads him to realize that "the transfer of heat" has "ceased to work" (p. 98). Entropy, the enveloping suicide of nature, ensures the death of nature's tiniest components, no matter how highly organized. By smashing the glass of the hothouse, Aubade affirms solidarity with the inevitable course of events and abandons the rearguard action of artificial rearrangement. She is choosing nature, but she is also choosing—ironically—among gnostic evils.

The full exploration of this irony involves recognition of the paradox that realizing one's humanity is an artificial enterprise in the sense that the realm of the human constitutes the locus of the transcendental quest. "Human nature" thus involves a going beyond nature in the striving for transcendental ideals and in the reflexivity by which one's position in nature becomes the object of contemplation and assessment. The same rhetoric that condemns Callisto and Aubade for unnatural, isolate orderings reverses, in this new context, to affirm the spiritual dimension that these very orderings demonstrate. A "perfectly-executed mobile" is, after all, a triumph of conception and creativity. Pynchon's music symbolism confirms this normative aspect of the hothouse. Aubade, whose name means "dawn song," has a peculiar sensibility that turns natural process itself into lyricism:

In the hothouse Aubade stood absently caressing the branches of a young mimosa, hearing a motif of sap-rising, the rough and unresolved anticipatory theme of those fragile pink blossoms

which, it is said, insure fertility. The music rose in a tangled tracery: arabesques of order competing fugally with the improvised discords of the party downstairs, which peaked sometimes in cusps and ogees of noise. That precious signal-to-noise ratio, whose delicate balance required every calorie of her strength, seasawed inside the small tenuous skull. (p. 92)

Aubade's effort here is finally one of spiritual ordering, of significantly structuring her relation to the fecund beauty of nature. The entropic cacophony downstairs rises in a constant assault upon this structure, symbolized by musical "arabesques of order." It is Aubade who must sustain the tension of a *metaxy* grounded at one pole by apeirontic "noise" and at the other by the "signal" of an ideal harmony of being. This desperate struggle for "balance" is the struggle to be human, and it hints, in its privileging of natural process, at the transcendental polarity of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

It is in this same normative light that we must examine the peculiar sentience of Callisto. He is differentiated from the oblivious pawns of entropy downstairs by his highly developed awareness of macrocosmic history, by his talent for acute diagnosis, and by a seasoned, self-reflexive humanity. These are qualities he shares with his "predecessor" (p. 84) Henry Adams and will share with a succession of Pynchon personae: the two Stencils of *V.* and the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Adams is really the presiding deity of this story, as he will be in *V.* Like Adams, Callisto keeps his diary in the third person to gain a more embracing perspective, and like Adams he "realizes" that "the Virgin and the dynamo stand as much for love as for power; that the two are indeed identical; and that love therefore not only makes the world go round but also makes the boccie ball spin, the nebula precess" (p. 84).

A basic gnostic ambivalence is present in the simultaneous admission of love as a powerful structuring element—an understanding crucial to metaxic balance—and the reduction of love to the level of mechanical power. Like Aubade, Callisto must struggle to maintain his human resonance against the vision of bleak mechanistic decline that entropy evokes: "He was aware of the dangers of the reductive fallacy and, he hoped, strong enough not to drift into the graceful decadence of an enervated fatalism" (p. 87). His peculiar mode of balance is "a vigorous, Italian sort of pessimism" (p. 88) that balances human skill and courage—*virtu* in the formulation that Pynchon adopts from Machiavelli—against the blind forces of *fortuna*. The entropic randomness predicted by statistical mechanics weights the scale heavily in favor of thermodynamic *fortuna*, threatening to destroy the balance that is humanity.

Because this growing randomness is part of nature's essence, it becomes problematic to project a transcendental ground from natural process. Dissolution, decay, and disorder hardly provide paradigms of spiritual harmony; rather, they mirror the apeironic polarity, thus negating the possibility of a creative tension. The attempt of Callisto and Aubade to establish such a tension fails because they seek a natural equilibrium that no longer mirrors nature. Their little shrine to the recycling of energies is the relic of an obsolete religion that has become gnostic in its beleaguered isolation and its desperate artifice. Irony's final twist lies in the efforts of Meatball to keep the lease party from "deteriorating into total chaos" (p. 97). Arbitrating, aiding, repairing, he seems to represent some stubborn vestige of enthalpy—the antientropic tendency *toward* order—that resides even in entropy's hedonistic disciples. It is a human impulse to preserve humanity, the hint of a norm in the face of cosmic futility.

Ironically, it is entropy that continues to energize Pynchon's fiction. Having appeared there as the definitive vehicle of decline, it never disappears; rather, it takes more sophisticated and insidious forms. The main hint of this evolution in the story "Entropy" is Callisto's reflection on European decadence as a form of energy dissipation. This decadence, in the mode of a cultural death wish and growing automatism, provides the focus of the story "Under the Rose," published a year later. It will be most useful for my purposes to treat this work in conjunction with *V.*, since it forms—in a modified version—the third chapter of that novel. In the interest of thematic chronology, however, it should be noted here that "Under the Rose" establishes not only the world-historical canvas central to Pynchon's later studies in malaise, but also the notion of a widespread conscious conspiracy in the service of this malaise.

The story is concerned with the activities of English and German spies in the Egypt of the 1890s. Their machinations are part of a much larger plot to bring on (or to prevent) a European "Armageddon," a cataclysm that will entail the entropic collapse of civilization. That such an end should be explicitly sought through the manipulation of world politics and carefully engineered dehumanization gives a demiurgic scope to questions of cause and effect and heralds Pynchon's increasing focus on cabalistic gnosticism. In his useful contrast of "Under the Rose" as story and novel chapter, Douglas Fowler points out that human agency is deemphasized in the latter in favor of "history" as "something more mysterious and terrible than human beings could have made it."<sup>17</sup> This is true; but the very investiture of history with demonic shadows creates the possibility of an alliance far more ominous than any between spies. Human collusion in evil acquires the status of cosmic



perversity when it expands to collusion with antihuman forces of historical process. The movement from “Under the Rose” to *V.* glosses just this expansion, and thus suggests a rationale for studying the two works as a single, comprehensive vision.

The last of the stories in *Slow Learner*, “The Secret Integration,” is Pynchon’s most conventional work of fiction, and therefore his most experimental. What, after all, could be more radical than for one of his stories to appear originally in the *Saturday Evening Post* and to present—at first glance—the ambience of a more erudite Norman Rockwell? The distinguishing metaphysical urgency of his writing seems suppressed here in favor of a narrower social urgency and the cultivation of period-piece nostalgia. The vehement racial prejudice central to the story’s theme does not have the overtones of world-historical genocide that sound through *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, nor is the crucial motif of preterite America linked to the shadowy schemes of the Tristero. It is as though a zoom lens had focused on the peculiar texture of small-town American life to the exclusion of the larger gnostic framework within which Pynchon habitually views this life.

Pynchon himself seems to approve of some such exclusion when he asserts in the introduction to *Slow Learner* that the story represents a “positive or professional direction” unfortunately “forgotten” by the time he wrote *The Crying of Lot 49* (p. 52). This judgment will appear perverse to most readers, a privileging of mediocre realism over gifted fabulation; but seen in this context it provides a valuable clue to Pynchon’s structural intentions in the story. He was, he says, finally beginning to hear America talking, and also to perceive its “nonverbal reality” (p. 22). It was the “towns and Greyhound voices and fleabag hotels” of Kerouac’s road that absorbed him and that seemed a key to the “deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live” (p. 21). Sympathetic visions of this life—the skid row scenes, for instance—form a central motif in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where they are given a gnostic dimension by their connection with the Tristero network. Presumably Pynchon felt that “The Secret Integration,” free as it was of this explicit machinery, offered a potentially more convincing integration of vision and dimension.

Whatever the case, a dis-integration of the story reveals that the familiar paradigms are present after all, disguised as child’s play and casual comment. The gang of boys constitutes a secret, alienated enclave within the hostile macrocosm of adult society. Privileged by access to the gnosis of their leader, the precocious Grover, they plot the disruption of oppressive institutions and imagine an environment of brotherhood and freedom. This gnostic paradigm becomes parody, however, in the particulars of its

execution. The “plots” are mainly schoolboy pranks such as flushing explosive sodium down toilets, infiltrating PTA meetings, and dropping water bags on moving cars. The dream of interracial fraternity ends with the banishing of the imaginary black playmate and the return of the “alienated” to cozy domestic rapport with the formerly “oppressive” adults. The subversive function of this parody is to diminish the boys’ guilt in perpetuating the gnostic cycle of violence, but at the same time to suggest the futility of their integrative efforts against society’s forces. The constant question in Pynchon is how one combats enveloping evil without becoming a part of it, and there is never a clear answer. The cartoonlike antics of the “Counterforce” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* will attest to the same dilemma and to the same uneasy mixture of parody and norm.<sup>18</sup>

No such moral ambiguity attaches, however, to less aggressive forms of resistance: a sympathetic awareness of the preterite who have fallen victim to oppression, and the acts of charity that flow from this awareness. When the boys minister to Carl McAfee, the alcoholic and homeless black musician, they become avatars of a normative humanity, of a fellow feeling that transcends its individual focus to comprehend the preterite desolation of the continent. McAfee’s tales of transient encounters in lost places are redeemed from oblivion by becoming part of a growing moral consciousness that will, in turn, fabricate an imaginary black child named Carl from “phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts in Étienne’s father’s junkyard—things they could or did not want to live with” (p. 192). The secret integration unifies more than black and white: it restores to the commonality all that had been alienated and rejected by the controlling forces. The gnostic dream of Return is realized in an act of imagination that will have crucial implications for Oedipa Maas in Pynchon’s next novel and for the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

In the world of the story, however, as in the world outside it, the forces prevail against the dream. Hostile police take the luckless McAfee into custody, and affectionate parents suborn the young rebels with showers, towels, and goodnight kisses. The truth of adult reality is a relentless fragmentation that invades imagined communions, leaving the boys with “dreams that could never again be entirely safe” (p. 193). This is the early onset of Pynchonian paranoia, that suspicion that potent mysterious forces are shaping a future inimical to humanity. This sense of siege and foreboding lends, in retrospect, a gnostic coloration to certain details of the story. Grover explains that “Operation A,” their latest subversion, is a reference to “Armageddon,” though Tim had guessed “Abattoir” (p. 155). Together, the

terms recall the specter raised in “Under the Rose”—the consciously engineered end of human community. It seems a long way from the mock-heroic antics of children to plots against existence itself, but—as Pynchon wryly points out—“You didn’t have to know what initials meant to drill kids.”

The gradual and insidious extinction of the human is also reflected in the ascendancy of estate housing and machines. Northumberland Estates, the project where “Carl” is imagined to live, is a nightmare of geometrical conformity and sterile openness. No privacy exists there, no hidden nooks where sustaining fantasies can thrive. Its designers attest the indifference of bureaucracy to the life of the spirit, and thus prefigure the gnostic entrepreneurs of Lot 49 and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Not surprisingly, it is a junkyard owner who warns of a related danger, the absolute triumph of automatism: “My [Étienne’s] father says everything’s going to be machines when we grow up. He says the only jobs open will be in junkyards for busted machines. The only thing a machine can’t do is play jokes. That’s all they’ll use people for, is jokes” (p. 150). The uniquely human provenance of humor is precisely what makes it valuable as a weapon against machinelike behavior, a fact not lost upon Mark Twain’s Satan or upon Pynchon’s gadfly personae. Once again, however, we are given the vision of a future in which neither idealism nor humor has availed to preserve humanity from reduction to an apeirontic “joke.” Metaxic balance is precarious, the forces of disruption are seemingly inexorable—such is the pessimistic formula that finally emerges from the early stories and that will, in fabulous permutations, inform the later novels.

#### NOTES

1. *Slow Learner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p. 4. All further citations of Pynchon’s short stories, except for “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna,” are to this collection.

2. Fowler, *A Reader’s Guide to “Gravity’s Rainbow”* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980), p. 33. Fowler’s study of the Eliot-Pynchon nexus in the section “Pynchon as Gothicism” (pp. 28–43) contains some valuable insights into the gnostic perceptions that link these two authors, e.g., “both Eliot and Pynchon ... take the same situation for the heart of their work: humanity imprisoned within a cage designed for an experiment upon it” (p. 31). When Fowler suggests that “Eliot’s supernatural is benign” (p. 30), he seems to be referring to the later, explicitly Christian phase of the poet’s work.

3. *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner’s, 1929), p. 327.

4. “Contributors” Notes, *Epoch* 9, No. 4 (Spring 1959). All citations of “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” are to this issue (pp. 195–213).

5. *Slow Learner*, p.4.

6. *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1963), p.18.
7. Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats's Search for Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p.135.
8. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), p. 21. Hereafter abbreviated TP.
9. *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), Bk. VI, 11. 391–393.
10. Conrad himself, of course, hints at such an inversion in Marlow's observation that London, too, "has been one of the dark places of the earth" (p.5), and in his constant equation between the remote heart of darkness and the immediate darkness of the heart.
11. Cf. Joseph Slade's observation that the Ojibwa motif "involves an assumed moral superiority of 'primitive' cultures over the decadent, 'civilized' type. Superseding the Ojibwas in later stories will be Maltese and Africans, cultures which have been laid waste by colonialism, but which still retain some spark of vitality" (TP, p. 24).
12. Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 47. Hereafter cited as CL49.
13. Pynchon, *V*. (New York: Modern Library, 1966), p.325.
14. *Seed, Labyrinths*, p.52.
15. Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (London:Calder and Boyars, 1977), p.1.
16. *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*, ed. Harold Edgar Briggs (New York: Modern Library, 1951).
17. Fowler, "Story into Chapter: Thomas Pynchon's Transformation of Under the Rose," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 14, No. 1 (1984):34.
18. Peter Cooper elaborates on this connection under the heading "Political Possibilities: The Counterforce" (Signs and Symptoms, pp. 92–93).



JOHN DUGDALE

*V.: A Fierce Ambivalence*<sup>41</sup>

‘Eulenspiegel [Owlglass]; all the chief jests in the book depend on this: that everybody speaks figuratively and Eulenspiegel takes it literally.’  
(Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*)<sup>42</sup>

‘Varèse, Ionesco, de Kooning, Wittgenstein, I could puke’.  
(Rachel Owlglass, *V.*, Ch.13)

*V.* • speculatively restages key moments in *fin de siècle* or Modernist art, seeking to discover the reality behind the scenes and images it invested with mystique: the dancer and the ‘terrible beauty’ of violence in Yeats; the acrobats of Picasso and Rilke; the rose garden, the hyacinth girl and the journey on the underground in Eliot. Imagining actual instances of apocalyptic crisis, military destruction, rape or sacrifice in the appropriate period, it interrogates the use made of such phenomena in Modernist fictions. It treats sceptically such legends as Maud Gonne, the romance of D’Annunzio and Duse, the first night of the *Sacré*. It detaches motifs like Eliot’s ‘still point’ from their original context and degrades them, often by finding a comic present-day equivalent (of the wound, the descent into the underworld, the epiphany) so that they become cultural junk, the images on the dump of Stevens, the sweepings and refuse of ‘The Circus Animals’

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From *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power*. © 1990 by John Dugdale.

Desertion'. It criticises and parodies the techniques of which they are the particular instances, myths (142, 450), metaphors (325–6), universal symbols (282). Regarding such fictions as veils and disguise: (325, 436), it strips them away to reveal the real entities they purport to represent; it travesties them on the assumption that they transvest and travesty things as they are.

Fictions are demystified in *V.* by reference to that which is the case, the reality of situations, flesh-and-blood and its sufferings. When the text focuses on a particular Modernist artwork in the mock-*Sacré*, the insistence is that the fetish/symbol is an actual female body, that behind the role and costume of the dancer, (the Modernist image par excellence) is a vulnerable young girl. The parodic thrust is literal-minded, finding its counterpart in the women of the novel—Rachel, Paola, Elena, Nita—who mock the metaphors and verbal camouflage of their male partners. The same emphasis is involved in the text's treatment of the creative impulse and the methods and postures of the Modernist artist. The desire to populate an imaginary mirror world, the attraction to metamorphosis, the wish to be 'something which does not exist in nature' (226), the project of living in several times at once, or predominantly in the past—all are reproduced by one of Stencil's 'repertoire of identities' (62) and are thereby undercut, because they derive from his desperation to escape his unbearable present and his glamourless everyday life. In the parodic model, the need for fiction as such, and particular poetic and fictional strategies, are given a comically simple basis in boredom, exile, unemployment and lovelessness. Stencil is wryly used in *V.* to exemplify Eliot's conception of poetry as 'an escape from personality':<sup>43</sup> the novel accepts that this is the motive, but suggests that the attempted escape is likely to be unsuccessful, and (through the evident correspondences between the Stencilized and New York chapters) that personal experience can not be perfectly transmuted into impersonal art. The reference back to Stencil's actual situation before each new story, and the exhibiting side by side of his real and imaginary worlds, also mock the schizoid division of the Modernist writer which results from such a view of art: Eliot's intentional separation of 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates'; Rilke/Malte in the *Notebooks*, living in the present among the lost ones of Paris, and vicariously in the past through invented figures who are *Vokabeln seiner Not* (the vocabulary of his need); the split in Yeats between his heroic masks and visionary adventures, and his self-scorned life in time and the body.

The attention to Modernism in *V.* is much more sustained than might be guessed from a superficial reading, which would recognise only the Fausto Maijstral and Paris chapters as of relevance to twentieth-century art. This layer of the novel is dispersed through it in fragments, and largely made up

of moments when art is not the overt subject (for example, the main passage on myth concerns tall stories told to girls at a street festival [142]). Only when the pieces are collated and the layer isolated, as in the previous chapter, does its extent, and complexity, and comprehensiveness—the attempt to deal with the whole of Modernism—become apparent.

Although the general approach to Modernism involves the form of debunking described above, there are frequent problems in particular cases in assessing the implicit attitude to the artist in question and the range of application of the parody. With Pynchon's work such problems can not be resolved by the usual recourse to extra-textual guidance, as there are no Pynchon letters, no interviews, no critical essays, no reported conversation and no patently autobiographical spokesmen. (When someone who is often taken to be such a figure appears, namely Fausto, he is also a multiple caricature). As they can not be correlated with statements elsewhere by the author about other writers, or about Modernism in general, the parodies remain enigmatic.<sup>44</sup> It is often particularly difficult to judge the value of the difference between parody and parodied; to interpret whether the parody is pointed or merely playful; whether it has a critical content or simply represents comic opportunism. Is the 'Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises' an unmasking of the essence of the *Sacré*, or just a game, a grateful borrowing of a scene? When a contemporary equivalent is found for an artist or work or motif of the past (for example, Callisto in 'Entropy' for Henry Adams) is there a suggestion that the original was no more than this, or only an exploitation of the interesting possibilities of transposition to a different context? This question leads back to the central problem of Stencil, who uses the settings, characters and symbols of Modernism as the scenery, costumes and props of a theatre in which he plays all the parts. Running through its entire repertoire of roles and techniques, he is modern art condensed in one person, a super-composite, a monstrous summation. But is he a mediocrity and a late-comer who in his 'ploddings' (411) acquires all of Modernism's bad characteristics and none of its good ones? Or is Modernism *reducible* to this figure split between his schlemiehl-like quotidian existence and his 'mad time-search' (406)? He is clearly a parody of a Modernist artist, but is he 'a critical imitation' (*OED* 1) or 'a poor, feeble imitation, a travesty' (*OED* 2)?

These questions are further complicated by the element of self-parody in V. In the satirising of post-war pseudo-art in, the New York narrative, for example, Brenda's evocation of the twentieth century which she shapes into a V ('It's a phony college-girl poem. Things I've read for courses' [454]), or the worthless achievements of the Crew ('parodies on what someone else,



had already done' [297]), or Slab's symbol of Nemesis, the Partridge in the Pear Tree (282), mockery and self-mockery seem to overlap. Stencil is a mirror to his creator as well as to Modernism: to his need for fiction, impersonation, 'forcible dislocation into a past he didn't remember' (62); to his folly in constructing a single myth to explain the modern world; to his attempt to write a work of Modernist scope and technique, which can only result in an 'exhausted impersonation' (56), an elaborate footnote to *The Waste Land*,<sup>45</sup> to his tendency to receive all experience 'secondhand' (SL, 9), mediated through previous fictions. The difficulty of inferring an 'attitude' towards Modernism in the novel is compounded by the apparent inclusion of the novel itself and its author in that which is criticised.

'I understand only,' Eigenvalue drawled, 'that your attitude toward V. must have more sides to it than you're ready to admit. It's what the psychoanalysts used to call ambivalence, what we now call simply a heterodont configuration'. (249)

In the configuration of attitudes towards Modernism in *V.* three main 'sides' can be identified. The first is the assumption that it is a resource available for the form of 'literary theft' described in the *Slow Learner* Introduction (SL, 16–18), which makes use of the waste of the literary past much as the contemporary art of Rauschenberg and Oldenburg exploits the junk of the New York streets. Though it bespeaks a lack of reverence, this intertextual game of transforming, transposing and combining is essentially neutral, leaving the achievements and reputations of the predecessors intact. The second is an attraction to the 'undeniable power' (SL, 7) of an art which still seemed to be a heroic and glamorous 'adventure of the mind' (61); which is associated with a sense that 'the parade has gone by' (SL, 9), and that present-day art is a tired and relatively minor endeavour. The third and final attitude is a wholesale rejection, involving the view that it was all, in the recurring images of the text, a collective madness ('At no point in the twenty or so years the legend had been handed on did it occur to any one to question the old priest's sanity' [120]), a dream that can be woken from, a *batequivre* or a wild party that can be quitted, 'only a sea story' (443), a sickness that can only be cured by being sick, 'expelling all manner of old words which had always, somehow, sat wrong' (354).

Certain images in the text, particularly associated with Old Stencil and the versions of V., go further in making the undeniable power of Modernism seem actively malignant: it is possession by an evil spirit (450–1), enchantment by a witch with a power of 'mesmeric trance' (463–4), haunting

by the ghost of a mad old man (399, 447). And there are corresponding moments when hostility towards it takes on the lethal aspect of Stencil's quest, which is a hunt for a quarry; indications of an Oedipal desire to destroy the father (the Old Stencil) for ever, to be his executioner as well as his executor. With a strong suggestion of revulsion, the ending of the novel 'slams down' (492) the father and the bewitching woman (Astarte), and the Modernist enterprise they represent, to the bottom of the Mediterranean.<sup>46</sup> There are many possible grounds for the hostility to Modernism in V. (for example, its perpetuation of Romanticism, its metaphysical delusions, its decadent sexuality, its idealising-sadistic representation of women), but such a sense of its malignancy can perhaps only have a political basis. It is with the political critique which informs the parody that the following pages will be concerned.

In his hunt for the woman V. Stencil finds (assuming for this purpose that the various women are the same woman, and that he does discover rather than invent) that her political sympathies were already authoritarian in 1898–99; that after a liaison with an Irredentist in 1913 she had become an agent of Mussolini by 1919. She spent Christmas 1920 with D'Annunzio at the siege of Fiume, and in 1922 she was associated with proto-Nazis in South West Africa. It is with this woman, in the form of Veronica Manganese, that Young Stencil believes his father had an affair; the ending of the novel, the denouement of the investigation into his fate, shows Old Stencil committing treason by being lured into a liaison with a Fascist agent. This is clearly intelligible, *inter alia*, as a parable which concerns the collusion of Modernism with the monstrous forces of the century, given that Old Stencil is a parody of Yeats, and a father who in 1922 leaves a legacy of texts to a son who will dream fictions in the 1950s. The traitor is also the man who hands on the tradition: *traditor, traditio, both from tradere*.

The question of the involvement of major Modernist figures with Fascism would have been topical when V. was presumably conceived, in 1958–59, as the treason charges against Pound were dropped in 1958. Yet there is no attempt to stigmatise writers by name, or to expose the biographical evidence and the incriminating statements, apart perhaps from one off-hand reference to the 'Usury Canto' (354). In place of such a direct indictment, there is, on the one hand, a more complicated political critique, centred on the structures, strategies, ideas and images of the actual works, which will be discussed in due course; and, on the other, the messages that can be deciphered from the relationship of Old Stencil to V., of V. to Mussolini and D'Annunzio, and from the case of D'Annunzio himself, the one modern artist that Pynchon does consider directly.

In a conversation in South West Africa in 1922 (247–9), V tells Old Godolphin that she just missed D'Annunzio in Florence in 1899 and Paris in 1913, finally encountering him during 'his supreme moment, his peak of virtue: Fiume!' The occupation of the town in defiance of the treaty of Versailles (1919–20) appears in this passage only as a doomed act of folly, with no indication of its further historical significance. But an earlier conversation, between Weissmann (the future Blicero) and Mondaugen points towards the connection between 1919 and 1922:

Ever heard of D'Annunzio? ... Mussolini? Fiume? Italia irredenta? Fascisti? National Socialist German Workers' Party? Adolf Hitler? Kautsky's Independents? (242)

The unsuccessful occupation was the direct inspiration for Mussolini's so-called 'march on Rome' in 1922. D'Annunzio has the unique distinction among the artists of the period of having acted as catalyst to a revolution.<sup>47</sup> His abortive intervention in politics enabled his writing to have effects in the real world, with its appeal for a nationalist hero uncannily answered by the Fascist dictator. (An agent of Mussolini *before* Fiume, V. is the link between the two men. Ironically she dies on Malta as a result of an Italian air raid, victim of a mad extension of Irredentism in which the island was bombed to rubble in an impossible attempt to regain it for Italy.) D'Annunzio, the preposterous mythomaniac and author of luxurious romances like *Il Fuoco*, is a mocking mirror for a figure like Pound, who also adopted the Machiavellian idea of virtue and became associated with Mussolini, at once more farcical and more successful.

A passage in which Old Godolphin tries to generalise from the case of D'Annunzio has often received critical attention. Vera has asked him what he thinks will fill the void left by 'the likes of Vheissu', which here apparently signifies any 'dream' from his own expedition to D'Annunzio's novels:

What is already filling it. The real thing. Unfortunately. Take your friend D'Annunzio. Whether we like it or not that war destroyed a kind of privacy, perhaps the privacy of dream. Committed us like him to work out three o'clock anxieties, excesses of character, political hallucinations on a live mass, a real human population ... our Vheissus are no longer our own, or even confined to a circle of friends; they're public property. (248)

Overtly, the passage explains the attraction to political activism for D'Annunzio, or Pound, or Yeats. Reacting to the expropriation of art and

fantasy by the new mass society, they seek to reverse the process by entering and altering the public world. However, the terms of the passage lend themselves to conversion into a description of a process with which the text is also concerned, in which the dream is followed by the real thing, but the dreamer is not the agent of its realisation. Instead of the artist 'working out' his political hallucinations on a real human population (as at Fiume) they work out, become political fact (as in Mussolini's coup) as if through magical causation.

This is the closest that *V.* comes to a formulation of the manner in which art is transformed into political reality. It will be helpful accordingly to consider the treatment of the process in the later work. In *Lot 49* the prime example is the Jacobean theatre, as represented by 'The Courier's Tragedy', a procession of scenes of violent death produced to gratify audiences who are 'preapocalyptic, death-wishful, sensually fatigued, unprepared, a little poignantly, for that abyss of civil war that had been waiting, cold and deep, only a few years ahead of them' (*Lot 49*, 43–4). The Jacobean theatre does not bring about the civil war; but it has the same origins in Jacobean politics, it derives from and responds to the repressed desires which contribute to the collective drive towards war, it simulates the ensuing bloodbath. *GR* advances towards a magical explanation in its account of the propaganda film which somehow brings the black Schwarzkommando into existence in Germany—'no way now to stuff them back in the bottle or even say the spell backward' (*GR*, 276). Like Siegel's avenging Indian in *MMV*, the Schwarzkommando (a potential figure for black nationalism in the USA and the Third World) appear 'as if conjured up', in Freud's formula for the uncanny; so, after all, art is magical. Elsewhere in the same passage it is the film *King Kong*, 'the legend of the black scapeape', that is held responsible for 'generating' the Schwarzkommando. This involves an interesting attempt to fuse magical and Freudian explanation, by implicitly assigning magical status to projection, which turns a repressed idea into an element of the real world: 'Why wouldn't they admit that their repressions *had*, in a sense that Europe in the last weary stages of its perversion of magic has lost, *had* incarnated real and living men' (*GR*, 277)

It should be recalled that such uncanny prophecy or invocation is by no means a minor issue in *GR*, since, as the same section of the novel testifies (*GR*, 270–2), the main plot depends on the correlation between Slothrop's sexual experiences or fantasies and rocket-strikes, which is interpreted variously by Government psychologists as psychokinesis or precognition (*GR*, 85).

For a literary instance of the phenomenon in *GR* one need look no further than the opening words: 'A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now' (*GR*, 3). It is often recognised that the first line is an echo of the first line of the *Duino Elegies*, 'who, if I cried out/screamed (*schriee*), would hear me among the angelic orders?', with a possible additional recollection of Yeats' images of the Second Coming and the apocalyptic scream.<sup>48</sup> It is less customary to ask why the V2 rocket should be identified with Rilke's cry; and why the last paragraph of the novel, describing the bombing of Los Angeles, draws on the 'happy failing' of the last line of the *Elegies*—'it was *not a star*, it was falling, a bright angel of death' (*GR*, 760). It would seem that Pynchon's 'screaming' condenses Rilke's cry with the response from the angelic orders he cries for; that the V2 rocket, and the later the ICBM, are presented as the incarnation of the terrible Angel of the *Elegies*. The text will later quote the passage in Rilke in which the Angel comes closest to being equated with a destructive Judgement:

These tall, these star-blotting Moslem angels ... *o wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel den Trostmarkt* ... German dreams of the Tenth-Elegy angel coming, wingbeats already at the edges of waking, coming to trample spoorless the white marketplace ...  
(*GR*, 341, first ellipsis in text.)

The Tenth and final Elegy, which ends with the 'happy thing' falling, is the one favoured by Weissmann-Blicero, the admirer of Rilke (*GR*, 97–102) who is part of the V2 operation at Peenemunde, and apparently launches the 00000 which descends on the Orpheus Theatre.

*GR* conducts an interrogation of 'the half-read wisdom of daemonic images' in Modernism, particularly those suggesting a fearful-joyful linkage of violent destruction and revelation. The critique comes into the clearest focus in the closing pages, when the account of the launching of the 00000 is conjoined with a group of literary references: to the Angel and Flame of Rilke (cf. *GR*, 97), the Tower of Yeats (*GR*, 747–8),<sup>49</sup> the Shadow of Eliot (*GR*, 760). It is not difficult to trace evidence of a similar critique of the apocalyptic strain in Modernism<sup>50</sup> in *V.*, Take, for example, one of the many mock-Pentecostal passages in the novel, in this case a scene in Chapter 9 in which South African planes bomb defenceless native men, women and children: '... the sun caught suddenly the three canisters dropped from each, turned them to six drops of orange fire. They seemed to take a century to fall' (276).

The sardonic parody here is of the description of an air raid in ‘Little Gidding’ as a torment devised by Love:

The dove descending breaks the air  
 With flame of incandescent terror  
 Of which the tongues declare  
 The one discharge from sin and error.

Pynchon further twists the screw by returning to the poem in the next Stencil chapter, in which Fausto, the disciple of Eliot, is unable to view the relentless bombing of Malta and the loss of his wife in a raid as the work of Love.

This reading of Modernism is informed by the observation of the resemblance between its practices and those of the conspiracy theorist who sees shapes beneath ‘the surface accidents of history’, and makes grand patterns out of ‘any cluster of phenomena’ (152–5), and detects alliances and agreements where the myth-maker sees connections. The analogy is underpinned in the novel by two important puns. The paranoid finds cabals (153), the Modernist author produces works which are cabbalistic, and even Kabbala-like.<sup>51</sup> The paranoid believes in plots (conspiracies), the author devises plots (narratives) and divines plots (schemes and patterns). In a further twist, Modernism is itself envisaged as of conspiratorial character, on the model of the forces of order in the novel, who plot together against plots. The transmission of the yarn of Vheissu in diplomatic circles in Florence (193–4) parodies Modernism as a form of intrigue among paranoids, in which the participants pass on to one another an apocalyptic anxiety and a certain story about the world; in which a perceived need for secrecy requires them to use fables of distant countries, and occult images, and a language of intimation. The allusions throughout the novel lend support to the conspiratorial conception by concentrating on texts which reflect the interconnections between Modernist figures, such as the influence of Conrad and Yeats on Eliot.

Although he displays schizoid and obsessional features, Stencil is primarily identified in the text as a paranoid. The quest begins in Chapter 3 only with the notion that there is ‘more behind and inside V.’ (53) than has been suspected, but after his ‘wound’ in the mysterious shooting incident in Chapter 5 he begins ‘grouping the world’s random caries into cabals’ (153) in the Florence chapter. By Chapter 9 he is ready to affirm that ‘his quarry fitted in with The Big One, the century’s master cabal ... the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name’ (226), and on his last appearance he appears to believe

that the whole of the Western world has become possessed by her (451). And this conspiracy theorist serves in the novel as a mediating figure, facing in one direction towards modern art, and in the other towards modern politics. He has a double career, as civil servant and as fiction-maker; his 'impersonations' include artists (Fausto, Porcepic) and people involved in political, military or intelligence activities (Porpentine, Godolphin, Weissmann, Old Stencil); he creates a myth, a fantasy, but it is also a 'V-structure' (226), analogous to the 'interlocking kingdom' (227) of an industrialist, or to an empire with parts scattered 'all over the western world' (389). The growth of his paranoia in the course of the quest is transmitted into his fictions, which bear the dates of nodes in cultural history, and are arranged in broadly chronological sequence; with the result that, viewed as an ensemble, his stories retrace the escalation of paranoia in modern art. At the same time the scenarios plot this against a parallel process in political history, following the development of the main character, the woman V., into a Fascist, and regularly registering the movement of Germany and Italy towards the adoption of paranoia as State ideology.

It seems reasonable to assume that the treatment of paranoia throughout Pynchon's work relies on the discussion of the condition in three of Freud's publications in the years before the Great War, namely the case history of Schreber (1911), *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13) and *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914); and that the characterisation of Stencil the conspiracy-theorist is influenced by the figure of Schreber.<sup>52</sup> There are many parallels between the two men (notably the latter's key fantasy of transformation into a woman, cf. 'soul-transvestism', 226) and a possible clue to the connection (the insistence on the Senatspräsident's birthplace, Leipzig, as the city of Karl Baedeker and Mondaugen, 408, 229) but the supposition rests principally on the extent to which Schreber anticipates Stencil's mediative status. Reminiscent of Fascism or other forms of autocracy in his megalomania, and his belief that the conflict with his Enemy will result in the end of the world, he is also a fantastic author, who sets out his fictions—delusional formations, 'deliria'—in his *Denkwürdigkeiten* (1903). He resembles moreover a Modernist author, uniting in himself, as Stencil does, those aspects of Modernism with which the novel is particularly concerned. He is a 'true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself' (*Lot 49*, 89); he has eschatological longings and expectations, which Freud compares to those of Isolde and Faust; he invents an imaginary system that explains everything in the world, described in the case history as a myth. Through the characterisation of Stencil, and through his various stories and identities, Pynchon develops a particular paranoia so

that it becomes a parody of a modern political leader, and a parody of a modern artist;<sup>53</sup> but this potential is already present in Schreber, the probable model—he can be found to be what Stencil is.

Yet *V.* is not merely engaged in catching Modernism in apocalyptic postures when it glances at Eliot's longing for all-consuming fire, or his wish that the world would end with a bang, not a whimper; or at Yeats invoking the Florist notion of the Third Age (472), which will also appeal to Mussolini and Hitler, and inform the latter's Third Reich'.<sup>54</sup> One can tentatively read back into the earlier text an analogous conception of the relationship of 'political epiphany' (273) to the real world to that in *GR*. The abyss of the Great War lies waiting, cold and deep, only a few months ahead of the audiences who watch Stravinsky's tumultuous sacrificial ritual. 'The Second Coming', as Yeats himself observed,<sup>55</sup> was an accurate prophecy of the 1930s. His apocalyptic images like the Sphinx (74) and Salome (465) may be inappropriate to the immediate situation, and comic if attached to a particular woman, but they are powerful prefigurations of subsequent monstrous forces; Pynchon will use the former at the end of *UR*, a story which involves 'our common nightmare The Bomb' (*SL*, 18), and the latter in a passage in which the shape of a missile can be discerned in the description of the dancer (*Lot 49*, 36). It is *as if* the *Sacré* and 'The Second Coming' (both based on quasi-automatic visions, according to the artists) had an engendering capacity. They have a troubling intermediate status, something more than simply predictive, something less than causal.

Modernism in its visionary moments, like *V.* in her last reported appearance (451), is an 'oneiromancer', prophesying by dreams. And this capacity is only explicable in terms of some 'intimacy' (154) between the woman *V.* and the 'something monstraous ... building' (386), 'the century's master cabal' (226). The relationship is suggested in the text by a crisscrossing of art and politics. Poets use a vocabulary of power—masterful images (cf. 436), rage for order—and fantasy is imperialist, conquering 'private colonies of the imagination' (158); but politics is fantastic, with statesmen and civil servants devising 'private versions of history' (225). Eliot's concept of myth is reproduced in Chapter 9 by Van Wych, who describes civil servants like himself as 'the lead weights of a fantastic clock, necessary to keep an ordered sense of history and time prevailing against chaos' (233). On the other hand 'Fausto's kind', poets, correspond to men of government disseminating misinformation, 'cloaking ... innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the "practical" half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie' (326). When Stencil speaks of a 'ministry of



myth' (450) that rules V.'s country, the phrase could equally be a figure for Modernism or a bureaucracy.

'We are on the same side, aren't we ... Our ends are the same' (487) the Fascist Veronica says to Old Stencil. Eliot's account of myth as a means to govern 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'<sup>56</sup> indicates the tendencies which art and political power have in common in Pynchon. They are both committed to order and control; their aim is to dominate and organise chaos, or to make structures which veil it. On the same side as power, art also shares its mentality. This affinity can best be perceived if one thinks of the Stencil narrative of *V.* as an investigation into the origins of the paranoid style in modern politics.<sup>57</sup> It tests various possible fixation points for twentieth-century consciousness (for example, 1898, 1913, 1919), scanning the past for the first signs of the phenomena and the atmosphere of the Cold War: the lethal chess game of superpowers, the 'grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon' (155), the sense of Western culture in terminal siege. And it conducts a parallel search for the nodes which mark the emergence of the paranoid style in modern writing, somewhere between Khartoum and the Boer War, or Sarajevo or Versailles; identifying such symptomatic features as the predominance of anxiety, the widespread fascination with the figures of the spy and the detective, the awareness of secret historical processes 'under the rose', of a menace which can only be symbolised through *unheimlich* images, spectres and doubles, Shadows and Beasts. The text's attention is particularly directed at the moments in Conrad where the threat of anarchy or nihilism is manifested concretely in anarchists or revolutionaries, and at the 1919–22 phase of Modernism, when the ideas of fragmentation and unreality in Yeats and Eliot are specifically tied to Bolshevism, Civil War, '*halb Europa ... auf dem Wege zum Chaos*'; that is, the points where aesthetics and politics intersect. (The allusions to American Symbolist writing look forward to *Lot 49*, which pushes the origins of the paranoid style back further, first to Poe, Hawthorne and Melville and then to the Jacobean era.)

The stories of *V.* and *Lot 49* involve an investigation by a detective-quester into the legacy of a dead father-figure, requiring travel, research, inference and invention. Both texts are founded on an analogy between the 'projected world' (*Lot 49*, 56) of the quester's paranoia and the actual world (San Narciso, the British Empire) controlled, or inhabited and represented, by the father-figure: the estate of Pierce Inverarity in *Lot 49*, the totality of places referred to in Old Stencil's estate, the journals, in *V.* As the quest proceeds, the investigator's fantasy becomes increasingly comparable to an organisation, a nation, a colonial-capitalist empire ('V.'s country', the

WASTE system, Tristero's shadow-state); while at the same time the investigation discovers the madness of those with power in the real world, including the father figures themselves. In *Lot 49* it becomes clear not only that Pierce Inverarity was crazy, but also that his business monopoly is like the projected world of the 'true paranoid', in which, 'everything is connected', 'all is organised ... about the central pulse of himself' (*GR*, 703; *Lot 49*, 89).

A two-way movement operates in the texts, in which mental structures become like real structures and vice versa. The first movement, in which Stencil's and Oedipa's fantasies become a V-structure and a Tristero-system, mimicking actual organisations, is anticipated in the Schreber case. Schreber's deliria, according to Freud, are constructions laid on top of the real. After destroying the world in his fantasy,

the paranoid builds it again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least so that he can once more live in it. He builds it up by the work of his delusions. *The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction.*<sup>58</sup>

Projection is the method by which the world is rebuilt as a fiction. The second movement is to pursue the resemblance to fiction of the real world of empires, and major cosmopolitan cities, and a Southern Californian conurbation. Though these entities actually exist, they are unreal in the terms of the texts, in so far as they are zones where the synthetic and the inanimate have displaced the natural and the human, alien installations in an animate world of land and organic community. *V.* supplies a central image for such a space of the 'unreal ... symbolic ... inanimate' (80) in the form of the 'supranational domain' (70) of Baedeker land, which contains only tourists, the buildings or monuments they visit, and 'automata' in service occupations. A scale model of imperialism, Baedeker land results from the process in which 'tourists bring into the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city' (411). It is important to recognise the association in the novel of Baedeker land with Fausto's notion of the 'superimposed' world of metaphor, 'devised to veil the world that was' (325–6, 331–2). This is effected in the extended and complicated discussion of the former in the Paris chapter (408–11) by the alignment of tourism and fetishism—a fetish being regarded as an unreal symbol of something real (404)—allowing the Baedeker world to be also understood as a 'fetish-country' (414, 411). The modern city is unreal in *V.*

because it is a landscape in which the inanimate is dominant, and humans have become reified; and because metaphors, myths and codes collectively compose a fictional overlay, disguising and repressing the realities of poverty, death, alienation and political disaffection (409). This vision of the city is carried forward to Oedipa's cosmetic San Francisco, 'made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars)' (*Lot 49*, 81).

In *Lot 49* the urban world with which the novel is principally concerned, San Narciso, is actually 'made up' by its paranoid founding father, and is little more than the sum of his 'projects'. In *V.* the domain of tourism is referred to as '(let us be honest) a world if not created then at least described to its fullest by Karl Baedeker of Leipzig' (408). The conceit that it has been brought into being by books written by someone from Schreber's birthplace enables Pynchon to hold together the ideas of fiction and the city, to envisage the latter as if it were the construction of an individual paranoid. Related on one side to Stencil's fantasies,<sup>59</sup> and on the other to colonialism (cf. 'a colony of the Kingdom of Death' [411]) and to Benny Profane's New York (cf. 'the Street ... the Street's own', [409]), Baedeker-land looks forward to the corresponding image of the superimposed world in *Lot 49*, which also has a mediative status. In imaging her own solipsistic art in the cloak or tapestry of *dordando el Manto Terrestre*, the painter Remedios Varo again images an empire or a business monopoly, 'for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world' (*Lot 49*, 13). A paranoid art—as Varo's is obliquely presented in the passage—is a self-aggrandisement, a thrust towards total control; while political or economic power resembles a surrealist artist like Varo in that, in its fantastic reconstruction or cloaking of the world, it creates the counter-reality de Chirico believed he should devise to refute current reality.<sup>60</sup>

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud links Schreber to the primitive, and the primitive in turn to the artist, who operates in the 'single field' in our civilisation in which the narcissistic omnipotence of thought still seems possible.<sup>61</sup> Pynchon reinforces the implicit association of Freud's 'autocratic' figure of the artist with paranoia; and expands the constellation to include any 'power structure' (*Lot 49*, 110), any political or corporate organisation. The power structure—The Empire of *V.*, the microcosmic *polis* of *Lot 49*, the State or System of *GR*—is paranoid in Pynchon both in the sense that there are 'pathologies in high places' (*Lot 49*, 71), and in that it may be construed on the model of the individual paranoid, it acts as if a paranoid were its demon (cf. 255, 'Foppl the siege party's demon, who was in fact coming more

and more to define his guests assembled, to prescribe their common dream'.) To construct a myth, project a world, assemble an artistic system, is accordingly to attain a certain 'sympathy', as the word is used in *V.*, with those at the centre of power structures, to resemble the notional demon. If the drives and fears of the power structure are insane, then this capacity for empathy is present in art in the degree to which it is paranoid, apocalyptic, visionary, surrealistic; in the degree to which it possesses the qualities identified in Modernism in *V.* An art which has a paranoid content, as in Yeats or Pynchon, penetrates to the inside of power, rather than merely observing it from the outside; and its intimacy with the dreams and nightmares of power are the basis of its uncanny 'oneiromantic' ability to prophesy historical phenomena. To adapt Stencil's formula for the relationship between *V.* and wars and revolutions, 'their etiology is also its own' (387).

This also applies to the protagonists of *V.* and *Lot 49*, creators of the *V.*-structure and the Tristero myth, and gives to their quests their peculiar quality of 'serendipity' (249). Their mental deterioration in the course of their investigations is as significant as the products of their investigations. As their paranoidias escalate they may move further away from an accurate empirical account of power, but they come to resemble it increasingly closely; their states of mind tell the truth about their respective 'estates' more directly than the stories they tell. As well as finding metaphors for political structures, they become the metaphors, unknown to themselves: aggrandising, ordering, integrating, deluded, building something monstrous, seeking to control all the contents of their world. As they come close to their father figures at the ends of their quests, they approach the state of mind of real men of power (for Oedipa, Howard Hughes; for Stencil, Henry Ford and President Wilson),<sup>62</sup> and they become analogues of the 'siege party's demon', 'the projector at the planetarium', the invisible centre of 'the visible structure' (*Lot 49*, 54, 71). Stencil comes to take on the aspect of late-imperial Britain, or of the USA in the McCarthy-Dulles era—Manichaeic, in siege, convinced of a diabolic plot, holding a single adversary responsible for all the crises and disasters of the century. Oedipa mimics her nation, extending her structure across the whole continent, reducing 'chances for diversity', assimilating everything into union (*e pluribus unum*), awaiting a rocket-shaped revelation.

The protagonists, therefore, are a way of perceiving the dynamic of power structures. And they are also a way of perceiving certain artists as a way of perceiving the inside of power. The writer is instructive about history, but not necessarily in his own terms: indeed he may be more instructive the

more deluded he is. His productions are complex symptoms (like Stencil's *V.* [386–7]) of more than his own neurosis, manifesting repressed needs and terrors, exhibiting forces in conflict. One might hypothesise that it is one justification of writing for Pynchon—of writing oneiric historical novels—that it is a mode of discovery about power. In writing, the novelist comes to know the rage for order of power as he assembles a supreme fiction, acts as demiurge to an imaginary world. Having written, he exists at the secret heart of a labyrinth (like Randolph Driblette, director and quasi-author, at the Tank Theatre, *Lot 49* [52–4]) as a mind inaccessible to those on the outside, wandering in the maze. In Pynchon's case the structure is even more labyrinthine than in his predecessors, the centre, since he maintains his silence about his novels, even more arcane.

Authorship which decides to be major, in the Modernist tradition, is pulled inside to side with authority, because it involves power, control and mastery, magical talents, charisma that resists routinisation, membership of an elect of 'a few visionaries ... men above the immediacy of their time who could think historically' (*Lot 49*, 113), perhaps an identification with destructive violence. Pynchon's novels are major prose fiction, in the tradition of Melville and Joyce, encyclopedic in relation to their subject matter and summational in relation to past literature. The secret affinity between writing and power is acknowledged rather than disavowed in the texts, notably through the presence in them of dominators like Weissmann-Blicero (*V.* and *GR*) and Pierce Inverarity, rather as Melville personifies one pole of himself in Ahab. Mavericks in the military-industrial-political complex, they also have literary associations (Pierce writes the will, Blicero in 1922 is a student of Rilke) and their demonic 'need to possess' (*Lot 49*, 123) is connected to a cultural tradition, the imperial ego of Emerson and Nietzsche. The protagonists of the novels undergo a psychic passage, and sometimes a physical passage, towards these figures, minotaurs at the middle or the end of the texts' labyrinths. In the central chapter of *V.* Stencil mentally translates himself into the *Schachtmeister* of a German concentration camp who may be Weissmann or Foppl. Oedipa, at the end of *Lot 49*, has arrived at the final state of mind of Pierce, 'writing the will, facing the spectre' (*Lot 49*, 123). In *GR* the novelist-surrogate Pirate Prentice, with his 'strange talent for getting inside the fantasies of others' (*GR*, 12) specifically has access to the nightmares of the powerful, including Blicero; while Slothrop travels Marlow-like to the hearts of darkness of the zone.

Against all this must be set a diametrically opposite tendency in Pynchon 'find them, find them! voices in whose misery is all the world's night' (80). There is an unmistakable partisan alignment on the side of the

profane (*V.*), the preterite (*GR*), those whom Oedipa calls the Tristero (*Lot 49*): bums, colonial subjects, ethnic minorities, seditionaries, exiles, inner émigrés, outsiders, rejects, social waste. The profane are the repressed in society, and also its repressed sense, the meaning it blocks out in its reading of itself. Every other page in Pynchon is a showing of these socially invisible, passed over by the tourists in Baedeker land in *V.* and by the mass media in *Lot 49*. As a member of the WASP élite, he can never completely become part of ‘the preterite he loves, knowing he’s always to be a stranger’ (*GR*, 731). As a dissident writer, forced into silence, inner exile and cunning, he can at least positionally identify with those outside the networks of government or opposed to it, as well as engaging himself on their side. One manifestation of this alignment is the motif of the ‘journey into the mind of Watts’ (the title of his magazine article on the black ghetto), which becomes increasingly prevalent over the course of Pynchon’s work. Oedipa and most of the principals of *GR* (Slothrop, Pirate, Katje, Enzian, Tchitcherine, the Argentines, Thanatz, Greta) are members of an élite within their culture who are shown in transit from ‘inside’ to ‘outside’, in a rite of passage towards preterition, exclusion, wretchedness. This ‘going over’ may be a positive decision to join a Counterforce or an organisation of the alienated (Pirate, Oedipa) or a falling into poverty or the underground which is compelled by circumstances (Young Stencil, Slothrop). But the novels also include forms of ‘going over’ which are Conradian betrayals, like the treachery of Old Stencil at the end of *V.*, or take the character in the opposite direction: the informer for colonial government, Fausto Maijstral senior; the ‘traitor’ called Konrad in *Lot 49* who proposes that Tristero should merge with Thurn and Taxis, and hence share in the imperial monopoly (*Lot 49*, 113); the Mexican anarchists who go over to the majority party (*Lot 49*, 83); Mondaugen and Pökler in *GR*, who work on the V2 after periods of living among the lost; the ‘Counterforce Spokesman’ at the end of the novel who tells the *Wall Street Journal*, ‘I know what your editors want, *exactly* what they want. I am a traitor’ (*GR*, 739). Even Oedipa, though she imagines herself as an alien joining the ‘waiting’ of the Tristero, ends the novel waiting in among the powerful in the auction room, and her state of mind is that of Pierce, ‘assumed full circle into some paranoia’ (*Lot 49*, 126–7). ‘The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was. Trembling, unfurrowed, she slipped sideways, screeching ...’ (*Lot 49*, 89).

Pynchon’s fear is that to make a supreme metaphor is to align oneself with those who are ‘inside, safe’, even if one’s general allegiance is to those who are ‘outside, lost’. Besides the idea of ‘going over’ in the texts, this fear

may influence the insistence in *V.* on the figure of the return of the prodigal son, itself a form of betrayal or collaboration, as the important fathers in the novel (Old Godolphin, Old Stencil) are representatives of Empire. The motif encodes not just the repetition of Modernism by post-war art, as previously described, but also Pynchon's own return to tradition, in constructing another labyrinth text, in producing in the woman *V.* another metaphor for history, however much it is undercut by irony. And to be drawn back towards Modernism is also to risk being 'assumed full circle' into the autocratic literature of the fathers, grandiose, paranoid-apocalyptic, system-building, world-reorganising. The anxiety of *V.*, to adapt some often quoted words from the opening of *GR*, is that it is 'not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*' (*GR*, 3); a project doomed to repeat the predecessor from which it seeks to free itself.

#### NOTES

41. *Lot 49*, 11.

42. Quoted in Critical Appendix to *A Pleasant Vintage of Till Eulenspiegel*, 1515 edition, trans. and intro. Paul Oppenheimer (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), p. 267.

43. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (*Egoist*, Sept. and Dec. 1919), rpt. in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed., Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 37–44.

44. Compare the thesis of Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), which is strikingly relevant to Pynchon. Much recent parody, according to Hutcheon, has a double relationship to the previous art it revises, inverts or replaces in a new ironic context; it uses and abuses it, 'bouncing between complicity and distance', combining filial fidelity and Oedipal opposition.

45. Many of the footnotes to *The Waste Land* begin with the sign *V.*, standing for *Vide*, see.

46. There is also a hint of self-disgust, as at the end of the Benny Profane narrative, with the allusion to *The Tempest* pointing to Prospero's 'deeper than did ever plummet sound/I'll drown my book' (v. i. 56–7).

47. See Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), pp. 37–9.

48. 'Juno's peacock screamed', from 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'; cf. *GR*, 223.

49. Pointedly, 'Members of the Order of the Golden Dawn believe The Tower represents victory over splendor, and avenging force. As Goebbels, beyond all his professional verbalizing, believed in the Rocket as an avenger'. (*GR*, 747)

50. Not so commonplace in 1963, before Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; rpt. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), pp. 315–7; and Frank Kermode, *The Sense*

of an Ending (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), ch. 4, 'The Modern Apocalypse'.

51. In Yeats, cf. *GR*, 747–8, and in Kafka, who called *Das Schloss* 'a new Kabbala'.

52. 'Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia' (1911), St. ed., XII, pp. 1–82.

53. Adapting Freud's own metaphor: 'It might be maintained that a case of hysteria is a caricature of a work of art, that an obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion and that a paranoid delusion is a caricature of a philosophical system'. *Totem and Taboo*, St. ed., XIII, p. 73.

54. See Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 13.

55. See Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 162.

56. 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' (*Dial*, November, 1923) in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, pp. 175–8.

57. See Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (*Harper's*, November 1964), rpt. in 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' and other Essays (London: Cape, 1966), pp. 3–40.

58. 'Psychoanalytic Notes', St. ed., XII, pp. 70–1.

59. Note the introduction of Stencil into the passage in Ch. 14; in the somewhat opaque comparison of tourism with fetishism, the sense of 'fetish-constructions like V's' (411) seems to extend beyond the affair with Melanie to Stencil's V-structure, and indeed to Pynchon's novel *V*.

60. Soby, 34, 66. Cf. *GR*, 129, 'acts of minor surrealism ... which in its pathology, in its dreamless version of the real, the Empire commits by the thousands every day'.

61. *Totem and Taboo*, St. ed., XIII, p. 90.

62. Fausto compares Stencil's beliefs about the V. plot to Ford's paranoid delusions: 'Yes, yes. Thirteen of us rule the world in secret' (451, cf. 360).





N. KATHERINE HAYLES

*“Who Was Saved?”: Families, Snitches,  
and Recuperation in Pynchon’s Vineland*

Imagine that Thomas Pynchon has been kidnapped and that his captors censor everything he writes. He determines to communicate with the outside world through coded writing that appears innocuously sentimental but has an ironic undertow. He finds, however, that the surface of such writing is far from passive. Forming his thoughts even as his thoughts form it, the sentimentality begins to interpenetrate with the ironic vision until the two are inseparable. No longer able to distinguish between them even to himself, he decides to use them as the basis for his next novel. The novel is *Vineland*.

This fantasy is more than a metaphor, for in a sense there is a group holding Pynchon hostage that he is both trying to communicate with and to elude. It comprises the generations grown up after the sixties, for whom the Vietnam war is as devoid of affect as is World War I or the Spanish-American conflict. The problem Pynchon sets himself is how to communicate in terms they will understand, while still recognizing the complexities of a past that for him (as for many of us) is still very much alive. The multilayered codes that result center on salvation and recuperation. When Hector Zuñiga asks Zoyd Wheeler “Who was saved?,”<sup>1</sup> he uses the question as a touchstone to measure how profoundly the American revolution of the sixties failed. Already scripted by the dream of apocalypse that ends *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the question reverberates throughout *Vineland*. Whereas in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the

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concern with salvation took on theological, political, and economic overtones, in *Vineland* the strongest resonances center on the family.

The family as it is constituted in *Vineland* is both literal and metaphoric. The framing narrative is the teenage Prairie's search for her absent mother, Frenesi Gates, supposedly gone underground because of her involvement in a radical film collective. Turning inward toward a familial context itself constitutes part of the answer to Hector's question. Obvious to everyone is the failure of the sixties to solve the problems the radical movement shouted to the nation—poverty, racism, American economic and military imperialism. Poor people were not saved, nor people of color, nor the people of Vietnam, Cambodia and other Third World countries. The only candidates left, apparently, are those who fought for the revolution. If they saved no one else, did their struggle and vision save themselves? The question points toward the metaphoric meaning of the family, the generation gap that separates Pynchon from readers who wonder what all the fuss in the sixties was about. Running parallel to Prairie's quest is another search, that of the narrator for his generation-gapped readers. The vector of Prairie's journey points from the present into the past, whereas the narrator's concern moves from the past into the present.

Along these vectors, two antagonistic force fields interact to organize the novel's responses to the double searches. Running in one direction are networks of family and friends that connect generations and overcome isolation. These I call the kinship system. The kinship system yields representations with which even young readers can identify, encoding emotions and events that have not changed substantially over the generations. Running in a contrary direction are networks of government agents that seek to gain information, incarcerate dissidents, and control the population—the snitch system. The snitch system, implying a skepticism about the government typical of the sixties, is likely to gain ready assent from ex-hippies but may strike younger readers as bizarre.<sup>2</sup>

The two systems, articulated through action and plot, are also connected by central metaphors that mediate between them. These metaphoric connections imply that the two systems may be collaborative as well as opposed, the attitudes and preconceptions associated with one serving to make possible and structure the other. Their entanglement echoes Slothrop's dark dream in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when he realizes that "They" may be only another version of us.<sup>3</sup> Reaching out to a generation that never knew the sixties, *Vineland* also gives voice to the bewilderment that the generation formed by the sixties felt upon finding itself in the Reagan eighties, with Tubal culture apparently flourishing in every household and

greed the bottom line on every contract. How did we get from there to here, and how can we communicate with those who do not understand what “there” was?

Answers to these questions are not so much stated as intimated through metaphoric and narrative connections. One of the tropes connecting the snitch and kinship systems is the metaphor of virginity. When Hector badgers Zoyd to give him information the government will find useful, the narrator informs us that “so far—technically—Zoyd had hung onto his virginity” (12). “Your child’s-well-bein’ against your own virginity as a snitch,” Hector later bargains with him (295). “Why this thing about popping my cherry Hector, can’t you see I have a kid to look after now,” Zoyd says (303). To show how the metaphor overlays one set of associations onto another, I want to consider its implications as they have been worked out in feminist theory.<sup>4</sup> Losing one’s virginity signifies inscription into a system of representations that structure relations, interpret responses, delineate options. The expression paradoxically constructs refusing to do something as a presence, while making sexual activity an absence or loss. Seeming to impart value to virginity, it also defines power relations between gendered partners that reveal how vulnerable women are in a patriarchal society. The male is the seducer; he wins if he can pop the cherry. The female is the seduced; symmetry requires that she wins if she can keep her virginity intact. In fact her virginity is useful only as a bargaining chip, for if she hangs onto it for too long it becomes useless, a sign of a spinster that no one desires. Virginity is thus valuable only as long as it is imperiled. Let the pressure diminish, and it loses its currency. Like money and information, it needs to circulate within a system of exchanges to exercise its value. Unlike them, it is a coin that can stand only one transaction before disappearing. Properly speaking, it signals an *initiation* into the exchange of money and information that follow.

Consider how these implications work to structure the snitch system when the kinship system is mapped onto it through the trope of virginity. Hector, pressuring Zoyd to turn informant, assumes the male role of seducer. Zoyd occupies the female role of seduced, a position reinforced by his responsibility for the child (“I have a kid to look after now”). Information has meaning only if it circulates, moving through the system in a series of exchanges that involve money, incarcerations, promotions, power—and not coincidentally, children. Traffic between the two systems flows in both directions; the snitch system helps to organize the kinship system, even as the kinship system provides the presuppositions and gender relations that determine its structure. The two effects are not, however, necessarily equal.

The threat that the snitch system poses to the kinship system can lead to solidarity rather than betrayal, a possibility realized most clearly in Zoyd's relation with Prairie.

Zoyd enters the novel's kinship networks primarily through his tie to Prairie. Apparently having no family of his own, he is slowly incorporated into Frenesi's family, to which she herself remains peripheral. Whereas his female role makes him liable to seduction in the snitch system, his maternal position in the kinship system opens him to connection. After Frenesi deserts him and Prairie, he decides to join forces with Sasha, Frenesi's mother. Despite the long-standing enmity between them, they realize that in a custody battle the judge would find little to choose between Zoyd's doper lifestyle and Sasha's communist past.<sup>5</sup> Rather than risk losing the child to a government agency—having her circulate among the snitch rather than the kinship system—they share responsibility and, increasingly, affection. Frenesi comes from a proud line of left-wing activists. As Zoyd accepts this family as his own, the kinship system creates a context where the sixties become part of an on-going struggle that included the Wobblies of the twenties and thirties and communist sympathizers who suffered under the McCarthyism of the fifties. The connections imply that the radicals of the sixties, with the arrogance typical of youth, may have made the movement seem more anomalous than it really was. When Zoyd makes common cause with Sasha, symbolic alliances are established that go beyond the private sphere of the family.

The nexus where the two systems come together most intricately is in Frenesi's relationship with Brock Vond, the high-level government agent who plots to incarcerate dissidents in a "reeducation" camp designed to coerce them into becoming snitches. Frenesi's left-wing heritage makes her separation from her parents unusually complex. For most young people involved in the radical movements of the sixties, being politically active served the dual purpose of embracing a cause and enraging their parents. For Frenesi, radical activity and parental approval go hand-in-hand. The outrageous act from their point of view is to cooperate in fascist plots, not to engage in radical politics. Frenesi's fascination with Brock Vond, otherwise inexplicable, makes sense in this context.

As in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the forbidden exercises its spell through sexual obsession. The liaison, as dangerous politically for Brock as for Frenesi, nevertheless is constituted through an asymmetrical power relation. Brock is the seducer; Frenesi the seduced. The seduction is enacted by Brock's persuading Frenesi to turn informant (209–10). "To seduce" here returns to its etymological meaning "to separate" (from the Latin *seducere*), for Frenesi's

seduction marks her slippage from the kinship to the snitch system. She is alienated by it both from her parents and from the allegiances of 24fps, the radical film collective she helped organize. Attempting to re-establish connection with a history she has lost, Frenesi tries to re-enter the kinship system by leaving Brock, marrying Zoyd, and giving birth to Prairie. Not one to idealize motherhood, Pynchon scripts a plot that has Frenesi falling into a postpartum depression so severe that she can scarcely function.<sup>6</sup> Resenting the resources she feels the child strips from her, she imagines that the baby “went along on its own program, robbing her of milk and sleep, acknowledging her only as a host” (286). At night she fantasizes that Brock is leaning over her bed, whispering ““This is just how they want you, an animal, a bitch with swollen udders lying in the dirt, blank-faced, surrendered, reduced to this meat, these smells”” (287).

Supported by her family, Frenesi gradually emerges from the depression. But she remains unable to internalize the maternal role or to connect with her own mother. Yearning to reciprocate Sasha’s affection, she feels that of “all her turnings, this turn against Sasha her once-connected self would remain a puzzle she would never quite solve, a mystery beyond any analysis she could bring to it” (292). Her relation to Prairie is similarly distanced. She imagines that the “baby was perfect cover, it made her something else, a mom, that was all, just another mom in the nation of moms, and all she’d ever have to do to be safe was stay inside that particular fate” (292). Although she believes that “Prairie could be her guaranteed salvation,” motherhood remains a role she could play, not an aspect of herself expressed. Because the role is so convincing yet false, Frenesi sees “*pretending to be Prairie’s mom*” as “the worst lie, the basest betrayal” (292, emphasis added). The judgment makes it virtually certain that she will return to the snitch system. Indeed, it reveals that she never really left it.

At the center of the snitch system is Brock Vond. As such, he is deeply antagonistic to the kinship system. As far as we know he does not say to Frenesi that motherhood makes her into meat, but the sentiment is consistent with his values. He continually tries to appropriate the signs of the kinship system and reinscribe them within the snitch system, changing their significance and altering their value. His “genius,” the narrator says, “was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it” (269). Where most of the country saw rebellion, Brock “saw the deep—if he’d only allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching—need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family” (269). At the PREP (Political Re-Education Program) camp he masterminds, he sees the dissidents-about-to-turn-

informants as so many errant children, the “men who had grown feminine, women who had become small children, flurries of long naked limbs, little girls naked under boyfriends’ fringe jackets ... the sort of mild herd creatures who belonged, who’d feel, let’s face it, much more comfortable, behind fences. Children longing for discipline” (269).

Significantly, the narrator describes Frenesi’s inscription into the snitch system in terms of children returning to their parents. The echo of Brock’s beliefs shows how thoroughly she has been coopted.

[A]s the Nixonian Reaction continued to penetrate and compromise further what may be only in some fading memories ever have been a people’s miracle, an army of loving friends, as betrayal became routine, government procedures for it so simple and greased that no one, Frenesi was finding out, no matter how honorable their lives so far, could be considered safely above it [ ... ] leaving the merciless spores of paranoia wherever [government money] flowed, fungoid reminders of its passage. These people had known their children after all, perfectly. (239)

Within the kinship system, likeness of face and form is evidence of lineage, visible sign of the relationships that bond families together. On several occasions Prairie scrutinizes her image in the mirror, trying to see in it her mother’s likeness. Brock encodes the lineaments of face and form into the snitch system by being a “devotee of the thinking of pioneer criminologist Cesare Lombroso,” who believed that certain physiognomies revealed debased mentalities and criminal tendencies (272). Scanning the “children” in the PREP camp, Brock registers “stigmata,” seeing them as “a parade of receding foreheads, theromorphic ears, and alarmingly sloped Frankfurt Horizontals” (272). When he confronts Zoyd in a jail cell, he sees only the cranium of a criminal, in contrast to Prairie who learns to see in her father’s face, as in her mother’s, a resemblance to her own.

If the snitch system is the extension and locus of Brock’s power, the kinship system is his greatest antagonist and fear. He intuits that if he were to slip within it, he would become powerless, wrenched from the role of seducer to seduced. He has a recurrent nightmare in which “he was forced to procreate with women who approached never from floor or ground level but from steep overhead angles [...] each time it was done, a terrible sadness, violation ... something taken away. He understood, in some way impossible to face, that each child he thus produced, each birth, would be only another death for him” (276–77). His fear is not unfounded. Because the systems are

articulated together, it is always possible to slip from one to another, as Frenesi does when she turns her back on her family and starts a new life, not as Prairie has been led to believe in the radical underground, but in the demimonde of the snitch system. In this semiotic, Brock's fear represents hope turned inside out, for it hints that transitions in both directions are possible.

Before this possibility is realized, the text explores the entanglements implicit in Frenesi's transition from kin to snitch. She works as a government operative in an "infinite series of increasingly squalid minor sting operations of steadily diminishing scope and return, against targets so powerless compared to those who were setting them up that some other motive, less luminous than that of the national interest, must have been at work" (72). Though we get only glimpses of what those motives might be, we know that for Brock they include the desire to appropriate into the snitch system as much of the kinship system as he can, thus aggrandizing his power and weakening what he most fears. His success can be measured by how family life is constituted within the snitch system. After she abandons her family, Frenesi hooks up with Flash, another informant whom she met in the re-education camp. Their relationship is based on the mutual toleration of lies—lies that they tell the victims they help to entrap; lies that they tell each other about fantasized or realized infidelities; lies that the monthly stipend checks and cheap transient apartments constitute security. The one bright spot is their child Justin, a precocious preteen who keeps his parents informed by watching MacNeil-Lehrer.

The two ingredients essential to the snitch operation are money and the computer, dollars and information. Both are coded in alphanumeric characters, ultimately in ones and zeros. The possibility that human action, perhaps even the human soul, can be reduced to the ones and zeros that in *The Crying of Lot 49* loom in the sky over Oedipa reappears in *Vineland*. In a complex play of narrative framing, metaphor, and image, this reductive coding is set in tension with the photographic image. Somewhere in their intersection, the narrative implies, lies the key to understanding why the revolution failed.

The credo of 24fps (frames per second) was based on the belief that through the medium of the human face the photographic image would reveal lies for what they were.

They particularly believed in the ability of close-ups to reveal and devastate. When power corrupts, it keeps a log of its progress, written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face.



Who could withstand the light? What viewer could believe in the war, the system, the countless lies about American freedom, looking into these mug shots of the bought and sold? Hearing the synchronized voices repeat the same formulas, evasive, affectless, cut off from whatever they had once been by promises of what they would never get to collect on? (195)

Their philosophy reflects and inverts Brock's belief in criminal physiognomy. Directed at government officials rather than dissidents, the camera exposes their secret crimes by interrogating their faces. The credo implies a basic faith in the American public. The public supports a bad war only because it has been misinformed. In thus constituting a good public separate from a bad government, the credo reveals a naiveté that Brock is not slow to exploit. This is where money comes in. If enough of the public can be put on the government payroll, they will be coopted into the system that the credo assumes they will resist.

The credo is naive also in its belief that the image can speak for itself, without mediation, and that it will speak truly, without distortion. Brock is a master not so much at getting people to believe in him, as poisoning their belief in what matters to them most. Having seduced Frenesi into taking money from him, he proceeds to poison her faith in Weed Atman, the charismatic mathematician who haphazardly became the leader of the rebellion at College of the Surf, restyled by the revolutionaries as the People's Republic of Rock and Roll, PR<sup>3</sup>. Brock tells her that what is already true of her—she has slipped into becoming his informant—is also true of Weed. It is not altogether clear whether the charge is true, but the evidence seems to indicate that it is not.<sup>7</sup> Very likely Weed's cooperation extends no further than appearing at mysterious sessions with the dentist that Brock planned as "reality" treatments (240). Brock is adept at insinuating that, because small breaches in propriety have occurred, integrity of any kind is a chimera. At crucial points in the narrative Brock lies in just this way, attempting to undermine what someone holds most dear.

The question of Weed's innocence is important, because it bears on whether the camera can lie. After Frenesi plants the rumor that Weed is a snitch, in an act of consummate bad faith she persuades him to tell his side of the story to the camera while she films it. The collective's weapon is now aimed at itself, like a wounded shark that eats its own innards. On some level Frenesi understands that the act of shooting is already a betrayal, for she tells Brock, "Once we have him on film, whether he lies or whether he confesses, he's done for, it doesn't matter" (240). Realizing the collective is falling apart,

Frenesi feels her consciousness split in two, as though she were both acting the role of herself and watching the image of herself acting. The feeling she has later about only pretending to be Prairie's mom has its origins here.

Beginning the night she and Rex had publicly hung the snitch jacket on Weed, Frenesi understood that she had taken at least one irreversible step to the side of her life, and that now, as if on some unfamiliar drug, she was walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all.[ ... ] No problem anymore with talk of "taking out" Weed Atman, as he'd gone turning into a character in a movie, one who as a bonus happened to fuck like a porno star ... but even sex was mediated for her now—she did not enter in. (237)

Tortured and schizophrenic as the collective has become, Brock is not content with its turning the camera as metaphorical weapon on itself. He wants a real shooting. He thinks of metaphors as unreal and therefore ineffectual. He does not understand that the gun, too, is a metaphor, a point that does not escape Frenesi.

Men had it so simple. When it wasn't about Sticking It In, it was about Having the Gun, a variation that allowed them to Stick It In from a distance. The details of how and when, day by working day, made up their real world. Bleak, to be sure, but a lot more simplified, and who couldn't use some simplification, what brought seekers into deserts, fishermen to streams, men to war, a seductive promise. She would have hated to admit how much of this came down to Brock's penis, straight-forwardly erect, just to pick a random example. (241)

In this reading seduction and aggression are two sides of the same coin. Men compete directly by killing each other and indirectly by seducing each other's women. The woman is a mere counter in a game men play, a receptacle that allows them to achieve a coupling they are forbidden to have directly.

The metaphor of the gun as a homo/phobic/erotic coupling is translated into actuality when Brock tells Frenesi that he wants to do more than destroy Weed's credibility; he wants to possess his spirit. He might have said, perhaps in a coded way did say, the same of Frenesi. He reminds her that when they last had sex he told her not to wash "because I knew you'd be seeing [Weed] that night, knew he'd go down on you—didn't he? ate your

pussy, hm? Of course I know, because he told me. You were coming in his face and he was tasting me all the time” (214). He tells her that she is merely “the medium Weed and I use to communicate, that’s all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places” (214). The coding of Frenesi into the snitch system is nearly complete. She exists not as a person with choice, free will, consciousness, but as a message sent back and forth between two male rivals and/or vicarious lovers. It is a small step from here to her full cooptation into the snitch system, complete with monthly stipend check and computer code.

The logic of seduction/aggression requires that Brock get Frenesi to take the gun into the collective, where it will be delivered to Rex, the tool Brock will use to Stick It In to Weed at a distance. “It’s only a prop” (240) Brock tells Frenesi, but she notes that it is loaded. Rex, believing Weed has betrayed them, works himself into a frenzy with Frenesi’s help. He watches her coaxing Weed to talk into the camera; “‘This will be your best chance, your most sympathetic forum, all you have to do is tell how it happened, how you think it *could* have happened, no one is judging you, Weed, the camera’s only a machine ...,’ and so forth, movie sincerity” (244). Finally Rex can stand it no longer and screams “Tell this asshole we know everything” (245). The result is the consummation for which Brock has yearned—the possession of Weed’s spirit.

What she would then have to bear with her all her life, what she would only succeed in denying or disguising for brief insomniac minutes here and there, was not only the look on his face [ ... ] but the way that what he was slowly understanding spread to his body, a long, stunned cringe, a loss of spirit that could almost be seen on the film, even after all the years between then and the screen in Ditzah’s house in the Valley ... some silvery effluent, vacating his image, the real moment of his passing. (245–46)

Even after years have passed, Frenesi does not fully realize that Weed’s spirit was killed not by others knowing of his betrayal, but by his knowledge of their betrayal. In a sense the act of filming itself stole his soul, for turning the camera on him in bad faith destroyed him more surely than the gunshots that followed. The collective’s assumptions about the camera as weapon, then, proved untrue. The unmediated image did not tell its own story, and the camera’s eye did not necessarily tell the truth.

These plot developments reflect the interpenetration of the kinship and snitch systems on another level. They confirm that purity of action and image is an impossibility. After Weed's shooting, it appears that the revolutionary potential of the image has been shattered and the coercive power of the computer established, for Frenesi goes from this final confrontation to one of Brock's "reeducation" camps. DL Chastain, "lady asskicker" in charge of security for 24fps, takes it upon herself to rescue Frenesi from the armed camp. Although DL succeeds in extracting her compatriot, Frenesi's spiritual imprisonment is not so easily remedied. Throughout a two-day marathon session with Frenesi in Mexico, DL probes for answers to why the disaster erupted. "Who'd we save?" Frenesi asks (259), echoing Hector's originating question and confirming that she can no longer believe in the efficacy of radical politics. After that, DL tells Prairie a generation later, "It was all just sad human shittiness" (261).

In the "now" of the narrative, Prairie has grown to young womanhood in Northern California and lives with Zoyd in one of the few pockets of counter-culture terrain America still has to offer. But the marijuana growers, zany towing service, and mystical pizza joint that make up the local culture are a far cry from the revolutionary fervor of the sixties. Prairie, watching the birth of PR<sup>3</sup> on the film archives of 24fps, senses "[e]ven through the crude old color and distorted sound" how different it was then, feeling "the liberation in the place that night, the faith that anything was possible, that nothing could stand in the way of such joyous certainty" (210). From this vantage the present can only be measured as a long, painful fall into ineffectuality and government "cooperation." It is typified by the bargain Zoyd struck with Brock years before to make sure that Prairie was kept away from Frenesi. As a sign of his continuing fealty to this arrangement, Zoyd agreed to stage an annual crazy stunt, receiving in exchange a monthly stipend check. The choice to crash through a plate-glass window was originally his. Over the years the media have become accustomed to filming the event, however, and when Zoyd tries to vary the routine by sawing up a bar with a chain saw, he finds that he must crash through a window nevertheless, this time (unknown to him) with the glass replaced by stuntman's crystallized sugar. The message is clear. The only craziness happening now is that approved, or rather *demande*d, by the authorized codes in the computer and the "inexhaustible taxpayer millions" of the snitch system, with the media and private enterprise as collaborators.

So much has been given up. What are the chances for recuperation? In contemporary discourse the phrase "to recuperate" has a double edge. On the one hand it is used in critical theory in the condemnatory sense of

recovering, often obliquely or underhandedly, traditional values whose falsity has been demonstrated by deconstructive analyses. On the other hand it also retains some of its older meaning of recovery, especially from illness. Both senses are applicable to *Vineland*. Compared with *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* can be seen as a recuperation in a negative sense. Gone are the sweeping scale, daring narrative techniques, hallucinatory imagery, implicit deconstruction of essentialist subjectivity, and dense texture that frustrated attempts at totalization. *Vineland* looks pallid by comparison. But there are also chances for recovery in *Vineland*. Precisely because it operates on a diminished scale, the problems seem more solvable, more as if they had a human face in contrast to the inhuman, looming presences that haunt *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The movement toward recuperation is signaled by Prairie's yearning to find the mother who exists for her only as a legend. The quest takes this teenager "back to and through an America of the olden days she'd mostly never seen" (198). The flashbacks are themselves attempts to connect generations, to build or rebuild alliances across fatigued memories, broken promises, ruptured networks. Prairie gets her first solid information about her mother from the computer banks at the retreat of the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives, the quasi-religious, quasi-martial-arts order with which DL is associated. Prairie finds that the computer screen can, in addition to alphanumeric characters, also yield images. More than the data, these images evoke for her the person her mother may have been.

She lingers over a shot of DL and Frenesi together, fantasizing about what they might have said. After she shuts off the computer and goes to bed, the narrator imagines that within the data bank, DL and Frenesi continue their conversation.

Back down in the computer library, in storage, quiescent ones and zeros scattered among millions of others, the two women, yet in some definable space, continued on their way across the low-lit campus, persisting, recoverable, friends by the time of this photo for nearly a year, woven together in an intricacy of backs covered, promises made and renegotiated, annoyances put up with, shortcuts worn in, ESP beyond the doubts of either. (115)

The movement from the data grid back to a humanly imagined reality is achieved, significantly, through the mediation of a photograph. It marks the transition within the narrative to the flashbacks that tell the story of DL and Frenesi's friendship, the early days of 24fps, the heady intoxication of PR<sup>3</sup>,

and the final betrayals. Even as the narrative's content draws the revolutionary potential of the image into question, its structure asserts the power of the image to reconnect this history to a new generation looking for answers to some of the same questions.

That the image is rendered by a computer makes clear that the image cannot speak for itself, nor can the camera eye reveal an impartial truth. The lesson that all images are mediated and all camera angles encoded with presuppositions was devastating in the context of Weed's shooting. As Prairie watches the old films it becomes recuperative, opening a passage between Prairie and her mother when the young woman realizes that the eye selecting the camera shots is the one she most yearns to behold.<sup>8</sup>

Prairie floated, ghostly light of head, as if Frenesi were dead but in a special way, a minimum-security arrangement, where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen, were possible. As if somehow, next reel or the one after, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her.... (199)

The idea that one could be dead but in a "minimum-security" way is the basis for the Thanatoids, a cult that has accepted their death as the only reality worth noticing. Weed Atman, apparently only wounded by the gunshots, shows up years later as a Thanatoid convert. His conversion makes clear the ambivalence of the novel's recuperative movement. Memories can be recovered and images reconstituted, but the spirit of the time, like Weed's spirit, is irrecoverable.

The recuperative movement reaches its zenith at the annual family reunion "meant to honor the bond between Eula Becker and Jess Traverse [Sasha's parents], that lay beneath, defined, and made sense of them all" (369). The highlight is the communal meal at which Jess reads a passage from Emerson, quoted in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

'Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.' (369)

The passage implies that the kinship system will finally be vindicated by "divine justice," a possibility the plot endorses when its two major strands

intersect, but with ironic qualifications. Prairie finally meets the mother for whom she has been searching. At the same time Brock Vond is preparing to make a “surgical strike” (377) that would wipe out the clan—or more precisely, gather them together in the reconstituted form he envisions. The double climax reveals both the potential for recuperation and the limitations of a recovery in which good and evil intermingle, for the purity of the past was always already interpenetrated with what it fought against.

The limitations are clear in Prairie’s encounter with her mother. She perceives this figure come to life from image and camera as a “woman about forty [...] heavier than Prairie expected, sun damage in her face here and there, hair much shorter and to the cognizant eye drastically in need of styling mousse” (367). Throughout the encounter Sasha babbles about Tubal trivia to cover the embarrassing silence that threatens to engulf them, for Prairie and Frenesi discover they have little to say to one another. What, indeed, could they say? Lifetimes lived apart do not suddenly conjoin because of genetic replication. Amidst this celebration of family unity, there is also a recognition that families cohere because of shared experiences and mutual commitments. Where these are lacking, kinship bonds are no more than accidents of birth. Moreover, families often do not cohere. In DL’s abusive family physical terror reigned; with Prairie’s friend Ché, the incest that can mark or destroy children was a staple of family dynamics. These instances notwithstanding, in this novel dedicated to his mother and father Pynchon uses the family to represent the best chances for connection and bonding.

The second climax occurs when Prairie, overdosed on family unity, leaves the group to be by herself in the woods. In a parody of a *deus ex machina*, Brock Vond swoops down on her dangling from a helicopter line. He intends to incarcerate her in a reeducation camp, but first he goes after her spirit, telling her that he is her father, not Zoyd. ““But you can’t be my father,”” Prairie ripostes, ““my blood is type A. Yours is Preparation H”” (376). The insult comes together with Reagan budget slashes to cut Brock off in mid-line. As word comes through that the PREP program has been axed, he is winched back into the copter over his vociferous protests. Sometimes the good guys do win, not because of the infallibility of Emersonian justice, but because of the ironic patterns of fate or Pynchonesque whimsy.

Other voices murmur through the text too, nonwhite, nonhuman—Yurok Indians, dolphins, and the mythical *woge*, river spirits who were “creatures like humans but smaller, who had been living here when the first humans came” (186). These voices represent presences who have withdrawn from active participation in the world and watch from the sidelines to see

whether the dominant culture can survive. If it can, Pynchon seems to say, it will not be by achieving the purity and innocence that seemed, for a brief time in the sixties, capable of transfiguring America. Tubal culture and the greed that the snitch system signifies did not spring from nowhere. The seeds were already present in the very movements that opposed them. If salvation comes, it will arrive by cherishing the small everyday acts of kindness that flourish in networks of kinship and friendship.

The conclusion is so recuperative in the negative sense that one may wonder whether the author of *Gravity's Rainbow* has not vanished into the mists of time, like the sixties themselves. Yet amidst the retractions that *Vineland* embodies, insights glimmer that make it in some respects the wiser book, although not the more accomplished. Chief among these is the realization that apparently totalized structures have fissures that can be exploited for progressive purposes.<sup>9</sup> A case in point is Hector Zuñiga. Cast in the opening pages as the novel's heavy and Zoyd's archenemy, Hector falls victim to a Tubal detox squad and becomes a fugitive himself. By the novel's end he has changed sufficiently so that he saves Frenesi, Flash, and Justin from Brock Vond's net and makes it possible for them to attend the family reunion. Granted, his motives are scarcely altruistic. He hopes to cast Frenesi in a government-financed movie based on her radical days in 24fps, the message of which will be the evil of drugs.

The incident expresses precisely the complexity of action in a recuperative era. At a time when the nation seems more conservative and capitalistic than ever, what is saved is not the vision that the sixties represented but a few moments of grace. One of the most resonant arrives the day of Zoyd and Frenesi's wedding, when the gods seemed to smile and the world responded. Zoyd particularly remembers a moment when he and Frenesi had sat together under a tree. Feeling blessed, he asks "'Frenesi, do you think that love can save anybody? You do, don't you?'" (39). Although she remains silent and the narrator remarks that "he hadn't learned yet what a stupid question it was" (39), Zoyd is determined to capture something of the moment. "He thought, At least try to remember this, try to keep it someplace secure, just her face now in this light, OK, her eyes quiet like this, her mouth poised to open ... " (39). The memory of the image, like the images in the computer, is not unmediated or untouched by time. Nevertheless, in whatever fashion and through whatever medium, it has managed to be saved, rendered again to a generation that never knew the intensity and hope of the sixties directly. In *Vineland* this is enough, must be enough, because it is all there is.



## NOTES

1. Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1990), 29. All quotations are from this edition. Ellipses that have been added to quotations appear in brackets; otherwise they are present in the original.

2. It is a staple of Pynchon criticism to recognize his concern with systems; see, for example, Mark R. Siegel, *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978). The snitch system in *Vineland* has an extensive parallel in Delillo's *Libra*, where it represents the underside of the idealism of the sixties. It may not be too strong to say that *Libra* is an intertext for *Vineland*, alluded to throughout but never mentioned directly.

3. In Slothrop's dream in *Gravity's Rainbow*, he looks up Jamf in a dictionary and finds "I" (287).

4. On virginity as a cult, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1978), 68–80. See also Nancy Theriot, *The Biosocial Construction of Femininity: Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988), and Muriel Dimen, "Power, Sexuality and Intimacy" in Jagger and Bordo, 34–51.

5. Raymond M. Olderman in "The New Consciousness and the Old System" in Clerc, 199–228, writes about the nonlinear, connection-seeking consciousness typical of marginal groups he calls "freaks," in contrast to the rigid, linear, system-bound thinking of "straights." Zoyd Wheeler and Brock Vond continue these patterns in *Vineland*. In this context the alliance between Sasha and Zoyd is a system-breaking connection as well as a familial bond.

6. On this aspect of Pynchon's fiction see Marjorie Kaufman, "Brünhilde and the Chemists: Women in *Gravity's Rainbow*" in Leverenz and Levine, 197–228.

7. Brock tells Frenesi that Weed is the "key log, pull him and you break the structure" (216). Weed occupies this role, Brock (or perhaps the narrator) says, because he is the only one "innocent enough" to enjoy everyone's "unqualified trust" (216). If Weed were already corrupted, Brock would not need the elaborate plot with Frenesi to plant rumors about him.

8. Frenesi's intensely blue eyes are mentioned so often that they become an identifying feature. The feature is, of course, useful in creating her character; but beyond this, it also forges an implicit connection between the radical credo and the inescapability of viewpoint.

9. The Counterforce attempts a similar recuperation in *Gravity's Rainbow* but is doomed to fail. Resistance in *Vineland* is less dramatic but more sustainable—and also more successful.

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BERNARD DUYFHUIZEN

*“Hushing Sick Transmissions”:  
Disrupting Story in The Crying of Lot 49*

“**T**he sight of sawdust, even pencil shavings, made [Mucho Maas] wince, his own kind being known to use it for hushing sick transmissions” (13). Although this image of consumerist deception appears on its face simply to be a symptom of Mucho’s inability “to believe in” the used car lot where he once worked, it uncovers for us a matrix of *transmissions* beyond the doctored gear boxes of beat-up Chevrolets. In automobiles, a transmission is the linkage necessary for transferring power into positive motion. If the gear box has been “doctored” (paradoxical jargon for “contaminated”) with sawdust, it cannot communicate its decay on the way to breakdown—the sawdust disrupts both communication, and ultimately, the transfer of power. Such a deception seems to define an America out of touch with its “founding” commercial values of integrity and truth-in-lending, and it hints at a key element of inquiry Thomas Pynchon pursues in *The Crying of Lot 49*: How does a culture or society transmit a heritage—its ideals or its corruptions—and how are these transmissions disrupted?

This fundamental question, however, suggests further questions that Pynchon wants his readers to ask: What *are* our cultural transmissions? How are cultural patterns valorized by a society formed from precursor social structures? How are these patterns produced to meet local needs for order and control? How do they establish a status quo that strives always to

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reproduce itself and, thus, to ensure the unencumbered transmission of sociocultural formations to the next generation? When asking these questions we must remember that cultural and social formation always implies the construction of a social hierarchy, complete with myths of power and privilege. Hence, we must ask whether the systems of cultural formation that operate within a given society paradoxically represent both something to be maintained and a process of positive motion toward an “improved” cultural formation (the myth of Utopia), or whether these systems become the sawdust that masks the decay of a society (the myth of dystopia)—a disruption that makes us deaf to the “truth” about the world in which we live.

Since cultural formation occurs in the incessant textualization of privileged representations, Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* asks his readers to look for texts beyond those sanctioned and visible, to listen for the sounds of “silence.” He brings the image of silence to the textual surface when Oedipa Maas, exhausted from her twenty-four-hour odyssey through San Francisco, returns to her hotel, finds a lobby full of delegates to a deaf-mute convention, and is swept up by a crowd heading for the grand ballroom:

She-trying to struggle out of the silent, gesturing swarm, but was too weak. Her legs ached, her mouth tasted horrible. They swept her on into the ballroom, where she was seized about the waist by a handsome young man in a Harris tweed coat and waltzed round and round, through the rustling, shuffling hush, under a great unlit chandelier. Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow’s head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. The only alternative was some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself. She followed her partner’s lead, limp in the young mute’s clasp, waiting for the collisions to begin. But none came. (131)

Oedipa, a parodic everywoman of 1960s middle-class America, finds in this silent ballroom full of dancing couples a cultural formation to which she is alien—a system of communal order inside a seeming anarchy that occurs beyond her particular patterns of logic; the necessary collisions never occur. Additionally, this scene is emblematic of the paradox Oedipa herself becomes during the course of the text, an everywoman whose journey to the center of

things is also a journey to the margins of possibility and to her own crisis of what “to believe in.” To see how she arrives at this dual position, we must view Oedipa as the figure of transmission, the channel that will mediate the matrix of cultural information and memory that by conventional paradigms should be flowing from its source to its destination. We come to discover, however, that neither source nor destination are finite and that the messages transmitted refuse to resolve into a single meaning; instead, the messages disseminate fragments of meaning across a culture that has lost any totalizing mythology. As Anne Mangel has observed, “[t]he pursuit of meaning in language turns into a chimera throughout the novel as information constantly disintegrates through transmission.”<sup>1</sup>

Meaning, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is never simple. From the very outset, when Oedipa discovers that she has to execute Pierce Inverarity’s will, questions proliferate faster than answers. Yet, as culturally inscribed in the history of the novel as a literary genre, a will is supposed to complete the text of one’s life: it is the epilogue to a life story. As Walter Benjamin writes in “The Storyteller”: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.”<sup>2</sup> The completed life becomes both narratable and transmissible—the will serving as a textual link that inscribes as textuality that which is inherited. But what worked for countless nineteenth-century novels no longer produces the same kind of satisfying textuality in the postmodern world of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Wills signify in legal discursive systems the orderly transfer of property, the collected semiotic material that frames (and in an increasingly materialistic culture, defines) the individual existence. Yet now this transfer of property is often anything but “orderly” as relatives struggle over objects, asserting their rights to give meaning to collected material. Within this context, Inverarity’s will represents a dislocation of codes: there are no squabbling relatives—there is only Oedipa—and there appears to be no limit to his estate, as Oedipa, near the end of the novel, comes to realize:

She walked down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway. Spurs ran off here and there into factory property. Pierce may have owned these factories too. But did it matter now if he’d owned all of San Narciso? San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, a moment’s squall-line or tornado’s touch-down among the higher, more continental solemnities—storm-systems of group suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence. There was the true continuity, San

Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. (177–8)

But what kind of legacy is this? “Might Oedipa Maas yet be his heiress?” And if so (the novel is provocatively ambiguous here), what does she really inherit—his assets? San Narciso? America? at each remove the orderly transfer becomes more fantastic, yet or a man whose name may be a portmanteau derived from the philatic term “inverse rarity,” shouldn’t we expect an inverse logic from his last testament, an inverse system of transmission for his property”?<sup>3</sup> Oedipa comes to wonder whether Inverarity “might have written the testament only to harass a one-time mistress.... Or he might even have tried to survive death, as a paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved” (178–9). either way, Inverarity may represent the attempt of the individual subject to project precisely what Benjamin suggests becomes transmissible to the storyteller at the moment of death: “authority” over the representation of one’s life. As Benjamin avers, “[t]his authority is at the very source of the story.”<sup>4</sup>

Applying a transmission theory of narrative to this exchange leads us to question the status of “authority.”<sup>5</sup> As its etymology demonstrates, authority derives from “author,” the originator, inventory, source of a text. The “text,” in the present case of Pierce Inverarity, is the literal will, which is both a metaphor for his life story and a metonym for Oedipa’s life story. In this complex relationship, Oedipa must try to make sense of things by becoming a storyteller. Yet how does one become a storyteller in what Jean Baudrillard calls the “hyperreality” of contemporary culture, a culture saturated with media and messages that are simulations of adherently displaced objects that no longer can be explained in a mode based on any logocentric paradigm of referentiality?<sup>6</sup> Indeed, how can Oedipa hope to transform her authority, assigned for whatever reason by the subject of her story, into an “authoritative” tale that will satisfy both herself and the laws of probate? She feels that “[i]f it was really Pierce’s attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation, then it was part of her duty, wasn’t it, to bestow life on what had persisted ... to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning” (81–2). Yet by the end of Chapter 4, Oedipa begins to wonder “whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out,

destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back" (95).

This image of total transmission breakdown haunts Oedipa—to achieve insight beyond the ordinary is to test the parameters of belief in the actuality of a “central truth.” Indeed, in Chapter 5, as Oedipa sets out from the Greek Way to begin her drift through a San Francisco night, she realizes her dilemma: “Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike ‘clues’ were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (118). Not only does this passage signal that each hint of a center is also a confirmation of the margin, but it violates the organizing principles of English grammar. The third “sentence” only makes sense in apposition to the second; thus, in its syntax it underscores the essential separation of “gemlike ‘clues’” from the “direct, epileptic Word.” This separation marks the failure of Oedipa to mediate completely the different transmissions occurring in the fictional culture of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

As at other similar moments in the novel, such as her first glimpse of San Narciso, Oedipa senses she is on the brink of a “revelation [that trembles] just past the threshold of her understanding” (24). Although the conventional teleology of a story is to arrive at a still point of “understanding,” Oedipa increasingly fears that she will be unsatisfied with the outcome of her quest to know the “central truth” of Inverarity’s will. This quest to know is also the desire of the storyteller for an authoritative tale. Oedipa’s quest in *The Crying of Lot 49* is to become the storyteller, yet to fulfill that quest she must seek a coherent story amid the myriad pieces of information and conflicted transmissions she discovers. This conflicted matrix of transmissions marks, as well, a cultural shift from the oral narrative tradition of the storyteller Benjamin discusses, to the multimedia simulations Baudrillard exposes in contemporary culture and in the very conception of America itself—Oedipa’s legacy.

In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin asserts that “the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.”<sup>7</sup> Significantly for Benjamin’s argument, the exchange of experience requires the oral storyteller whose tale embodies the cultural memory of events and people. In opposition to the storyteller, Benjamin cites the purveyors of “information” who reduce events



to facts and processed explanations: “The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.”<sup>8</sup>

In many respects, Oedipa Maas is the figure of this dichotomy between story and information. Her first name parodically echoes a foundation story in Western culture: Oedipus, whose story, as told by Sophocles, is an amalgam of storytelling exchanges, the enforced repetition of cultural memories perhaps repressed but never forgotten. Yet her last name, Maas, also implies “mass,” which in turn implies the mass communication networks of the present era. If told on the six o’clock news, would information about Oedipus’s actions merely shock us rather than move us to catharsis, to a recognition of our flawed nature? Oedipa’s attempt to construct a story through various moments of oral exchange is disrupted by the hints of Tristero that surface in every story she encounters; and as these hints accumulate, Oedipa realizes the impossibility of exchanging experiences in the modern world. Tristero, the secret mail courier system that comes to obsess Oedipa and to deflect her from her original task of executing the will (though she comes to wonder whether they aren’t connected after all), is a counternarrative to the one articulated by official power and embodied in the national postal system. As an underground system, Tristero offers the possibility of epistolary stories, though in reality the messages sent by WASTE turn out to be as much waste as the junk mail delivered by the official carriers. Nevertheless, Oedipa’s awareness of this counterstory’s existence leads her to pursue it, to try to become its storyteller even though her sources exchange their tales with, at best, a “ritual reluctance” (79).

Two scenes of oral exchange in *The Crying of Lot 49* exemplify Oedipa’s attempt to recapture memory via the transmission of story. The first is her interview with Mr. Thoth, whom she seemingly randomly discovers because of her “what you might have to call, growing obsession, with ‘bringing something of herself’—even if that something was just her presence—to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations” (90) or, as she calls it earlier in the novel, “stelliferous Meaning.” By trying to bring something of herself to the story she wants to construct, Oedipa tries to fulfill Benjamin’s stricture to inject what she discovers into her life as a storyteller so that she will be able to express it again—“traces of the storyteller cling to the story.”<sup>9</sup> In encountering Mr. Thoth, Oedipa comes face to face with an embodiment of the storytelling of another era. As he wakes from dozing in front of the

television, Mr. Thoht immediately engages the convention of storytelling transmission as he foregrounds his mediating position:

“I was dreaming,” Mr. Thoht told her, “about my grandfather. A very old man, at least as old as I am now, 91. I thought, when I was a boy, that he had been 91 all his life. Now I feel,” laughing, “as if *I* have been 91 all my life. Oh, the stories that old man would tell. He rode for the Pony Express, back in the gold rush days. His horse was named Adolf, I remember that.” (91)<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Thoht goes on to tell Oedipa that his grandfather was an Indian killer, but more importantly, that he once had an encounter with the “Indians who weren’t Indians.” Although brief, this story, with its corroborating talisman of the ring he shows her, rehearses for Oedipa the same plot elements she had heard in the account of the GIs killed at Lago de Pietà and in *The Courier’s Tragedy* (and that she will later uncover in *The Singular Peregrinations of Dr. Diocletian Blobb*).

The repetition of identical plot elements in stories placed in widely divergent contexts sets up an uncanny sense of coincidence, yet in *The Crying of Lot 49* the fine line between randomness and pattern is always under question. The text complicates our sense of this line by its transmission procedures. Through much of the novel Oedipa receives her stories second- and third-hand, always displaced from the originary moment. Moreover, these stories disrupt themselves: Manny Di Presso’s account of American GI bones used for cigarette filters is open to question because its source is an organized crime figure; *The Courier’s Tragedy* becomes a problem of textual transmission as Oedipa tries to account for the line mentioning Trystero in the performance she has witnessed; and Mr. Thoht himself is barely able to keep his memories of his grandfather separated from the cartoons he watches on television. Oedipa needs to experience Tristero firsthand if she is every going to make sense of this strange detour in her quest for the authoritative tale of Inverarity.

Oedipa’s odyssey through San Francisco in Chapter 5 brings her closer to a sense of Tristero’s reality at the same time that she comes to realize how marginally she is positioned in relation to that reality. To become the storyteller, Oedipa must try to move from the margin to the center, and her opportunity comes when “[t]hrough an open doorway, on the stair leading up into the disinfectant-smelling twilight of a rooming house she saw an old man huddled, shaking with grief she couldn’t hear” (125). Like another Greek hero, Odysseus, Oedipa enters this symbolic realm of the dead to

bring back a message from the enactment of self-discovery. Benjamin asserts that one of the archaic representatives of the storyteller is “the trading seaman,” the carrier of “the lore of faraway places.”<sup>11</sup> Odysseus of course fills this role in the *Odyssey*, but by the time Western culture has reached Pynchon’s vision of San Francisco in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Odysseus has become the decrepit sailor Oedipa encounters on the rooming-house steps, a seaman who will never make it home to his wife in Fresno and who asks Oedipa to post “a letter that looked like he’d been carrying it around for years” (125).

On one level, the sailor’s story has lost its oral dimension, reduced to a text that may never reach his Penelope, whose patience, by now, has probably worn quite thin. Yet on another level, as Oedipa looks at him she perceives a different encryption of his tale—a tale that would someday

end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare seat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost[.] She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him without it. (126)

This transmission and exchange through human contact is one of the most moving scenes in all of Pynchon’s writing.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as the scene develops, Oedipa is increasingly drawn to the insight that at this moment, when the sailor’s letter has given her the key to the empirical existence of Tristero, it is the metaphoric formation of existence that dominates perception: “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was” (129).

Oedipa’s uncertainty is figured in the play on DT/dt (delirium tremens/time differential). In the high magic of low puns, Oedipa recognizes that “DT’s must give access to dt’s of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright” (129). Again, as with the deaf-mute dancing that soon follows this moment in the narrative, Oedipa experiences something beyond the visible realm of her limited, culturally inscribed perceptions. This glimmering hint, however, is nothing more than that—Oedipa recognizes her helplessness to preserve either the story the sailor has to transmit or the sailor himself. Although Oedipa will follow the trail of an apparent Tristero courier, this experience does not become “story,”

it becomes “data” that Oedipa knows she has verified, yet “she wanted it all to be fantasy” (132).

After the experience with the sailor, Oedipa’s actions become increasingly mechanical and distant. Her contact with those who have surrounded her quest begins to unravel—Hilarius flips out, Mucho trips out, Metzger runs off, Driblette checks out, Zapf’s Used Books burns down, and so on—until she makes her last stand at the novel’s closing auction. The process of disruption and loss that leads Oedipa to all but total isolation signifies the entropy of Oedipa’s life story, where gains in the quantity of information are offset by the gradual destruction of the story itself. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to say that only one moment in the text stages this shift from story to information; indeed, Oedipa still desires the authoritative story even at the end, but there seems to be a conspiracy against her. Ultimately, Oedipa comes to embody the postmodern condition of information overload—like a reader of postmodern fiction (Pynchon’s own novels, for example), Oedipa cannot keep all of the fragments together in one totalized story. As Molly Hite has observed, the “absent insight” that will lead to the “Holy Center” of Pynchon’s fictional universe is always displaced and deferred.<sup>13</sup>

But displacement and deferral pervade Pynchon’s novel from its very first sentences, which are watched over by the “greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (9). Television, video, and filmmaking are to become significant foci in *Vineland*,<sup>14</sup> and in *The Crying of Lot 49* we can see an early example of Pynchon’s fascination with television and the creation of television culture.<sup>15</sup> This fictional deployment of television has already been noted in Mr. Thoth’s cartoon-altered consciousness, and it plays a side role in Oedipa’s encounter with John Nefastis, but it is most apparent in the novel’s second chapter, when Oedipa and her co-executor, the lawyer Metzger, first meet to discuss Inverarity’s will (28–43). At first she cannot believe in his reality:

He turned out to be so good-looking that Oedipa thought at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on. It had to be an actor. He stood at the door, behind him the oblong pool shimmering silent in a mild diffusion of light from the nighttime sky, saying, “Mrs. Maas,” like a reproach. His enormous eyes, lambent, extravagantly lashed, smiled out at her wickedly; she looked around him for reflectors, microphones, camera cabling, but there was only himself and a debonair bottle of French Beaujolais, which he claimed to’ve smuggled last year into

California, this rollicking lawbreaker, past the frontier guards.  
(28)

In the passage, the dialogic intersection of discourses is striking. At first, Oedipa can only organize Metzger through her still-budding paranoia as a simulation—not a real lawyer but an actor playing a part. Oedipa’s regular lawyer, Roseman, with his obsessive views on the “Perry Mason” television series (18–20), has foregrounded this reading, and as the plot of the novel develops Oedipa will increasingly wonder whether everything she has experienced has been staged. Oedipa’s simulated reading of Metzger as actor is intensified by the double framing of the door and the pool that focuses him against the night sky backdrop. The description of his first words and of his eyes then slips into the voice of Raymond Chandler, and if we associate this description with Oedipa’s point of view, is it any wonder that she starts looking for the camera? Even when it is “only himself” and a bottle of wine, the indirect telling of the *story* of the wine echoes certain movie plot clichés, which Pynchon’s narrator undercuts in the voice of a studio promoter hyping a situation comedy starring “this rollicking law-breaker.”

By destabilizing this “cute meet,” Pynchon wants to question the status of the “real.” As Jean Baudrillard writes, “Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium, such as photography.”<sup>16</sup> We can safely extend Baudrillard’s example to include film and television; indeed, the cultural function of both has been the massive production and reproduction of images that within contemporary culture underscores Oscar Wilde’s adage: “Life imitates Art.” Yet Pynchon’s substitutions are never simple metaphors: Metzger looks like an actor; then we discover a few sentences later that he actually once was a child actor, driven by a stagestruck mother, and “‘You know what mothers like that turn their male children into’” (29). Metzger deploys a Freudian reading (yet another metaphor) to rationalize his oedipal upbringing, to which Oedipa replies, “‘You certainly don’t look,’” only to be cut short by her own counter-rationalization of the apparent discontinuity of images, perhaps recognizing that at the level of signs her own name reproduces a medium for telling his story. In Metzger, we see a startling contrast between Benjamin’s conception of “story” and the hyperreality of California culture, in which the carefully constructed *look* is projected and reproduced in a symbolic exchange of signs or “realities” that are always simulations of simulations. Metzger may argue that “Looks don’t mean a thing any more.... I live inside by looks, and I’m never sure” (29), but we know better.

Yet Oedipa may prefer hyperreality to story: when Metzger suggests that he and Inverarity had once discussed her, she snaps on the TV to avoid hearing about herself. What blooms onto the screen is the movie *Cashiered*, starring none other than Baby Igor—Metzger the child actor. From here the coincidences proliferate; not only with Metzger in the film, but the commercials that frame the segments of the film all promote Inverarity interests: Fangoso Lagoons (the map of which reminds Oedipa of her earlier hierophanic moment where she compared San Narciso to a giant printed circuit—one of the novel's many technological metaphors for the means of transmission and reproduction), Beaconsfield Cigarettes, and Hogan's Seraglio. The corporate holdings, the assets to be transmitted to Inverarity's heirs, are now reproduced in broadcast images that trade only in the production of desire, yet we might question whether that desire is for a real product or merely for a simulation captured in the semiotics of advertising. This matrix of simulations comes to overwhelm Oedipa to the point that she cannot disengage her life from the incessant reduplication of images.

Again, Metzger serves to represent this matrix of reproduction. At one point, Metzger tells Oedipa that he had recontextualized as a tax write-off her fondly remembered trip with Inverarity to Mexico. This revaluing of her cherished experience prompts Oedipa to accuse Metzger of being, along with Perry Mason, a shyster, to which he responds with an explication of the connection between lawyers and actors:

“But our beauty lies,” explained Metzger, “in this extended capacity for convolution. A lawyer in a courtroom, in front of a jury, becomes an actor, right? Raymond Burr is an actor impersonating a lawyer, who in front of a jury becomes an actor. Me, I'm a former actor who became a lawyer. They've done a pilot film of a TV series, in fact, based loosely on my career, starring my friend Manny Di Presso, a one-time lawyer who quit his firm to become an actor. Who in this pilot plays me, an actor become a lawyer reverting periodically to being an actor. The film is in an air-conditioned vault at one of the Hollywood studios, light can't fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly.” (33)

Yet most pilot TV shows are never broadcast in the first place, so the endless repetition (and it probably *can't* be repeated while it is safe in that vault) marks an already emptied means of reproduction. Moreover, it should not surprise us that Di Presso shows up in the next chapter at Fangoso Lagoons, once again a lawyer, now building a case against the Inverarity estate over the

bones used in the Beaconsfield cigarette project. That this has filiations with Mr. Thoth and *The Courier's Tragedy*, as well as to other clues Oedipa traces, suggests the hyperreal intertextuality that is woven through the various transmissions of the text. The lines of demarcation between transmissions disappear, hushed in a way that disrupts any hope Oedipa (or the reader) might have for the emergence of a univocal "story."

At this point, Pynchon teaches us how to read *The Crying of Lot 49*. The plot of Metzger's evening with Oedipa becomes entangled with the plot of the film *Cashiered*. To fulfill his desired tryst with Oedipa, Metzger engages in a game dynamic based on determining the plot and ending of the film. The plot of the game entails their sexual liaison, which ultimately, as it turns out, follows the archetypal plot of sexual conquest in a paradoxical relation to the plot of military failure depicted in the film. This intersection of plots, however, is not simply an alternation we might structurally chart; instead, the film reels are shown out of order, disrupting the continuity of Oedipa's reading in such a way as to call into question the teleological convention she expresses: "All those movies have happy endings." Since Metzger will not give her odds, Oedipa hedges her bet (that the film will not end with the conventional happy ending) and disrupts the game—Strip Botticelli—by donning nearly every piece of clothing she has available. In the humor of this parody of epic preparation, capped by the flight of the hair spray can, we can see again the influence of television culture as Oedipa's acts of avoidance rival any that Lucille Ball concocted during the years of "I Love Lucy."

Nevertheless, there is an underside to this scene: as Oedipa seeks to build her defenses by overdressing, she deconstructs the erotics of the fashion system and the semiotics of the scantily clad image on the sign of the Echo Courts Motel. Clothes confer power and control within social contexts; but like the spray can that starts careening around the bathroom after she knocks it over, Oedipa's power is limited and will be exhausted by Metzger's persistence. In the process, Oedipa loses a sense of her identity; the intrusion of Metzger into her life disrupts the transmission of her life story as faithful housewife. The condition she enters unknowingly is that of becoming—a process of shifting states of being that shakes her out of her Young Republican complacency and toward a more radical formation of her self.

Added to this already full scene is the performance of the Paranoids, a musical simulation of 1960s British rock'n'roll. Not only does their music drown out Oedipa and Metzger's conversation (which is already disrupted and incomplete), but it comes to coincide with the intersection of transmissions that are about to climax around Oedipa. The game of Strip

Botticelli mutates into Metzger's playing with Oedipa as if she were a "Barbie doll," removing the layers of clothing: "She may have fallen asleep once or twice. She awoke at last to find herself getting laid; she'd come in on a sexual crescendo in progress, like a cut to a scene where the camera's already moving. Outside the fugue of guitars had begun" (42). Oedipa has become nearly totally passive as the metaphors suggest the intersection of music and the cinematic. Orgasm, however, coincides with a power blackout: "Her climax and Metzger's, when it came, coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black" (42). The power's return coincides with the movie's ending—the tragic ending Oedipa had predicted. Although she has "won" the game, she loses in the end. Metzger has exploited Oedipa's weakness for storytelling by engaging her in a game that trades only in information, in hyperreal fragments that defy conventional reconstruction. By this means he achieves her submission, and, as we have come to recognize in the novel, Oedipa's actions are always haunted by paradigms of submission to forces beyond her control, forces perhaps set up by Inverarity, forces that always reorder the plot away from a teleology that will resolve itself into order.

Oedipa's submissions to the transmissive power of other cultural formations present a difficulty for readers who desire her success in the quest, and who also desire success in their own teleologies of reading. Pynchon perhaps saw Oedipa as kin to Herbert Stencil in *V.* and Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*—seekers of coherent stories who end up clutching fragments of information rather than a unified truth. In *Vineland*, Pynchon writes of a stronger group of women, especially DL Chastain, whose battle with power, embodied in Brock Vond, does not presuppose her submission. The women in that novel take over the technology of hyperreality—the film cameras and videotapes—to record their stories and provide a record of the abuses of power. But Oedipa works increasingly alone, trapped in solipsistic transmissions that self-disrupt in moments of extreme doubt. The set of signs that comes together for Oedipa cannot be exchanged in the medium of "story" because variability and indeterminacy have replaced the older models of narrative transmission that once served to order our world.

Can Oedipa tell her "story" to anyone, can it find a form for its telling? Rather than a story of inheritance, is it ultimately the story of disinheritance, a story of the disenfranchisement of Oedipa Maas? At the close of the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon seems to disinherit *The Crying of Lot 49* when he comments somewhat disparagingly that this "story ... was marketed as a 'novel.'"<sup>17</sup> As readers, we consume "novels" in particular ways



based on the codes and conventions of reading that we bring to a text. Pynchon has always challenged our habitual conventions of reading, asking us to trace other possibilities within the variable codes of his writing. We end the text with “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49” (183); if the truth is to come, it comes in the void, the hushed silence of the blank end pages—the pages upon which many readers begin to inscribe their own texts of interpretation. In *Vineland*, Pynchon briefly visits the fictional universe of *The Crying of Lot 49*, but all we discover is that Mucho Maas “decided around 1967, after a divorce remarkable even in that more innocent time for its geniality, to go into record producing.”<sup>18</sup> Although hardly the continuation we may desire, at least we can infer that Oedipa got out of the auction room. Small comfort.

#### NOTES

1. Anne Mangel, “Maxwell’s Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*,” in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 96.

2. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections of the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 94.

3. Richard Poirier makes this point in his essay “The Importance of Thomas Pynchon,” in *Mindful Pleasures*, p. 22.

4. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” p. 94.

5. For more on transmission theory, see my “Mimesis, Authority, and Belief in Narrative Poetics: Toward a Transmission Theory for a Poetics of Fiction,” *Novel 18* (1985): 217–22; more specifically on the topic of authority, see Ralph Flores. *The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority: Deconstructive Readings of Self-Questioning Narratives, St. Augustine to Faulkner* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), and my “Questions of Authority and (Dis)Belief in Literary Theory.” *New Orleans Review 12*, 3 (1985): 67–74.

6. See Jean Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death” and “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 119–48, 166–84.

7. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” p. 83.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

10. Uncannily, Benjamin writes a passage that echoes Mr. Thoth’s meditation on age and remembrance: “A man—so says the truth that was meant here—who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life.” (*Ibid.*, p. 100)

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–5.

12. Compare Oedipa's gesture to help the sailor with a scene such as Franz Pökler's trying to comfort a concentration camp survivor in *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), pp. 432–3.

13. Molly Hite, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983).

14. As early as *V.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), Pynchon creates Fergus Mixolydian, who, by implanting a switch “on the inner skin of his forearm[,] ... became an extension of the TV set” (p. 56). *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990) presents us with representations of 1980s California, where television has saturated the culture to the point that one character—Hector Zuñiga, a true “Tubefreak”—has to be taken to a “Tubaldetox” center.

15. An excellent source for understanding the cultural aspects of television is John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987).

16. Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” p. 144.

17. Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p. 22.

18. *Vineland*, p. 309.



MICHAEL WOOD

*Pynchon's Mason & Dixon*

A character in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* pursues, by various dubious and ungrounded means ("inference, poetic licence, forcible dislocation of personality"), what is described as "a past he didn't remember and had no right in, save the right of imaginative anxiety or historical care, which is recognized by no one." Recognized by no one, and therefore not much of a right perhaps; but a right all the same, a slender justification, a suggestion of something better than mere curiosity about the old days, tourism in nostalgia.

I kept thinking of this suggestion as I read *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's new novel, wondering where it was going, when it would end, whether it could end, why I was enjoying it so much, why its very aimlessness, which bothered me for a couple of hundred pages, ceased to be a problem. It's not that its aimlessness became its point. There was no simple retreat into mimetic fallacy. Rather, the general aimlessness seemed to conceal or permit a number of particular, interesting aims, and Pynchon appeared to feel no urge to unite them into a single big story, or indeed into a story at all, as distinct say from a set of scattered jokes, perceptions, songs, evocations of moments, places, people. The obvious question is why we should care about this amiably imagined old world, this motley and circumstantial eighteenth century smuggled into the twentieth—unless of course it is a ragged

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twentieth century smuggled into a simulacrum of the eighteenth. But the phrase from *V.* both answers this question and invites us to reformulate it. If we do care, we don't have to ask why. Our care, our anxiety constitute our right, our passport or excuse. The new question is, what are we doing when we care about the (more or less remote) past? Where does the exercise of our right get us?

Reviews of *Mason & Dixon* were (mainly) intelligent and sympathetic, and, appropriately, slightly dazed. Anthony Lane (*New Yorker*, 12 May 1997) thought the book had "a narrative—a real honest-to-God story," while Louis Menand (*New York Review of Books*, 12 June 1997) said "the narrative machinery just seems to crank out one fabulous yarn after another. The book is, in short, in no great rush about getting nowhere in particular." Lane decided Pynchon was "in the fullest sense, an old hippie," while Menand saw the novelist as "the unlikely offspring of Jack Kerouac and the Cornell English department." These designations are not as contradictory as they look, and represent rather well the sense many of us have that Pynchon ought to be placeable and yet is difficult to place. Menand then developed an interesting argument about culture and modernity, in which Pynchon is seen to have written an allegory of our depletion of the world, "a work of cultural anthropology, a *Tristes Tropiques* of North American civilization, and an astonishing and wonderful book." James Wood, in a lengthy and glittering essay (*New Republic*, 4 August 1997), seemed at times to be reviewing Menand's review rather than Pynchon's book. Wood objected to the cultural allegory of *Mason & Dixon*—"It is about a cultural moment, about an idea or an ideal—not a moment of free fiction but of unfree allegory"—and to the cultural politics of the work. "Pynchon's fiction elaborates an allegorical politics. Partial truths are forced into a bent absolutism." There are "delights in Pynchon's book, and some wonders," but the whole thing is colored by "a purchaseless benignity"—Wood wanted something a little stiffer. Menand saw Pynchon as dedicated to a politics of radical freedom, a meditation on the devastations of order. Wood saw the politics of freedom as a politics of vagueness. "Dream is the utopian space of resistance," but both dream and utopia are empty words, wishful avoidances of "governance and rule."

It's true that Pynchon is not suggesting alternatives to order; not even utopian ones. But the argument between Menand and Wood is rehearsed in *Mason & Dixon* itself, and the allegory, it seems to me, keeps dissolving into its particles. The cost of governance is a recurring, fragmented question, and it is one of the reasons for the recourse to the past with its array of inspectable choices among possibilities.

We may want to think of Walter Benjamin reminding us in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that not even the dead will be safe if we fail to abandon our notion of simply progressive history, which consigns the past to the rubbish-heap even as it claims to remember it. Or of the following exchange which occurs late in *Mason & Dixon*, and where the words *history* and *care* figure prominently. One character wonders whether the famed boundary line between Pennsylvania and Maryland will have produced, in “History’s assessment,” more good than not-so-good. Another character says, “You wonder? That’s all? What about ‘care’? Don’t you care?” Both of these characters are historical, meticulously reimaged. It makes a difference, although perhaps not the difference one expects, that one of them is a mechanical duck. It is the duck, none other than Vaucanson’s famous automaton, who asks the questions about caring. It is Charles Mason, senior architect of the Line, who wonders about history’s verdict. Pynchon tells us, for good measure, that the duck, at this moment an unlocalized voice, is able to “act powerfully as a moral Center.” “Tis the Duck speaking, naturally,” he adds, “—or, rather, artificially.” “Naturally” here means obviously, who else would we expect to ask the hard ethical question. Not Mason and Dixon, they’re just doing their job, and wondering is as far as they mostly go towards philosophy. But then the artificial is the natural, only the mechanical duck seems to have the longer human perspective on human labor.

*Mason & Dixon* is, among many other things, a book about learning, rather slowly, to care instead of wonder. The central characters learn this, about themselves, each other, their families and friends, their various surveying and astronomical tasks, through surviving and talking and thinking; and we learn this, about ourselves, about America, about boundaries, about historical possibility, through reading the book, staying with these characters. And then we all forget, and need to learn again, since we can’t care all the time and about everything, and we can’t stop wondering. There’s nothing wrong with wonder, anyway, and care can easily get soggy. We just need to spot the times when wonder is not enough; not a right, just a spectator’s privilege.

The novel is narrated, in 1786 in Philadelphia, by one Wicks Cherrycoke, an English clergyman sponging off his American relatives, and who has met Mason and Dixon on several occasions. It’s quite clear that he is making up a good deal of his narrative, generously indulging in imaginative anxiety and historical care. When Cherrycoke guesses at one of Mason’s rather complicated thoughts, we are told that “the Revd ... was there but in a representational sense, ghostly as an imperfect narrative to be told in futurity”—a narrative now has created a narrated then, or more precisely, the

past is being fitted to the needs of the present, scripted by hindsight, like the report of a prophecy after its fulfillment. This is not to say that the picture is false or that the prophecy wasn't fulfilled; only that its logic is later than its events, and that whole portions of it have been imagined. The imagined can also be true, as Flaubert used to insist.

In an intricate mirroring of this set-up, Mason recalls that he and Dixon used to have a scribe following them around. "Preacher named Cherrycoke. Scribbling ev'rything down...." The gag here is that Mason is talking to Dr. Johnson and Boswell, and he also describes Cherrycoke as his and Dixon's "joint Boswell." At this point Mason puts a truly dizzying question to the Doctor's biographer.

"Have you," twirling his Hand in Ellipses,—“you know, ever ... had one yourself? If I'm not prying.”

“Had one what?”

“Hum ... a Boswell, Sir,—I mean, of your own. Well, you couldn't very well call him that, being one yourself,—say, a sort of Shadow ever in the Room who has haunted you, preserving your ev'ry spoken remark,—”

We glimpse an infinite regress. Johnson has a Boswell, and Boswell has another. And that Boswell.... This happens often enough in life, in games of Chinese Whispers, say, and in gossip and politics at all levels. But of course it happens all the time in fiction, where there is a shadow in every room, pretending to preserve every invented remark—the historical author whom fictional characters once in a while, in Nabokov, Proust, and Joyce, for instance, eerily point to and name. In Beckett, they eerily point and fail to name. Pynchon is Cherrycoke's Cherrycoke, and what Cherrycoke calls futurity is the novelist's perpetual present, the now which is and is not then.

Mason and Dixon, widowed West Country astronomer and bachelor Geordie surveyor, first meet in 1761 on a voyage to Cape Town to observe the Transit of Venus. More precisely they meet in a pub in Portsmouth before the voyage's start; and the voyage itself is a second attempt, since they were supposed to go to Sumatra, until their ship was set upon and driven back to England by the French navy. After various none too consequential adventures in South Africa, Dixon returns to England, and Mason is sent to St. Helena to observe other stars, neither suspecting that they will be paired up again in the American project that made their names, if not them, famous. The bulk of the book sees them in America, measuring their Line, cutting through forests, meeting a picaresque mob of exiles and extravagants, eating

(a lot), drinking (even more), getting cold, getting hot, getting lost, arguing, Anglican against Quaker, mystic against rationalist, and finally discovering that their need and respect for each other, in spite of the frequent “acidity” of their exchanges and their constant mutual fending off of real intimacies, the drawing of a sort of line *between* Mason and Dixon, add up to a form of passion, indeed the central passion and care of their lives. They return to England when their work is done, and Dixon dies in his native North in 1779. Mason, always the more haunted of the two, rather abruptly ups and returns to America, where he dies in Philadelphia in the year of Cherrycoke’s story.

The language of *Mason & Dixon*, with its many capitalized words and constant contractions, its fine and ancient turns of phrase, suggests an elaborate pastiche, something in the vein of John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*. There is certainly plenty of pastiche in the book, much of it extremely brilliant—“She sinks with a sidewise contraction of her body onto a Couch design’d more to encourage the Illusions of Youth, than to console the Certainties of Age”—but the overall effect is of something else, “beyond pastiche,” as Anthony Lane said, “with none of the cramped self-amusement that usually attends the genre.”

The effect is very difficult to describe. The jokes and songs play a large part in it, and may help us to see where we are. The jokes are often puns, casual, foolish, thrown away. “Suture Self, as the Medical Students like to say”; “Sirius Business.” “Not sure I know how to cut a Sod,” Mason mumbles. Dixon, never one to miss the chance of any gag, says, “Quickly’s best,—before he can pick up a Weapon ... ?”

“Come, Sir, can you not sense here, there, just ’round the corner ... the scent of fresh Coriander, the whisper of a Sarong ... ?”

“Sari,” corrects Mason.

“Not at all Sir,—’twas I who was sarong.”

The book teems with this kind of stuff, usually although not always coming from Mason and Dixon themselves, as if they were Groucho and Chico, or, closer to old England, Morecambe and Wise. The sheer ease and levity of the jokes suggest a habit, banter as a form of (perhaps unrecognized) intimacy, but they also suggest a world saturated with echoes and ready-made phrases, patchwork cultural material which runs backwards and forwards in time. We presumably need to know something of the context and tone of Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* to get the full flavor of the Indian



response to Mason's explanation that "they who control the Microscopick, control the World": "Listen to me, Defecates-with-Pigeons..." Pynchon doesn't borrow "the pursuit of Happiness" from Jefferson, Jefferson borrows it from Pynchon's Dixon, who invents the phrase as a toast because he doesn't want to salute either his king or his king's enemies.

The songs have the same tang of multiple anachronism. The following lines could in part have come from Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, but surely the idiom belongs to a later period.

Yet a Shark is a Shark, in the day or the dark,  
 Be he Minister, fish or King's Be-ench-man,  
 With a Munch and a Crunch and the Lunch shall be free!  
 And Goodbye, Royal Soci ... e-tee!

In this couplet Brecht's version of Gay seems to have taken a detour through the Western:

Be it dangle 'em high, or strangle' em low,  
 Hangmen have Feelings, or didn't you know?

In other songs, the twentieth century is firmly in control, from, say, Cole Porter to Janis Joplin:

It ... was ... fun,  
 While it lasted,  
 And it lasted,  
 Quite a while,—

Dairy!—oh gimme that  
 Dairy! the lengths that I'd  
 Go for its sake are extr'ordin-ary,—

The jokes and the anachronisms are not incidental, not just winks at a knowing audience, signs of a retro eighteenth century we don't have to take too seriously or of some sophisticated line of thought about the impossibility of history. They are the least anxious of exercises of imaginative anxiety, ways of making Mason and Dixon honorary citizens, citizens by allusion, let's say, of two centuries, theirs and ours; and actual citizens of yet another country, the infiltrated, memory-haunted fictional space of this novel, "contemporary and colonial at the same time," as Louis Menand put it. What starts as

pastiche ends up as a new language—made up of old languages, to be sure. We learn to read and perhaps even to speak it as we learn to read and speak the late prose of Henry James. And what we discover through doing this is not so much a definable history or a legible psychology as a set of habits of mind, modernity refreshed by long immersion in what can be imagined of another century.

The going is not easy, and the writing is not all stylistic success. Here is part of a battle at sea:

Casualties begin to appear in the Sick Bay, the wounds inconceivable, from Oak-Splinters and Chain and Shrapnel, and as Blood creeps like Evening to Dominion over all Surfaces, so grows the Ease of giving in to Panic Fear. It takes an effort to act philosophickal, or even to find ways to be useful.

The second sentence, in spite of its spelling, is lame and modern, but the rhythm and diction of the first sentence show precisely how pastiche can begin to look like a new idiom. It's as if Pynchon has reinvented gothic prose—that is, apparently copied it but actually turned it into something else, the way Borges' Pierre Menard reinvents Don Quixote. Here is a more extended example, a picture of the dreamfilled sleep of reason, which, like the invitation to care, is one of Pynchon's recurring topics. "Isn't this suppos'd to be the Age of Reason?" Mason jokingly asks himself when he thinks he hears the voice of his dead wife, but there is a rationality of the irrational too. "But if Reason be also Permission at last to believe in the evidence of our Earthly Senses, then how can he not concede to her some Resurrection?" "Some Resurrection" is very delicate; as if it came in different amounts, and any quantity of it would be better than nothing.

There may be found, within the malodorous Grotto of the Selves, a conscious Denial of all that Reason holds true. Something that knows, unarguably as it knows Flesh is sooner or later Meat, that there are Beings who are not wise, or spiritually advanced, or indeed capable of Human kindness, but ever and implacably cruel, hiding, haunting, waiting,—known only to the bloodscented deserts of the Night,—and any who see them out of Disguise are instantly pursued,—and none escape, however long and fruitful be the years till the Shadow creeps 'cross the Sill-plate, its Advent how mute. Spheres of Darkness, Darkness impure,—Plexities of Honor and Sin we may never clearly sight,

for when we venture near they fall silent, Murdering must be silent, by Potions and Spells, by summonings from beyond the Horizons, of Spirits who dwell a little over the Line between the Day and its annihilation, between the number'd and the unimagined,—between common safety and Ruin ever solitary.

This is gothic enough because of its lurid personifications and its excited adjectives, its grotto and its eagerness to scare us, but the element of pleasure in the picture, the lingering lilt of parody, also hints at a new gothic, loyal to the spooky solicitations of the old but aware of its later incarnations, like the moment of Freud's calling up Virgil's powers of darkness at the opening of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or for that matter, since Pynchon doesn't worry too much about divisions between high and low culture, of the radio mysteries of *The Shadow*. Those implacable, disguised beings are twinned with something inside the self; they are versions of death, but also engage us in honor and sin. What annihilates day, in this extraordinary vision, is not just its end, as in Hopkins ("All/Life death does end and each day dies in sleep"), but some unnameable, unshareable form of ruin.

*Mason & Dixon* has plenty of flickers of Pynchon's old interest in conspiracy. There are hints of orders behind orders, murky involvements of the Jesuits and the East India Company in affairs which seem remote from their spheres. "Are we being us'd," Dixon asks early on, "by Forces invisible." "Charter'd Companies," Mason remarks much later, "may indeed be the form the World has now increasingly begun to take." "Both Pennsylvania and Maryland are Charter'd Companies as well..." "Tho' I don't mind a likely Conspiracy," Dixon says, "I prefer it be form'd in the interests of Trade...."

"Whom are we working for, Mason?"

"I rather thought, one day, you would be the one to tell me."

But the flickers are only flickers. No overarching conspiracy, or even the steady suspicion of one, unites the unravelled strands of this book. The closest we get to a plot in this sense is the notion that geometry itself, once applied to the material world, might be an imperialist gesture, an administrative onslaught by the numbered on the unimagined, to use Pynchon's terms in the passage quoted above. "To rule forever," a Chinese anti-Jesuit says, "it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call ... Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very

shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People....” The conservative view, of the American Revolution for example, is expressed as precisely the opposite—“the Refusal of all further Belief in Boundaries or British Government,—a will’d Departure from History”—which might suggest that Pynchon is really pushing a case here. Down with boundaries and bad history. This is what James Wood thought, and there is a curiously emphatic sentence which seems to confirm this view: “Mason and Dixon understand ... that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along—a conduit for Evil.” Even this is different from saying the Line *is* evil, though, and Mason’s and Dixon’s job is more often presented as a kind of trespass of reason, an incursion into the heart of darkness with instruments made for the light. The risk of the Line, of any line drawn across the unknown, is that it will destroy what Pynchon calls “the realm of the Subjunctive,” a sort of America of the mind, just beyond the edge of the America anyone knows. Surveyors and writers disenchant the world, as Louis Menand says, by drawing lines.

But the line also marks the realm of enchantment, and possibly creates the subjunctive, certainly highlights it. Without it we could hardly know where the indicative ended. Thinking of the Indians of the Ohio River territories, Pynchon writes of a “Membrane that divides their Subjunctive World from our number’d and dreamless Indicative”; and he describes the financiers and politicians of the American East as “Lords for whom Interests less subjunctive must ever enjoy Priority.” Reason and these Easterners inhabit “the true, terminable World,” and what they miss, it seems, is not a mystical revelation or an ancient wisdom, and not the grand conspiracy underlying all things, but a sense of “Human Incompletion.” The subjunctive, in *Mason & Dixon*, plays something of the role the preterite played in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but with a difference: the subjunctive is not what is passed over and not even what might have been, but what might be, the interminable because hypothetical world—a world which need be none the less precise because you have to imagine it. This place is America too, but only when America remembers it isn’t finished. America is “a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive hopes, for all that *may yet be true*.” The slightly dizzy romance of this phrasing fades as soon as we remember that the subjunctive doesn’t have to be good news. America is a dream but also an infinite danger, and never more dangerous, the implication is, than when it claims to know itself or close its frontiers. “We dream’d of you ... before we ever saw you,” an Indian says to Mason. “Yet you never dream’d of us.”

The book doesn’t mime aimlessness, but it does more than mime human incompleteness. It performs incompleteness in a complicated and

discreetly moving way—by suggesting its attraction and necessity and risk, and by finally failing to be loyal to it, by settling for completion at last, having staved it off as long as possible. Mason and Dixon, after their American adventures, are lost between worlds, and content to be there. “They are content to reside like Ferry-men or Bridge-keepers, ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition.” We are content too, or at least I am. There is something here of the familiar feeling of novel writers and novel readers: we have lived with these people too long to want to let them go, invested too much of our imagination in their continuing life. But there is more. Mason and Dixon are going to die in fiction, as they died in fact some two hundred years ago; Pynchon and his readers have other calls on their attention, and we too are going to die. But an end is not a completion. An end has to be accepted. To call it a completion is to fill it out with meaning, to turn death and limitation into a story, a version of progress. This can be very beautiful, and Mason’s reconciliation with his son on a journey to the north of England after Dixon’s death is a perfect example of the appeal of closure. Completion can be irresistible, as Frank Kermode acutely suggested long ago, and even ruin is a dark completion. But in Pynchon completion is also and always a betrayal, not of sprawling Romantic possibility, but of something like the truth of disorder, the unacceptable anticonspiracy of local knowledge.

DAVID COWART

*The Luddite Vision: Mason & Dixon*

Locke sank into a swoon;  
The Garden died;  
God took the spinning-jenny  
Out of his side.  
—Yeats, “Fragments”

Early reviewers and critics, praising Thomas Pynchon for his confidence with scientific, technological, and mathematical subjects, may have overestimated his commitment to such material.<sup>1</sup> His allusions to *Scientific American* notwithstanding, the author's intentions seem always to have involved more than didactic exhortation of readers to become scientifically knowledgeable. He has suggested, to be sure, that humanists who ignore science can do little more than defer to—or rail against—the ascendancy of technologists. He has sought, too, to deny science the power that mystery tends to wield over ignorance. Yet beyond these arguments, in one novel after another, Pynchon has devoted his formidable powers of subversion and satire to exposing the false premises behind the technocratic syllogism. Thus in *V.* a woman seeks to transform herself into a machine. In *The Crying of Lot 49* a nutty inventor invites volunteers to communicate with Maxwell's demon. In *Gravity's Rainbow* various characters seek, as technological grail,

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the Rocket that will complete the abortive Armageddon of World War II. In *Vineland*, the villainous federal agent Brock Vond perishes in one of the “dead-black Huey slicks” he favors in his private, highly mechanized war against pot-growing former hippies like Zoyd Wheeler.<sup>2</sup> In *Mason & Dixon*, finally, an astronomer and a surveyor violate the American wilderness in the name of cutting-edge cartography. Here Pynchon scrutinizes the age in which technology began to come into its own—bringing with it the modern world’s spiritual desperation. He exposes the fallacy of scientific rationalism at the moment of its great efflorescence in the eighteenth century.

If the seventeenth century saw an explosion of true science (Kepler’s formulation of planetary orbits, Newton’s optics and laws of motion, Boyle’s chemistry, Leibnitz’s calculus), the eighteenth century saw science expanded and applied. Pure science (Buffon in zoology, Linnaeus in taxonomy, Priestley and Lavoisier in chemistry) vied with practical applications, as Watt patented the steam engine, Arkwright the spinning jenny, and Cartwright the power loom. Adam Smith demonstrated the logic of markets; astronomers strove to determine a practical method for determining longitude at sea. Diderot published the monumental *Encyclopédie* (focused less on philosophy and great ideas, one should recall, than on mechanical and technological processes), and Benjamin Franklin, that paragon of canny pragmatism, invented the lightning rod, bifocals, and a new stove while demonstrating the rational principles of economic success. Meanwhile faith in human perfectibility grew as philosophy sought, in human affairs, some equivalent to the laws of physics. Surely civilized humanity could return to the natural nobility still visible, as Rousseau suggested, among savages. Surely human institutions, studied carefully enough, could be made answerable to reason. The century reached its apogee, some would say, with realization of a great experiment in self-government founded on rational principles: the American nation.

In *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon anatomizes this nation on the eve of its founding. Like other novelists and historians, he identifies a strange mix of philosophical rationalism, spiritual yearning, and economic rapacity in the American salmagundi. But uniquely he settles on the surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line as symbol of and index to the forces that would become America. Like the kabbalists at the tavern called the Rabbi of Prague, he sees that the handiwork of Mason and Dixon may be read, in its cartographic westering, “much as a Line of Text upon a Page of the sacred Torah,—a Tellurian Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> As kabbalists seek mystical significance beneath surface meanings, so does Pynchon descry in the line arrowing its way into the continent a host of portentous intimations regarding the future of the

nation whose birth, as the surveyors take their sightings, looms on the historical horizon.

Pynchon's views of the American eighteenth century incline, predictably, to the iconoclastic. Certainly the portraits here of George Washington or Benjamin Franklin bear little resemblance to the lovable figures depicted in older American histories. Franklin, his eyes hidden by spectacles that change color as often as the skin of a Vheissuvian spider monkey, represents mercantile forces that will elbow aside a host of spiritual and cultural alternatives in the New World. Washington, too, has his eye on emerging markets, and he dreams of an Ohio Company as rich as New York, Pennsylvania, or Massachusetts. The kabbalists may speak for the idea of a different America—now lost—when like Melville in *Israel Potter* they inveigh against “Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks.... The coming Rebellion is theirs,—Franklin and that Lot,—and Heaven help the rest of us, if they prevail” (487–88).

Piety and weaponry. At once spiritual and materialistic, idealistic and brutal, America has always displayed the instinct for contradiction and paradox that Fitzgerald, an early literary hero of Pynchon's, probes with such subtlety and economy in *The Great Gatsby*. Pynchon, too, studies the American paradox, which shows to peculiar advantage, he suggests, in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. Subject to a fundamental duality, the United States seemed to exemplify the triumph of reason and faith in human potential, yet without sacrificing its identity as a place of spiritual distinction—a city on a hill. Indeed, Pynchon intimates that the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic in growing numbers were fleeing not religious coercion so much as the Old World's crevice secularism. America, to them, represented “one more hope in the realm of the Subjunctive, one more grasp at the last radiant whispers of the last bights of Robe-hem, billowing Æther-driven at the back of an ever-departing Deity” (543, cf. 480). Home to “the poor fragments of a Magic irreparably broken” (612), America was, absurdly, “this object of hope that Miracles might yet occur, that God might yet return to Human affairs, that all the wistful Fictions necessary to the childhood of a species might yet come true, ... a third Testament” (353, Pynchon's ellipsis).

The language here reveals the attenuation, perhaps tragic, of religious faith, absurdly committed to hope, broken magic, “wistful Fictions,” an absconding deity, and “the realm of the Subjunctive” (the imagined-as-true). As one knows from studying the founders of the American state, the secularizing ideals of the Enlightenment—notably Deism—also found a



home on these shores. Thus Pynchon lays considerable emphasis on the secularism of the age. He characterizes the “times” as “unfriendly toward Worlds alternative to this one. Royal Society Members and French Encyclopaedists are in the Chariot, availing themselves whilst they may of any occasion to preach the Gospels of Reason, denouncing all that once was Magic, though too often in smirking tropes upon the Church of Rome.... One may be allowed an occasional Cock Lane Ghost,—otherwise, for any more in that Article, one must turn to Gothick Fictions” like the stories serialized in *The Ghastly Fop* (359).

In a number of ways *Mason & Dixon* is a 773-page expansion of sentiments previously articulated in Pynchon’s 1984 article “Is It OK To Be a Luddite?” Noting in this essay a “clear identification between the first Luddites and our own revolutionary origins,” Pynchon expresses an interest in the struggle between scientific rationalism and the perennial yearning for mystical possibility.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the novel he characterizes America as a crossroads for the energies of the eighteenth century, and here the Mason-Dixon Line becomes a powerful symbol of rationalism’s putting its mark on a land once consecrated to multiple perspectives, a land, as Pynchon says in *The Crying of Lot 49*, “with ... chances once so good for diversity.”<sup>5</sup> For those unsure after *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Slow Learner*, and *Vineland*, *Mason & Dixon* allows a glimpse of just what kind of Luddite Pynchon himself is.

In the article Pynchon examines the Luddite phenomenon of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for what it reveals of popular resistance to the materialism and incremental godlessness of Enlightenment thinking. “Folks in the 18th century believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells. The laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated back then” (40). At a time when science and the industrial revolution seemed to advance without check, Pynchon observes, “religion was being more and more secularized into Deism and nonbelief.” But an “abiding hunger for evidence of God and afterlife, for salvation—bodily resurrection, if possible—remained” (41). Describing this hunger as a disruptive presence within the Age of Reason, he recognizes in Gothicism and romanticism, as many before him have noted, manifestations of resistance to an untrammelled Enlightenment narrative. He draws his examples from both European and American culture, with particular reference to Methodism, the Great Awakening, Freemasonry, and such fictions as Hugh Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

This last, characterized as a “Luddite novel,” an “attempt ... to *deny the machine*” (40), begins and ends amid the same polar wastes—frequently invoked in Pynchon’s previous work—that Jeremiah Dixon, late in his story, claims to have traversed in the “small Sledge of Caribou Hide” (739) of a mysterious emissary, a kind of Hermes Psychopompus of the Arctic. Dixon’s experience resembles that of Shelley’s Robert Walton, the arctic explorer who beholds, in Frankenstein’s hideous creature, a ghostly precipitate in the beaker of Enlightenment rationalism. As Walton perpend the lesson embodied in the dying Victor Frankenstein, victim of a Faustian dream of scientific mastery, so must Dixon be brought into imagined contact with what his own science threatens with extinction. Poised between two historical paradigms, Dixon visits one of those “holes at the poles” theorized by John Cleve Symmes (and certain characters in *V.*). Entering the hollow earth, “the World beneath the World” (498), he encounters the race those above call “Gnomes, Elves, smaller folk” and, in a reversal of Swift’s Academy of Lagado (itself an inspired meditation on intellectual hubris in the Age of Reason), visits “the local Academy of Sciences” (740) to learn the toll that researches such as his will have on this fabulous realm: “‘Once the solar parallax is known,’ they told me, ‘once the necessary Degrees are measur’d, and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish. We will have to seek another Space’” (741). Dixon’s parable, told to Mason, his fellow measurer of the earth, recapitulates and expands a conceit introduced over a hundred pages earlier by the lumberjack Stig. In both instances, Dixon defends the fantasy by alluding to the Book of Job, specifically to those passages in which an angry deity chastens human intellectual presumption.

Dixon’s visit to the “*Terra Concava*” (740) makes retroactively clear the novel’s many references to the subterranean realm. These include the “Islands in Earth’s Magnetic Field” (442) and the perfectly spherical lead deposits (547) described by the crystal scryer, Jonas Everybeet; the cavern Mason and Dixon visit near South Mountain (497); and “Capt. Shelby’s ‘Mound’” (598), which seems to inspire Mason’s yarning when, searching for Schiehallion, the Scottish mountain “too regular to be natural” (748), he has a conversation, in 1773, with Samuel Johnson. On this occasion, evidently imagined by Wicks Cherrycoke, Dr. Johnson cautions Mason against Deism, which represents the attenuation of miraculous possibility in the world. Much earlier, in one of her visitations on St. Helena, the dead Rebekah urges Mason to “[l]ook to the Earth” and hearken to “Tellurick Secrets” (172) still capable, perhaps, of chastening rationalism untempered by spirit. Like Dr. Johnson, she implies that modern science threatens more than gnomes and

elves. By denying that consciousness or spirit might survive annihilation of the body, it threatens the dead with an oblivion yet more absolute.

Pynchon suggests that the subterranean realm represents a vital, if dangerous, alternative to Enlightenment self-delusion. The darkness of this realm figures the something tenebrous at the human heart—and at the heart of history, too. The resisters of rationalist excess—in this Pynchon joins Blake, Yeats, D. H. Lawrence—have always construed this darkness, when acknowledged, as fecund. When repressed, it issues in reptiles of the mind. Nor do the reptiles scatter when exposed to light; indeed, *The Crying of Lot 49*'s Dr. Hilarius is driven mad by, among other things, the realization that psychoanalysis, whose inventor discovered repression in one of the supreme achievements of Enlightenment thinking, cannot finally banish the demons of the human spirit. The letting in of light, efficacious at first, eventually effects a different kind of repression, blighting the growth of any spiritual mushrooms in those once-dark cellars of the psyche.

Pynchon also gauges political repression, targeting the colonialism that notoriously justifies itself as a bringing of light to the benighted (one thinks of Kurtz's painting in *Heart of Darkness*). The author subverts this tendentious symbolism in repeated references to the infamous 1756 incident in which the "*Peevish Wazir*" (562) of Calcutta plunged a selection of Europeans into a dreadful oubliette, a "black hole" in which the reader recognizes a complex metaphor for all that an age of reason might seek to deny. Pynchon limns the terrible political meaning of that cornerstone of Freudian doctrine, the return of the repressed. Of the "146 Europeans ... oblig'd to spend the night of 20-21 June 1756" (152) in the nawab's airless dungeon, only 26 survived. Those to whom evil is done, says the poet, do evil in return.

Modern astronomy contributes further to the symbolism of the black hole. The star that has collapsed and created a gravitational pull so powerful as to preclude the escape of light is yet another metaphor that pronounces on the Enlightenment pretension to knowledge. Just as light can be swallowed in a black hole, so must the Age of Reason be schooled to its own limitations. All totalizing systems—colonialism, for example, or capitalism, or logocentrism, or language, or, for that matter, Ptolemaic astronomy—may be described as subject to the creation of black holes. Each defines itself in such a way as to seem all-subsuming, yet sooner or later each reveals inward collapse. Each is, in the Althusserian sense, "ideological," in that a false consciousness is promulgated that allows, as it were, only the thinking of certain thoughts. As with Orwell's *Newspeak*, the counterideological thought is precisely that which cannot escape the idealogical gravity. Orwell

imagined Newspeak as the invention of especially resourceful totalitarians, but its true horror lies in the recognition that it was always already there, a metastasizing cancer of discourse.

Some such dynamic explains the frequently conflicted terms in which Pynchon's title characters express themselves. Dixon, a surveyor with an above-average education, and Mason, a sensitive scientist of the second rank, attempt to be good eighteenth-century empiricists, men of reason, but neither can stop seeking evidence of magic and the supernatural. Mason, in particular, will eviscerate the hollow-earth theory one moment and dream of messages from Rebekah, his dead wife, the next. In the midst of the New World's bare-knuckle politics and brutal hustling for lucre, both characters evince a variety of humanistic perceptions and sympathies, from an abhorrence of slavery and genocide to a powerful hunger for miracle. Amphibii of the age, Mason and Dixon enact within their own intellects the increasingly unequal struggle between reason and magic.

Though Pynchon avoids simplistic representations of the mighty forces he charts, he plays, as always, with comically exaggerated characterization. If Wicks Cherrycoke, the artist-storyteller and heteroclitite man of the cloth, defines one pole of sensibility, Wade LeSpark, the arms merchant brother-in-law who reluctantly provides shelter and listens to his story, defines the other. Even more antithetical are Padre Zarpazo, the arch-Jesuit "Wolf of Jesus," and Captain Zhang, the "mystic Chinaman" (543) who represents an idea of magical possibility at odds with European rationalism. Zarpazo, a character who defends every proposed atrocity in the language of reason, a character ostensibly religious to the point of superstition (especially regarding *Feng-Shui*, Zhang's magic), confounds such opposed categories as "rational" and "fideistic." The Wolf of Jesus pursues control, speaking of "walls," "right lines," and "imprisonment." He embraces carceral imagery in language that betrays him (language that Foucault has taught us how to read). In that "the Impurity of this Earth keeps him driven in a holy Rage," he resembles Moldweorp, the spy disgusted by human *sozzura* (filth) in "Under the Rose." One recognizes, too, an affinity with Captain Blicero, the character in *Gravity's Rainbow* who orients himself towards the north and death. Zhang calls Zarpazo "Lord of the Zero" and observes that "his Vows include one sworn to Zero Degrees, Zero Minutes, Zero Seconds, or perfect North." Zarpazo is the story's least sympathetic geometer, the extreme embodiment of what Mason and Dixon undertake. "[T]is his Destiny to inflict these Tellurick Injuries," Zhang declares, "as 'tis mine to resist them" (544).

As chief spokesman against the Line, Zhang strives to articulate its enormity in terms that mix the mystical with the historical. A “Geomancer,” he practices what cartographic historian John B. Henderson characterizes as “an art concerned primarily with siting of ... structures in places where they would harmonize with and draw upon the flow of the energetic pneuma (*qi*) that circulates through such features of the terrain as mountains and streams.”<sup>6</sup> Zhang’s remarks about the occult properties of terrain, along with his prophecy regarding the retribution that must follow the marking of the earth with right lines, lie at the heart of the book. The Visto, he avers, “acts as a Conduit for ... *Sha*,” or “Bad Energy,” and he describes “a Wind, a truly ill wind, bringing failure, poverty, disgrace, betrayal,—every kind of bad luck there is,—all blowing through, night and day, with many times the force of the worst storm.” Boundaries, says Zhang, should follow nature, should honor the *shan* or dragon within: “To mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon’s very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long, perfect scar” (542; cf. 547). “Bad History,” Zhang subsequently observes, will follow Bad Energy: “Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,—to create thus a Distinction betwixt ’em,—’tis the first stroke.—All else will follow as if predestin’d, unto War and Devastation” (615). With characteristic indirection, Pynchon hints here at what the Mason-Dixon Line would become in the moral economy of another century. Zhang prophesies the Civil War.

Upon completing their task, Mason and Dixon “understand ... that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along—a conduit for Evil” (701). But internecine conflict is for Mason and Dixon a remote evil, the nation it will divide not having been founded yet. Pynchon, by the same token, devotes his attention to the more proximate ills of the century in which his surveyors carry out their fated commission. The blazing of the Visto due west, for example, enacts in miniature the expansion on that compass bearing of white civilization. The Line defines a trajectory that will intersect, at right angles, its natural antitype: the ancient north-south “Warrior Path” of Native American cultures.

Chief among Pynchon’s concerns, then, are the eighteenth-century contexts within which the Line drawn by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon came into being—and came to be, half a century after its completion, a notorious demarcator between South and North, slave and free. Yet one of the lessons of *Mason & Dixon* is that neither the North nor the South ever had any kind of monopoly on shortsightedness, brutality, or folly. When

Dixon suggests to Captain Zhang that “Negro Slavery” exists “upon one side ... and not the other,” Zhang rejoins that “Slavery is very old upon these shores,—there is no Innocence upon the Practice anywhere, neither among the Indians nor the Spanish nor in the behavior of the rest of Christendom, if it come to that” (615—16). Thus Pynchon, creator of such unsympathetic Southerners as Major Duane Marvy in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Rooney Winsome in *V.*, and Twinkletoes Dugan in “The Small Rain,” declines the opportunity for simplistic moralizing—for what Mason calls the “Inexpensive Salvo” (302).

As such droll recastings of a later century’s colloquialisms reveal, the author’s fidelity to eighteenth-century actuality does not prove constrictive. Indeed, one recognizes in *Mason & Dixon* a book that contextualizes its meditation on spatial phenomena (the Line and its orientation to the heavens) by a remarkably exhaustive attention to the temporal—to time, that is, in all its manifestations. Thus Pynchon imagines astronomers’ clocks talking to each other and surveys the contrasting cultural attitudes to time among Maryland Catholics and Pennsylvania Protestants. To chasten his former student, Emerson sends Dixon, a “Newtonian” who “wants all Loans of Energy paid back” (318), a perpetual-motion timepiece. Elsewhere Pynchon refers to the Virginia Resolutions of 1769 as “that Dividing Ridge beyond which all the Streams of American Time must fall unmappable” (395). From consciousness to history to eternity, “the cruel flow of Time” (605) figures here as spatial parallax.

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” says Thoreau in one of the more memorable passages of *Walden*. It is, moreover, a passage that defies logic, shifting as it does from temporal to spatial exemplification, then inverting both coordinates. Time is at once the stream that is “shallow” and the stream bed that is eternal. He fishes in and drinks from the temporal stream, which he then, heartstoppingly, reveals as an image of “the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.”<sup>7</sup> I suspect that Thoreau is in the back of Pynchon’s mind in some of the conceits about sky fishing in *Mason & Dixon*, but more apropos here is the conflation—peculiarly American, perhaps—of spatial and temporal. It is a conflation that manages to be supremely and elegantly congenial to the intellect at the same time that it frustrates logic in its less imaginative forms, and some such mental high-wire act is, Pynchon implies, necessary to intellectual balance in any time that congratulates itself as an Age of Reason.

How easy, for example, to lose one’s mental balance in attempting to comprehend, with Pynchon’s characters, what becomes of the five and one-quarter degrees the Jesuits remove from the Chinese circle (which thereby

becomes, like its counterpart in Western geometry, a mirror to the annual round of 365 and one-quarter days and, perhaps more importantly, loses its non-European character). This act of spatial adjustment complements an even more confusing act of temporal adjustment: England's conversion, in September 1752, to the Gregorian Calendar. What has become of the eleven days that disappeared when, almost two hundred years after it was first promulgated, the English accepted the reform introduced by Pope Gregory? The conversion strikes many, of course, as a capitulation to papist interests. As Mason's father observes, "if the Popish gain advantage in Time's Reckoning, they may easily carry the Day" (190). The attention to calendar reform serves a number of thematic strands. Most simply it contributes to the general dread of "Jesuit" machinations. Pynchon contrives, too, to make the time change paranoia suggest new variations on a colonialist theme, as Mason, tiring of the endless task of explaining sensible if mind-frustrating science to lay doubters, concocts fantasies worthy of *Cyrano de Bergerac* with which to regale those who persist in badgering him about the supposedly lost days. On one occasion he suggests that a race of strange, Asiatic pygmies has colonized the eleven days; on another he claims that when "the rest of England" (556) made its instantaneous transition from 2 September to 14 September 1752, he for some reason lurched into 3 September and went on to experience, in its entirety, the interim unknown to all others. Stumbling into a depopulated London, "this Metropolis of British Reason," he finds it "abandon'd to the Occupancy of all that Reason would deny" (559). He experiences, as it were, the colonization by unreason of reason itself. Mason's fantasies, like the calendar reform they pretend to rationalize, have a disorienting effect—even on Mason himself, who is not altogether immune to wonderment regarding the supposedly lost days. Whether or not he would agree with the Franklin who calls time "our greatest problem" (287), he knows himself time's prisoner.

If "Time is the Space that may not be seen," as Emerson writes to Dixon, humanity should, the Reverend Cherrycoke explains, be thankful: "out of Mercy, we are blind as to Time,—for we could not bear to contemplate what lies at its heart" (326). What lies there, as long-time Pynchon readers know, is an absence of any rationale, a nothingness, an emptiness, the triumph of death and entropic principle. Mason would like to think that "this Life ... is like the eleven days,—a finite Period at whose end" (561) he will be reunited with his dead wife Rebekah. But it is in an altogether less sanguine sense that this life resembles the eleven days: it is an anomaly, untransfigured by some imagined exemption from the mortal state. A remark of Wicks Cherrycoke's about the eleven days lost to calendar

reform carries portentous overtones: “We think of ‘our’ Time, being held, in whatever Time’s equivalent to ‘a Place’ is, like Eurydice, somehow to be redeem’d” (555). But of course Eurydice’s redemption is a failure.

Thus Mason’s remark about Franklin—“By Reputation, he is a man entirely at ease with the inner structures of Time itself” (271)—says more than is at first evident. Those “inner structures” are merely the inexorable cogs and wheels of oblivion: Franklin, as a hero of the Enlightenment, is in league with forces hostile to the vital principle. Indeed, in one of the novel’s more unsettling tableaux, Franklin leads a serpentine dance out of a tavern and into the street—an eloquent representation of the idea that rationalism leads its followers a merry dance indeed. Two centuries later Americans continue snaking along in the wake of this Philadelphia philosophe, not recognizing the Conga line as a Dance of Death.

Simple discrimination between space and time as they figure in *Mason & Dixon* can present challenges to the reader, who is occasionally hard pressed even to identify the entity under review. What is one to make, for example, of the reverie into which Wicks Cherrycoke sinks after a fatiguing day of carriage travel? Having been along on such carriage rides before (in Cervantes, in Fielding, in Smollett, in de Maupassant, in a John Ford film, even), the reader is attentive to allegorical suggestion: the ride will presently reveal itself as a life journey, the carriage passengers as a societal cross section. But here the symbolic dimension emerges only when, at Mr. Knockwood’s new inn on Octarara Creek, the reverend retires on a curious reverie:

“What Machine is it,” young Cherrycoke later bade himself goodnight, “that bears us along so relentlessly? We go rattling thro’ another Day,—another Year,—as thro’ an empty Town without a Name, in the Midnight ... we have but Memories of some Pause at the Pleasure-Spas of our younger Day, the Maidens, the Cards, the Claret,—we seek to extend our stay, but now a silent Functionary in dark Livery indicates it is time to re-board the Coach, and resume the Journey. Long before the Destination, moreover, shall this Machine come abruptly to a Stop ... gather’d dense with Fear, shall we open the Door to confer with the Driver, to discover that there is no Driver, ... no Horses, ... only the Machine, fading as we stand, and a Prairie of desperate Immensity...” (361, Pynchon’s ellipses)

This is an “American” dream, as unanchored and illogical as the fading consciousness from which it emerges. One cannot extend one’s stay when



one has not yet stopped—though perhaps, in memory, one can remain at some recollected place. But the coach, which is bound to time, must be reboarded; time cannot be arrested, even in fantasy visits to the past. Like the carriage in the Emily Dickinson poem, this vehicle carries its passengers towards eternity. More concretely, the destination not reached is the Heavenly City toward which Western Humanity once thought itself en route. As religious certainty wanes, however, the carriage reveals itself as driverless and horseless. “Fading as we stand,” it has become some such contraption as H. G. Wells’s Time Machine, a device that carries one forward towards a vision of the entropic heat death—or, in the present, American instance, towards “a Prairie of desperate Immensity.” This is at once the prairie into which the as yet embryonic republic will expand and the vast vacancy of a godless, rationalistic dispensation. American time, American space. American history comprises both.

From Benny Profane and Oedipa Maas to Tyrone Slothrop and Zoyd Wheeler, Pynchon’s characters struggle impotently against enormous forces. The twin protagonists of *Mason & Dixon* do not violate the expectations of readers schooled in Kute Korrespondences. In their timorous surmises after the *Seahorse* fiasco, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon discover themselves minor players in a larger political, cultural, and scientific drama, “Lodgers inside someone else’s Fate, whilst belonging quite someplace else” (75). When Policeman Bonk presents himself to them in Capetown, he seems a mildly silly figure of authority, but later, recognizing his own pawnlike standing, he admits to the confusion, the vulnerability, and the feelings of inadequacy that reveal a curious bond between himself—sometime fascist bully—and the humble and increasingly paranoid servants of the Royal Society. Subsequently, in America, Captain Zhang characterizes Mason and Dixon as “Bystanders. Background. Stage-Managers of that perilous Flux” he calls *Sha*. He further characterizes the Line on which they expend their spirit as merely “a Stage-Setting, dark and fearful as the Battlements of Elsinore, for the struggle” (545) between himself and the monomaniacal Jesuit Zarpazo. The reference to *Hamlet* invites the reader to recognize in Mason and Dixon the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the eighteenth century.

Like Pynchon’s other paranoids, however, Mason and Dixon are victims not of a plot but of certain constraints on the imagination. Their paranoia functions as an index to or metaphor for their struggle to think independently—to think in terms divorced from their age and the conditions of knowing therein. Thus defined, paranoia constitutes a form of resistance to the Enlightenment *epistēmē*, an attempt to escape what Blake calls “mind-forg’d manacles” and Pynchon the “mental Cilice” (230) or chastity belt of

the mind. The implied struggle for perceptual freedom moves, in *Mason & Dixon*, through a spectrum from the personal to the geopolitical to the cosmic. That is, the protagonists' concern about the supposed ire of the Royal Society over the letter of protest they write after the *Seahorse* affair, along with their iterations of Dixon's query as he reflects on the massacre of peaceful Indians at Lancaster, Pennsylvania ("Whom are we working for, Mason?" [347]), swiftly modulates toward engagement with the more historical dimensions of paranoia. Those with whom they come in contact, for example, suspect them of being spies in the endless wrangling between interests characterized alternately as those of Maryland versus Pennsylvania, Catholic versus Protestant, or, in terms suited to the coming rebellion, Tory versus Whig. The very times, in other words, are plot obsessed, and the rearguard actions of faith against the triumphant armies of reason compound the sense that one's least gesture may have cosmic consequences.

The Society of Jesus, for centuries the *bête noire* of English Protestantism, provides the chief target of Anglo-American paranoia in the novel. Though Pynchon's Jesuits no doubt owe something to Monty Python, historical perceptions in fact require little embroidering: from the death of Queen Mary to the defeat of Bonny Prince Charlie, from the Gunpowder Plot to the Glorious Revolution and the French and Indian Wars, the Protestant, English-speaking world struggled with real and imagined "Popish" or "Jesuitical" enemies.<sup>8</sup> The colonies were not spared. An early, pre-Revolutionary struggle took place in the New World between a largely Catholic (and Jesuit) French interest and a largely Protestant British interest. Too, the Crown had granted one of the earliest American charters (1632) to George Calvert, Baron Baltimore, whose Maryland colony became a haven for his fellow Catholics, who were often at odds with colonists of the opposing persuasion. In 1691 Maryland became a royal province, and in 1692—and again in 1702—attempts were made to establish the Church of England as its official faith. Through much of the eighteenth century Catholic services could be performed in Maryland only in private homes. The other colonies saw even more virulent distrust, hatred, and persecution of non-Protestants. In 1696 the South Carolina Legislative Assembly guaranteed religious freedom to all Christians—except Roman Catholics. In 1700 Catholic priests were banned in Massachusetts and New York.

Again, an important measure of Pynchon's accomplishment here lies in the extent to which he successfully reconstructs contemporaneous perceptions of the boundary established by *Mason and Dixon*. The notoriety of that Line as symbol of the divisions between the agrarian, slave-holding South and the industrial, abolitionist North was a development of the

century succeeding the one in which it came into officially sanctioned cartographic existence. In the century of its laying out, the Line was perceived as dividing Calverts from Penns, Maryland from Pennsylvania, locally Protestant from locally Catholic (“locally” because farther north, in former French Canada, were more Catholics, and farther south, in Virginia and the Carolinas, were more Protestants). At the same time, however, Pynchon represents the Line as archetypal, emblematic of divisions the Christian West has always construed as essential. The drawing of lines—in division, differentiation, discrimination, and other such boundary making—is as old, it seems, as creation itself. According to the Genesis presumably read by Catholic and Protestant alike, acts of demarcation were among the first items of divine business. They commence a mere four verses into the Old Testament as the deity divides light from dark and ordains the firmament to divide the primordial waters. Mr. Edgewise, on the coach to Philadelphia, describes all land and boundary disputes as mere “Sub-Division” (361) of those first, divinely executed demarcations.

In human hands, however, boundaries become occasions of discord. Thus the reader may notice a certain picking up of lawsuits as the Line inches towards completion, offering fresh opportunities “among the most litigious people on Earth,—Pennsylvanians of all faiths” (324). Rhodie Beck, for example, whose husband Zepho metamorphoses into a were-beaver at the full moon, threatens a lawsuit against the hapless surveyors when, to the considerable embarrassment of several parties, they neglect to predict a lunar eclipse. More and more, boundary disputes and litigation follow the line, which takes the hapless surveyors through the territory of Frau Redzinger, who has been paying taxes to Pennsylvania but may have thereby allowed her property to fall into escheat in Maryland (360), and of the mad Captain Shelby, who “exhibits signs of mania upon the topic of Land-Disputes ... with Boundary issues a particular Passion” (585). Shelby seems, nonetheless, instinctively to recognize a certain kind of boundary drawing as work requiring the assistance, as “Third Surveyor” (604), of the devil himself. Small wonder that no answer is imagined for the “fatal” question the Mohawks may ask: “Why are you doing this?” (641).

That question—asked in a variety of ways throughout the novel—concerns something more basic than the surveying feat of Mason and Dixon. It reminds readers that Pynchon’s story concerns the drawing of a boundary line that has built-in aesthetic, metaphysical, spiritual, and epistemic dimensions. Blazing the Visto with their little army of assistants, Mason and Dixon resemble *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Enzian and the Schwarzkommando, riding another “interface” between scientific paradigms and phases of

history. But the author does not limit himself to either the Mason-Dixon Line or to the lines and boundaries of private property. Thus he characterizes the “grimly patroll’d Line” between life and death as the “very essence of Division” (703). Early in the story Mason, Dixon, and the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, sailing to South Africa, cross the Equator—Uncle Ives calls it “some Geometers’ Abstraction that cannot even be seen”—and undergo the traditional ceremonies. With the sun directly overhead, they cross, without incident, the line dividing the northern hemisphere from the southern, pass “thro’ the Gate of the single shadowless Moment” (56).

Yet “in the world that is to come, all boundaries shall be eras’d” (406). The pronouncement applies, first, to the Apocalypse and to the American Revolution, but it also invites recognition of other boundaries that, late in the twentieth century, function *sous rature* if at all. Like other postmodernists, that is, Pynchon problematizes the lines supposedly differentiating history and fiction. When Wade LeSpark, the unimaginative weapons merchant, complains of “too much ... failing to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation” (429), one wonders who else fails to mark them—indeed, whether such boundaries can be said to exist in *Mason & Dixon*.

The fluid, unfixed line between history and romance, between the real and the imagined, indicts the very logic of rationalism. Any attempt to firm up this line leads not to objectivity but to the imposition, more or less fascistic, of a single, official perspective. Not by accident, then, does Mason, chary of “betraying” his dead wife, tell Dixon a story apparently unconstrained by fact when asked to speak “of how Rebekah and he first met” (167). Captain Zhang is described as “yet another damn’d Fabulator, such as ever haunt encampments” (552). Most interestingly, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, joking about his “Authorial Authority” (354) in one place and calling himself an “untrustworthy Remembrancer” (8) in another, draws the reader/audience’s attention to his own possible unreliability as narrator. By the same token, he allows his tale to subsume, at points, a story or stories from *The Ghastly Fop*, Pynchon’s imaginary Gothic periodical. Read by characters at disparate narratological levels (Mason and Dixon on the one hand, Brae and Thelmer on the other), this periodical bleeds into—indeed, discourages the privileging of—the narrative of Wicks Cherrycoke in ways that resist our desire for distinctions between the real and the fanciful. As the Gothic troubles the smooth eighteenth-century sea of rationalism, so does this particular example of the Gothic militate against one’s desire for a readerly, unambiguous narrative.

The narratological point suggests that one must recognize as fictional the boundaries between fiction itself and the reality or history naively taken to occupy a separate epistemological category. “If the traditional historical novel attempts to replicate a way of life, speech and costume,” observes T. Coraghessan Boyle, “the post-modernist version seeks only to be just that, a version.”<sup>9</sup> Historical fiction—and *Mason & Dixon* is no exception—seeks always to remind its readers that the semantic distinction between the words *story* and *history* will not stand scrutiny. The word *history* originally meant “a narrative either veracious or imagined,” as in the subtitle of the eighteenth-century novel *Tom Jones: The History of a Foundling*. Through the process linguists call aphaeresis, the dropping of an initial syllable, *history* became *story*—but without the original form’s disappearing. Seeming to vie with each other semantically, the two words afford a convenient but misleading distinction, largely absent in other languages related to or influenced by Latin (these retain only one ambiguous form: either the original, as Russian *istoriya*, or the shortened form, as Italian *storia*).

Pynchon suggests that the most valuable history recognizes its own fictive underpinnings to achieve imaginative insight into the human condition. In John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a novel with which *Mason & Dixon* has numerous affinities, a character affirms the ancient superiority of the poet to the historian—indeed, to the whole tribe of traffickers in the narrowly factual: “Men think he hath a passkey to Dame Truth’s bedchamber and smiles at the scholars building ladders in the court.”<sup>10</sup> Both Pynchon and Barth remind the reader that truly disinterested discourse does not exist—least of all among historians. Thus Pynchon foregrounds the premise, familiar at least since the incisive critique of historiography in Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), that history is never simply a matter of accurate facts one can recover, objectively marshal, and present in a narrative form immune to the fictive undertow. Like any other discourse, history is always constructed, always subject to subjectivity. For historians, as for anyone else, “*Prandium gratis non est*” (317)—there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Wicks Cherrycoke, chief spokesman for this recognition, plays with his auditors (not to mention the reader) when he earnestly notes what appears to be the odd recurrence of eleven-day units in the field journals left by Mason and Dixon. Any such mensuration, he invites his auditors to object (and they do—“Poh, Sir!” [555]), derives from the conscious or unconscious projection of the researcher. Like Herbert Stencil or Oedipa Maas, in other words, the historian pursues an ultimately chimerical objectivity, a spurious grail.

Hence, in chapter 35, the debate regarding distinctions between history and romance. Wicks speaks here for the metahistorical perspective, as his

listeners articulate the commonsense objections. Mr. LeSpark, for example, quotes the Great Lexicographer: “Dr. Johnson says that all History unsupported by contemporary Evidence is Romance” (351). When his brother, the bibulous Ives, delivers himself of a tirade against novels, the new form that outromances the romance, one recognizes an inchoate syllogism that seeks to disparage the historical novel—*Mason & Dixon*, for example—as little more than an oxymoron. Wicks, however, dismisses the earnest pursuit of unitary truth and mischievously suggests that the greater the element of romance, the better the history. He rejects the sober fact mongering of a Gibbon in favor of the richer, paradoxically less deluded homages to Clio that Herodotus wrote—and in later ages Sir John Mandeville, Captain John Smith, and Baron Munchausen. Wicks, like Aristotle, values history only insofar as it allies itself to the insights of poetry or, more broadly, of literature. “Who claims Truth, Truth abandons” (350), he declares, articulating a kind of parallax view of history. By implication, Truth creeps in where the imagination reigns—especially imagination of multiple perspectives. At its best, historical fiction allies itself to that search for the miraculous so inimical to the logo-centric pretensions of the Enlightenment. If this is history as carnival, history constantly threatening to “converge to Opera in the Italian Style” (706), it is also the history that Wicks can characterize as a record of humanity’s “*Hunt for Christ*” (75).

This last phrase has a sting in its tail. Far from the dancelike quest for salvation Wicks momentarily imagines, the hunt also involves, as the freethinking Aethelmer hastens to point out, “ev’ry Crusade, Inquisition, Sectarian War, the millions of lives, the seas of blood” (76). The original “hunt for Christ,” one recalls, was undertaken by the soldiery of King Herod, desperate to forestall the new dispensation. The Slaughter of the Innocents was preceded by an augury that inspired, in the Flight into Egypt, the common era’s first embrace of preterition (“I am passed over”). It was also the Holy Family’s introduction to a paranoia that, in both the short term and the long, proved wholly justified.

Yet Pynchon’s career-long emphasis on paranoia, often taken to be little more than a holding of the mirror up to a characteristic psychopathology of the age, reveals itself in his fifth novel as potentially transformative. Pynchon sees paranoia as *pharmakon*—at once the poison and its remedy. Thus the paranoia of *Mason and Dixon*, at first the measure of their inconsequence, becomes the gauge of their sensitive resistance to rationalist excess. They come to see that their Line does a great deal more than signify where Pennsylvania ends and Maryland begins. They recognize in the Line an epistemic watershed, a boundary between dispensations.

By the same token, the Line becomes for Pynchon, in the end, an unusual emblem of his own art and his own philosophical outlook. As boundary and as literary subject, the Line resembles the wall in a well-known Frost poem. In "Mending Wall," one recalls, the speaker tells a whimsical story of meeting a neighbor periodically to walk the wall that divides their property, repairing it as they go. "Something there is," the speaker twice observes, "that doesn't love a wall,/That wants it down."<sup>11</sup> This something would seem to be nature itself, the earth, what Captain Zhang calls the *shan*. It is also, more simply, winter, and winter's subversive agent, frost. Perhaps the poet whose name derives from this climatological condition also "doesn't like a wall." Certainly the spectacle of the neighbor making for the wall with a stone in each hand prompts the speaker to see him, momentarily, as "an old-stone savage armed" who "moves in darkness." The poem, with this image, becomes a meditation on the territorial imperative, the atavistic instinct that insists on boundaries between self and other, mine and thine. If there is something in nature that does not love walls, there is something in the human heart, also ruled by nature, that insists on them.

Frost, as in so many of his poems, invites recognition of a startling analogy between his callings as farmer and poet. He describes the activity shared with the farmer on the other side of the fence as "just another kind of outdoor game, / One on a side." The reader who recalls Frost's remark about free verse (he likened it to playing tennis without a net) will recognize wall mending as the symbol of that other game, poetry, in which, perhaps, one "wins" by writing iambic pentameter that, never violating the rhythms of speech, deceives all but the most vigilant eye, all but the most acute ear. Frost reflects here on the relationship between poet and audience. The poet wants the walls down, wants to communicate, but knows full well that meaningful communication depends, in some paradoxical way, on those very walls. It is the poet-speaker, after all—the one who seems to disapprove of the activity—who initiates the wall mending.

A similar element figures in Pynchon's meditation on the larger meanings of the Mason-Dixon Line. Commonly credited with no small postmodernist refinement and extension of the reflexive gesture that Frost and his contemporaries made a signature of modernist literary practice. Pynchon seeks to subvert or restructure the old mix of adversarial and collaborative between author and reader. He radically reimagines Frost's wall or net, along with the rest of the literary "game." Though winning the game remains problematic, one knows that the surest way to lose is to track down a meaning that pretends to account for all elements of the text—as, in fact, one was invited to do by the modernists (at least as read by the New Critics

they called into existence). The binary of winning or losing—like Pynchon's manifold variations on the seductive logic of either/or ("either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero" [*Lot 49*, 182])—constantly teases with the prospect of resolution or closure. Thus Pynchon seduces his readers into actions that mirror those of his questing protagonists. As Herbert Stencil, or Oedipa Maas, or Tyrone Slothrop, or Prairie Wheeler seeks V., or the Tristero, or the Rocket, or Frenesi Gates, so do readers pursue a grail-like textual wholeness that constantly retreats before them. Just another kind of indoor game, one to a side.

A necessary corrective to certain forms of totalizing thought, such play is not necessarily at odds with the Transcendental Signified. In *Mason & Dixon*, as in his previous novels and stories, Pynchon plays with myth making and the signifying loop, but not in any cynical spirit of iconoclasm. As a serious artist, Pynchon strives to do full justice to the complexity of the world and history, language and the human mind. Thus he does not reject the possibility that spiritual realities have been obscured by centuries of what Derrida calls "logo-centric metaphysics." One can argue, I think, the mounting evidence of Pynchon's spiritual and metaphysical (even religious) seriousness, his disinclination to privilege either the scientific and technological message or the endless lesson of textuality.

Which is not to say that Pynchon is, as the Hemingway character says, *croisant*. Pynchon insists only that undiluted rationalism makes impossible the apprehension of such spiritual reality as may exist. By the same token, though much exercised by the Line, Pynchon may not agree with those of his characters who construe it as irredeemably evil. He might differ, that is, with the reviewer who sees in *Mason & Dixon* "an indictment of private property, arguably man's most pernicious invention."<sup>12</sup> Pynchon surely recognizes in the surveying of the Line a legitimate activity of human beings, who must pay attention to boundaries or lapse, as Frost hints, into vastly more primitive forms of territorialism. On this score one would err, I think, to take either the pronouncements of Zhang or even the late thoughts of Mason and Dixon as definitive formulations of authorial views. Pynchon's real attitude to his subject matter might best be characterized as Faulknerian: he reveals the built-in, programmed elements of tragedy in the human struggle with landscape and history. If he sees the seeds of tragedy in the totalizing assurance of Enlightenment discourse, Pynchon is not, in the end, the perfect Luddite. In the latter days of the rationalist dispensation he must make especially cogent the antirationalist case, but he does so less as mystic than as apologist for balance.



## NOTES

1. Salutes to Pynchon's scientific acumen continue in the reviews of *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon "loves the intellectual purities of science and understands them better than any American novelist ever." declares Paul Gray in "Drawing the Line," *Time*, 5 May 1997, 98. Pynchon is "a literary encoder of scientific arcana," according to Louis Menand, "a novelist with a message that requires," among other things, "an advanced knowledge of thermodynamics ... and the differential calculus" ("Entropology," *New York Review of Books*, 12 June 1997, 23).

2. Thomas Pynchon, *Vinland* (New York: Little, Brown, 1990), 375.

3. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 487; hereafter cited parenthetically.

4. Thomas Pynchon, "Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?" *New York Times Book Review*, 28 October 1984, 41; hereafter cited parenthetically.

5. Thomas Pynchon. *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 181; hereafter cited parenthetically.

6. John B. Henderson, "Chinese Cosmographical Thought: The High Intellectual Tradition," in *The History of Cartography*, vol. 2, bk. 2. *Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies*, ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 216.

7. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 98.

8. "More than any other period of English history," writes Gordon S. Wood, "the century or so following the Restoration was the great era of conspiratorial fears and imagined intrigues.... Everywhere people sensed designs within designs, cabals within cabals; there were court conspiracies, backstairs conspiracies, ministerial conspiracies, factional conspiracies, aristocratic conspiracies, and by the last half of the eighteenth century even conspiracies of gigantic secret societies that cut across national boundaries and spanned the Atlantic. Revolutionary Americans may have been an especially jealous and suspicious people, but they were not unique in their fears of dark malevolent plots and plotters" ("Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 [July 1982], 407). Though I see Pynchon as construing the paranoia of Mason and Dixon in ultimately positive terms, Wood's account of the eighteenth century's obsession with conspiracy reveals a kind of historiographical bonus in the author's conceptualization of characters ever ready to ascribe their sufferings (at the hands of the Royal Society, for example) to conscious and concerted vindictiveness among the mighty. It is a commonplace that writers of historical fiction frequently invite readers to recognize, in the past, a mirror of their own age, but the author of *Mason & Dixon* tempers any reflection, in his story, of twentieth-century paranoia with a recognition of sharp divergences in what one might call levels of innocence. Eighteenth century paranoia, with its conviction of causality always traceable to human volition, was not without its charming, innocent side, and in this it contrasts with its late-twentieth-century cousin. In the liner notes for *Spiked!* (Catalyst, 1994), a collection of the wacky, instrumentally challenged performances of Spike Jones, Pynchon

characterizes the greater simplicity of the past as a “blessing and gift, finally, to us, adrift in our own difficult time, with moments of true innocence, like good cowbell solos, few and far between.”

9. T. Coraghessan Boyle, “*Mason & Dixon*, by Thomas Pynchon,” *New York Times Book Review*, 18 May 1997, 9.

10. John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, 2d ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 220.

11. Quotations from “Mending Wall” are from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 33–34.

12. Ted Mooney, “All down the Line,” *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 11 May 1997, 3.



THOMAS H. SCHAUB

*Plot, Ideology, and Compassion  
in Mason & Dixon*

I

Several years after the rumors of a book about Mason and Dixon first began to circulate, Pynchon wrote in the introduction to *Slow Learner*:

Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it—occasionally, as here, offset to a more colorful time and place.<sup>1</sup>

Here are posed for us the terms of aesthetics and politics so central to criticism and theory in recent decades, but they are posed here in such a way as to allocate to the realm of power alone the power to do something, while the writing of fiction exists only on a spectrum of impotence between forgetfulness and insanity. While *Mason & Dixon*'s place on that spectrum has

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From *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, eds. Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin. © 2000 by Associated University Presses, Inc.

yet to be determined, the following discussion begins an inquiry into the aesthetic mode of the novel's relation to politics and the power to do something.

This region between forgetfulness and insanity, it may be recalled, is the region occupied by Oedipa Maas, what she comes to feel is the quasi-paranoid position of "relevance." Many readers have thought the saving grace of Oedipa's example to be her pursuit of meaning, projected or found remaining uncertain. It was this very uncertainty, among other devices, which created the interactive text sensitizing and radicalizing the reader. In this way, Pynchon's fiction has always been an overdetermined instance of Peter Brooks's definition of plot: "the organizing line and intention of narrative ... best conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession."<sup>2</sup>

In *Mason & Dixon*, this sense of plot is entirely missing, for meanings do not develop "through textual and temporal succession."<sup>3</sup> Instead Pynchon gives us a sequence of fables, each of which illustrates similar or related meaning, giving us a textual and temporal repetition of theme. Doubt and uncertainty, the main-stays of Pynchon's narrative torque, are in *Mason & Dixon* less structures of the condition of meaning than the fabulist's comment upon his own art, comments transposed into an eighteenth-century key, as here in a passage from Wicks Cherrycoke's book, *Christ and History*:

Doubt is the essence of Christ. The final pure Christ is pure uncertainty. He is become the central subjunctive fact of a Faith, that risks ev'rything upon one bodily Resurrection.... Wouldn't something less doubttable have done?<sup>4</sup>

The reader can't help wondering at this point if Cherrycoke expresses an aspect of the writer's poetics, uncertainty providing the subjunctive condition of fiction's sacral mystery. With *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon has jettisoned his use of the detective genre, the central figure in search of V. or Tristero or the rocket, and with this abandonment he has dispensed with the epistemological doubt that he had used to bedevil and provoke his readers. More accurately, from a narrative point of view this doubt remains but is transformed (or solved) by an intermediary storyteller—Wicks Cherrycoke—a device that makes clear from the get-go the contingency of what follows.

In *Mason & Dixon*, by sharp contrast with his earlier novels, the status (as well as the meaning) of the allegory is always in sight, while doubt itself becomes a recurrent theme, rather than the experience of the reader, who

never works very hard to identify Pynchon's intentions or (for example) the meaning of that Line which Mason and Dixon are surveying: "we were putting a line straight through the heart of the wilderness," Cherrycoke recalls (8). The Line and its analogues spoil a good night of romance: "Imagine you're out late on a Spring night, riding along, with your Sweetheart, and Evening trembling with Promise, all the night an Eden" and all at once you blunder "sheep-eyed upon yet one more bloody Mill,—a river turn'd to a Race" (313). At another point, the Visto cuts a swath between husband and wife, leaving one in Maryland and the other in Pennsylvania. Dixon has made a living converting "common" ground to "private" property, and after his father's death sought a "mapped World he could escape to" (242). Mill-races, enclosures, maps, lines, and clocks are evidence, Cherrycoke tells his audience, that chartered companies are now "the form the World has begun to take" (252).

Let Judges judge, and Lawyers have their Day,  
 Yet soon or late, the Line will find its Way,  
 For Skies grow thick with aviating Swine,  
 Ere men pass up the chance to draw a Line.

(257)

Through Captain Zhang, this propensity for the drawing of straight lines helps develop the ecological allegory of the novel. Zhang declares the Line "acts as a Conduit for what we call *Sha*, or, as they say in Spanish California, Bad Energy.... Ev'rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,—coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks,—so honoring the Dragon or *Shan* within, from which Land-Scape ever takes its form. To mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon's very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long, perfect scar" (542). Zhang's declaration is further evidence that Pynchon may have been working on *Mason & Dixon* during the writing of *Gravity's Rainbow* because it echoes a description late in the earlier novel: "You can look up and see a whole slope of cone-bearing trees rushing up darkly away from one side of the road. Trees creak in sorrow for the engineered wound through their terrain, their terrenity or earthhood."<sup>5</sup> This ecological mood begins to affect Dixon, too. By the time he encounters the American surveyor Shelby, he is put off by Shelby's "love of complexity" for whom the "pure Space" of America merely "waits the Surveyor" (586), and Dixon is made melancholy by Shelby's rabid pleasure in converting space to lines and angles. Because—and this is the last of my examples—"for as long as its Distance from the Post Mark'd West remains unmeasur'd, nor is yet

recorded as Fact, may it remain, a-shimmer, among the few final Pages of its Life as Fiction” (650). The “America of the Soul” is ever “an Interior unmapp’d” (511)!

Writing itself is a kind of mapmaking, and nowhere more so than in the genre of the Novel, with its claims to represent the past more faithfully than history itself. Given this implicit analogy between author and surveyor, however, Pynchon has his narrator sharply distinguish his own procedure from a history that claims to be a record of fact. In *Christ and History*, by Wicks Cherrycoke, the good reverend insists there must be “more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever”; unlike the technique of surveying that cuts a straight line, this one is “not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common” (349). This passage from Cherrycoke’s book helps to clarify the analogy between Christic doubt and novelistic fiction implicit in the passage from this book that I quoted earlier, for here fabulist history—the novel—is a tangle of lifelines through which lives of the past are resurrected.

In the effort to write without bounds, to write extravagantly, Pynchon might remind readers of the conclusion to *Walden*, where ever-restive Thoreau expresses his impatience with a single understanding of life. “As if,” Thoreau wrote,

Nature could support but one order of understandings.... As if there were safety in stupidity alone. I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced.... I desire to speak somewhere without bounds.... In view of the future or the possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side.... The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated ... the words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly in *Mason & Dixon*, when Uncle Ives, speaking for the impulses of the Age of Reason, remonstrates with Wicks that what we need are facts, the “whole Truth,” Wicks replies, “Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too

innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,—who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been” (350). Cherrycoke’s solution to this difficulty requires forms of circumspection: “She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev’ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government” (350).

This last extended metaphor, of the fabulist doffing the disguise of (historical) truth, exactly reverses the strategy of *The Crying of Lot 49* in which Oedipa stumbles upon “the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero” through a process of striptease—“As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered as dense as Oedipa’s own streetclothes in that game with Metzger ... as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness.”<sup>7</sup> And yet, as I have been trying to argue, there is neither striptease nor disguise (nor boundlessness) in *Mason & Dixon*. Instead of a “disorderly Tangle of Lines” we have ever before us a parable of the construction of the West misread by the Age of Reason and mystified as discovered “fact.”

This play with the eighteenth century’s familiar distinction between fact and fancy seems to be the bass line that the reader hears beneath the by turns comic and melancholy melody of *Mason & Dixon*’s progress. At the close of the novel, in which Cherrycoke imagines the deathbed scene between Mason and his second wife, with Benjamin Franklin attending, Mason unwittingly theorizes Pynchon’s postmodern history in the language of deism, by which the eighteenth century managed to conflate Newtonian mechanics with a faith in God:

“’Tis a Construction,” Mason weakly, “a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. I have all the proofs you may require. Not all the Connexions are made yet, that’s why some of it is still invisible. Day by day the Pioneers and Surveyors go on, more points are being tied in, and soon becoming visible, as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac’d in Almanacks.” (772)

But even the sympathetic irony implicit in this account of Mason’s deathbed optimism has already been extracted from the Line and allegorized earlier in the novel when the character Nathe writes his school friend that the path of



the Line “speeds its way like a Coach upon the Coaching-Road of Desire, where we create continually before us the Road we must journey upon” (459). That which Mason imagines latent, awaiting discovery and proof, record and name, is just what Mason says, “a construction.” This is a familiar moral to readers of Pynchon’s novels, who may recall the closing sentences of the Advent scene in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “you must create [the path] by yourself, alone in the dark.”<sup>8</sup>

The conversion of common to private, of nature to commerce, of openness to enclosure, of wholeness to division, of pure space to lines and angles, and of unmapped soul to recorded Fact: of all these things the Line is the symbol. Wonder ye then at the party of surveyors?

## II

Cherrycoke deserves more direct attention at this point because I have rather shamelessly been reading this narrator as a mildly distorted conduit for our author himself. There are reasons for doing so, given Cherrycoke’s impeccable credentials. Perhaps most significant is the disappearance of the outside narrator into the voice of Cherrycoke. The novel begins with third-person narration (“Snow-Balls have flown their Arcs”), while the voice of Reverend Cherrycoke makes its appearance three pages later (“‘It’s twenty years,’ recalls the Rev<sup>d</sup>” [7]). Yet this standard nesting collapses by the end of the first chapter, where Cherrycoke’s voice appears suddenly without quotation marks: “Tho’ my Inclination had been to go out aboard an East Indiaman (the Rev<sup>d</sup> continues), as that route East travers’d notoriously a lively and youthful World of shipboard Dalliance” (10). Nesting of narrators and narratives continues inside Cherrycoke’s narrative voice, but at this point his becomes the outer narrative frame, displacing the mediating ground between character and author. In fact, Pynchon gives us the parenthetical to make sure we haven’t missed the deletion of quotation marks. Removing those marks, I am suggesting, bestows a new authority upon Cherrycoke, or, at the very least, the reader is now turned over, as it were, to the good “Rev<sup>d</sup>,” and put in the care of his story.

As a storyteller resurrecting the past, Cherrycoke places himself within a three-part division of historians: mere chronologists, whose work is the business of lawyers; the compilers of testimony, the whole truth, which is the goal of historians; and remembrancers, whose memories “[belong] to the People” (349). Cherrycoke calls himself an “untrustworthy Remembrancer” (8), and *Mason & Dixon* is surely a novel for the people, as antigovernment as

any Idaho militiaman, restless with any account settling into the rigid appearance of fact. Like the story of Dixon whipping the slave driver, though it does not appear in official histories, family stories are perfected “till what survives is the pure truth, anneal’d to Mercilessness, about each Figure, no matter how stretch’d” for it is “part of the common Duty of Remembering,—surely our Sentiments,—how we dream’d of, and were mistaken in, each other,—count for at least as much as our poor cold Chronologies” (695-96). We must, insists Cherrycoke, “place our unqualified Faith in the Implement, as the Tale accounting for its Presence” (695).

Though Pynchon’s manipulation of the discourse of fact and fancy may and should be considered an aspect of his faithfulness to historical period (as is Uncle Ives’s being scandalized by young ladies reading novels), there is no mistaking the accuracy of the term “fabulist,” as described here by Cherrycoke, for characterizing Pynchon’s narrative strategy. The creation of in-your-face “irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy” (351) has long been Pynchon’s forte. These aesthetic swipes at power always have their moral, too: Oedipa constructs meaning and relevance through the act of metaphor, and Slothrop can turn any corner to find himself inside a parable. As Maxwell’s Demon is a metaphor of Oedipa’s search for meaning, and the Rocket of Western man’s death-wish, so here the surveyors’ Line is a metaphor of the construction of “the West” by the Age of Reason. The author of *Mason & Dixon* is a kind of Learned Dog, a “tail-wagging Scheherazade” offering “Provisions for Survival in a World less fantastik” (22), just as Cherrycoke earns his room and board by keeping the children entertained.

Thus when Cherrycoke tells his listeners of Dixon’s encounter with the Rabbi of Prague—a staging device for yet another moral—who tells Dixon that the New World exists not for wealth but is a secret body of knowledge that may be read East to West “much as a Line of Text” (487), we know pretty well that this secret body of knowledge is none other than the novel itself, which is the reading of that Line. The implications of this irony, as Richard Rorty has written, “go all the way down,”<sup>9</sup> for the cutting of this Visto (the making of the Line as well as our reading of it) is ever the creation of what Cherrycoke terms the “subjunctive fact of a Faith” (511)—or of the novel’s fabulation.

Even “humanity” itself, like the novel, is a creature of this age in which the modern subject is formed in discourse. This major theme in the novel is the best reason yet for giving Cherrycoke the authority here attributed to his character. For among the other items in his dossier is his status as ghost,

returned like Banquo from the dead, a “shade with a grievance” (8) and resurrected storyteller, to narrate or resurrect stories from the past. Cherrycoke is an enemy of the state, having committed the crime of anonymity by leaving unsigned “Accounts of certain Crimes ... committed by the Stronger against the Weaker” (9), including not only evictions and assize verdicts but also the crime of “enclosure” by which Dixon has been making a living and which the book seems to say is an English activity carried over into the spaces of America. (Under the pressures of Vietnam, Pynchon had expressed this view with the more highly charged language of apocalypse: In America “Europe had found the site for its Kingdom of Death.”<sup>10</sup>)

In naming names—Pynchon’s Cold War origins remain central—without giving his own, Cherrycoke discovers that his “name had never been his own,” just as Slothrop discovers his penis was never his own but belongs to the government as the means of calling him out, subjecting him:

It took me till I was lying among the Rats and the Vermin, upon the freezing edge of a Future invisible, to understand that my name had never been my own,—rather belonging, all this time, to the Authorities, who forbade me to change it, or withhold it, as ’twere a Ring upon the Collar of a Beast, ever waiting for the Lead to be fasten’d on.... (10)

This Althusserian fable is the paradigmatic fable of the story that Cherrycoke has to tell about the assembly of the nation from the pure space of America—or, more pointedly, about the way that Old World institutions (enclosure and slavery, to name two) reproduced themselves in the newly discovered land.

From this viewpoint, one might understand *Mason & Dixon* to be not only an historical novel but also an historical-novelistic answer to Althusser’s question, “What, then, is the reproduction of the conditions of production?”<sup>11</sup> Althusser argues that these conditions are reproduced through repressive state power and its control over ideological state apparatuses such as the church, the schools, or in the case of Pynchon’s novel the Royal Society. ISAs, in turn, “function by ‘ideology,’” which cannot exist “except by the subject and its subjects” who are (necessarily, tautologically) constituted as subjects by ideology.<sup>12</sup>

In a futile effort to speak outside this recognition, Pynchon has created voices of the nonhuman, like Learned Dog, who comment on their role in defining the subject’s humanity. For self-protection, then, the Learned Dog acts as humanly as possible, “nightly delaying the Blades of our Masters by telling back to them tales of their humanity” (22). This may be another of

Cherrycoke's qualifications, since, having died, he too is nonhuman and knows the ideological formation of the modern subject (the individual) in story—ideas, illusions, imaginary representations.<sup>13</sup> Coming at this construction from a different angle (or story) are the people from the East hired by Macclesfield, people who “remain'd as careless of Sequences in Time as disengaged from Subjects, Objects, Possession, or indeed anything which might among Englishmen require a Preposition” (195). Understanding “humanity” as a story we tell ourselves, Pynchon seems to recognize the novel's complicity in the creation of the modern subject because his own novel takes place on the cusp of modernity when even the fully developed agents of science and method—Mason and Dixon—still believe in ghosts and hauntings.

In earlier books, such concepts as subjectivity, epistemology, and the creation of history are hitched to plot and plotting so that the reader's interest in ideas is motivated by and coincident with the desire to make sense of plot. Developed character in Forster's definition was correspondingly weak. In *Mason & Dixon*, reader involvement with plot is largely absent because readers know the task contracted by Mason and Dixon, and they know the line was cut and drawn. There are mild, low-profile suspicions, like those that the two surveyors hold of the Royal Society, and there are departures and digressions from the novel's “line,” but they do not structure the novel or motivate the major characters, who are (it might be said) largely unwitting and loveable agents of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason.

On the other hand, if the act of surveying the Line is seen to participate in the Enlightenment project of bringing mystery into light, and magic under the reign of reason, one can argue that Mason and Dixon, like their ancestors in Pynchon's oeuvre, are also on a search, and in this general, abstract sense, there is a plot, but it is a plot of social and political formation. From an Althusserian point of view, Mason and Dixon might be said to advance the plot of history at the same time they participate, ideologically, in its creation. This redefinition of plot naturally has consequences for our understanding of character in Pynchon's novel.<sup>14</sup>

As many of the novel's reviewers have argued, *Mason & Dixon* is a novel rooted in characters rather than in plots and plotting, who even as they help construct the modern rationalized world encounter along the Line different cosmologies, the mysteries of the wilderness, and other characters whose understanding of the natural world, politics, and belief differs greatly from their own.<sup>15</sup> It might be argued, in fact, that Mason and Dixon are Pynchon's first sustained characters, capable of engaging reader interest and emotion, and as such constitute another dimension of Pynchon's fidelity to history, this

time to the history of the novel and its roots in such characters as Clarissa, Tom, and Tristram. But to put it this way is to remain within the novelistic ideology of Forster, for we may now understand more accurately that Mason and Dixon are the interpellated subjects of plot, that it is they who practice the formation they reproduce. In ideological critique, then, the distinction between plot and character may be viewed as an aspect of false consciousness.

To take this argument yet further, we must approach the author himself and imagine Pynchon confronted by the quandary of his own recognition as a subject within ideology, for “this recognition,” Althusser writes,

only gives us the “consciousness” of our incessant (and eternal) practice of ideological recognition—its consciousness, i.e. its recognition—but in no sense does it give us the (scientific) knowledge of the mechanism of this recognition.

The problem Althusser outlines at this point is at once the problem of any speaker or author:

Now it is this knowledge that we have to reach, if you will, while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e., subjectless) discourse on ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, this formulation is the Marxist version of Wittgenstein’s early thoughts on language in which the “limits of my language are the limits of my world” or of William Burroughs’s aphorism, “to speak is to lie.”

In this context, one can argue that the novel’s use of characterization and its corresponding affective claim on the reader’s emotions is an effect of the cul-de-sac in which Pynchon finds himself, since he clearly lacks Althusser’s confidence (or delusion) that one may speak outside of ideology. This affective characterization works to sentimentalize the Enlightenment and its projects, evoking sympathy in subtle counterpoint to the book’s critique of reason, a counterpoint noiselessly collapsed into the double entendre of Mason’s last words (quoted earlier):

“’Tis a Construction,” Mason weakly, “a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. I have all the proofs you may require. Not all the Connexions are made yet, that’s why some of it is still invisible. Day by day the Pioneers and Surveyors go on, more

points are being tied in, and soon becoming visible, as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac'd in Almanacks." (772)

Punning on Mason's word "construction," Pynchon seamlessly embeds two opposed views: in one, which has the emotional force of Mason's "weakly," the New World is a "great single Engine" that pioneers and surveyors discover or make visible; in the other view (the framing narration mediated through Cherrycoke) the word "construction" denotes the emplacement of rationalized system upon natural and social heterogeneity; or, in the language of *The Crying of Lot 49*, a kind of right-angled tapestry that spills out the slit windows of reason and ownership, not into a void but into—and through—Otherness: in one, history seen by the individual; in the other, history understood through ideological recognition.

This yoking of sentiment and critique is a key structural principle of *Mason & Dixon*, one which gives new emphasis to the element of compassion present in Pynchon's fiction from at least *The Crying of Lot 49*. Readers of *Vineland* are still puzzling over the end of that novel, in which the dog Desmond licks Prairie's face, and still wondering over the status of McClintic Sphere's aphorism in *V.*, "keep cool, but care," but with *Mason & Dixon* we are now in a position to suggest that sympathy and compassion have always occupied a somewhat dissonant place within Pynchon's satiric analytic. Near the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the narrator's access to Oedipa's thoughts reveals a little-discussed rumination: "Though she could never again call back any image of the dead man to dress up, pose, talk to and make answer, neither could she lose a new compassion for the cul-de-sac he'd tried to find a way out of, for the enigma his efforts had created."<sup>17</sup> In *The Crying of Lot 49*, this "cul-de-sac," it must be recalled, is an image of monopoly, patriarchy, narcissism, cultural incest, and entropy, yet Pynchon endows his character with "a new compassion" for Pierce and the "enigma his efforts had created."

Perhaps this is a key to what has happened: his own awareness of ideological complicity, his position on a "spectrum of impotence," has induced in Pynchon a forgiving pastoralism, always present but now emerged to occupy a more dominant place in his work.<sup>18</sup> In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's melancholy compassion is quickly overshadowed by Oedipa's marvellous meditation on the republic and its "excluded middle," but in *Vineland* the novel ends on an affective note worthy of Frank Capra when Prairie—a name evoking the republic's pre-Columbian past—awakes from her fantasies of Brock Vond to the "warm and persistent tongue" of her dog Desmond, his "face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home."<sup>19</sup>

To accomplish this about-face in his most recent novel, Pynchon has had to rewind time to the point where Mason's two sons by his first wife Rebekah are remembering their eagerness to travel to America:

"Since I was ten," said Doc, "I wanted you to take me and Willy to America. I kept hoping, ev'ry Birthday, this would be the year. I knew next time you'd take us."

"We can get jobs," said William, "save enough to go out where you were,—"....

"The Stars are so close you won't need a Telescope," said Doc.

"The Fish jump into your Arms. The Indians know Magick."

"We'll go there. We'll live there."

"We'll fish there. And you too." (773)

These last words are spoken by William and Dr. Isaac after their father's death, but because of Pynchon's subtle weave of mood and tense, they appear to issue from a time prior to their emigration, giving to the novel's close all the utopian expectancy of youth, a prospect already considerably compromised by their father's experience and the reader's ex post facto knowledge of what such dreams have become. A paragraph that begins with dependent consequences ("would" and "will prove") modulates backward in time to Doc's memory ("Since I was ten"), to present-tense declaration ("We can get jobs") and finally to future hopes: "We'll fish there. And you too." In these last three words, no doubt, readers are meant to hear the pastoral accents of Frost's farmer going out to clean the spring in "The Pasture" ("You come too"), and Whitman's invitation in "Song of Myself": "I stop some where waiting for you."

Pynchon's novels have always had their moments of pathos and compassion: the sailor in Oedipa's arms and Pöckler putting his ring on the finger of a Camp Dora survivor are two examples, yet these emotions were invoked in the midst of satiric critique and apocalyptic outrage. These novels appeared in the midst of and seemed aligned with such initiatives as Earth Day, antiwar demonstrations, and coalitions for a nuclear freeze. The endings of *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* are qualitatively different. Both seem to be aesthetic strategies for getting over the hump of apocalypse, in which even the quality of anger has diminished. One has only to compare Dixon's whipping of the slave driver—itself possibly an apocryphal story handed down through the family generations—to "Mondaugen's Story" in *V.*, which vividly presents the colonial ruthlessness of von Trotha's 1904 genocide of the Hereros, to note the transition from the appalled imagination to one

more forgiving. The result may be termed the genre of nostalgic (or bourgeois) tragedy: tragic because there is always some prior crime that makes our present moment “too late,” and nostalgic because the novels end “at home,” in moments of willed reconciliation with what has gone before. Readers might ask of Mason’s sons, What stream shall we go a-fishing in? The polluted stream of our present moment, or the time of the novel, which is to say in the remembered futurity of a nation about to be born, the past already imperfect?

## NOTES

1. Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 19.
2. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1985), 37.
3. At the International Pynchon Week Conference, David Cowart asked, “does *Mason & Dixon* have a plot?” (“The Luddite Vision: *Mason & Dixon*,” International Pynchon Week Conference, London and Antwerp, June 1998).
4. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 511. Further references will be included parenthetically within the text.
5. Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 733.
6. Henry David Thoreau, “*Walden*” and “*Civil Disobedience*,” ed. with notes and introduction by Sherman Paul (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 221.
7. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 54.
8. Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 136.
9. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii.
10. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 722.
11. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), 61.
12. Althusser, “Ideology,” 76, 95.
13. *Ibid.*, 87, 90.
14. Brian McHale, for example, speaks of *Mason & Dixon* as a novel of “subjunctive space,” which is the space of “wish, desire, possibilities” (“*Mason & Dixon* in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon Space,” International Pynchon Week Conference, London and Antwerp, June 1998); and Hanjo Berressem argues that “the line is the reason there is an ‘if’ in front of all the other possible worlds [in *Mason & Dixon*] ... the Line occupies fact” (“‘Hit the Spot, Draw the Line’: Cultural Inscriptions, Traumatic Wounds and the Multiplexity of Matter in *Mason & Dixon*,” International Pynchon Week Conference).
15. See, among others, Anthony Lane, “Then, Voyager,” *New Yorker*, 12 May 1997, 97–98, 100; Rick Moody, “Surveyors of the Enlightenment,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1997, 106–10; T. Coraghessan Boyle, “The Great Divide,” *New York Times Book*



*Review*, 18 May 1997, 9; Michael Dirda, "Measure for Measure," *Washington Post Book World*, 27 April 1997, 1–2; and Michiko Kakutani, "Pynchon Hits the Road with Mason and Dixon," *New York Times*, 29 April 1997, B1, B4.

16. Althusser, "Ideology," 95.

17. *The Crying of Lot 49*, 178.

18. Anthony Lane sees this as a more recent development: "Since the rocket-powered riffs of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon has learned how to stop worrying about the Bomb. He has even started loving a little, extending an amused tenderness in all sorts of directions" (100).

19. Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 384–85.

## *Chronology*

- 1937 Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr. is born May 8 in Glen Cove, New York.
- 1953 Graduates, at the age of 16, from Oyster Bay High School as salutatorian of his class.
- 1953 Attends Cornell University where he studies physics and literature. Leaves Cornell briefly to join the navy, but returns to complete his degree.
- 1958 Graduates from Cornell. Rejects an offer from Cornell to teach creative writing, as well as an editorship at *Esquire* and a Wilson Fellowship. Lives in Greenwich Village while writing *V*.
- 1959 Publishes "The Small Rain," his first short story, in the *Cornell Writer*.
- 1960 Begins work as an engineer at Boeing in Seattle, where he stays through 1962. Publishes stories in *New World Writing* and the *Kenyon Review*, as well as an article on the Bomarc guided missile in *Aerospace*.
- 1963 Publishes *V*, his first novel, which wins the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel of the year.
- 1965 Publishes *The Crying of Lot 49*, which garners the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

- 1966 Publishes an essay entitled “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” in the *New York Times Magazine*.
- 1973 Publishes *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for which he wins the National Book Award. Though selected unanimously by the Prize Committee for the Pulitzer, the committee is overruled by an advisory board which finds the novel obscene.
- 1984 Publishes *Slow Learner*, a collection of short stories which had appeared previously in magazines and journals.
- 1987 Receives a MacArthur Foundation Award.
- 1990 Publishes *Vineland*.
- 1997 Publishes *Mason & Dixon*.

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