PYNCHON NOTES

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V. IN LOVE: FROM THE "OTHER SCENE" TO THE "NEW SCENE"

Hanjo Berrsem

--Love is love. It shows up in strange displacements (V 412).

1: The Machine and the Subject

In his "Seminar II," Jacques Lacan describes the brain as a "machine made to dream." Philip K. Dick's question, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is the title of the book on which the post-industrial cult movie Blade Runner is based; Dick's question may almost be read as a comment on Lacan's statement. Both quotations testify to the fact that, after having invaded the subject's garden, the machine has finally invaded the subject itself. Freud's and certainly Lacan's theories are already constructed from systems to which images of interlocking optical, linguistic and sexual "machines" are central. Most drastically, however, the machine figures in the theories of Denteuz/Guattari, whose work begins with and departs from Freud. For them, the machine's entry into the unconscious as the pattern of unconscious registration marks a new beginning: "The unconscious itself is no more structural than personal, it does not symbolize any more than it imagines or represents: it engineers, it is machinic." This heralds a possible breakup of what Denteuz/Guattari regard as old, corroded Gdipal structures and a release of "culturally" unregulated and unmediated flows of pure desire/energy, with a generally liberating effect. But even within this paradoxical promise, the "machinic" carries more sinister connotations which resonate in the background of Denteuz/Guattari's study. Borrowing their terminology from chemistry and physics, they use the contrasting terms molar and molecular. Molar machines are great machinic networks following certain well-defined parameters, in which all flows are directed towards a particular projective (the Gdipal Machine, the Social Machine, the Capitolist Machine). In contrast, their molecular Desiring Machines are machines without operational use, "formative machines, whose very misfirings are functional" (A0 288). Like the machinic sculptures of Jean Tinguely, these desiring-machines are in fact defined by their very uselessness and their aesthetics of pure motion, flows, passages and movements, completely free of directed, functional parameters: "A machine may be defined as a system of interruptions or breaks" (A0 36). These machines, in their dynamics also reminiscent of the Futurists' spectacles of pure speed and energy, find their dark doubles in the cold, mechanical robot of the factory, or of any "operative" endeavour, for that matter. Within the molecular machine, the (utopian) liberation and the liberating dispersion of the subject as well as the "objectification" of
desire are carried out; whereas molar machines insert the subject into pre-set structural patterns, within which—as a living extension of this machine—it is defined, much like Charlie Chaplin in the "Modern Times Machine."

Deleuze/Guattari's use of the vocabulary of "machine," "machinic," "molar" and "molecular" involves more than metaphor. On the one hand, an expression like the "Oedipal Machine" is a metaphor for a familial-social system which Freudians believe "operates" (in the West? in the World?) to "produce" human subjects of a certain—our—kind. On the other hand, Deleuze/Guattari do not want us to think of these "machines" as wholly separated, by their metaphoric nature, from the machines and the mechanical which are more than metaphor, more than model and paradigm, which increasingly invade the minds and bodies of human subjects, or of subjects—robots, androids, cyborgs—made on the model of the human, and whose presence is acknowledged throughout Pynchon's fiction. The meeting of the machine and the subject is carried out within psychoanalytical as well as cultural registers and figures as a constant trope within modern consciousness. It pervades all discursive practices, either as formal structuration or as direct content, and gives each discursive instance a specific marking. Postmodern society has born witness to this meeting in all its various manifestations, from projects of Artificial Intelligence to worldwide computer networks, from Ballard's post-industrial science-fiction to the whole complex of political/technological simulation.

This landscape of automata and their "mechanical brides" also defines the scenario of Pynchon's novel V., an overall investigation of the inanimate by the animate. The dark vision of modern society (actually a dystopia) Pynchon sketches, I will argue, also implies a critique of outdated humanistic illusions concerning the status of the "subject." The text describes the infiltrations of the inanimate as parallel to the growing mechanization of V., which stands metonymically for the growing usurpation of the human and its body by the various "simulacra" of science and culture.

2: The Freud/Pynchon Interface

Chapter fourteen of V., entitled "V. in Love," describes the relation of V. to Mélanie L'Heuremaudit. Within this scenario, which re-enacts the effect of "mechanization" upon what used to be called love, Pynchon stages the disruption of Freudian psychoanalysis and posits, if not the invalidity of its theoretical framework, then at least its inapplicability to a new scene. His critique revolves around notions of "the subject" and "the fetish," and enters the Freudian system at the level of its most basic assumptions.

Freudian psychoanalysis is based on specific assumptions concerning the status of the subject and defines itself as the science of this subject. Pynchon questions this position by applying Freudian concepts to a "subject" that has turned into a pure "object." Beginning within the Freudian assumption of the
(primarily Oedipal) determination of the subject, Pynchon quickly moves to reveal and confront the problematics of Freudian analysis by making it address a subject completely determined by forces "outside of psychoanalysis." This kind of critique is analogous to recent post-structuralist debates, themselves strongly influenced by Freudian and Lacanian concepts and to a great extent unfolding within their parameters. Jean Baudrillard's writing enters the post-structuralist scene at an angle comparable to the one at which Pynchon's enters the Freudian one. Baudrillard voices his critique from within post-structuralist theory, but aims at a complete rearrangement and disruption of its positions via the concept of "simulation." Pynchon's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, I would argue, is similar to Baudrillard's: the latter enters the Freudian scene in its second, Lacanian generation, and Pynchon's concept of "complete determination" may well be read as an early, narrativized version of Baudrillard's "simulation": the subject's shift into a mere symptom and concept.

Chapter fourteen of V. describes the final days of Mélanie L'Heuremaudit, a fifteen-year-old dancer who comes to Paris to perform in an avant-garde ballet. It describes her relations with a mysterious woman (V.), and culminates in her death during the premiere of the ballet, in which she dies the death she was only supposed to act out on stage. Already the first sentence of the chapter develops these tropes and defines Mélanie in her first "appellation": her last name translates as "The Cursed Hour," a time that denotes both a historical and a cultural framework—for Pynchon a growing decadence. Accordingly, Mélanie's exact time of arrival in Paris is not her time, and can only be extrapolated by its relation to various time-systems operating simultaneously. "The clock inside the Gare du Nord read 11:17. Paris time minus five minutes, Belgian railway time plus four minutes, mid-Europe time minus 56 minutes" (V 393). Her arrival is the interface of various paradigms, its time not an instance in a general flow, but already colonized by differing forces and determinations and a specific historical moment: "By the cover of Le Soleil [..] it was 24 July 1913" (V 393). Against these geographically, culturally and politically mediated times, Mélanie's position is explicitly undefined: "To Mélanie, who had forgotten her traveling clock—who had forgotten everything—the hands might have stood anywhere" (V 393). Another such interface, this time not temporal but psychological, defines her personality, which is neither unified nor dispersed (as are Derrida's/Lacan's utopias of the schizophrenic), but also defined within specific functions: Apart from being Mélanie L'Heuremaudit, she is also "La Jarretière" (her stage name, "the Garter" and "Su Feng" (the character she plays on stage).

3: The Fetish

The psychoanalytical concept within and against which the whole chapter must be read is that of fetishism, introduced early on by Itague's welcome to Mélanie: "'Come, fétique, inside!'" (V 395). For Freud, fetishism is related to the fear of castration
and is thus first a male domain. The fetish enables the male to "re-create" the missing phallus of a woman, the lack of which grounds his fear of castration in that it presents him with a state in which it is absent, a state which, he fantasizes, may come to be his own as well. The fetish is thus related to woman in her function as the object of male desire; for man, it serves as a circumvention of the fear of castration because it recreates from a material object associated with women's bodies a missing phallus out of the realm of the inanimate. For Freudians, then, the fetish is the male's way of giving female nature something that it initially lacks, if "lack" is viewed from within the phallic position; the fetish is a supplementation of this initial lack by a sort of conceptual crutch. The fetish-object is always this supplement and this simulation. It stands for (signifies) the phallus, inscribing its presence at the very place of its absence via a semiotic substitution (signifier for signified/referent). Freud's contention that fetishism becomes pathological only when it loses this function of "supplementarity" and becomes a "signified" itself mirrors the exclusion of the signified within semiotic theory, an exclusion which inaugurated the Lacanian topography of the law of the signifier. The fetish, however, is a supplement only from within the phallic position: "If women are not fetishists, that is because they apply a constant fetish-work upon themselves, turning themselves into dolls." In other words, woman can use the inanimate to add to and to shape her body in ways congruent with male desire, so that the missing phallus is not equated with a single fetish (her shoe, her underwear) but is spread out over her entire body as phallic object. From both positions (the female as well as the male), it is the phallus which "defines" the fetish, so that women ultimately become their "own as well as the Other's fetish" (SE 171). From the male perspective, the fetish replaces the absence of the female phallus (itself a virtual, imaginary term) by an inanimate object; from the female perspective, the absence of the "female phallus" also causes the fetishisation of the "real thing" (the male phallus) and the power it signifies. This economy is inaugurated and guarded by the phallocratic structure of psychoanalysis. As Lacan says:

I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in him to whom she addresses her demand for love. Perhaps it should not be forgotten that the organ that assumes this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish."

Lacan writes from the Freudian position that "there is only one libido, [Freud's] text showing that he conceives it as masculine in nature" (E 291). This implies that: "the problem of [the woman's] condition is fundamentally that of accepting
herself as an object of desire for the man. In order for the woman to make the phallus "her own," she can either make the male phallus into her fetish or turn her own body into a phallus, a gesture facilitated by the complementary male desire to turn the female body into a phallus. Lacan clearly situates her in this position when he says that: "such is the woman concealed behind her veil. It is the absence of the penis which turns her into the phallus, the object of desire" (p. 322). Man and women both, having it and fearing its lack, or lacking it, desire the phallus. Woman does not need an animate object for a fetish, then, because the phallus—as a function—is either in the place of the male or "spread out," projected over her own body. For her, the inanimate quality of the "male" fetish is thus paralleled by the inanimate quality of her phallic object or by the "real" phallus. These positionings of woman within the "phallic theatre" designate to her the role which she has to act out within this double choreography of her own desire, which in turn firmly grounds male desire.

Mélanie's first auto-erotic scenario soon after her arrival starts with a daydream triggered by the image of herself in an overhead mirror and continues after she has undressed and put on the costume she is to wear as Su Feng. The scene shows her insertion into the phallic mode and proceeds exactly along these two modes. In the beginning, she watches herself in the mirror and moves her legs: "the blue skirt had worked high above the tops of the stockings. And lay gazing at the black and tender white" (V 397). The "route" of her desire is already lodged according to a male perspective and is grafted onto her own body: she sees herself (in the mirror) as the object of male (in this case, her father's) desire: "Papa had said, 'How pretty your legs are: the legs of a dancer.'" (V 397). In her taking the perspective of her father's desire in relation to herself, she already includes herself firmly into a fetish-function.

After this initial contemplation in the mirror, which already stresses the relation between body and cloth, she immediately goes on to "disguise" herself. The broken relation to her own sexual attributes, which Lacan diagnosed in woman, is highlighted by the emphasis placed on her being "dressed up" for her encounter with the lady figure, rejecting (concealing) quite literally "all her attributes in the masquerade" and thus all natural relation to her own body. This need for concealment as well as addition marks her involvement with her own body: She rose, in a near-frenzy, removed blouse, skirt and undergarments. [...] Back in the hot room she quickly removed shoes and stockings, keeping her eyes closed tight until she had fastened her hair in back with the spangled amber comb. She was not pretty unless she wore something. The sight of her nude body repelled her. Until she had drawn on the blond silk tights, embroidered up each leg with a long, slender dragon; stepped into the slippers with the cut steel buckles, and intricate straps which witheld up halfway to her
knees. Nothing to restrain her breasts; she
wrapped the underskirt tightly around her hips.
It fastened with thirty hooks and eyes from waist
to thigh-top, leaving a fur-trimmed slit so that
she could dance. And finally, the kimono,
translucent and dyed rainbowlke with sunbursts
and concentric rings of cerise, emamys, gold and
jungly green. (V 397)

In this intricate phallic masquerade in which the objects
themselves already come to life—the inventory includes blond
tights, writhing straps and underskirts with "eyes"—she "lay
back once more [. . .] breath taken by her own beauty. If Papa
could see her" (V 398).

This transformation of her body into a phallic simulation
also entails her body's submission under someone else's language
and code:

The whole contemporary history of the body is that
of its limitation, the matrix of marks and signs
that cover it with a network and partition it,
that negate it in its difference and its initial
ambivalence in order to . . . change it into a
sexuality that is seen as the determining
instance—a phallic instance, which is organized
entirely around the fetishization of the phallus
as the general equivalent. (SE 155)

Within this "phallic grammar," the female body itself is strictly
excluded, and banned from representation. All the signs that
cover it are male signs, so that a male erotics ultimately has to
detach itself from the body proper and affix itself to the
overlying signs themselves, the endpoint of which is the "body as
sign" defined within and dominated by a "phallic code." Because
of this code:

[A] marking gets the power of a sign and by way of
this a perverse erotic function. It turns into a
line of demarcation which represents
castration. . . . castration is signified and by
way of this, misunderstood. The naked and the
clothed stand in a structural opposition and work
towards the representation of the fetish. As for
instance the edge of the stocking on the
thigh . . . becomes the naked thigh and
metonymically the whole body by way of this
demarcation has turned into the phallic image, the
fetish-object of contemplation and manipulation.
(SE 158)

Roland Barthes detected a similar structure in Sarrasine, in
which this "dissemination of the female body" is, however,
countered by a belief in the textual "body of love":

the subject . . . knows the female body only as a
division and dissemination of partial objects:
leg, breast, shoulder, neck,
hands... a fragmented woman... Divided,
anatomized, she is merely a kind of dictionary of
fetish objects. This sundered, dissected body
... is reassembled by the artist... into a
whole body, the body of love... in which
fetishism is abolished.

It is within the juxtaposition of skin and clothing (garter, for example, la Jarretière), that the phallic erotic
element is lodged as a result of an "emphasis placed on a
fragment of the body by a horizontal line, a line of demarcation"
(SE 158). These eroticized divisions make lace the ultimate(ly)
erotic fabric; it is the "délie"18 of the polarity between body
and fetish. It is the line as such which opens up the play of
the juxtapositions (body/fetish) and within which male desire is
lodged, enabled by a structural framework of
oppositionality/difference. This line also always functions as a
demarcation between animate (skin) and inanimate (cloth). The
demarcation of clothing and body, of black stockings and white
skin, which was so important for Mélanie in her first
"reflection," denotes the part of the structure in which the
phallus is spread out over her own body, turning it into a
fetish.19

Another route determines her relation to the mannequin,
which functions as a replacement of the desired phallus (her
father's). Unlike a fetish, it denotes a real (temporal/spatial)
lack rather than a structural one. It is an attempt to
hallucinate the presence of the real being, and the lay figure,
in its life-likeness, is of course the perfect surrogate and
substitute, especially because it is "without a head" (V 396) and
thus has no identity: it is the truly phallic (and already
machinic) body. "The ideal body... is that of the
mannequin. The mannequin is the model for this complete phallic
instrumentalization of the body" (SE 170). This body-as-
mannequin refers primarily to the female body and to women, who
are quite literally the mannequins of phallicratic fashions;
"the unveiled body of the woman denotes quite obviously the
appearance of the phallus, the fetish-object" (SE 161). It can,
in this scene, however, take on a complementary function for the
woman, who is herself already a fetish-object. In her fantasy,
Mélanie transposes the (phallic) body of her father unto the
mannequin.

Both parts of the initial encounter are performed within a
phallicratic perspective and denote the two ways in which women
has to lodge her desire. In the first structure, she emerges as
the object desired by the phallus, in the second as the object
desiring the phallus herself. The scene shows the
supplementarities and dynamics of this economy, the result of
which is that in both "dimensions" Mélanie can relate to herself
only within an "exteriorization." Active or passive, her desire
is ultimately the desire of the phallus, and she is the product
of her father's fantasy: "He gave her all that. Or was he
giving it all to himself, by way of her?" (V 399).
Within the chapter's literary structure, the scene also figures as an overture, pre-staging its "automatic" ending, and from the beginning establishes (via the lay figure) a connection between Mélanie's father and the automat. Just before the scene, Itaque tells Mélanie about the inclusion of automat in the ballet, and the connotations of this permeate the entire scene: "What was he saying? Automata..." (V 396). Her "lovecraft," which ends the scene, is, in this sense, also already a prefiguration of her final dance.

The lay figure in the corner was light and carried easily to the bed. She raised her knees high and--interested—saw her calves in the mirror cross over the small of its plaster back. Felt the coolness of the figure's flanks against the nude-colored silk, high on her thighs, hugged it tight. The neck top, jagged and flaking off, came to her breasts. She pointed her toes, began to dance horizontal, thinking of how her handmaids would be. (V 398)

The phallic "alienation" of woman from herself is carried to its limit within striptease, the scenario in which the complete woman, and not only some of her attributes, is turned into a fetish-object. Within the inversely proportional movements of the discarding of clothes and the revealing of the body, the "subject" vanishes completely, and a purely male "hallucination" takes its place, her auto-erotic caresses becoming caresses of herself-as-phallus within the two basic positions of striptease: voyeurism and fetishism.

4: The Dream of Psychoanalysis

From the beginning, various motifs serve to establish a Freudian connection for Mélanie: her very first word, the screamed "Papa!" (V 394) (triggered, revealingly, by a statue of Apollo); the images of her incestuous relation with her father in the past ("Mélanie lay on the wide bed beside him, while he touched her in many places, and she squirmed and fought not to make a sound. It was their game" [V 394]); a remembered daydream of herself sliding down the roof of the family mansion (a thinly disguised dream about incestuous sexual intercourse).

Mélanie's dream about the German engineer, however, which follows her "dance" with the lay figure, is the most revealingly "Freudian" one, and also the one in which psychoanalysis itself is thematized along with Mélanie's shift from "cultural" and "psychoanalytical" to "real" object. In this dream, she equates the engineer of the automat with her father (the phallic instance), the engineer who "built her."

The German stood over the bed watching her. He was Papa, but also a German.

"You must turn over," he repeated insistently. She was too embarrassed to ask why. Her eyes—which somehow she was able to see, as if
she were disembodied and floating above the bed, perhaps somewhere behind the quicksilver of the mirror—her eyes were slanted Oriental; long lashes, spangled on the upper lids with tiny fragments of gold leaf. She glanced sideways at the lay figure. It had grown a head, she thought. The face was turned away. "To reach between your shoulderblades," said the German. What does he look for there, she wondered.

"Between my thighs," she whispered, moving on the bed. [. . .] The Mélanie in the mirror watched sure fingers move to the center of her back, search, find a small key, which he began to wind.

"I got you in time," he breathed. "You would have stopped, had I not . . ."

The face of the lay figure had been turned toward her, all the time. There was no face. She woke up, not screaming, but moaning as if sexually aroused. (V 401-02)

The mechanical "arousal" of the automaton by the winding of the key between their/her shoulderblades figures as a displacement of a more direct sexual arousal; her whispered "Between my thighs" denotes her desire to change the place of arousal from the back to her genitals. Constructed directly according to Freudian concepts of displacement and condensation, the dream contains much of the latent wish within its dream-material and is in this sense a "quotation" of psychoanalytical theory. Because of this equivalency, it can be read, not only as Mélanie's dream, but as the dream of psychoanalysis itself. Mélanie's desire (to be a phallic automaton) mirrors the desire of psychoanalysis itself for its latent wish, the implied (phallic) structuration behind the scenarios of the dream-work; Mélanie dreaming is thus simultaneously psychoanalysis dreaming the nostalgic dream of the (phallic) subject. In this reading, the dream is "made" from psychoanalysis and is the result of a retro-projection of psychoanalytical structures into the unconscious itself, which (conveniently) "takes on" the structure of its "science". The "ghostlike" structure of this dream as well as the complicity it establishes between sex and the inanimate (the implications of what Freud calls the "death-drive" within the sexual arena) is expressed by Mélanie's final reaction, which is not, as one might have expected, horror, but rather arousal. Already here, Pynchon's final project emerges: not only a critique of the subject within psychoanalysis, but a critique of the subject constructed by psychoanalysis.

Yet the Freudian scenario is not the only episteme within which Mélanie is defined. Because psychoanalysis is itself a specific cultural phenomenon and moment, she is also the object of a specifically "modern love" and thus a cultural object. Within phallocratic society, a society directly inaugurated and simultaneously mirrored by Freudian concepts and further developed by Lacanian ones, woman has to turn herself into a
doll in order to fit the "phallic scene," which is exactly how V. describes Mélanie.

"What are you like unclad? A chaos of flesh.
But as Su Feng, lit by hydrogen, oxygen, a
cylinder of lime, moving doll-like in the confines
of your costume . . . You would drive Paris mad.
Women and men alike." (V 404)

The repressed image of the female body as a chaos of flesh is
transformed by artificial light effects and costumes into a
phallic performance. As its doll, the inanimate representation
of a human, Mélanie becomes the inanimate object of (phallic)
desire itself. Within male society, woman seems to lend herself
"naturally" to such an object-function, her role (as cultural
object) having been instigated via a long historical process.
But within Pynchon's setup, the "fetish-object"—not shoes,
garter-belts, etc., but the one to which the fetish is linked as
a supplement—that is to say, the "subject," turns herself into
an "object" by becoming in her entirety a "fetish." Woman thus
crosses the border from being a cultural object, but still human,
to being a fetish-object, and thus inanimate. Within the shift,
Pynchon also implies that from now on both victim and victimizer
(female and male) will be victimized, because in the new scene
sexual differences will be annulled altogether.

In what follows, Pynchon explores the mechanics of this new
"erotic stage" along the split between subject and object within
the new fetish-object (the "inanimate female"), because some sort
of separation has to be re-established within the fetish/object;
otherwise, both subject and object functions would be combined in
an unstable "personal union." The line of demarcation, the bar
which separates the "fetish" (the fetish as human) from the
"object" (the human as fetish) is the plane of the mirror. It
takes over the function of the "bar" (the horizontal line) within
fetishism, the plane on which differences can be inscribed. But
by now, this line is no longer directly connected to the body of
the subject, but marks the complete exteriorization of the fetish
in relation to itself.

5: The Mirror

Mirrors mark the topography of the whole chapter and are
ever-present. Mélanie herself "functions as a mirror" (V 399).
Her investment within what Lacan would call the Imaginary (the
space of specular identification) can be observed in her
inability to express herself within the Symbolic, the realm of
language and discourse. The only words she speaks within the
whole chapter are: "Papa!" (V 394), "I have nowhere to stay" (V 396), "Move?" (V 396), "I . . . in (V 404), and,
within her dream, "Between my thighs!" (V 401). Twice her
silences are commented upon from the outsider: "Mélanie could
not speak" (V 404), and "the girl didn't answer" (V 406). Whereas
within the Lacanian topography the Imaginary and the Symbolic
constantly interact once the "Mirror Stage" has been passed,
Mélanie is firmly caught within a specular scenario, less a
subject than herself the mirror-plane, reflecting the presence of her father, who has modelled her after his own wishes. She has become the embodiment of this "phallic" dream, its "fétiche." But because the phallic scene had itself been revealed as a mere ghost (a male hallucination), she can, as its mirror-image, only mirror "the reflection of a ghost" (V 399).

The initial reason for Mélanie's obsession with mirrors and her double is that she herself, being a pure object (a fetish), can relate only to a double of this object and can "love" only other fetishes, who thus become fetishes of a fetish. To any other reality she is emotionally immune: "The eyes would not respond. Not with fear, desire, anticipation. Only the Mélanie in the mirror could make them do that" (V 404).

Her first mirror-encounter had still been performed under the aegis of the male, the memory of her father and her incestuous relation with him. But while in that instance it had been a "bringing-to-life" that was performed by the mirror, an identification of the inanimate object (the lay figure as phallus) with the animate one (the desired father as phallus), in her later mirror encounters, the audience which she had only hallucinated in order to fill the gap between "object" (lay figure) and "loved object" (Papa) becomes real. It is exactly here that Pynchon finally overthrows the Freudian scenario: while Mélanie's first encounters were still taking place within a phallic scenario, and Mélanie (as a male hallucination) remained a metaphorical object, her relation to V. defines her as a real object. The textual nodal-point at which this change is established is another of Pynchon's "low puns." Like Mélanie who completely internalizes (takes for real) her fetish-function, Pynchon takes psychoanalysis at its word: taking the word object literally, he can re-define the Freudian setup and project this new scene back onto the old one. Once the fetish-function has completely colonized the female body (within psychoanalytical parameters), one can then treat this body as a completely objectified site. The shift from "human body" to "automaton" is closely linked to V., with whom Mélanie enters into a "lesbian" relationship. Pynchon thus disrupts the male/female dichotomy, not only by letting Mélanie become the fetish for a woman, but by making this woman at the same time already a "machine," an automaton who sees in Mélanie the perfect fetish:

"You are not real. [..] Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a jacket... une jarriètire. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure." (V 404)

Their meeting is from the beginning a meeting of two variously defined "objects" that are mirrored and grafted onto each other. Even before she had met Mélanie, V. had worked within parameters of fetishism. During a "Black Mass," she is:

absorbed in burning tiny holes with the tip of her cigarette, through the skirt of the young girl.
She was writing ma fétiche, in black-rimmed holes. The sculptress wore no lingerie. So that the lady finished the words would be spelled out by the young sheen of the girl's thighs. (V 403)

Soon after their introduction, Mélanie and the woman enter into a complicated "menage à trois" in which the concepts of subject and fetish are imploded and constantly oscillate. V. leads Mélanie to her loft outside Paris in "a landscape of factories, chemical works, iron foundries" (V 406). Within this ambience of industrial robots and molar machines, she has created a secret chamber of mirrors: "As for Mélanie, her lover had provided her with mirrors, dozens of them. Mirrors with handles, with ornate frames, full-length and pocket mirrors came to adorn the loft wherever one turned to look" (V 408). In this landscape of the Imaginary and its multiple diffractions, Mélanie derives pleasure from the (two-way) contemplation of the image of herself (her double) in the mirror which can function as audience (as "other"), since this image is violently split along the mirror-plane and separated from herself. She can use her voyeuristic position to enact the internal split of subject and object functions within herself and to recreate her own image for herself as her own (though "other") fetish. She uses the presence of a real "other" (V.) whose virtual as well as real images are present to amplify this separation/split of herself from herself. The presence of V. strengthens the voyeuristic position of the "mirror-Mélanie" by the introduction of a real voyeur, and thus equalizes herself-as-audience with the other-as-audience on the plane of the mirror(s) which marks an even more basic split.

She needs, it seems, a real voyeur to complete the illusion that her reflections are, in fact, this audience. With the addition of this other--multiplied also, perhaps, by mirrors--comes consummation for the other is also her own double. (V 410)

Within the complicated geometries of the virtual spaces, the multiple and diffracted images constantly ricochet and are lost in the depths and dispersions of the mirror planes as such.26 The (virtual) mirror-image of V., her (real) image and her voyeuristic function "objectify" V. for Mélanie in the same ratio to which her own image had been "objectified" via the reflections: a step by which the self-as-audience is put into a similarly distant position as the other-as-audience. The separation of (virtual) "fetish" from (real) "fetish" is carried out within these substitutions.

In the position of the "real" voyeur, V. (herself a fetish) occupies a position parallel to that which the fetish (Mélanie) has to itself: "As for V., she recognized--perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness--the fetish of Mélanie and the fetish of herself to be one" (V 410). Within these multiple identifications, the scenario is closed into a symbiotic triadic
function, because from V.'s perspective the fetish (Mélania) is also doubled and amplified in the mirror(s) in a similar equation of mirror-image and original. In this complex grid of "fetish functions," the tableau freezes into inanimateness. No submission, no oppression: "No movement but a minimum friction" (V 409). In fact, gazes are the only carriers of this structure. The scopic structuration of this tableau also anticipates Lacan, who has defined the gaze as "object a," because it is via the gaze that the subject and the "other" are connected. Here, however, with each image already a mirror-image, the other as well as the self, and one as well as any other, the gazes can no longer affix themselves to a subject (even if permanently de-centered), but bounce from fetish to fetish in an endless doubling and re-doubling. Unlike in Lacan, there is no "alienating identification" (E 4) but a complete dispersion, and no "anchoring points" (E 15A) which might throw "the subject" out of its paralyzed passivity. The "minimum friction" also evokes again Freud's "death-drive," and it is precisely at this point that Pynchon introduces death (master of the inanimate) as the final equivocator of the fetish-function:

Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Love-play until then becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish. (V 410)

The fetish posing as human and the human functioning as a fetish are the final transmutations within this scenario, which violently disrupts the psychoanalytical system in relation to its "field." It can no longer be the science of a subject, because the line of demarcation does not run anymore between subject and subject, but between object and object.

Pynchon thus "displaces" the Freudian concept of fetishism on various levels. First of all, he dis-connects it from the male perspective and interlocks it with the systems of lesbianism, and, via V., with the machinic. He thus undermines one of Freud's basic contentions, the relation of fetishism to the fear of castration, although a shadow of this relation does persist and is taken up again within V. as the "braid-cutter," hence castratrix, of an androgynous, hence partly-male, Mélania: "One day the girl arrived at Le Merv accompanied by the woman and wearing schoolboys' clothing [. . .] Moreover, her head—all her thick buttock-length hair—had been shorn. She was nearly bald; [. . .] she might have been a young lad playing hooky." (V 407). In a second step, Pynchon disrupts the level of relations between fetish and loved object, declaring, like Baudrillard, the loved object in her entirety to be a fetish. Taking elements of the Freudian system, leaving the basic definitions intact (such as fetishism and homosexuality) but aligning them along different lines, the initial displacements trigger a number of other displacements in a sort of domino-effect. What Pynchon disrupts in the first step is the internal "structuration" of the Freudian setup. That he also has his fun with Freud can be seen in the lovingly detailed speculations about the "64 different sets of
roles" (V 408) Mélanie and V. could enact in their triangular scenario.

In the second step—the equation of subject and fetish—however, Pynchon breaks open the difference between animate being (formerly the "living object") and inanimate object (formerly "the fetish"). From the viewer's perspective, Freud's fetish-object is inanimate object which has a supplementary relation to the animate one. Pynchon's concept of the fetish describes rather the implosion of the animate object into the inanimate, and thus blurs the initial difference between subject and object on which the Freudian binarism is based.

6: The Automaton

Two of Mélanie's "appellations" have been brought into play by now: "L'Heuremaudit," "the cursed hour," denoting the atemporality of Mélanie as an object, and "La Jarretière," "the garter-belt," denoting her function as fetish-object, but which can also mean, in a revealing twist of the French language, "conductor-wire." This discursive "sexualization of science" and "scientization of sexuality" defines Mélanie in her role as Su Feng, the raped virgin in "L'Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises."

This final "mirror-stage" of Mélanie differs in an important aspect from Lacan's. While it is a constant dis-placement that underlies Lacan's concept, a continuous and basic mis-apprehension ("faux/connaissance") which gets carried over into the Symbolic, Pynchon defines it as an even more complete disruption. In Lacan, the "self" and "l'autre" constantly oscillate, though sometimes this autre/other is the "other-as-other" (within the realm he defines as the Symbolic), and at others it is the "self-as-other" (within what he defines as the space of the Imaginary). In either case, self and other thus define each other, albeit in a constantly missed encounter. Yet, despite this oscillation, the notion of "subject," even if violently de-centered, is still valid and in operation. In Pynchon's setup, these terms implode into each other, and the subject becomes an object in its totality. This "new scene," as differentiated from the psychoanalytic "other scene" of Freud, is adapted for the stage by Porcelin and Satin. Within it, all elements of the new triad are present: it is populated by male and female dancers, but also—and this is the addition that disrupts the basic Freudian binarism—by automatons; it is this scene in which the final implosion of "fetish and human, dead and quick" is acted out. The climax of the ballet, depicting the rape of the virgin by Mongols, shows the impalement of Mélanie by the "entire male part of the company" (V 413) while the women lament. Here the phallic and psychoanalytic connotations are unmistakable, and Pynchon is still working within the psychoanalytical structure which he then sets out to deconstruct. But while this part of the drama directly implies the Freudian/Lacanian concept of the phallic signifier and contains in a nutshell the female position within Freudian and Lacanian theory, Pynchon provides the scene
with yet another twist: the death that should have been only simulated (the theatrical one) becomes real: Mélanie "forgets" to wear her protective belt, "the one inanimate object that would have saved her" (V 414). But because Mélanie is in her entirety a fetish, this real death is also one in which only a simulated human—a fetish—dies. Orchestrating this final disruption in an ironic side-show, one of the automatons on stage, whose "life-likeness" had been so stunning ("But they move so gracefully! Not like machines at all!" [V 396]), runs amok and commits, it seems out of some sort of machinic solidarity with Mélanie, a symbolic suicide.

Within the growing chaos of the music, automaton and human finally merge: the automaton acts human, while the human is revealed as having always already been an automaton, and it is only in death, within the final passage from animate to inanimate, that "the expression on the normally dead face" (V 414) becomes haunting. The "phallic machine" and the automaton switch places, taking on each other's characteristics within the chaos of the climactic music: "all tonal location had been lost, notes screamed out simultaneous and random like fragments of a bomb" (V 414). While the automaton actively "toss[es] itself about the stage" (V 413), Mélanie's movements get more passive, uncontrolled and "more spastic" (V 414). Within this catastrophic moment, the inanimate and the animate implode, and the scene tumbles out of the psychoanalytical framework into a machinic one, which cannot be read in "human" parameters (Lacanian or otherwise) anymore, but only in machinic ones, and in which the law-of-the-father is replaced by the "law-of-the-machine."

7: The Man-Machine Interface

In V, this law-of-the-machine takes over the personal as well as the cultural field. It annexes the body in both dimensions, a double definition also commented on by Baudrillard: "For the systems of political economy, the robot is the ideal type of body; for the system of the political economy of the sign, the mannequin is the reference-modal of the body" (SE 180). The fetish, all work-force or all sign, is the signifier by which the culturally determined (sexual) economy is inscribed onto the body via the semiotic code. It is the relay by which "symbolic ambivalence" is replaced by phallic economics: "The rationality of the sign is rooted in its exclusion and annihilation of all symbolic ambivalence on behalf of a fixed and equational structure." Its status as signifier finally comes to designate the desire of the semiotic code itself: "Something like a desire, a perverse desire, the desire of the code is brought to light here." This transfer of desire onto the code replaces the body/subject with the sign/code within psychoanalysis and harks back to the importance of objects (signs) and their oppositional structure: "It is the sign in this beauty, the mark . . . which fascinates; it is the artifact that is the object of desire" (SE 94). For Mélanie, this exclusion of the subject had created the space for the display of all her clothes, objects
and supplements, but it also marks the nodal point between economy and psychoanalysis. The human body is split into two functions: an "ego-nomic" one (the robot) and an "ego-nomic" one (the mannequin). Within both spheres, however, it is a dead or at least non-animate body that serves as the reference model.

Pynchon follows the sexually dead body into its equally dead culture. Like Shroud and Shock, two more automates in V, Mélanie and V (whose whole history describes her "mechanization" into a pure object) enter the inanimate and death-time. The deceptively idyllic, private scenery in which their love-drama is acted out is embedded within a larger cultural analysis of Tourism and its Colonial machine, which Pynchon calls "perhaps the most absolute communion we know on earth" (V 408). This machine has the same relation to the "visited" cultures as man has to the fetish, so that fetishism is ultimately a "tourisme-du-deux." It replaces/simulates the "other" within one's own parameters, much in the same way as the fetish replaces/simulates the phallus within the parameters of castration.

For as tourists bring into the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city, so the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V's, which represent a kind of infiltration. (V 411)

The concept defining both movements is that of psychic and cultural "colonization." It implies a gesture that radically alters and re-defines objects according to specific operational parameters, a gesture that invades the "other" and redefines him/her as a pure object.

In V, Pynchon carries this tendency to its two logical conclusions, at the end of each of which invariably lies a dead object. V might have [. . .] come to establish eventually so many controls over herself that she became—to Freudian, behaviorist, man of religion, no matter—a purely determined organism, an automaton, constructed, only quintly, of human flesh. Or by contrast, might have reacted against the above, which we have come to call Puritan, by journeying even deeper into a fetish-country, until she became entirely and in reality—not merely as a love-game with any Mélanie—an inanimate object of desire. (V 411)

Both trajectories (the robot of Puritanism and the fetish of psychoanalysis) are defined by inanimateness, once in the change from "subject" to "economic simulation" within the social order, and once in the change from "subject" to "fetish/object," in which desire itself is dead because it is invariably implicated in the deadness of its object. These two determinations together insert the body inextricably into an operational grid, an
ultimate molar machine, a purely machinic Metropolis in which even the operators are machines, an industry of robots building other robots. Max Weber's critique and analysis in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is of course the early key text for Pynchon, but Baudrillard provides a later, parallel text:

For the system of political economy the robot is the ideal type of body. The robot is the ultimate model of the functional "liberation" of the body as work-force. It is the extrapolation of the completely rational, asexual productivity . . . . For the system of political economy of the sign, the mannequin (in all its variants) is the model of reference for the body. As a contemporary of the robot . . . the mannequin represents a . . . fully functionalized body . . . . It is no longer the work-force that is being produced . . . but sexuality itself as a model. (SE 180)

Similar perspectives open up for Profane and Stencil. What is at stake is the transformation of psychoanalysis into mechanics.

The limit of fetishism, and also the limit of psychoanalysis, is man as fetish and man as pure object. It is from this new perspective, presided over by the engineer, that Pynchon "deconstructs" psychoanalytic constellations. He exposes the inadequacy of psychoanalysis and its field, a field based on outdated assumptions, in the light of a new cultural arena. In a radical critique of humanistic patterns of explication, psychoanalysis is the first to fall. Appropriately, the last image is, again, of V., standing metonymically for the new scene:

at age seventy-six: skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. Solenoid relays would be her ganglia, servo-actuators move her flawless nylon limbs, hydraulic fluid be sent by a platinum heartpump through butyrate veins and arteries. Perhaps [...] even a complex system of pressure transducers located in a marvelous vagina of polyethylene; the variable arms of their wheatstone bridges all leading to a single silver cable which fed pleasure-voltages direct to the correct register of the digital machine in her skull. (V 411-12)

8: The Fetish-Text

The spectre of simulation and the fetish weaves not only through this chapter but through the whole of V. At every conceivable (and investigable) angle, inanimate simulation enters the "real": Profane's fight against his inanimate universe;
Rachel's sexual relation to her MG; Fergus, the extension of the TV set; Esther's nose; Eigenvalue's dentures; the "inanimate buddies from Detroit" (V 357); Profane's dream about an all-electronic woman ("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 361]). These all add up to a universe streaked through with the mechanical and the machinic. The female body, however, seems to be a privileged site for this mutation. Being simultaneously the direct phallic object and the ultimate "other" of the phallic scene, woman is defined by these functions within a general economy, and she is the first, but also the last, to fall prey to this mechanization.

Like the stage-setting within Chapter 14, the text itself stages this invasion on the field of the signifier, the ultimate fetish. Within its space, the death of desire, the demise of the human and the advent of the machine are recovered within the text's desire, its thrust into signification, and the momentum which loads the signifiers with desire within the infinitesimal line of demarcation between the stage and the street.

But there is yet another aspect of the text. Being part of the code, the text itself is a fetish, a function which Barthes has commented on:

The spitefulness of language: once reassembled, in order to utter itself, the total body must revert to the dust of words, to the listing of details, to a monotonous inventory of parts, to crumbling language undoes the body, returns it to the fetish... it accumulates in order to totalize, multiplies fetishes in order to obtain a total, defetishized body. (S/Z 114)

In The Pleasure of the Text, he further extends this function to the reader: "The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me." Pynchon's stance towards language is defined within these problematic. Aware that the text is always already this supplement, Pynchon constantly carries it to its own limit, to the limits of reading/writing. As the ending of The Crying of Lot 49 shows, Pynchon knows about the dangers of too much reading, and it is certainly no coincidence that the agent of the "unknown hidden" who will carry Dedina's search into yet another round is called "Schrift" (L49 175) which, after all, is the German word for "writing."

What remains for the text is to be a site to voice the desire for the "real," the "whole body." That it is always already implicated within "writing," and never quite "real" itself, however, opens up the question of its desire for its own termination within its desire to "signify."

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Notes


4 One might add the Derridean "Philosophical Machine" (see Derrida's argument with Hegel in *Margins of Philosophy* [Sussex: Harvester, 1982]), as well as what Deleuze/Guattari would call the Lacanian Machine, which they attack directly through their critique of Oedipal structures.

5 Deleuze/Guattari see the molar machines as conglomerations of molecular machines under "determinate conditions":

By "determinate conditions" we mean those statistical forms into which the machines enter as so many stable forms, unifying, structuring, and proceeding by means of large heavy aggregates; the selective pressures that group the parts retain some of them and exclude others . . . . These are therefore the same machines, but not at all the same regime . . . . It is only at the submicroscopic level of desiring-machines that there exists a functionalism--machinic arrangements, an engineering of desire . . . . Only what is not produced in the same way it functions has a meaning, and also a purpose, an intention. The desiring-machines, on the contrary represent nothing, signify nothing, mean nothing.

(AO 287-88).

Within this definition, the desiring-machines are defined as being situated outside of any semiological framework.

6 "Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression" (AO 26). This elision of the subject entails a replacement of the Lacanian "object petit a" by an "object-machine petit 'a'" (Felix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984] 115), and of Lacan's definition of the signifier as "that which represents the subject for another signifier" (E 316 [see note 15 below]) by "a pure
signifying space where the machine would represent the subject for another machine" (Molecular Revolution 117), thereby foreclosing any internal (Oedipal) structuration within psychoanalysis.


8 As the notions of "subject" and "object" will be important reference points throughout this paper, it is important to delineate how they will be used. Their demarcations are situated along two axes: One is that of "intersubjective" relations, in which each subject is simultaneously the object for another subject, the position from which one speaks, designating the subject and object functions, as in Lacan. The other axis runs along economic structures; it juxtaposes an object which is fabricated with definite aims, a "product," and over which an instance of power has control, with an object completely out of the subject's control, a complete "other." This line of demarcation can best be followed in Bataille's and Baudrillard's critique of the "economical object." In this paper, the object is always understood as a "product," entailing a (self-legitimized) position of power within the "subject." Pynchon's whole critique, I would argue, is directed against this "object," and in favour of the "object-as-other."

9 "Simulation" entails a model-built reality, which cannot reach back to an original any more, but only to operational modes themselves. "The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction ... the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is already reproducing: the hyper-real," Jean Baudrillard, Simulation (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 146. Hereafter cited as S. Operational structures underlie simulations, whose raison d'être is to gain complete control. The "real," as antagonist to the "human," is turned into "simulation/real," a "real" produced by the human. Analogous to fetish constructions, it thus becomes a supplement and a signifier. The result is a merely "hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself" (S 142). It is interesting to note that Baudrillard uses the same rhetorical device to designate the originators of simulation that Pynchon uses for the members of the "Firm": "They have already tested "reality" ... They have broken down reality into simple elements that they have reassembled into scenarios of regulated oppositions" (S 120, my emphasis).

10 The whole chapter is a pastiche of the eclair of the premiere of Stravinsky's "Le sacre du printemps" in Paris in 1913, which provides a constant sub-text
within the chapter. Porcepic, Satin and Itague represent Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Diaghilev respectively. While Stravinsky was working on "Le sacre du printemps" (a ballet about the sacrifice of a young girl to the god of spring), he was also working on another piece, "Petrouchka," a ballet about an automaton, inspired by "a vision of a mannequin which suddenly comes to life and tests the patience of the orchestra by its diabolic arpeggio of its jumps, so that it finally threatens it with fanfares" (Wolfgang Burde, Stravinsky [Mainz: Goldmann, 1982] 66, my translation).

11 "A decadence," Itague put in, "is a falling away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories" (V 405). Mélanie's Buddebrockian family history, as well as her name (in itself less a proper name than a designation referring to a specific function), also evokes this ambience of decadence and pôles maudits.


13 Sigmund Freud, Studienausgabe Bd. 5, "Der pathologische Fall tritt erst ein, wenn sich das Streben nach dem Fetisch ... an die Stelle des normalen Zieles setzt, ferner wenn sich der Fetisch von der bestimmten Person loslässt, zum allgemeinen Sexualobjekt wird" (54). "The situation only becomes pathological when the longing for the fetish ... actually takes the place of the normal aim, and further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object."


psychoanalysis constantly "represses") to a simulation of the phallus.

17 In The Medium is the Massage (New York: Bantam, 1967), Marshall McLuhan comments on a photograph of two crossed female legs in net stockings: "when information is brushed against information," showing the double definition of the erotics of the code and the code of erotica. Baudrillard sees a similar convergence: "within the general equivalent of the phallus-cult, the body has turned into a complete sign-system, steered by operative models" (SE 175).


19 The pun on délire in French (it means "delirium" but, as de-lire, "of reading") is here especially apt. Lace indeed produces an intricately woven "erotic text."

20 In the analysis of "Little Hans," Freud had already stressed the fact that the phallus had served the child as a clue to the problem of the animateness/inanimateness of objects. The shift from the human to object to machine can thus proceed especially well along these lines.

21 In Mythologies (Fragmore: Granada, 1973), Barthes describes exactly these "chinoise" dynamics.

22 For Lacan, the male as well as the female narcissistic object is a "heteroclite mennequin, baroque doll, a trophy of limbs."

23 For Lacan, the male as well as the female narcissistic object is a "heteroclite mennequin, baroque doll, a trophy of limbs."


25 "La Jarretière" evokes again the scene in which Mélanie had contemplated her body in the overhead mirror and is related to the line between thigh and nylon constituted by the garter-belt.

26 Here it is again, the juxtaposition of cloth and skin, inanimate object and body, into which the fetish-function is quite literally inscribed.

27 One is reminded of the shootout-scene in a gallery of mirrors in Orson Welles's The Lady from
Shanghai, of its play with differing planes of reality and of the emphasis it places on the difficulty of shooting at the right image, the real object.

27 Pynchon gives the Freudian reference himself: "Had they [...] read [...] in the new science of the mind, they would have known that certain fetishes never have to be touched or handled at all; only seen, for there to be complete fulfillment" (V 408). The immediate reference here is to the famous "Glanz auf der Nase," which really was a "glance of the nose." Freud, "Fetischismus," 383.


29 Again, Pynchon gives the Freudian reference himself: "Lesbianism, we are prone to think in this Freudian period of history, stems from self-love projected onto some other human object" (V 407). He might be referring to any one, or several, of various Freudian texts, e.g.: "Zur Einführung des Narzissmus," in Studienausgabe, Bd. 3 ("On Narcissism: an Introduction," Standard Edition, Vol 74); bei Perversen und Homosexuellen ... dass sie ihr spätere Liebesobjekt nicht nach dem Vorbild der Mutter wählen, sondern nach dem ihrer eigenen Person" (54); "with perverts and homosexuals ... because they choose their future loved object not after the model of their mother, but after their own person." In "Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci," Studienausgabe, Bd. 10 ("Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood," Standard Edition, Vol 11), Freud first writes a similar statement: "und seine eigene Person zum Vorbild nimmt, in dessen Ähnlichkeit er seine neuen Liebesobjekte auswählt ... er findet seine Liebesobjekte auf dem Wege des Narzissmus" (125); "and he takes his own person as a model, in whose similarity he chooses to find his future loved object ... he finds his loved object along the route of narcissism." He then combines it with two other themes that are of importance in this chapter: "Die fetischartige Verehrung des weiblichen Fusses und Schuhs scheint den Fuss nur als Ersatzsymbol für das eineinst verehrte, seither vermiste Glied des Weibes zu nehmen; die 'Zopfabschneider' spielen, ohne es zu wissen, die Rolle von Personen, die am weiblichen Genitale den Akt der Kastration ausführen" (122); "the fetish-like veneration of the female foot and the shoe seems to take the foot mainly as a supplementary symbol for the once venerated and since then missed female genital; the 'braid-cutters' play, without being aware of it themselves, the role of people who perform the act of castration on the female genital."
30 In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon has a similarly "harsh" image of this relation. During an orgy on the Anubis: "A girl with an enormous glass dildo inside which baby piranhas are swimming in some kind of decadent lavender medium amuses herself between the buttocks of a stout transvestite in lace stockings and a dyed sable coat." Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 468.

31 For Lacan, the law-of-the-father denotes basically the male position (phallic instance) of control and authority.

32 For Baudrillard, ambivalence is a concept outside of semiotic reach. It is not a net of connotations but a more basic, structural ambivalence of the objects of the world themselves which in fact challenges the authority of the semiotic codings. Jean Baudrillard, "Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign," For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (St. Louis: Telos, 1981) 149.

33 Jean Baudrillard, "Fetishism and Ideology," For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, 82.

34 It has also created a space in which Pynchon can stage "orgies of the signifier," fetish-countries of increasing complexity in which his prose can wander at will.


36 In Chapter eleven of V., "Confessions of Fausto Majstral," Pynchon shows the relation of the engineer not to psychoanalysis but to poetics. Dunblane, the poet, turns around into "Anteburund(t)" (Latin for "they will progress"), the engineer of empty progress, who ends up building roads in America. The counter-weight is Fausto, fragmented humanist, who tries to re-create the "lost" unity in his poetry. As so often, Pynchon plays out these two extremes against each other and creates a sort of "third term."


38 This aspect relates Pynchon's poetics to Lacan's ontology. Whereas the strictly psychoanalytic aspect of Lacanian theory (its phallicocratic structuration) is opposed to Pynchon's ideas, his more general topography (especially the function of the Lacanian Real within the triad of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real) might well provide a useful reference for a reading of Pynchon's constant "de/constructions" of his own texts.
PYNCHON, V., AND THE FRENCH SURREALISTS

Michael W. Vella

It is appropriate to suggest connections between Pynchon and French surrealism for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Pynchon himself points us in that direction in his "Introduction" to Slow Learner. There, Pynchon reminisces about his student days in an elective art history class where what most impressed him was surrealism. After admitting what we might call a "shock of recognition," Pynchon says that as an apprentice writer he tried to apply surrealistic techniques—chiefly that of assemblage—in his early stories. This passage in his "Introduction" evidences Pynchon's early commitment to surrealist techniques, but more to the point are his self-criticisms for not quite having "done it right" (he accuses himself of misunderstanding assemblage and of not having had enough access to his dream life); for such reflections made more than twenty years after the fact can be construed as at least a residual belief in the legitimacy of the surrealist aesthetic. The title he gave to his collection of early stories, Slow Learner, suggests as much.

I would like here simply to sketch out some of the concrete ways we might pursue Pynchon's involvement with surrealism and go beyond his general remarks in Slow Learner. My purpose is not to argue Pynchon's "indebtedness" to surrealism so much as it is to point towards the aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual climate in which I think he created V.

One of the most impressive and provocative correlations between V. and surrealism has to do with two avant-garde reviews published in New York. In View and VVV, the French surrealists who exiled themselves to New York during the Occupation found outlets for their writing, graphics, and manifestos. In this self-imposed exile, Breton, Masson, Tanguy, Ray, Ernst, Duchamp, among others, formed an impressive core of talent and creative energy that remained active in New York throughout the Forties. Their first vehicle of expression was the extant avant-garde magazine View, which published their work from 1940 until about 1945. But by 1942, Breton had become dissatisfied with View's eclecticism, and together with David Hare, Duchamp, and Ernst, he launched the more uniformly surrealistic VVV. Since VVV was thoroughly surrealistic in orientation, it had an agenda, and each issue contained a manifesto-title page put together by Breton.
that is, \( V+V+V \). We say

\[ \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \cdots \]

as a vow—and energy—to return to a habitable and conceivable world, Victory over the forces of regression and of death unloosed at present on the earth, but also \( V \) beyond this first Victory, for this world can no more, and ought no more, be the same, \( V \) over that which tends to perpetuate the enslavement of man by man,

and beyond this

\( V \) of that double Victory, \( V \) again over all that is opposed to the emancipation of the spirit, of which the first indispensable condition is the liberation of man,

whence

\( V+V+V \) towards the emancipation of the spirit, through these necessary stages: it is only in this that our activity can recognize its end

Or again:

one knows that to

\( V \) which signifies the View around us, the eye turned towards the external world, the conscious surface,

some of us have not ceased to oppose

\( V+V+V \) the View inside us, the eye turned toward the interior world and the depths of the unconscious,

whence

\( V+V+V \) towards a synthesis, in a third term, of these two Views, the first \( V \) with its axis on the EGO and the reality principle, the second \( V+V \) on the SELF and the pleasure principle—the resolution of their contradiction tending only to the continual, systematic enlargement of the field of consciousness

towards a total View,

\( V+V+V \) which translates all the reactions of the eternal upon the actual, of the psychic upon the physical, and takes account of the myth in process of formation beneath the VEIL of happenings.

Apart from evident similarities between the mere title of Pynchon's novel and that of the review \( V+V+V \), the message of Breton's manifesto, with its plethora of explicated \( V \)'s, reads
like a veritable list of V.'s general themes. Together with Minotaure, VV was one of the most striking of the surrealist magazines, and it often figures in histories, exhibitions, and discussions of the movement. Insofar as VV is mentioned often and its title page frequently reproduced, there is a good possibility that Pynchon's art history class at Cornell made reference to it—evidently he took the class in 1957-58—or that Pynchon's enthusiasm for the surrealists led him to the discovery of VV on his own, perhaps in the New York Public Library, where Pynchon is reported to have often worked and where to this day both VV and View remain readily available. The uncanny correlations between Breton's exposition of V.'s in the VV title page and the general themes of V. suggest such a link.

As much as there is reason to suspect Pynchon may have seen VV, there is circumstantial evidence suggesting he knew of View as well. This would not be altogether surprising since the two are often discussed in tandem. Pynchon, for example, has Fausto Mejstral cite a relatively obscure novel, Habdomeros, as one of his inspirations. In fact, Habdomeros is a surrealistic novel by the painter Giorgio de Chirico (mentioned elsewhere in V., as we shall see), a man whose work the surrealists esteemed, largely because it adumbrated their own. Habdomeros, for example, foreshadowed their literary endeavors with its dreamscapes, its journey motif, its structure that reads like a picaresque of the subconscious and thus is so suggestive of the automatic writing to which the surrealists were so attached. The point here, however, is that, if Pynchon read Habdomeros (and there is reason to believe he did), he read it either in an obscure 1929 French edition, and this seems unlikely, or in View, where it was published in two parts in a translation done by Paul Bowles in 1944. No other English translation was available until 1956, three years after V. was published.

De Chirico had already attracted attention in the New York art world before the surrealists came to New York bringing their enthusiasm for his work with them and subsequently spreading it to Americans like Bowles, among others. In 1935-36 de Chirico visited New York to sell paintings and participate in shows. His major collector, promoter, and early defender in New York was James Thrall Soby. Soby's collection of de Chirico was the most extensive anywhere, and it was this collection that was eventually bequeathed to the New York Museum of Modern Art (hereafter NYMMA), becoming part of its permanent collection. Not only was Soby the man who largely made de Chirico's paintings present in New York; he also frequently wrote about the artist. If Pynchon, for example, had only read about Habdomeros without actually reading the novel, Soby is a likely source.

Another example of the de Chirico-V. connection that winds back to the surrealists exiled in New York has to do with Pynchon's "Catatonic Expressionist," Slab. Slab paints endless sequences of Cheese Danishes, but his obsession is more than another example of Pynchon's humor. De Chirico himself painted series after series of paintings of pastries, and the best of these were bought by Soby and bequeathed to the NYMMA. In
September and October of 1955, the NYMMA had a major exhibition
of de Chirico for which Soby wrote the catalogue. Pynchon had
just finished his first two years at Cornell and would shortly
leave on Navy duty. It appears he had not yet taken his art
history elective, and if we assume this class is the most likely
source of his discovery of the surrealists, we would have to
assume here a prior interest in contemporary art sufficient for
Pynchon to go see the de Chirico exhibit. In any case, textual
correlations and edition history both suggest an "early"
awareness on Pynchon’s part of Hebdomeros. Had he discovered
Soby’s mention of Hebdomeros and de Chirico’s obsessive painting
of pastries in the catalogue?

Elsewhere in V. Pynchon mentions Paola’s having a print of
"di Chirico’s street." Is it possible that Paola’s print is that
of de Chirico’s most famous painting—one that hung for a long
time in Breton’s apartment, figured as a backdrop for many
surrealist gatherings, and eventually ended up in the NYMMA’s
collection—the well-known Melancholy and Mystery of a Street?6
Does the Street that figures so importantly in V. find its
origin, or at least its imaginative equivalent, in the many
paintings by de Chirico of emptied, eerie streets like that in
Melancholy and Mystery of a Street?

To call Slab a "Catatonic Expressionist" is another of
Pynchon’s jokes, of course, but its humor depends on what New
York-based Abstract Expressionism was, and once again, highly
suggestive cultural links between V. and the exiled French
surrealists seem at play. The Abstract Expressionists grouped
around Pollock, Motherwell, and Rothko shared a primary tenet
having to do with "action painting" as a technique, the rough
equivalent in painting for "automatic writing" in surrealist
writing. Action painting is most associated with Jackson
Pollock, but the spontaneity it presupposes was a characteristic
of the movement.

The fact is that action painting was perhaps the single most
important inheritance of the surrealist presence in New York for
Abstract Expressionists like Motherwell, Rothko, and Pollock,
among others. Not only did these artists contribute to both View
and VVV; they came under the influence of the surrealist
aesthetic—"automatism" is only one such influence—because
people like Matta, Tanguy, Ernst, Masson, and Breton arrived
on the New York art scene at precisely the moment when a whole
generation of young American artists was just coming into
maturity. According to one art historian, the surrealist
 technique of "automatism" aided the young American artists to
free themselves of academicism and, through the route of action
painting and spontaneity, tap their creative resources in what
has come to be called Abstract Expressionism.7 That Slab paints
endless sequences of Cheese Danishes may be a humorous remaking
of the croissants and pastries that obsessed de Chirico, but that
he is a "Catatonic Expressionist" plays upon the important
liberating factor of automatism for the Abstract Expressionists,
something they inherited from the French surrealists. Pynchon’s
off-the-wall joke is built upon knowledge of everything that Rothko, Motherwell, and Pollock represented.

Another of V's artists who suggests Pynchon's familiarity with the French surrealists' presence in New York is Fergus Mixolydian. When Pynchon writes that Mixolydian's creative ventures included taking a walk from a man's room stall in Penn Station and entering it in an art exhibit "as what the old Dadaists called a 'ready-made,'" he is retelling an infamously anecdote about Marcel Duchamp, an anecdote the surrealists cherished and which has become legendary within the history of the movement. In 1917 Duchamp was invited to serve on the exhibition jury of New York's Grand Central Palace Exhibit (patterned along the lines of the surrealists' Independents exhibits in Paris). Duchamp secured a mass-produced ceramic urinal, signed it "R. Mutt," titled it Fountain, and submitted it to the theoretically open-entry exhibit. When it was refused admission, Duchamp resigned from the jury in protest.\[10\]

Not only was Duchamp one of the "old Dadaists" Pynchon mentions; it was Duchamp himself who coined the term "ready-made" especially for the mass-produced objects, gadgets, and devices for which America was becoming so famous. Duchamp merely took such objects from their banal and quotidian contexts, altered them slightly, and by presenting them in other less banal and more "aesthetic" contexts, such as in shows and galleries, claimed them as "ready-made" works of art. The infamous Fountain was merely one of the first of Duchamp's "ready-mades"; others like Bicycle Wheel followed. Both of these well-known Duchamp ready-mades, for example, were initially shown in New York's Sidney Janis Gallery, and eventually they, too, like much of the art we have been discussing, ended up in the NYMMA to become part of the general New York artistic patrimony.\[11\] The point is not only that the "old Dadaist" Duchamp is the legendary figure upon whom Mixolydian is modeled; more important, I think, is considering this and other of the details I have been mentioning as evidence of how important the surrealists were to enriching that patrimony for artists and writers in New York. Duchamp's ready-mades, de Chirico's paintings, Breton's avant-garde review—these remained objectively present in New York as materials for inspiration, imitation, and creative provocation for a whole generation of artists and writers coming of age in the Fifties.

In fact, Pynchon's portrait—at times satiric—of the Whole Sick Crew is a rough sketch of the New York avant-garde circa 1955-1960, years in which Pynchon finished college and began writing V while living in Greenwich Village. The slightest details in V often resonate with the quasi-bohemian currents of the period: take, for example, Pynchon's mentioning the vague of "accidental art" during the mid-Fifties, or the Whole Sick Crew's "aesthetic experience" before an open refrigerator during one of their parties. This latter, a relatively unimportant detail, recalls Rauschenberg's 1955 Interview, a kind of collage-sculpture consisting of an open cupboard door with various banal objects exposed—family photographs, a baseball,
etc. Rauschenberg insisted he worked "in that gap between" art and life, and generally avowed his debt to Duchamp. 2

The extent to which the New York heritage of Dada and surrealism, to use William S. Rubin's words, "clearly is a factor in contemporary American literature has, I think, tended to be underestimated in a way that has not occurred in our understanding of the modern plastic arts. Men like James Thrall Soby, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Sidney Janis, among others, and the institutions they represented—the museums, the galleries, the forward-thinking collectors—succeeded in legitimizing, indeed "institutionalizing" the avant-garde aesthetic of the exiled French surrealists by collecting, exhibiting, defending, and maintaining their work as a highly visible part of the artistic and cultural matrix of New York; and they thus made certain aesthetic strategies and values available for a budding writer like Pynchon.

By the time Pynchon was actually composing V. in Greenwich Village, the surrealist and Dadaist undercurrents were surfacing and becoming pretty explicit. In 1959, for example, the NYMM put together a large show of many works that ultimately derived from this heritage. The "New Images of Man" exhibit, as one of its participants wrote, can be seen as part of the Dada revival which has been flourishing since the last decade and which seems to be as little confined to any particular locality as was the original movement. The Dada groups which sprang up in Zurich and New York during the First World War were in rebellion against the lies of convention, against militarism and the suicide of war. It is hardly surprising that at a time when the means of mass communication have made for a much greater conformity and when lunacy seems to have become world policy, young artists conjure up a new kind of trenchant mockery. 14

Frank O'Hara, also writing for the exhibit catalogue, declared that "In physics and philosophy, in technology and communication, the elements of change and motion underlie the concepts of our own time. In one way or another, a great many artists have attempted to cast these principles of transformation and of a world in flux into visual form." If anything, in V., Pynchon "conjures up a trenchant mockery" of modern forces of mass destruction and also recasts "principles of transformation and of a world in flux" into literary form. In fact, insofar as the "New Images of Man" exhibit was the culmination of the surrealist and Dadaist heritage in New York, similarities between passages in its catalogue and the general thematic concerns of V. tend to substantiate the suggestion I have been making here—that Pynchon was enriched by the Dadaist and surrealist heritage in New York and that at least in V. he was a creative participant in that cultural matrix. In the Preface to the exhibit catalogue, Paul Tillich wrote that "whenever a new period is conceived in
the womb of the preceding period, a new image of man pushes toward the surface and finally breaks through.16 The new image of man that Tillich saw in the exhibit art was one of man in rebellion against "the dehumanizing structure of totalitarian systems," the "consequences of technical mass evil," and "the danger of [man's] losing his humanity and of becoming a thing amongst the things he produces."17 These are themes central to V. Consider Jean Dubuffet's remark cited in the catalogue: "the key to things must not be as we imagine it, but . . . the world must be ruled by strange systems of which we have not the slightest inkling."18 Once again, a more concise declaration of a concern shared by Pynchon could not be had.

The "New Images of Man" exhibit took place at the NYMM from late September through November 1959. By this time, Pynchon had returned from his Naval duty in a Mediterranean tense with the Suez Crisis; the world had been on the brink of World War III during his ship duty. Now he had returned to graduate from Cornell in June 1959. After having performed his military service during a moment of extreme world tension, after having worked as an apprentice—a "slow learner," to use his words—on the staff of The Cornell Writer, in which he published an early story, after having installed himself in Greenwich Village, where he worked on V. until February 1960, he began like the artists on exhibit not far from him at the NYMM to construct for himself a "new image of man." His techniques in V. owe much to surrealism and his themes and preoccupations seem largely to have been formulated within what Rubin calls the Dadaist and surrealist heritage in New York.

By 1960 the surrealists' intrusion into the New York art scene was complete. Happenings, events, avant-garde reviews, manifestos, shows in the galleries and museums, and the efforts of private collectors had made of a once marginal, deviant, and underground movement a driving cultural and artistic force. From November to January 1960, New York's D'Arcy Galleries mounted another major surrealist exhibit, this time directed by Andre Breton and Marcel Duchamp themselves. The exhibit was titled "The Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain." Its theme was more or less explicitly the surrealist presence in America, but by then Pynchon had left Greenwich Village, taking the manuscript of V. with him, to work on technical documents for Boeing in Seattle. At the moment when the surrealist presence in New York broke surface, Pynchon had disappeared into the belly of the Leviathan . . .

—Université de Nancy II

Notes

1 VVV 4, Feb. 1944. Ed. David Hare, Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst.


3 Pynchon may indeed have seen View or VVV in the New York Public Library, where apparently he worked in the north wing of the reading room. According to Francis D. Mathison, Curator of Rare Books for the New York Public Library, both VVV and View are to this day in the stacks, the former in the Art Division and the latter in the General Research Division. According to a library spokesperson, VVV and View have always been "readily accessible." Letter of October 22, 1987 to my query from Francis D. Mathison, Curator of Rare Books; letter of October 23, 1987 from Reproduction Services, New York Public Library. Pynchon’s working habits at the NYPL are mentioned in Earl Ganz, "Pynchon in Hiding," Plum 3 (1980): 5-20.

4 There is not sufficient place here to discuss fully the de Chirico-V. link, but there is both textual and extra-textual evidence suggesting correspondence between the two novels. See note 6 below.


6 In both The Early Chirico (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1941) and De Chirico (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), James Thrall Soby discussed aspects of de Chirico in words that resonate with V. "To be really immortal," de Chirico wrote, "a work of art must go completely beyond the limits of the human; good sense and logic will be missing from it . . . . In this way it will come close to the dream-state, and also the mentality of children." Quoted by Soby in De Chirico 6. Of Hebdomeros Soby wrote: "In this picaresque of the imagination de Chirico relates how Hebdomeros, the central character, moves from place to place (if 'place' is not too tangible a word) in search of what is primarily Eternal Truth, encountering strange situations on the way, and philosophizing about them in a dramatic if inconclusive manner." De Chirico 6-7. See also page 8 for other such passages.
Slab's Cheese Danishes have a lot in common with de Chirico's paintings of pastries. "Certain objects occur so frequently in Chirico's early paintings that they are clearly obsessive in origin," wrote Soby. "For example, edible objects—fruit, candy, biscuits and vegetables—occur time and again in these paintings .... As a child, Chirico is said to have had an enormously sensual appetite for sweets and delicacies, many of them forbidden him. As an adult in the Italian army at Ferrara, he spent his hours of leave in pastry shops, in an ecstasy of gratification, buying the macaroons and biscuits which play so important a part in the paintings of his 'metaphysical' period. Whatever its ulterior motivation, physiological or psychological gourmandism itself is a definite obsession, and perhaps it alone accounts for the fact that edible objects in Chirico's paintings are rendered with such sharp clarity of appeal." The Early Chirico 33-34.

De Chirico's series of mysterious, empty streets and squares is as curious as his paintings of pastries. Delights of a Poet, Montparnasse Station, and Enigma of a Day are all well-known examples of this series, and all were in the Soby bequest to the NYUMA. De Chirico, with texts by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, Domenico Ponzio, Wieland Schmied, Dennis Messler (Paris: Société Nouvelle des Editions du Chêne, 1979). [Editors' Note: Melancholy and Mystery of a Street appears on the dust-jacket of David Seed's very recent The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1988). Seed discusses aspects of the de Chirico-Pynchon connection on pages 74 and 102 in ways that are consistent with Nella's more detailed discussion here.]

The arrival of the surrealists in New York in the late Thirties and early Forties was especially important for the then maturing group of American artists. They were influenced by surrealist aesthetic strategies such as the "personage" motif, biomorphism, primitivism, collage, frottage, and automatism. In a more removed way, their influence continued well into the Sixties in the Pop Art movement. According to Lucy Lippard, surrealist "ideas and techniques have expanded and been absorbed so thoroughly that traces of the original aesthetic and antiesthetic can be found in the most unlikely places." One of these places is recent American prose fiction, as I have been suggesting here. Surrealists on Art 212.

The Duchamp anecdote is recapitulated in Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism (Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1978) 71. The anecdote is frequently retold in histories of the movement.

12 See Rubin 56-59. In Slow Learner, Pynchon recalls his youthful enthusiasm for the Beats, themselves greatly influenced by surrealism. For a "reconstruction" of the Beat scene and the general vie de bohème of Greenwich Village in 1960 when Pynchon was writing V., see Ned Polsky, Hustlers, Beats, and Others (London: Penguin, 1971). Polsky is a sociologist whose "participant-observer" study, apart from its sociology, enables us to get a sense of Village life at the moment Pynchon was writing V.

13 Rubin 56-59.


15 Selz 146.

16 Selz 9.

17 Selz 9.

18 Selz 63-64.
TELEGRAMMATOLOGY PART I:
LOT 49 AND THE POST-ETHICAL

Alec McHoul

"... are not the goddesses of Destiny also the goddesses of the human Lot, of allotment—the Moirai, the last of whom is the Silent One, Death?"

—Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse

[This paper is part of a larger project called "Telegrammatology." That project is, in turn, embedded within a larger one: the production of a collection of papers by myself and David Wills on the work of Thomas Pynchon and its relations with the grammatological concerns of Derrida and others. In particular, Telegrammatology sets out to address some of the questions raised in David's paper called "PLS RECORD BOOK BID LOT 49 STOP J DERRIDA." In that paper, he draws together some of the mutual concerns of Lot 49 and Derrida's Envoi with respect to postal systems and the question of destination. Its title is an imagined construction of what Derrida's telegram would look like were he to be the Mysterious Bidder who arrives at the crying of the Lot. This first reply, Telegrammatology I, looks at the question of how to read Pynchon and takes an arbitrary slice through Lot 49. Prior to that, however, it considers some of the questions critics have raised in regard to Pynchon's contribution to the "morality" of the 20th century. A concept of the post-ethic is generated to deal with this, drawing on Derrida's deconstruction of the origin/destination opposition. In Part II of the Telegrammatology, I turn to more obviously Derridean questions while remaining within the general question of how to read. If one can take an arbitrary slice through Lot 49, the same approach might work with, say, Of Grammatology. By deconstructing the distinction between the correct and the erroneous, Part II shows how a collection of errors in the Derrida text can generate a positive reading, leading to a concept of the unmetrical (on the model of the "unconscious").]

Oedipa, the mass of America, is left with four possibilities: "Those symmetrical four. She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was" (130). Mentally ill, then; that's one. The other three: (1) a true network of Americans, really communicating, a real community; (2) she is hallucinating; (3) there is a plot, most likely set up by Inverarity, to place post-horns and such like in her path. The four finally duldle, over the last few pages of the book, down to two: a real Other, a Word (137) behind the obvious; or else only that latter itself, the humdrum empirical bits and pieces of everyday life. The essential or the
contingent? The Platonic form or the inessence of its mere filling-in? And this real, if it exists, is a community, a real America behind its "crust and mantle" (135), behind its mere "name." Put bluntly: is the Word behind the word? A hideous excluded middle, which Oedipa knew was "bad shit, to be avoided" (138).

To find anything behind the name, the inscription, is to be paranoid—in America all the more so because it could mean community, and we all know how the first six or seven letters of that word can be used. It fractures the American dream of independence, of atomisation, of self-security, of what the Germans called, in reference to both writing and the development of the independent self, bildung:

... they'd call her names, proclaim her through all Orange County as a redistributist and pinko ... (137)

Not much choice here: you crack up inside or else lose all possibility of a real outside. If the world is together, I'm mad; I am only sane if it is fragmented. And so we are (or it is) left, awaiting the crying.

This was how we diagramatised this in "Gravity's Rainbow and the Post-Rhetorical":

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a (     ) b
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Accordingly: a and b might be a number of things or signs. For example, we could say that Oedipa has to exist uncertainly between signifier and signified, between, for example, the signifying post-horns and their meaning, the Tristero. If she veers too close to the signifier alone, she is left with a meaningless array of figures. On the other hand, to veer the other way—towards meaning—induces paranoia. She lives in a world where there is no longer any correspondence between Sr and Sd—and so she can't take the option—it's not there for the taking—of bringing the two together.

Again: a and b might be literal and metaphorical forms of signification. In this case, Oedipa cannot veer too close towards a literal reading of what she sees and hears—and neither can "the reader." Nor can she get lost in the mise-en-abyme of metaphoric connections because that would lead nowhere but to her own insanity.

We could probably also plunder a number of other valencies for a and b, other dualisms in which Lot 49 abounds: the real and the fake postal systems, the odd politics, for example, of Mike Fallopian which cannot be situated as left or right (65-66), the animate and the inanimate, the humane and the mechanical, the "transcendent meaning" or "only the earth" behind the "hieroglyphic streets" (138):
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. (138)

As a matter of fact, Lot 49 does not tell us if or how
Oedipa "resolves" all this--she is simply left to await the
"crying" of the lot, of the mass perhaps, the not-too-critical
mass. But plainly, the extremes are not recommended. The
excluded middle, somehow (but how?), has to be excluded,
cancelled, and a space opened (if you'll excuse the syntax)
parenthetically up. The novel says "look here"--but won't tell
us where "here" is and what can be found there.

At such a point of interpretation as this, it is difficult
to distinguish the supposedly pure, almost linguistic, problem of
signifying practice and a whole range of mental/ethical problems.
In the same way, a purely logical paradox becomes a practical
double-bind when it ceases to be a mere proposition in a textbook
and becomes instead an order or command. For example, the army
barber is ordered to shave all the men except those who shave
themselves and is on a charge whether or not he shaves himself.
The semiotic becomes ethical, however, at the point where we ask:
how to live in a world where the side of the signifier and the
side of the signified cannot be conjoined and where neither alone
is to be trusted: neither pure materiality (5r) nor absent or
continually deferred meaning/spirit (5d): neither substance nor
phantom?

So what is Oedipa's problem at the semio-ethical level?
Perhaps it could be formulated as follows: while the middle is,
in some sense, officially perhaps, excluded, Oedipa finds
herself in a middle of some sorts. At the very least, she is in
media res. She is caught between Origin (being) and Destination
(purpose), between "because" and "in order to." She is caught
like a dead letter, WASTEd communication, left in trash-can
rather than post-box. She is--or is manipulated into being--
exactly where the binary system will not let her be.

So she is in more than a double-bind in the classical sense
analysed by Bateson, Laoz and others. For: in the double-bind
proper, neither term can operate. It is prevented by the other
term. One cannot, for example, be either loved or unloved by
one's mother, and one cannot be both. In excluding a and b, the
double-bind's logic excludes "both a and b" and "either a or b."
There is, after all, something definite, literal, logical, or
non-modal, about the double-bind as we know and love it. No
doubt that is why Bateson thought it could be resolved by
"metacommunications."

On the other hand, for Oedipa, both terms can, at least
potentially, at least in principle, be operative at once. The
trouble is that she can't tell if, and if so which, or if both.
If Origin points to Truth and if mere presence (experience) is
paranoid, then Oedipa is prevented from finding a further truth:
the truth of the relation between Truth and experience--or Origin
and presence. That truth would tell her "what-to-do." It would signal destination, somewhere and something to be.

Thereby: even the metaphysical conception of Truth (as Origin) is displaced for Dedila. (While, for the one who is merely doubly-bound, two over-arching, terribly obvious, and contradictory truths run amok.) Something has to be sought. But this truth lies in a relation between two terms, one of which is itself, Truth and that is, by definition, unavailable. If our end is indeed our beginning (and Lot 49, it should be remembered, does end with "Lot 49"), then there is no comfort when the beginning is just as obscure(d) as the end. If you like—and you probably won't—Dedila is, if anything, doubly-unbound. She is in a state of. End. There may be something comforting in that which is binding, in the legal sense, because one can know where one is with it. But this comfort is unavailable to Dedila. Even the binding contract of the will seems indifferent to her.

Where I want to go from here, then, is to draw together two things: (a) the idea of beginning and end as ethical terms or termini and (b) the idea of beginnings and ends as textual points or puncta. Two ideas. The first involves us initially in the problem of Origin/Destination that Dedila faces and the ways in which a deconstruction of that opposition might yield us a post-ethical ethics—a way of dealing with, though not necessarily "solving," Dedila's dilemma. The second will be picked up once we have worked through the first section which could be considered on its own and called

Labyrinths

The paper PL$ RECORD$ BOOK BID rightly refuses some of the possibilities which other readers of Lot 49 have taken to be positive ways for avoiding binaries: the psychic insights of the old sailor's dt's and the sensitivity of conspiring with Maxwell's Demon, to mention only two obvious ones. But somewhat in their place, there is a turn towards "the flip-flops of prosthesis," "perpetual switching," "perpetual motion between sensitivity and diabolism."\(^5\) Prosthesis, then, separates a space between a and b, an infinite series of delta-t discontinuities. It prizes apart signifier and signified so that neither one seems to be satisfied. And in the spectrum or rainbow which the two terms make, what we are and what we make of ourselves, now has infinite play rather than being fixed to the two terms (Sr/Sd) themselves. The solution is not, I think, unlike some readings of Gravity's Rainbow, readings in which the straight-laced lines of gravity (seriousness) are split through a prism into play (unseriousness) creating an infinitely expanding band width. Gravity's Rainbow, then, would not be unlike "Limited inc . . ." with its infinite ways of being spilled on the page.

In and through these labyrinths, I want to suggest another way—not necessarily incommensurate with BOOK BID/Pynchon/Deleuze. It takes a new theme, however, in relation to g/b: that of refusal rather than splitting. I begin in the present tense but, as will shortly become evident, the past may be more appropriate . . .
What are we all looking for?—the religious, the theoretician, the person (like Gedipa so often) in the street? For want of yet another metaphor, what I think we're looking for is origins. In trying to find who we are, individually and collectively, there is a very strong will to origin. Perhaps especially for those of us in the New World(s) where, ultimately, past a certain point, history is always elsewhere. It is as if the finding of origins were the method we could all agree on as the correct means of self-knowledge. If, we think, we knew from whence we derive, we will know ourselves. The two terms are now almost synonymous. So firm is the grip of the discourse on origins among us. The theorist of human nature, with all her stories of primeval humanity, and the man in the office of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, looking up family history, or else Gedipa on the trail of Pierce's will: all are on the same quest.

One problem with this dominant method—the search for and will to origin—is that we do not know where to stop. Because everything seems to us to derive from what we call origins, so too does our knowledge of where to stop. Only when we have found our origins, only, that is, when we have learned, among other things, how to stop, will we know how to stop searching. The process is obviously self-defeating and makes our "advanced," "technological" societies seem backward by comparison with those that have strong origin myths and non-linear conceptions of both historical and conceptual time.

In its potential for endlessness, the search for origins is like a labyrinth. Except that we are apt to use the wrong picture of a labyrinth when we think of it. Most of the mazes we are used to have definite starting and ending points. The starting point is "here," on the outside. The ending point is "there," usually in some as-yet-unknown-but-projected centre. And this indeed shows the strong connections between our notions of origin and centre. But anyone who has ever got to the centre of a large garden maze will know that the centre contains nothing special. It is an almost arbitrary point in the general landscape. Its hedges, seats, pathways and so forth are pretty much identical with hedges, seats and pathways to be found in any other byway of the labyrinth. Centres, then, are arbitrary and are simply places we imbue with special significance.

Another version of the labyrinth is Gedipa's view of the streets of Southern California, well laid-out, mainlining to the heart (17). And, in BOOK/BID, there's the idea that a joy or pleasure might be derived from the infinite moves to be made around this maze of circuits and lines.

Mythically, however, we have tended to populate our maze-centres. Usually with monsters or treasure. That is, we imagine our origins as being either hideously natural or corruptingly cultural. And, as we follow mazes, it is certainly a motivating force if we can clearly imagine things of this kind. Treasure or fortune is certainly more attractive than aimlessness—yo-yoing perhaps. The monsters to be killed and the gold to be won keep us on our track to the empty, arbitrary centre. We know, though
we rarely think of it, that the centre is no centre. The goods there are no good.

So, if we chance upon some possible centre, we feel always as if we have reached nothing. And then we want to return to our exploring because at least the exploring gave us a sense of purpose. So the search continues, even if we have discovered the centre to be empty. But now there is a continuous feeling of having been let down. It's the same feeling we get on the journey home. It always passes quicker than the outward journey. The freshness, the newness of the scene, the hope of an end in sight: all of these have been removed.

Even if the physical, common or garden labyrinth has some sort of central point, this is no more than any other psychological way-station. The regress still looms—the regress which is perhaps identical with the infinite flip-flop of prosthesis and, in itself, a source of pleasure. Whether we feel pleasure or anguish, our search for origins is still unsatisfiable. It is no more and no less than an addiction—much like the old sailor's addiction in Lot 49. Like all addictions, it has no purpose except for the satisfaction of the addiction itself. The way in and the way out are equally baffling. They provide the same kind of puzzle. And so every point along the way becomes a potential centre—and end.

Our problem is not "too few origins." It is not scarcity. Rather it is "too many origins." Over-abundance. War, love, god, self, man, wealth, nature, truth. . . . We can't see "the" point because there are too many points, not too few. The will to origin and its pluralism constitute a central contradiction in our lives—and so we live in the eternal chasm between dogma and amlessness, uneasily, always tending to one side, carving a "middle way" between with the aid of various tools which often have the titles "religion," "ideology," "belief," and so on. We feel sometimes that we can never reach the, or a, goal.

But what we get wrong is: the idea of a goal. Goals, perhaps, are like goals scored in football: there can always be another quite different in character. There is no ultimate goal. If so, then it makes no more sense to say we can't reach it than it does to say we can. And the myth of "the" goal is, for us and perversely, the origin. We have turned our ends into mythical beginnings. We will them to be so.

Here is the mistake: we want to stop—but we think that stopping means reaching for the origin/end while, in fact, stopping means stopping either to search or to feel hopeless in the absence of anything to search for. I want a morality which refuses both. A post-ethical ethics. For: the two sides of the mistake are sides of the same coin—and the coinage is what is debased. We should continue (if I may be permitted to prolong this dogmatic fragment) to want to stop—but in another sense entirely. This different sense of stopping is: refraining from the hope for a definite origin and refraining equally from the hopelessness of the absent origin.
If the origin/end is—by some miracle—to return (and I doubt it), then it will do so without our going out and looking for it. Like some lost souls deserted by their mothers or their spouses, we go searching in the night through all the likely, and some of the unlikely, places. What we don't see is that our quest actually prevents any return. Refraining will not guarantee it either but, unlike the search, it won't prevent it. That is the odd paradox: there is more hope in abstention from hope. But this is as far as hope can be allowed to go.

The positive search for an origin is associated with the concept of "same"—all things must have the same origin. A life lived on the concept of sameness (despite the empirical plurality of candidate origins) is a life which valorises "mystique" in Péguy's sense. To believe, on the contrary, that the origin cannot be attained is to live a life on the concept of difference—the bases of life, in the absence of an origin, one believes, must be plural, fragmented, differentiated, one-for-each-of-us or each-group-of-us. Here the origin is, too, deferred. It is continually put off. Such a life, again in Péguy's sense, valorises "politiq
e." Here, the origin is absent and condemns us to this world, to politiques. While, with the former course, the positive origin is never of this world—hence mystique.

But "same and different," "mystique and politiques," in themselves, constitute another order of difference. The division between them is, therefore, on the side of politiques. We need to see this difference as the difference which will give us a clue as to how to refrain (from the search for origins and also from fears of the goal being absent). The mystical dogmatist sees only a uniform world in which even the unbeliever has her origins in one central and primordial form. The unbeliever sees a multitude of worlds, including among them the mistaken beliefs of the mystic. But the "higher order" difference is that the world is both uniform and plural—or else it is neither, for its essential energy derives from relations between same and different, mystique and politiques, uniformity and plurality, just as physical energy comes neither from a single indivisible subatomic particle, nor from the plurality of such particles but instead from the relations between them. (And what has been said up to this point is not very far from the prosthetic opening of the gap between a and b in BOOK/BID.)

The mistake is to go looking in the properties of objects (e.g., the will, the Tristano, etc.) instead of cancelling the object domain and focusing instead on the domain of relations. (And, once again, I may be pointing to the non-binarity of a/b, to its status as a triple term: a-slash-b—-but need I say that my "look here" is more than simply that, for it points to a way of refraining from reading the slash in a definite way—e.g., as exclusion.) In physics, relations can be represented mathematically—as relatively pure writing. In the "human" domain we have no exact equivalent of mathematics. The relations can only be shown. That is, they can only be lived. Living becomes a form of writing—living. Life becomes identical with
its representation. (And that is why I want to get to a literary
theory which looks, to invoke the symbolism of material typonomy,
as follows: The novel/death of the Novel //Writing.) Attempts
at representation of the relations—which can be called
psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and so on—are
doomed because they over-value the analogue with physics. They
are all, whatever their protestations, positivistic, in this
sense: in the sense that they hold life to be representable in
some other form than life. The difference which gives human
life meaning(s) is different from the difference which creates
physical energy. And so the attempt which Oedipa makes at
contact with the Demon, through the representation of Maxwell on
the box cover, is always doomed; the two differences cannot be
treated as the same. There is no equivalent of a mathematics to
which we can turn (though many have mistaken logic for such a
technique).

If I want to be happy with my life, or you with yours, or
Oedipa with hers, then that will never eventuate as long as we
demand an origin (the ultimately "same") or as long as we think
of the origin as unattainable (the ultimately "different"). Yet,
in these times, it is certainly probably easiest to take the
latter option: "No Future," "God/Man is Deed," etc. In our
present circumstances, it's very easy to distrust the route of
sameness and origin which served well for our pre-nuclear
ancestors, and to cast off the present in a far as to replace it
with its antithesis, its inverted image. The point would then
be to remove either image and not to mistake the removal of the
first for the currently popular ideology of mere difference and
hopelessness.

One beginning was the search for secular forms of "same" and
"origin"—and some have made this move under the rubric of
"humanism." That may be an important initial corrective—and it
shows the historical importance of movements such as
existentialism—yet it is only on a par with adolescent
impersonations of adulthood. Our age of humanism is effectively
over now. But we have mistaken the new impersonality for
hopelessness instead of seeing it as a possible freedom—albeit a
freedom within the vestigial constraints of same and different.

So it may be true: one does not know the way ahead. But it
is as important as ever to find out what its limits are. All of
the beliefs we have relied on in the past are either beliefs
which will get us into the labyrinth or beliefs which will get us
out. What we need, then, are counter-beliefs which will prevent
us from entering at all. But this is like saying "Stop crying!
" to one who is terminally disturbed. It is no good simply
saying "Don't enter!" We have to find not only reasons but also
motivations for not entering. This is a burning project—in both
senses.

I'm talking here like a child who has had enough of the maze
game. But I have no idea how I can persuade you—some mythical
you who wants to continue playing—that we should move on to
another game. Maybe I simply have to complain loudly and long
enough. I'm not sure. But one thing is obvious: there's no going it alone. We have to give up together for it to make sense, even if the new game is not well formulated in my mind. I cannot give anything like rational reasons for wanting to cease and to begin in a new way. My only strategy is this: to tell you stories—stories about what we might do when we cease.

Here, then, is a story. As it happens, it's a story about stories. Once upon a time we used to tell stories of morality in which there were quests. Chrétien de Troyes almost single-handedly invented the Grail legends. The Bible tells us nothing of it. In de Troyes' story and in many quest stories right up to Tolkien and Pynchon and beyond, a young man is born, the last of a noble line. He is kept sheltered from the world of chivalry, often by his mother, in a country (or a country retreat) far from civilisation. But one day, by accident, he wanders and meets a knight on the road—or hears/read of rumours of knights. Torn between his seemingly lowly origins and chivalry, he chooses the latter and goes off on his quest—unsure of his, or its, authenticity. Often the Grail, or its equivalent, eludes him at a crucial moment. For example, he may fail to ask or answer a simple question properly.

His lowly origins extend to common insecurities about language in formal situations. We simply go wrong, against our own better judgment and capacities—as the common phenomenon of esprit d'escalier (knowing just what to say after the event) shows. The young man does, however, despite this and other failings, turn into a great king or leader in some new zone. But he is always insecure about his "natural" ability. His success seems more a matter of luck than of ability in any true or ultimate sense. This is especially so in the light of his failure in the face of the Question. But he makes wise laws, keeps in touch with the people and often dies or disappears, childless. But he does return from time to time—shadowy and not quite material. Sometimes this is in the prefiguration of other legends. Sometimes it is in later stories. And sometimes it is in the works we call "scholarship," "criticism," or "mythology" (in the disciplinary sense). The scholar's quest for the hero is often just like the hero's own quest. And of course the hero—or the Grail—can turn out to be a monster or a treasure.

Today, the quest is unpopular. We see no point in searching. Nothing seems to be worth it, to have any value to us either in terms of the destruction of evil nature (the monster) or in terms of the value of goods (treasure). Essentially we have lost what used to be called a "model of man," a conception of human nature. But the denial of the quest, the refusal of a theory of human nature, our very hopelessness, is an ethos in itself. The absence of a "model of man" assumes a "model of man" from whom the model is absent. We think we have gone without (in the sense of "lack" and/or in the sense of "beyond")—but the pull of the origin, one would like to say the form of the origin—quest, for all its inversion, holds us still in our very anguish, aimlessness and despair.
The one who goes on a quest—Oedipa, Quixote, Percival—is like the paranoid. The "model of man" for the quester is paranoid; for the paranoid can see pattern and purpose in absolutely everything. The hand of God is visible in the configuration of cigarette butts/ends around the library steps. The windmills are giants. Whatever John, Paul and George may say, the sect are after Ringo's ring (cf. the comparisons between The Paranoias and The Beatles and between Lot 49 and Help in particular). Old milk bottle tops are (real) gold and silver. Ring-pulls thrown away at random are rings which guarantee invisibility. But the anti-quester is simply the anti-paranoid. She is hebephrenic. The hebephrenic is one who can see no patterns in anything—can make no sense of the most significant events or objects (data, experiences, etc.). The quester is relation-ful and the anti-quester is relation-less.

Both of these extremes are a kind of illness. Some of us perhaps want to strike a balance—to manage the tightrope between the two. The world is full of agnostics of this kind. No one seems to have the fortitude to embrace out-and-out atheism—to prolong the metaphor. Atheism, here, would mean that both the quest for origins and its antithesis are pointless—both of them requiring an initial conception of origins. But that would not mean that life is pointless. Atheism would be like a kind of environmentalist. It would show us that there is a landscape outside the labyrinth and that we hardly know that landscape, let alone how to live in it, or at one with it.

We can learn from Western philosophers how to use balls of string to trace our way back to the entrance of the labyrinth. But they can no longer help us once we get out. Getting out, as I have said, is no different from the quest itself—even if it is an anti-quest. We need to turn elsewhere to find out details of the counter-quest, of the cancelled **#**.

What I have been writing so far might be reduced—by someone who was not sympathetic to my ideas—to a simple distinction between the universal and the particular. After all, the idea of a quest for origins is rather like a kind of universalism, and the idea of purposelessness does make it look as if we're stuck with the particular minutiae of the moment, behind which no universal light ever shines. And then, if one accepted this reduction, it could be said: "Well, he's looking for a path between universalism and particularism, only in the area of the ethical—and particularly with regard to morality."

To some extent, that's a reasonable summary. But this is as far as I would want to go with these doctrines: universality and particularity I see as being bound up with the question, ultimately, of signification—which is where we started our investigation. They are a game with signification. Our times are surely ones in which people have come more and more to think about language and how it signifies, "the ways in which it means." (So much so that we can—as I just did—use "surely," or "certainly" to mark a kind of reservation.) Thus is, if anything, the age of the signifier. Before we began to think
about the signifier, in its modern sense, before perhaps the work
of de Saussure, words and other bits and pieces of language were
thought to mean something by being attached to non-linguistic
things: to cats and dogs, but also to love, happiness, anger and
so forth. Rather in the way that a label is attached to a
parcel, or a postage stamp to a letter. (Now, of course, we can
collect just the labels or the stamps without that to which they
were attached having much importance.) This "being attached"
which was so important gave us the doctrine of unus nomen unus
nominatum—which sounds quite particularistic but was in fact
quite the opposite in its effects. Once you have an idea that
signifiers, particular signifiers, never shift their meaning
because they are attached in this way, you begin to believe that
each has a universal, once-for-all meaning. So this was the age
of the universal signifier—as if it were hard currency, fixed to
some kind of gold standard, and when you cashed in your
signifier, you always got the same thing (object, image) in
exchange for it.

Now there has been something of an end to this. We have
come to accept the sliding around of meaning—the fact that words
and other linguistic paraphernalia are not fixed to a central
meaning. We’ve come off the gold standard. The currency of
signification is floating in a basket of related currencies. And
here we can see perhaps why the word "meaning" itself is used in
different ways: for example, sometimes it can be considered as
"linguistic meaning," sometimes as "significance" in the sense of
"the meaning of life," sometimes as "intending," sometimes as
"leading to" (’x means y) . . . and so on. It floats around
in a way that we could consider as a metaphor for, or at least an
instance of, the problem of meaning generally and its instability
in our age. Just as we have the Old and the New Penny, we might
talk about the old and the new signifier. The new one involves a
lot more free play. Its value is by no means fixed. But we have
not yet learned—like many people who introduce new currencies—
to find our way with this new signifier. We keep trying to
attach it to the value of the old. We keep making translations.

So our relativism has extended to or perhaps even derived
from our conceptions of language—and the old, universal,
signifier is now very much out of date (and, therefore, sought
after? a relic? an antique?)—for all the new, playful,
signifier keeps on being referred back to that shadow. (And the
very act of referring, in this case, is a technique hanging over
from our ways of utilising the old currency.)

Again we seem to be faced with a choice between fixed
origins and the abyss of unreason. But here too it need not be
so. The mistake, I think, is of the order of the other mistakes
I’ve dealt with here. It involves actively looking for some
quality called "the meaning" and then either finding that quality
fixed or finding it hopelessly free. In place of this, we can
think of meaning as other than "the meaning"—as an activity,
like bathing and so forth. Then it would be as odd to ask "What
is the meaning of a word?" as it is to ask "What is the bathing
of a person?" This does not mean that we have to come down on
the side of universalism or particularism. It means that we can avoid asking that kind of question about our language. Perhaps this means refusing the whole problematic of Lot 49:

(I don't know how to put the mark of erasure under erasure, except by intensifying it.) This may be where we find our postern where once there were only post-horns—for look how the slashes make a \//\ an Un-Lot perhaps, my final two letters.

The day of the fixity of language may be over; but equally the free play of language is by no means infinite—as the prosthetic reading might have it. There are indeed many sorts of activities we can undertake with, and as, language, and no one feature seems to bind those activities together. There is no "language in general," then. So ought we to despair? Perhaps not. Take the example of a greeting and a sermon. They are as unlike as lawn mowing and heraldry. Yet it is always quite clear that if one of these is to be done, then we can tell from the language and its accompanying activities whether or not it has been brought off. And we can "decide" these matters quite easily without worrying about fixed meanings or sliding signifiers. If the pathways, the shufflings from a to b (from "en?" to "be1"?) are flip-floppy, then the ways in which we actually move, the language-games we undertake, are important.

Amless wanderings through the streets or circuits are not the necessary upshot of the tangled variety we have available. Often it's very difficult to keep our hands out of this trap, though. But that is what we must do if we are to retain any kind of equilibrium. refuse! And what is waste if not refuse? Things must be fused again—re-fused—both in the bomber's and the welder's sense. Blown up. Brought together. The material is there. The point now is to use it rather than to sit contemplating its (present or absent) origin.

* * * * *

This marks the end of my labyrinths. They have left us with one important question for the reading of Lot 49: how to refuse the lot? How to make it an Un-Lot? This is how I would begin to answer that question, an answer which will take us into the text of Lot 49 and eventually into Telegraphmatology II. The first thing would be to face the problem of selecting analytic examples from the text. All literary analysis takes its examples. Usually, you get a critical theme and select passages which fit it. The "entropy" readings of Pynchon, for example, have done this with aplomb (a lead?). And so does BOOK/BID.

What this procedure (theme first, text second) achieves is a low degree of failure in literary studies. To increase this degree and thereby to add, in Popperian terms, an element of falsifiability to literary ideas, suppose we were to take our text—bits first. This would also mean that we were facing up to the materiality of the text. For example, we could take those parts of a text which held the same structural positions. This would constitute a new form of "identification" with the text. What then could we mean by "the same position"? Lot 49, for a
start, is made up of six chapters. Each chapter has to start and finish. It has to start and finish with particular units: words, sentences, paragraphs. ... So, in a purely structural way, we could take the first sentence of each chapter. Interestingly, when we do this, we get a not-too-bad summary of the plot:

One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inerarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. She left Kinnetet, then, with no idea she was moving toward anything new. Things then did not delay in turning curious. Though she saw Mike Fallopian again, and did trace the text of The Courier's Tragedy a certain distance, these follow-ups were no more disquieting than other revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero. Though her next move should have been to contact Randolph Dribblette again, she decided instead to drive up to Berkeley. When she got back to Echo Courts, she found Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard arranged around and on the diving board at the end of the swimming pool with all their instruments, so composed and motionless that some photographer, hidden from Oedipa, might have been shooting them for an album illustration.

Doubtless, a range of literary-critical remarks could be made here which would, I suspect, be as cogent as anything written on Lot 49—certainly as comprehensive. It would be tempting to analyse the patterns of contact Oedipa makes, to map her journey—as one may map Slothrop's arc-journey through the Zone. It's all here, in the selected text—most of the major moves. So are many of the main characters, with some important exceptions—though, again, they could be brought in with a few skilful moves and connections. Thematically one could point to alcohol, wills, money, town-city moves, the build-up of clues, the pointlessness of them despite their temptation as jigsaw material, the texture of The Courier's Tragedy and therefore the relations between Oedipa's and the critics' searches for interpretations, the mathematical nature of the enterprise, the 60's/Beatles connections, the hidden narratorial hand in the shape of the photographer, the inter-textual connections with cinema and so on. And so on. The point is not to do that but to
refuse and to show how plainly it could be done from these structurally culled and essentially random bits.

Now we could turn to the final lines of each chapter. Doing so, we get a very different text—one might even say the "other side" of the lot. And here I have arranged the sentences a little differently. The last lines:

- If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?
- After awhile she said, "I will." And she did.
- She got in and rode with him for two miles before realizing that the whimsies of nighttime reception were bringing them KQUF down from Kinnet, and that the disc jockey talking was her husband, Mucho.
- As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine.
- But by then it was too late to make any difference.
- Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 40.

This is a markedly different text from the first. If the first was—no, not the lot!—an almost fantastically narrative text, this one is much less so. It uses fewer declarative, propositional utterances. It kicks off, for example, with an interrogative, moves on to reported speech, invokes a plot-tangential coincidence, makes a gnomic remark, becomes resigned, and finally, reports an event, but an ultimate one. The tone now is poetic—philosophical even. The themes do not have to be wrung by implication from the narrative events—they are there (for all their vagueness) as plain as day.

If the first text was from a nineteenth-century novel of the event-reportage, chess-game type, this is now from the post-modern philosophical novel, the novel of ellipsis and existential crisis, invoking Oedipa’s dilemma: she cannot escape like the romantic heroine from the tower. She, only by fiat, random and impulsive choice, is able to bring her words (I will) and her deeds (She did) together. Only the "whimsies" bring her into touch with those closest to her in any "official" capacity (her next of kin, her husband, Mucho). And the line about the dead may well refer back to Mucho upon she discovers changed, almost to the point of disintegration:

They are stripping from me ... one by one, my man. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband on LSD, groopes 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 one extra-marital fella has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the Trybloc has taken a Brody.

Where am I? (116)

The dead may persist, in a bottle of wine, too, given Didi's glimpse of escape in the dr/DTs. And, of course, death will always mean that it's too late to make a difference. Its meaninglessness cuts across all difference. And so on, to the point of waiting for the crying.

But it's always just too paranoid or too aimless: either to search for textual patterns or to recommend, as do the Reader's Liberation Movement, the free play of interpretation. You can do it with, and between, these two faked passages. But the point would be, after all of this, not to do it. Not to put one's hand into the traps I have just put mine into.

If Derrida is indeed the Mysterious Bidder (though it may be Genghis Cohen) who does apologise to Didi for showing up, after all—and I admit it could be an apology merely for showing up and not for being "He"—I just wanted to sound a note of caution about reading the text such that it's definite we don't know who "He" is)—if it is Jacques, I'll give you one guess who I think Loren Passerine might be. Again, beginnings and ends will give you a clue, as will syllables. —D. Murdoch University

Notes


5. The quotations are from page 19 of the manuscript of PLS RECORD BOOK/BID.


7. This argument is close to that of Wittgenstein in Zettel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) #993. It also
owes much to the position taken by Mark Deitch in his unpublished paper "Wittgenstein and Derrida: No Contest."


9 Here I'm thinking of Barthes' argument that the unloved lover, for example, "identifies" with anyone of the same ilk regardless of other differences. See Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, (London: Cape, 1979) 129. The identification is no longer psychological or subjective but structural: "The subject painfully identifies himself with some person (or character) who occupies the same position as himself in the amorous structure."

10 See Gerald Prince, Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative (Berlin: Mouton, 1980).

11 As often happens, more text has to be dragged into the fray once the process of critical interpretation is underway.

12 NB: The Penguin edition blurb says "the eminent philatelist Genghis Cohen, who likes his sex with the news on"—thereby confusing him with the telesexual Nefzulis (80). The only other textual error I can find is on page 89 of the same edition where a non-speech passage begins with a quote-mark: "'They'd never heard it that way..." This and other errors (and their importance as structural points for text selection) are taken up in Telegrammatology Part II.
RITUAL RELUCTANCE:
THE POETICS OF DISCONTINUITY IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

James Perrin Warren

In The Crying of Lot 49, as Oedipa watches The Courier's Tragedy, the narrator explains that in Act IV of the play "a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance." The narrative discourse of Gravity's Rainbow enacts, on an epic scale, precisely this "ritual reluctance," and it does so, at least in part, in order to extend the possibilities of narrative language for representing non-temporal, non-continuous, non-continuous aspects of human reality. The twin verbal chords of "continuity" and "discontinuity" are struck repeatedly in Gravity's Rainbow, beginning with the epigraph to "Beyond the Zero": "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death." Lance Dzier has treated the figural calculus of continuity, and several critics have explicitly or implicitly treated the question of continuity, in discussing Pynchon's cinematic narrative techniques. But while these various critical studies suggest the complicated terrain of the terms "continuity" and "discontinuity" in the novel, they do not explain how or why Pynchon focuses so much energy on the concepts of narrative continuity and discontinuity. Nor do they explain how narrative continuity and discontinuity relate to Pynchon's figurative uses of the terms "continuity" and "discontinuity" in the text. These are the twin objects of this essay.

Contemporary theorists of the novel provide a useful set of distinctions for the analysis of Pynchon's techniques of discontinuous narrative. The most basic of these distinctions, that between the story or diegesis and the narrative or discourse, provides a touchstone for interpreting narrative rhetoric. The distinction is readily apparent, for any narrative consists of a sequence of events, or story, and a sequence of sentences, or discourse. The same story can be told in an infinite number of narrative discourses. One narratologist who has written extensively and persuasively on the subject is Gérard Genette. In addition to the work of Figures and Figures II, the recent publication of Figures III and its translation into English as Narrative Discourse have solidified Genette's position as the foremost French theorist of narrative poetics. In all three of the Figures books, and particularly in the method advanced in Narrative Discourse, Genette scrupulously observes the fundamental distinction between histoire (story) and récit (narrative discourse) as well as the distinction between these two logics and the third narrative instance, the narrating itself. This strict observance of narrative relations allows
Genette to make a number of systematic advances in the analysis of narrative.

An exhaustive exposition and application of Genette's methods lies beyond the scope of this essay, though such a project would certainly be as productive regarding Pynchon as has been Genette's own project regarding Proust. Within Genette's three categories of narrative discourse—tense, mood, and voice—I will concentrate on the category of tense, which is synonymous with the narrative category of time. More specifically, Genette divides the relations of time in the story and "pseudo-time" in the narrative into three aspects: order, the relation between the temporal succession of events in the story and their pseudo-temporal arrangement in the narrative; duration, the relation between the speed with which events occur and the "pseudo-duration" of their telling; frequency, the relation between the occurrences of events and the repetitions of narrative. The temporal category of frequency and the other narrative categories of mood and voice could prove useful in an interpretation on a larger scale than this one. For the present, however, the categories of order and duration seem to me to shed the most light on Pynchon's discontinuous narrative.

Within the category of order, Genette treats "the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative" (ND 36), which he calls anachronies. These include the familiar techniques of flashback and foreshadowing, or analepsis and prolepsis, though Genette's systematic treatment of these techniques in Proust puts to shame the homemade, intuitive categories we usually employ. For instance, Genette distinguishes among external, internal, and mixed analepses, depending on the relationships of temporal reach and extent obtaining between the frame or "first degree" narrative and the flashback or "second degree" narrative. The "reach" refers to the temporal distance of the analepsis from the "present" moment of the frame or first degree narrative. The "extent" refers to the temporal duration of the analepsis. In Book XIX of the Odyssey, for example, the analepsis concerning Odysseus' wounding by the boar has a reach of several decades and an extent of a few days. Since the analepsis covers a period earlier than the frame narrative of the Odyssey, it is an external analepsis; its extent remains external to the extent of the first degree narrative (ND 48-49). Within the category of internal analepsis, where the temporal extent of the flashback lies within the temporal extent of the first degree narrative, Genette further distinguishes between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narratives. In the former, the story line (and thus the diegetic content) of the analepsis is different from that of the first narrative; in the latter, the analepsis treats the same diegetic content as the first degree narrative.

An extended example from Gravity's Rainbow shows the usefulness of Genette's detailed vocabulary. In "The Counterforce," while the reader's conventional expectations of narrative continuity, characterization, and plot resolution are continually being frustrated, the narrator reluctantly tells, in
a series of internal homodiegetic analepses, how Thanatz was washed overboard from the Anubis, how he was rescued by a Polish undertaker, how he encountered homosexual prison-camp inmates near the Oder river, how he became a member of the prelate's displaced person, and, finally, how he remembered the firing of the 0000 rocket and reported it to the Schwarzkommando (663-73). This sequence of disparate events is as nearly linear and continuous as the narrative of Gravity's Rainbow becomes. And the narrator is extremely grudging in giving a plausible account of how we can know there even was such a thing as the Schwarzerif or the 0000 rocket: "You will want cause and effect. All right" (663). What ensues is hardly realistic in any conventional sense, but the analepsis prepares for Thanatz' remembering the rocket-firing. That is, the linear narrative of the flashback or second degree narrative sets up a further flashback or third degree narrative, an analepsis within an analepsis:

Little by little his memory of that last rocket-firing on the Heath grows clearer. The fever-fine-polish, the pain removes impurities. An image keeps recurring—a muddy brown almost black eyeball reflecting a windmill and a jagged reticule of tree-branches in silhouette ... doors at the sides of the windmill open and shut quickly, like loose shutters in a storm ... in the sky, one cloud, the shape of a clamshell, rises very purple around the edges, the puff from an explosion, something light ochre at the horizon ... closer in it seems snarling purple around a yellow that's brightening, intestines of yellow shadowed in violet spilling outward, outward in a ballying curve toward us. There are, oddly (not to cut this picturesque scene off) but oddly enough, get this, no windmills on the Luneburg Heath! (670)

A key technique in this passage is narrative ellipsis. In the first place, the entire analepsis concerning Thanatz is a completing analepsis, one which fills in the simple break in temporal continuity by rejoining Thanatz at the Anubis and tracing his progress toward the Schwarzkommando. But, second, even when giving us the completing "cause and effect," the narrative veers away from continuous temporal sequence. Thus we encounter the analepsis within the analepsis. Third, Thanatz' memory of the rocket-firing is anything but temporally sequential or causally clear. Instead of the rocket firing itself, the analepsis describes a non-existent windmill reflected in Blicero's black eyeball: "Contiguous to the windmill we find one cloud ... the puff from an explosion," but the points of ellipsis disrupt any presumed causal relationship between the cloud and the puff. Similarly, the points of ellipsis erase any trace of human agency: "... doors at the sides of the windmill open and shut quickly, like loose shutters in a storm ..." These grammatical and figural ellipses
signal a movement away from direct, sequential, causal narrative and a counter-movement toward discontinuous, elliptically jumbled images. In sum, the grudging narrator wins out here, for he does not give us cause and effect. Rather, he gives us "only fragments, now and then" (670), ellipses within analepses, creating in the narrative discourse exactly the type of temporally discontinuous experience he describes in connection with the Polish undertaker:

Well, it's a matter of continuity. Most people's lives have ups and downs that are relatively gradual, a sinuous curve with first derivatives at every point. They're the ones who never get struck by lightning. No real idea of cataclysm at all. But the ones who do get hit experience a singular point, a discontinuity in the curve of life--do you know what the time rate of change is at a cusp? infinity, that's what! (664)

The Polish undertaker passage raises the question of Genette's second temporal category, duration, where Pynchon's discontinuous narrative technique once again revolves around the use of ellipsis. In the analysis of duration, ellipsis creates the effect of infinite speed, "where a nonexistent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story" (ND 93). For example, the opening of the novel gestures toward events which it does not narrate, and the effect of this beginning in medias res is to place the reader immediately in an aftermath: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre" (3). By placing us in a belated position, the opening sentences emphasize both the gap between past and present and the inability of narrative to close that gap. From the very first words of Gravity's Rainbow, then, an implicit ellipsis creates narrative discontinuity.

A second, more complicated example of Pynchon's elliptical narrative comes during the "War's evensong," when Roger and Jessica visit the church "Somewhere in Kent" (127-36). Part of the complication stems from the slowness of the evensong, an effect approaching the opposite of the ellipsis. This is what Genette calls the "descriptive pause," where "some section of narrative discourse corresponds to a nonexistent diegetic duration" (ND 93-94). In the evensong, the long description takes place while the choir sings the 15th-century macaronic. Indeed, we can interpret the meditation as occurring "between" the line "Alpha es et 0" (129) and the line "O Jesu parvula" (136). Between the two "0's," Pynchon takes us "beyond the zero" in one of his most beautiful prose poems.

Within this infinitely slow descriptive pause, the characteristic ellipsis asserts itself in moments of infinitely fast transition. The pause can be divided roughly according to the following topics:
--the Wrens melting scrap metal (130)
--toothpaste tubes (130-31)
--the schizophrenic patient (131)
--wedding dresses (131-32)
--returning British prisoners (132)
--Italian P/Ms (132)
--children and Spam tin toys (133)
--grandparents and the Radio Doctor (133)
--time and the Nativity (133-34)
--the church and "the path home" (134-36)

The ten topics and nine boundaries do not fully describe the passage, but they do suggest the rich variety of Pynchon's Whitmanesque catalogue. They also indicate the speed with which the narrative shifts ground through ellipsis. Although the initial effect of the elliptically transitive catalogue may be simple bewilderment, it appears upon re-reading that a degree of figural continuity underlies the apparent temporal discontinuity. As the narrator notes, regarding the fingerprints on the toothpaste tubes, "Yet the continuity, flesh to kindred metals, home to hedgeless sea, has persisted. It is not death that separates these incarnations, but paper: paper specialties, paper routines. The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives" (130).

Part of Pynchon's narrative strategy is to combat the Empire by thwarting standard expectations of causality and temporal sequence. During the descriptive pause, no diegetic time elapses. Indeed, we could term the entire evensong an "achronous" or atemporal catalogue. To the order of topics is, to a degree, random, and the style of the passage insists upon the collecting of disparate parts from the London area. Thus, for instance, there are only four paragraphs in the entire catalogue, and one paragraph, beginning "Advent blows from the sea," takes up the majority of the pause (131-35).

Of course, connections between and among the various topics do exist. The unused wedding dresses parallel the British prisoners returning to "the city addresses that surely can no longer exist" (132). The returning British prisoners at first contrast with the "Italian P/Ms," but then "both kinds of prisoner" recognize that "life has to go on" without them (132). The brief passage on the children's toys made of Spam tins moves fluidly into the children's grandparents and their insomniac awareness of the War's quickened clocks. From this partial list, it would seem that one common thread holding together the disparate parts of the catalogue is the victimization of individuals by the Empire. Yet another thread is the idea of incarnation. Despite the apparent differences separating the parts of the catalogue, each part is an incarnation of the common hope symbolized by the Nativity:

There must have been evensong here long before the news of Christ. Surely for as long as there have been nights bad as this one—something to raise the possibility of another night that could
actually, with love and cockcrows, light the path
home, banish the Adversary, destroy the boundaries
between our lands, our bodies, our stories, all
false, about who we are [...]. (135)

Within the catalogue of the evensong, figural continuity
coexists with temporal discontinuity. Moreover, the infinite
speed of elliptical transitions coexists with the infinite
slowness of descriptive pause. Pynchon's narrative technique
therefore combines logically incompatible, mutually exclusive
categories. And it does so, in this passage, in order to escape
the inevitable end of the temporal continuum, to "light the path
home" if only for a brief, nearly timeless moment, between the
two "0's" of the evensong.

These examples of how Pynchon distorts temporal order and
duration demonstrate that ellipsis is one of the most important
stylistic and rhetorical devices Pynchon employs in creating the
discontinuous, atemporal narrative of Gravity's Rainbow. Another
major device is paralipsis, or pretentio.11 Genette treats
paralipsis as an extreme form of ellipsis, for both rhetorical
strategies create gaps or discontinuities in temporal order (NG
51-52, 195). Thus we might expect to find instances in Gravity's
Rainbow of the "omission of one of the constituent elements of a
situation that the narrative does generally cover" (NG 52).

Not surprisingly, examples of paralptic or pretetive
narrative abound. One major omission concerns the mystery
plastic, Inipolex G. The plastic seems central to Tyrone
Slothrop's sexual trajectories, but Pynchon never delivers the
solution to the detective-story plot.12 In "Some Characteristics
of Inipolex G," the narrator comes close to stating a solution to
the mystery of the "Peculiar Polymer." But, in the typically
eelliptical fashion of Pynchon's ritual reluctance, the
scientific description of the erectile plastic is interrupted by a
mystifying parenthesis:

(slowly gleaming in the Void. Silver and black.
Curved warped reflections of stars flowing across,
down the full length of, round and round in
meridians exact as the meridians of acupuncture.
What are the stars but points in the body of God
where we insert the healing needles of our terror
and longing? Shadows of the creature's bones and
ducts—leaky, wounded, irradiated white—mingling
in with its own. It is entangled with the bones
and ducts, its own shape determined by how the
Erection of the Plastic shall proceed: where fast
and where slow, where painful and where slippery—
coy. Whether areas shall exchange characteristics
of hardness and brilliance, whether some areas should be allowed to flow over
the surface so that the passage will be a caress,
where to orchestrate sudden discontinuities—
blows, wrenches—in among these more caressive
moments). (699)
The parenthesis proposes a series of figurative continuities and discontinuities. Examples of continuities: "the Void" becomes "the body of God," while the stars become acupuncture "points." As if the analogy were too clear, however, the narrative interrupts with "Shadows of the creature's bones and ducts" and "It is entangled with the bones and ducts." These fragmented statements resist translation into logical assertions or figural continuities. Who or what is the "creature," and what is "It"? One level of explanation may seem obvious: the two correspond to Slothrop and the Plastic. But the language of the passage omits this obvious reference in favor of "sudden discontinuities." The "It" cannot be the Plastic because its "shape [is] determined by how the erection of the Plastic shall proceed." Is the "It" the "body of God," or is "It" perhaps the "Void" itself? Any of these answers appears possible, but none appears to be privileged over the others. Similarly, the narrator gives three possible modes of transmitting the stimulus to the plastic surface, but none of these is given special credence. "Some Characteristics of Impiplex C" is an exercise in providing both "caressive moments" and "sudden discontinuities." For throughout the passage the narrative proposes multiple explanations while omitting the one explanation the reader wishes to insert. That one explanation, which would demystify the "Peculiar Polymer" and its continuous relationship both to Slothrop and to the "body of God," remains paralipetic—gestured at, yet omitted.

A second instance of paralipetic narrative once more demonstrates Pynchon's consciously self-reflexive rhetoric of discontinuity. Besides Impiplex C, a major paralipetic element of Gravity's Rainbow is the drug Oneirine, which is mentioned several times but never explained. Along with Oneirine, Wimpe, the "long ago IG Farben V-Mann," functions as a paralipetic element. Wimpe appears briefly in dialogue with Tchitcherine before the two shoot up the "Oneirine theophosphate [...] indicating the Presence of God" (702). The two "run screaming all over the suite," but then the scene dissolves in another ellipsis. The narrator moves with infinite speed into a pseudo-scientific discussion of "the so-called 'Röker singularity'" and "Oneirine hauntings," noting that the hauntings "show a definite narrative continuity, as clearly as, say, the average Reader's Digest article" (703). The only clue to an Oneirine haunting is "some radical thing, a plausible violation of possibility: the presence of the dead, journeys by the same route and means where one person will set out later but arrive earlier, a printed diagram which no amount of light will make readable" (703).

When Pynchon narrates "Tchitcherine's Haunting," however, the "narrative continuity" becomes considerably less clear than we might expect from a Reader's Digest article. Ripov and his two "dive-drub agents" appear, but Tchitcherine sees nothing remarkable:

This is, after all, an Oneirine haunting. Mellow, ordinary. The only tipoff to its unreality is—
The radical-though-plausible-violation-of-reality...
All three men are smiling at him now. There is no violation. (704)

The paralipsis in this passage is the combined mention and omission of the "radical-though-plausible-violation-of-reality." Tchitcherin recognizes the haunting because he perceives the absence of the violation, and this absence itself is a violation of reality. In other words, the scene with Ripov is too ordinary, too continuous, so that continuity becomes a contradiction of reality. We could interpret the smiles of the three men as the violation, but the narrator directly contradicts us: "There is no violation." So the fact that the smiles do not violate reality would seem to be the "tipoff to its unreality."

This second example of paralipetic narrative emphasizes the oniric quality of Pynchon's novel as a whole. The premise of Gravity's Rainbow is, in fact, a "violation of reality," and Pynchon's method of developing that premise is to stress the discontinuity between the surface regularity of life's continuous, "sinuous curve" and the deeper irregularities beneath the surface. By violating the reader's sense of reality, the novel re-orders what Enzian calls at one point "their time, their space [...] the white continuum" (326). And the rhetoric of ellipsis and paralipsis is the fundamental strategy Pynchon employs to violate the narrative conventions of cause and effect.

Pynchon's oniromantic propensities do not always content themselves, however, with pointing out causal and temporal discontinuities. As we have seen in the "War's evensong" and in the pseudo-scientific name "Unirine theopilhitrate," the narrative continually gestures toward an atemporal, spiritual realm of significance. Several passages in the novel mention "the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (1), "the continuity, flesh to kindred metals, home to hedgeless sea" (130), or "some continuity of sacrament" (372). Not all uses of the word are affirmative in tone, but these examples suggest an alternative to "the white continuum," one which would not be a simple negation of temporal continuity. The last use of the term "continuity" in the novel is the clearest instance of what I mean. As the Schwarzkommando near their moment of firing the DODOMI rocket, Pynchon focalizes through Enzian a meditation on the parabolic rainbow:

But remember if you loved it. If you did, how much, how much—after all you’re used to asking "how much," used to measuring, to comparing measurements, putting them into equations to find out how much more, how much when ... and here in your common drive to the sea feel as much as you wish of that dark double-minded love which is also shame, bravado, engineers' geopolitics—"spheres of influence" modified to toruses of Rocketrange that are parabolic in section ...
... not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it "rises from" and the Earth it "strikes" No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the peak that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world, violently (a jet airplane crashing into faster-than-sound, some years later a spaceship crashing into faster-than-light) Remember The Password In The Zone This Week Is FASTER-THAN, THE-SPEEDOFLIGHT Speeding Up Your Voice Exponentially—Linear Exceptions Made Only In Case of Upper Respiratory Complaints, at each "end." understand, a very large transfer of energy: breaking upward into this world, a controlled burning--breaking downward again, an uncontrolled explosion ... this lack of symmetry leads to speculating that a presence, analogous to the Aether, flows through time, as the Aether flows through space. The assumption of a Vacuum in time tended to cut us off one from another. But an Aether sea to bear us world-to-world might bring us back a continuity, show us a kinder universe, more easygoing ... .

These two paragraphs are characteristic of Pynchon's elliptical style, which employs non-standard grammar, punctuation, and typography to violate temporal and causal continuity. More important, however, the meditation centers upon a central opposition—a paralipetic absence. The "lack of symmetry" between the "controlled burning" and "uncontrolled explosion" leads us to the idea of a "presence" flowing "through time." This temporal "Aether" becomes the counterforce to defeat the "assumption of a Vacuum in time," which "tended to cut us off one from another." The language recalls both "the Void" of "Some Characteristics of Impolite G" and the paper separations of "War's even song." Thus the omission of controlled, continuous symmetry in the rocket's flight provides the paralipetic possibility of a figurative return to "a kinder universe." This figurative return would create a continuity, for it would close the gap between an absent, innocent past and an absent, innocent future. Hence Pynchon's radical discontinuities of narrative temporality finally gesture toward an atemporal, quasi-divine type of continuity, or at least toward a somewhat nostalgic hope that such a continuity may become possible. But the narrative discourse of Gravity's Rainbow does not, in the final analysis, privilege one sort of continuity over another or one sort of discontinuity over continuity as such. Instead, the narrative discourse tends to hold these mutually exclusive axes—continuity/discontinuity, figural order/temporal order, presence/absence—in a rhetorical solution marked by ellipsis and
paralipsis. For each axis is necessary for both the construction and the deconstruction of the text.

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Notes

1 Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; New York: Perennial, 1986) 71. See also page 79 for an echo of the phrase.
4 The literature on this subject is vast; for a helpful introduction to the distinction, with bibliography, see Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 169-97.
6 For a discussion of these three narrative levels, see Narrative Discourse, 25-32. All further references to Genette's work use this translation and appear cited as ND.
7 See Ozier's discussion of the figure of mathematics in this passage and its relation to the thematics of temporal/atemporal transformation, 202-04.
8 Genette distinguishes three types of narrative ellipsis—explicit, implicit, and hypothetical (ND 107-
Molly Hite notes that Pynchon's use of ellipsis in *Gravity's Rainbow* is an innovation in his prose style; see her *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 138.


10 Genette terms this type of temporal autonomy, in which events are arranged by some atemporal logic or figure, *syllepsis* (ND 84-85).


12 In this sense, the ritual reluctance of *Gravity's Rainbow* is already contained in miniature in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and both novels display Pynchon's tendency to privilege discourse over story. For an excellent discussion of this point, see Hite, 13-45.
"Everything straight lieth," murmured the dwarf, contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."

"Thou spirit of gravity!" said I wrathfully, "do not take it too lightly! Or I shall let thee squat where thou squattest, Halffoot,—and I carried thee high!"

"Observe," continued I, "This Moment! From the gateway, This Moment, there runneth a long eternal lane backwards; behind us lieth an eternity."

—Friedrich Nietzsche
Thus Spake Zarathustra

"You only want to know about your path, your Autobahn."

—Thomas Pynchon
Gravity's Rainbow

1: Introduction

We have in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, a narrator who would embrace, who would delight in the double-entendre Nietzsche's translator constructs for the word 'lieth.' By gratuitously and a-contextually transporting the fundamental ambiguity of this pun to Pynchon's Zone, we make available certain insights into not only the anatomy, but also the affective presence of Pynchon's work, that is, its capacity to act upon itself, to influence the world it describes. At the very least, I propose here one possible itinerary, a segment of an Autobahn that "lieth" as a route through a work of highly complex and shifting meaning.

Brian McHale, in his attempt to invest the term "Postmodernism" with his version of coherence, suggests that Pynchon the Postmodernist carries epistemological issues so far that they become ontological issues, that Pynchon's enterprise in fact echoes Dada's "projection" of a world. Leaving aside the question of the most suitable lexical (or perhaps taxonometric) designation, I would like to make a few assertions about, not so much the nature of that projected world, as perhaps the spirit in which Pynchon projects it. As a useful model for Pynchon's narrator, I suggest the Trickster figure in Native American discourse, a sometimes likable, sometimes repellent rapecallion on the fringe of society who creates and recreates
the world at his whim. But by unfolding his "encyclopedic" presentation of a world that turns out to be diffuse and unstable, the narrator clearly demonstrates his lack of absolute control over his creation; and by, as Anne Mangel puts it, "failing the irrelevance, redundancy, disorganization, and waste involved in language, the narrator effectively defines the signification of fiction as a disjunctive, open-ended system. This seeming lack of concern for maintaining an authoritative role in the projection of worlds suggests in the narrator an attitudinal flexibility and nonchalance that show him to be in fact very comfortable with the uncertainty of his Zone, and perhaps, as we shall see, ours.

Pynchon has elaborated in Gravity's Rainbow an intentional structure in which the narrator finally negates to confirm a consistent, totalized, or enduring construct of narrative and thematic elements. Possible meanings expand along the novel's paradigmatic axis as a system of open alternatives available for reader consumption. At the very outer perimeter of the text is a narrating consciousness temperamentally inclined to move freely between interpretive possibilities in the act of generating discourse. The narrator's obsession for accumulating detail suggests a desire to achieve precision by alternativity rather than by exclusionary definition. To this extent, then, the narrator has created Tyrone Slothrop in his own image and shares the habit that Slothrop develops, as David Leverenz so aptly says, of just not paying attention. The narrator exhibits this "lack of attention" in his predilection for ontological dynamics, his capacity to make The Zone a radically varying place depending on the varying interpretive awarenesses of his characters. This narrative framing invites us to find the whimsy of the Native American Trickster as the essential organizational principle in the text.

Gravity's Rainbow engages the synthesis of interpretation as a structural and thematic issue by dramatizing "paranoid" formalization, "the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected" (703). The capriciousness of signification provided by the Narrator/Trickster suggests a fundamental antipathy to a paranoid insistence on conceptual closure. I will focus primarily on how the novel enacts the problematization of paranoid system building as it follows Slothrop's activities in and around the Zone. Because the novel persistently discusses Slothrop's paranoia in the idiom of the physical/spiritual quest of cyclic romance, as well as in terms of a displaced holistic or transcendental experience, I feel justified in using the convenient, and I believe useful, rubric mysticism to describe the cognitive and emotional system building that sometimes motivates Slothrop, sometimes only accompanies him. The novel allows dramatic play to the notion that mysticism operates by interpretive conjunction which frequently reifies itself in iconography. Gravity's Rainbow problematizes mysticism. The novel points out that mysticism has a tendency to evolve toward an object orientation; specifically that is, Zone mysticism fetishizes the Rocket (and its post-Hiroshima avatar,
the nuclear weapon) and installs it as an acceptable and perhaps necessary element of a contemporary world view. By letting a Trickster narrator tell the story, Pynchon allows for the possibility of worlds both inside and outside the text that could exist without this icon of apocalyptic destruction. He charts a course that lies its way out.

First let me describe how the text displays mystical, interpretive system building, and then let me suggest ways in which the ontological whimsy of the narrator provides an antidote.

2: Mysticism and the Object

Edward Mendelson points out that Gravity's Rainbow operates as an exhaustive survey of the post-World War Two world, an attempt at the "public function" of defining a world rendered unstable by physics and macroeconomics. The tour that Pynchon's narrator provides of this Zone organizes itself around American Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop's search through demilitarized Germany for a particular German V-2 rocket, number 00000, equipped with the S-Cerat, a search that Bruce F. Kawin associates with "a quest for wholeness," or what Thomas Schaub refers to as that "tyrannizing desire... of the mind for unity and meaning." In place of the mystic's desire for direct, intimate intuition of all-encompassing wholeness through union of the soul with God or some other spiritual organizing principle, Pynchon's narrator suggests to the reader the possibility of a connectedness by conspiracy. A Plot orchestrated by a They through the labyrinthine channels of a manipulative Firm sends coherence to human experience by its teleological orientation to German rocketry, and by extension, nuclear weapons. Many of Pynchon's characters have been drawn into the system of activity and meaning generated by this Plot, and their "paranoia," that is, their apprehension of a hierarchy of control and order beneath the discord of the Zone, drives them to seek further knowledge and understanding of their roles in a Plot that transcends their individual beings. As a result, as Richard Poirier notes, "the persistent paranoia of all the important characters invests any chance detail with the power of an omen." So "acts of minor surrealism" which "the Empire commits by the thousands every day" (129) threateningly form intricate and often convincing corroborating testimony to the "pattern you're in, right now" (257). Here are radio operators swear they can identify individual sending-hands through the deadpan filtering disguise of Morse Code (733). And above it all, the reader hears the suspicion in the voice of Slothrop asking, "Sa-a-a-ay... Why are all you folks helping me like this? For free and all?" (257).

This is, after all, a definitive characteristic of mystic experience—an individual seeking the intuitively defined "vision" that will put the places of the sensory accessible world together into an indivisible whole, a schema capable of providing
salutary unity, a sense of belonging usually brought about through a subordination of individual identity. In short, mysticism feeds on subjectively screened information; it offers a spiritual method that wants to convert all data to evidence for an a priori proposition. An event can become variously proof of an approaching millennium, the intervention of a benevolent creator, an inexpressible Tao. While mysticism pretends to scramble cause and effect with paradox and to contravene a positivist world view, in actuality it continues to operate smoothly, but deductively, from principle to manifestation in a direct causal relationship, so that the Tractatus, for example, operates finally, and relatively comfortably, as both a mystical and positivist document.

Similarly, for most of Pynchon's characters, sign wants persistently to become evidence: the priority of presence diminishes, the particular shifts toward the universal, and cause and effect moves on the wings of the "accidents and anomalies of individual sensations or fancies" that Coleridge associates with mystic perception. Consequently, as Molly Hite points out, Gravity's Rainbow is obsessed with documentation; the stuff that mysticism is usually not considered to be made of. But Pynchon's clues to the Big Plan remain grounded in ambiguity. His narrator displays for us information that comes to conflicting interpretations of Zone cosmology. Utilizing one of the well-thumbed applications of a basically omniscient narrative point of view, Pynchon frequently capitalizes on the tension between what the reader knows and what character knows to undermine the credibility of any absolute confidence in unity that either one might occasionally develop. When Slapshot feels a sense of personal volition, the reader sees the specter of Laszlo Jamf; but by the time Slothrop suspects that "this is some kind of a plot, right?" (603), the reader has been so disoriented by the "ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet" (284) that he cannot continue to process evidence of conspiracy. Signs become spurious, perhaps merely exercises in Horschach inkblot projection (81). As the narrator tells it, mysticism, because it inevitably requires evidence and information, will naturally result in the missed messages of the Hereros, answers lost to the built-in "friction" of information theory while in transmission from the sacred to the profane. The Zone becomes a place of which Gell can say with no understanding of the paradox, "It's so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements" (290). Beginning with the novel's opening epigraph and the conjunction of Werner von Braun with the Puritan impulse to apprehend an order of spiritual meaning beyond the corporeal world, Pynchon hints that in Gravity's Rainbow something will go seriously wrong with mysticism.

The problem is stage one of Comte's hierarchy of cultural/intellectual development, specifically, the introduction of a Baal or a Grail, the point at which mysticism becomes associated with the veneration of objects. Whether it begins in Edward Taylor's dream-based animism or in behavioral...
conditioning, fetishism elaborates the human penchant for belief in a spirit reality beyond the mortal body, more particularly, a spirit reality which can incorporate the essence of the self in a larger transcendental whole. Although locating spirit/magic/medicine in a physical fetish object might seem to work at cross purposes with a transcendental impulse, such is not the case. The systematizing program of mysticism is a desire to process and reconcile information, and the physicality of the fetish object acts as a subdued but self-imposed obstacle to the attainment of the desired sense of spiritual union. Consequently, it preserves the event of desire and the need for the mystical experience of synthesis by maintaining an intentional dynamic in which the focus oscillates between the tangible and the intangible. The invested spiritual power of the ceremonial object necessitates a relentless movement between presences; the spiritual and physical aspects of the object are both substitute and that which is substituted. The object, therefore, is not so much invested with a spiritual power gained through transcendental insight as it is an embodiment of the ongoing process of that insight.

This impulse to systematize experience through fetishization follows the general course of Western Intellectual history and becomes habitual and institutional to the extent that human mental processes, as Murray Bookchin puts it, "changed [experiences of mystery] epistemologically from gnosis into the warped sensualism." In the Western European/American tradition, mystical perception has periodically and cumulatively concentrated in a number of physical tokens, including the Ark, the Grail, and the vast proliferation of relics that decorated Medieval religious experience. More recently, the fetishization of abstractions has followed a number of very diverse patterns. John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" marked an important instance of an early American association of spirituality with the physical fact of the New World; Frederick Jackson Turner later extended that association when he conceived of the American frontier as the key to the nation's social and political evolution. When the Enlightenment began to operate from doubt rather than faith, it ushered in a new emphasis on the empiricism we are in a process which established the intellect as a new mystical vehicle to penetrate beneath superficial flux. The "oscillation" between the tangible and the intangible could now be propelled with newly emerging data as both evidence and end. Later, Herman Melville initiated a search for unity and law that led to the mystery icon of the white whale but did not begin to exhaust the abstractive carrying capacity of objects. William James's "radical empiricism" in combination with a received and culturally sublimated residuum of the Puritan discrimination between Elect and Preterite began to produce our popular culture understanding of the "Puritan Ethic." This understanding requires object accumulation or economic success as evidence of grace in an expanding commercial environment which relies on Veblennesque leisure class media awareness. With Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon extends this montage to include its perhaps ultimate fetish object, the Rocket/nuclear weapon.
This spiritual interanimation (to borrow Donne's term) of the abstract and the concrete devolves for Pynchon to "the terrible politics of the Grail" (701), the process by which Hitler's V-2 rocket exacts vengeance on the entire culture for allowing it the power to do so. The Rocket enforces a complex of destructive, phallocentric, and object-oriented modes of hierarchical control too elaborate to outline here. Rather than acting simply as a leveling device making all "equal in the eyes of the rocket" (57), the weapon bifurcates humanity into the binary whole of a "chain of being" consisting of those with and those without access to the firing switch. As such, it represents a dangerous concentration of power, a spiritual as well as a political basket with too many eggs in it. In the Hippie-Puritan lexicon that Pynchon allows his narrator, the Rocket suggests terminal private property, the most convincing exhibit possible of Election. But beyond this, the Rocket (and by extension the nuclear weapon) acts, to use John Nichols' phrase, as "a spiritual hombre for all seasons," an image that can "answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it" (727), be they Gnostics, Kabbalists, Manichaean, or Slothropian seekers.

3: Mysticism and the Atomic Object

In the social and psychological dynamics of religion, the human need for security from a social group finds expression in collective identification with a set of beliefs and physical objects associated with those beliefs. When the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow dramatizes as an object of veneration a weapon of virtually incomprehensible destruction, he enacts a powerful tension within the framework of mystical system building. The narrator asks his fiction to test the extent to which the horrible can be holy. He asks in what circumstances the horrible can be a comforting source of security. As a V-2 rocket, the Rocket of Gravity's Rainbow provides a sense of spiritual security in its capacity as a sort of spirit guide, a vehicle of transport to another world. As a typological prefiguration of the nuclear weapon, the Rocket looks prospectively to the period 1945 to 1949, the forty-seven months between Harry Truman's authorization of the atomic attack on Hiroshima and the American public's discovery that the Soviets also had gained the capability to wage atomic war. During this almost four-year period, "The Bomb" came as close as it ever has to representing genuine safety and security. In the public's perception, an American monopoly on the atomic bomb was all that forestalled the expansionist aims of an otherwise better armed Soviet Union. The status of the Rocket as an institutionalized fetish object depends largely on its association with nuclear weapons and dates from the time when "The Bomb" seemed to Americans benign, simply because it was theirs.

What this translates to, in Gravity's Rainbow, is a narrator who insists on evaluating through his presentation the
status of the Rocket as central political/economic and religious/mythical artifact in post-World War Two Western culture. Just as the V-2 confuses the normal order of sensory perception because its approach is audible only after it has exploded (48), so the Rocket acts as a relic commemorating an event that hasn't happened yet—a nuclear holocaust. To bring this about, Pynchon's narrator describes the rocket (and in fact develops his discourse) by an ongoing process of melosis, an unequal division of characteristics, in which dualities develop faster than the reader can assimilate them. The Rocket splits into two rockets, the 00000 and the 00001, adding to and embodying a complex of fleeting associations between life and death which form a "confusion of ideas of the opposite" (90) framed within a Heraclitian conception of the one—day and night, summer and winter, war and peace, satiety and hunger, and now, we might add, 0 and 1. In Rocket mysticism, the dialectic of human experience comes of the integration, or rather penetration, of death into life. The Quest for the Rocket enacts the culture's desire for its own annihilation (738). This unifying nature of the Rocket can perhaps offer a solution to the fragmentation of the modern world, but its apocalyptic method is horrific. The narrator does not allow the reader to fall for long under the spell of this mechanomorphic world view; he makes the reader share in the sense of world-affirming relief implicit in Slothrop's explanation, "If you hear the explosion, you know you must be alive" (222). He forces upon the reader the realization that out of the late 1940s came the 1950s, a period dominated by the desire for internal, international, and personal security but unable to come across with the goods.

And so this is the Grail that the narrator parades past a confused Perceval, a Pavlovian artifact of deductive cause and effect, invested with power and authority. The novel repeatedly displays characters framing their attitudes about the V-2 rocket with the archetype of the Grail, that religio-mythical talisman of transubstantiation which so persistently surfaces in our literature and criticism. The narrator peoples the Zone with "Pilgrims along the roads of miracle" who regard "every bit and piece a sacred relic, every scrap of manual a verse of Scripture" (391).

Clearly Slothrop's burlesque quest for the Rocket functions as the principal superstructure of the novel. Even though the narrator's presentation suggests a deeply ambivalent attitude about Slothrop as quest hero and the status of the S-Gerät as grail (cf. 275 and 364), the references accumulate to characterize Slothrop's "exposure" to the German rocket (82) as a Grail-specific quest for the information that will help him piece together a unified explanation of the behavior of his Pavlovian conditioned sexuality, "the penis he thought was his own" (216). The brief tenures of his alter egos—Ian Scuffling, Rocketman, Errol Flynn, and Plachazunga—link him with what Molly Hite calls the "American cult of the good-guy loner," but as he begins to admit that he doesn't even want to find the Rocket
(375), as he disavows interest in even buying the S-Gerät (490), a radical epistemological suspension comes to dominate the personality of the quest hero. He becomes a Perceval taking seriously the good advice not to ask questions and the element of personal volition exits Rilke's poem (98). As the "buccaneering" associated with Rocketman (372) fades out of Slothrop's style, so comes the realization that "it's the S-Gerät after all that's following him" (490). Slothrop's search for the explanatory icon of the Rocket, his desire for wholeness, imposes the most radical obstacle to desire available. Slothrop's desire imposes a subject/object inversion that in a sense preserves the quest by confusing the identity of its object, or goal. The subject sees himself as the desired object and the desired object as the origin of the desire. As a result, the narrative disrupts mysticism's tendency toward fetishization. Slothrop begins his celebrated, "problematic" disintegration. In other words, he becomes the coefficient of a kind of "pure," that is, essential, unspecified principle of desire, which actually finding the Rocket only would have destroyed.23

What happens, of course, is that Slothrop happily metamorphoses from Perceval to Tannhäuser, as the narrator tells it:

[. . .] he has become one plucked albatross.
Plucked, hell-striped. Scattered all over the Xen. It's doubtful if he can ever be "found"
again, in the conventional sense of "positively identified and detained." (712)

Slothrop's disintegrating search for the S-Gerät provides in its conclusion, as it did throughout, a parodic revision of the quest for mystical understanding as represented by the Grail. He simply no longer "pays attention" to the paranoid structure of meanings that animates the quest, and the Rocketman who could prosecute the quest cannot "hold on," ceasing thereby to be "any sort of integral creature" (740-41).

Now wait a minute. Shouldn't we ask ourselves at this point how a narrator seemingly still chauvinizing over the Nietzschean lieth pun would regard this extravagant scattering? Clearly, Slothrop's spaeages represents a distinctly Modernist conclusion to the mystic endeavor, but his is no Sufi Fana, no Buddhist nirvana, no snuffing out of the Romantic self. What we lose when we lose Slothrop is the caused self, the determinate self, the self as an element of the quest's subject/object dialectic, the self accessible to Pavlovians, psychologists, and Puritans. Pynchon's narrator requires that the essential unknowing of the individual survive, not by way of a Dadaist celebration of indiscipline, but rather through the discipline of uncertainty. For the mystic the ego may be a prison, but for Pynchon's narrator the ego is a "cover" for the Man (713), so that when Malory's Galahad replaces Perceval for a moment, he looks finally into the recovered Grail and sees what words cannot express: he holds an empty cup whose ineffable emptiness has become dangerous and condensed because the modern mind has believed since
Nietzsche that when he finally found the cup he would have nothing to say. Is the transcendental experience in trouble here?

4: A Cross-reference

At this point in the discussion, the time has come for an interregnum of sorts. I would like to refer you to another Zone altogether. The situation runs something like this:

"Ivan (shaking his shaggy ox-like head in an emphatic affirmative): 'Oft's right, Scotty. I don' li-like blow up, no by devil!"24 The time is ten minutes before midnight, the year is 1915, and the ammunition ship steaming through the "War Zone" of the north Atlantic is a hothouse of paranoia. Against the threat of German submarine attacks, the ship travels completely blacked out, but when awakening crew members discover in their quarters an uncovered porthole letting light out into the blackness, their fear prompts them to suspect a SINISTER SPY CONSPIRACY! Suddenly every sign becomes evidence. After all, that Smitty speaks with a British accent just TOOGOOD to be authentic. And what about that BLACK BOX he keeps under his mattress? Is it TICKING?

When the seamen in Eugene O'Neill's 1916 one act drama "The Zone" give in to the paranoid insight that one of their fellow warriors is in reality a German spy on a mission to blow up their ship, they begin to see everything in the new light of rapidly forming connections coalescing for them in one captivating, horrifying object, Smitty's mysterious black box. Certain that it conceals a bomb, they drop it in a bucket of water before forcing an outraged Smitty to open it. Even when they discover that it contains not explosives but love letters, Dear John letters, they continue to operate under the patterning spell of paranoia. Code, they conclude, a clever German code. And that smudged word at the top of a page—they are sure it reads "Berlin."

Then, just as they prepare to throw the spy overboard, a dry, pressed flower falls from one of the envelopes. Although this flower does not in any rational manner contradict the conspiracy, and although they could presumably interpret it as yet another omen implicating Smitty, the crew seem suddenly stunned. They release Smitty and lapse into "silence, in which each man is in agony with the hopelessness of finding a word he can say.25 Even though Pynchon covers his biographical tracks assiduously, he purposefully, I think, leaves a conveniently clear trail leading to some of his sources and references.26 The correspondences between Gravity's Rainbow and O'Neill's play proliferate, but for this discussion, I will summarize only one central parallel. In Gravity's Rainbow the dangerously concentrated power of the Rocket as a fetish object dissolves for Slothrop as his "inattention" to his quest for the Rocket results in his disintegration, which paradoxically maintains the quest by sidetracking and therefore preventing the fulfillment of his desire. In O'Neill's The Zone the fearful
seamen (also questing after the systematization of information) witness the transformation of a supposed "bomb" into a packet of letters. The concentrated and threatening paranoid meaning of the bomb cum letters is undermined by the process of discovering and ordering information. In both cases, the condensed meaning of the artifact undergoes a diffusing/defusing through the quest, and as a result, the central element of the quest, desire, continues.

In a sense, the performance of O'Neill's sailors provides an illustration of a tendency Frank Kermode observes in the critic, the disposition, perhaps the compulsion, "to interpret texts in a humanly satisfying way despite our awareness that such meanings are tentative and provisional."28 While pursuing their quest for corroborative evidence of a conspiracy they basically accept as a priori knowledge, and in their abrupt and almost arbitrary distancing of the object of that quest in favor of the continuance of the desire for system, the seamen idiosyncratically deny Wittgenstein's injunction, "say what you choose, as long as it doesn't prevent you from seeing the facts,"29 advice that Pynchon's narrator precisely inverts by making the saying the fact.

5: An Antidote

When Slothrop scatters in the continuing dysfunction of his quest for the Rocket, the narrator creates a set of circumstances under which the weapon effectively ceases to exist, not so much physically as functionally. The typological connection that the narrator has so thoroughly fashioned between Hitler's vengeance campaign and the nuclear standoff of the early 1970s scatters with Slothrop, and consequently the rocket launched at the noval's beginning, whose parabolic flight lasts until the Nixon presidency, finds its target but never quite hits. By dividing for us the rocket's arc into delta-\(t\)'s, the narrator evokes a mechanized Achilles who will never overtake the audience in the Orpheus Theatre. The rocket operates within a structure of infinite divisional bracketing \(\frac{\left(\frac{d}{2}\right)}{2}\ldots>0\)

in which, defined functionally, teleologically, it vanishes. In a present that does not include thermonuclear holocaust, the nuclear weapon simply does not exist.

This bracketing of all but the present instant naturally enough brings us to Gertrude Stein. In 1946, the year she died of cancer, she wrote a short, curious, and delightfully Steinian piece called "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb," which so persuasively demands admixture with Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow that I have reproduced it here in its entirety. While you read it, I would like you to play Rossini in the back of your mind.
They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it.

I like to read detective and mystery stories. I never get enough of them but whenever one of them is or was about death rays and atomic bombs I never could read them. What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. If they are not as destructive as all that then they are just a little more or less destructive than other things and that means that in spite of all destruction there are always lots left on this earth to be interested or to be willing and the thing that destroys is just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people starting it off, but really nobody else can do anything about it so you have to just live along like always, so you see the atomic [bomb] is not at all interesting, not any more interesting than any other machine, and machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested. I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldn't any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. And really way down that is the way everybody feels about it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story. 30

Yes indeed. Characteristically, Stein simply refuses to play, or rather alters the rules to such a radical extent that the game itself becomes unrecognizable. She circumvents The Bomb psychologically by denying its capacity to render individuals insignificant because they can be so instantaneously and democratically destroyed. She plays Nietzsche by making of Slothrop's mendacious seduction line, "honey [...] right now's all there is [...]") (208), a personal solution to the Cold War. And even more significantly, with her indictment of nuclear weapons as just another "dull and meaningless" secret, she takes
out the entire history of Western mysticism, of which I hope we are all now convinced The Bomb is a part. Finally, by framing her discussion within the context of the process of reading a detective novel (without excessive concern over who done it), Stein drags the text along for Slothropian disintegration.

Granted, Stein's position might have been more persuasive in 1946, and an argument could be raised (and was raised extensively by the SDS during the 1960s) against this sort of "drop out," exile approach to socio-political issues. There is the temptation to read Stein here as operating in an "escapist" mode. But let us withhold judgment briefly as we examine more closely how Gravity's Rainbow functions as a prolix elaboration of Stein's "nice story."

For Pynchon's narrator, the Counterforce is merely a step in the right direction. While it appears to oppose the Plot, it does so only in a strictly Hegelian sense, as a complement necessary to flesh out yet another of the novel's numerous dualisms. The Counterforce never breaks away, nor is it intended to break away, from its binary co-orbit with the Fink. In fact, the alarmingly inverted solipsism (no I, only They) that readers discover when they can no longer believe in the John Dillinger heroics of the Counterforce produces one of the novel's most powerful effects. But from the narrator's perspective, at least one element of the Counterforce, its musical orientation, represents an important breakthrough. The "Rossini solution"—that "a person feels good listening to Rossini" (440)—which the narrator associates with the Counterforce, moves beyond the yin/yang commingling of Plot and Counterforce. It bypasses the direct demand for freedom that Gustav Schlabon cognizes with Beethoven (440) and suggests instead an Ophitistic pleasure principle to mitigate against the "reality principle" of the entire Plot/Counterforce dialectic.

This then is a "nice story" that Gravity's Rainbow tells, a bedtime story about how society lives with The Bomb. The "sublime" Rossini can make us "comfortable" (376), as a cultural legacy of 1950s conspiracy thinking can never do. In this process of "removing" The Bomb, of stepping back from the goal-oriented system-building mysticism that makes it work, the narrator allows Slothrop's quest to simply run down; he upsets the dialectic of the "good" and "bad" Rockets, the Plot and Counterforce, and in short, all the structural dualisms that seemed to be giving the novel its structure; the novel jettisons its own clear organization. So when the narrator dissolves the Rocket, he makes of the Zone a place where even discourse itself has been disturbingly destabilized. The long historical perspective of Pound may be a good idea, but not to promulgate unity as much as to demonstrate a great unevenness in continuity and a history of rough transitions. As Molly lite notes, we can forget in this text any "vision of the universe as 'blindingly One.'" In other words, Plato's suspicions about discourse are confirmed by the destruction of the forms, and the passerby is free to misinterpret the signs and omens, so that
"Kraft, Standfestigkeit, Weiss"(250) can be taken for any number of types of graffiti.

6: The Narrator Administers an Antidote

But wait. Now the time has come to wonder who it is that tells us this story and why he directs the singing at the novel's close. In Native American tradition, the Trickster figure acts as a tension-relieving device, much like the institutionalized Feast of Fools did in Mediaval Europe. He uses his semi-divinity to flout all social mores and rules, displays stunningly bad taste at every turn, blunders into vulgarly uncomfortable situations, and frequently even admits his own sense of self-revelation. He will certainly never receive the Pulitzer. Pynchon calls him a "travelling salesman of primitive culture," an outrageous character who is funny as long as he remains safely fictional. 39

So Pynchon puts to work in Gravity's Rainbow the seminal magic described in Frazer's Golden Bough, a method of acting upon the world that precedes religion and science. He does this through the offices of the Trickster, whose blundering antics are also associated in Native American tradition with his capacity to create light, 39 to create and then recreate the world by giving it its structure and appearance. He uses a shaman's trickery, but it is trickery that works, that heals wounds by making them new in the context of a mindset that defines illness in terms of a loss of soul. Pynchon began his writing career with his original paranoid, the Ojibwa Indian Irving Loon in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," who yields to the possession of the Windigo, an evil ghost who breaks down the taboo against cannibalism by causing the afflicted person to perceive humans as animals. He manipulates Gravity's Rainbow with a narrator whose propensity for what seems to be accident and omission only disguises an ability to commandeer worlds and alter them at will. The narrator's lack of control over his creation is, paradoxically, the very essence of his control. As a result, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow breaks so many taboos of narrative coherence that culturally institutionalized paranoid visions such as Loon's cannot sustain themselves.

When we combine the characteristic playfulness of the Trickster with his multiple generative capacity, we have a useful metaphor to discuss the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow. He simply replaces the world of the Rocket/nuclear weapon with another. As Slothrop stops thinking about the S-Gerät, it disappears. When we combine the Trickster's defiant rejection of established norms with his capacity to work magic, we have a narrative with affective presence, the ability to get something done within itself and beyond its limits. We have indications of an author who recognizes the potential for creative political/social action in denying the reader's expectation that the goal of fiction is to tap into an ineffable One and subsequently fail in the expression of it. Bent on plundering the fetish of the Rocket/nuclear weapon, the narrator as Trickster carries out what
Bookchin in *The Ecology of Freedom* identifies as a "black redistribution," the attempt to "desymbolize power and property," to de-mystify its dominion over human life. The raid of *Gravity's Rainbow* on the central mechanomorphic icon of a "muddled Western spirituality" casts the narrator in the role of the "Badass" that Pynchon refers to in a 1984 *New York Times Book Review* article. In the tradition of the quasi-mythical Ned Ludd, who in 1779 broke into a Leicestershire cottage to become a symbol of the ongoing counter-Industrial Revolution, the narrator attempts (with Bookchin, with Frankenstein, with King Kong, with Ludd), as Pynchon says with prominent italics in the *Review* article, to "deny the machine."

This brings us again to Stein and Rossini purged now of any taint of apathy. What the Trickster narrator accomplishes with his new Rocket/nuclear weapon-free fictional world is to offer us a way out of the stultifying mandala of transcendental totality, out of the self-consuming system of Kakulä's dream where positivism folds strangely into mysticism and where the Renaissance confidence in the perfectibility of man has been almost entirely supplanted by a cynical trust in its controllability.

Pynchon's narrator offers an exciting textual Autobahn. Because the fiction "lieth" convincingly enough to fashion its world anew, it points a way that "lieth" out of the mandala in a linear movement of non-causally linked confusions. It suggests a route through an epistemological no man's land where entropic information loss and the discontinuity of culture benefit humanity by precluding the risky concentration of authoritarian and symbolic power. He describes in *Gravity's Rainbow* a long line of unrelated "I don't know's" which "penetrate the moment" (158) like a series of the cause and effect-free centers of Mrs. Quad's candies (118).

The final clue in understanding this linear Autobahn taking us away from Rocket mysticism is to recognize it also as the line of light moving through the darkness of the movie theatre, from the "one bright, burning point" (104) behind the projector's lens.

The Trickster's world of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a voodoo world and operates as a von Häll film with the ability to become real, to have impact on the extra-fictional world. Telling Death to "f*ck off" (10), not as an expletive of frustration, but rather as a spell, animates this novel and makes of the Trickster's bedtime story a well-thought-out Lukkite strategy.

This implies that *Gravity's Rainbow* is essentially ritual discourse, effective because it reconnects the individual to his society and his culture through the offices of a playful, metashamanistic narrator. I posit in this novel a text with the capacity to act upon its audience, by blurring the outlines of fiction/reality dualism, yes, but more significantly, by allowing the capacity of fictions to supersede other categories of experience. If I wished to expand the discussion here, I would
say that Gravity's Rainbow offers critics a text where the discourse-orientation of post-structuralism and the goal-orientation of historical materialism can productively cohabit. Pynchon's more recent comments suggest a certain ambivalence about the capacity of fiction to generate praxis. In the Review article, he questions the existence of a mythical/fictional Badass "bad and big enough" to overshadow nuclear weapons, and in his 1984 introduction to Slow Learner, he defines fiction as working somewhere on a political "spectrum of impotence."

But when these remarks merge with the textual fact of Gravity's Rainbow, we find, I think, a mandate when the film goes off, Pynchon would rather we opt to touch the persons next to us, not to reach between "[our] own cold legs" (760). The "spell" of literature works in ritual fashion when the line out of the mandala becomes discourse becomes effect, all in a fluid dynamic based, not on a notion of abstract wholeness, but rather on genuine human contact and possibility, on "being someone new, someone incredible" (177). Pynchon's narrator stalls the fall of the Rocket to give us a chance to solve the problem it represents, and to keep us together in that theatre long enough to disarm the potential for limiting self centeredness inherent in paranoia.

To William Slothrop's hymn, Pynchon's Trickster will play minnesinger.

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Notes


2 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 174. In the German, the phonetic basis for the pun is not quite as close as in Common's English because of a diphthongal shift. The first lieth in Common's translation corresponds to Nietzsche's liegt, the second lieth to his liegt. "Thou spirit of gravity" corresponds to Nietzsche's "Du Geist der Schwere!"


4 The etymology of the noun whim traces an intriguing intermingling of the mental and the physical, the abstract and the concrete. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the usage "a capricious notion or fancy" grew up space with "a fanciful or fantastic creation; a whimsical object" (see the Oxford English Dictionary). The "whims" used in 18th century minstrealy to raise ore and water attest to the transference of meaning from the abstract to the concrete.

5 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 99. See also Edward Mendelson's introduction to his excellent collection Pynchon: A Collection of


8 I use the gender specific pronoun purposefully to refer to the narrator. The Raven and the Coyote Trickster figures usually appear in Native American discourse as males.

9 Mendelson 5.

10 Bruce F. Kawin, The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 201. For the most extensive argument for a holistic reading of Pynchon, see Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity’s Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978). Although I do not deny the usefulness of Siegel's understanding of the Rocket as mandala, for the purposes of this essay, I would propose another analogy. Slothrop's graffiti-schematic of "the A rocket, seen from below" (224) suggests a resemblance to the Lamaist Mandala "Khor, or prayer wheel. A prayer wheel is a revolving cylinder inscribed with mantras, or mystically efficacious utterances, used by Tibetan Buddhists to mechanically recite the inscribed mantras. The prayer wheel is typically turned by hand, wind, or running water, and each revolution of the cylinder corresponds to one oral recitation. Both the prayer wheel and the Rocket of the novel represent a simultaneously physical and spiritual presence and event.


13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge as quoted in The Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 under "mysticism."

14 Hite 136.

15 See Schaub's discussion, 57.

16 See Auguste Comte, The Positive Philosophy [1830-42], trans. Harriet Martineau (1853; New York: AMS, 1974) 545. Comte writes: "The theological period of humanity could begin no otherwise than by a complete and usually very durable state of pure Fetishism, which allowed free exercise to that tendency of our nature by which Man conceives of all external bodies as animated
by a life analogous to his own, with differences of
more intensity." I am arguing that the mental habits
associated with fetishism do not confine themselves to
cognition and behavior that Comte would group under the
heading "First Stage."

Sexual fetishism, of course, bears directly and
interestingly on Pynchon's work as well. The
eroticization of an object as a result of either
conditioning or a splitting of the self into two parts
can be effectively followed in Gravity's Rainbow.

17 Murray Bookchin, The Ecology of Freedom: The
Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy (Palo Alto:

18 John Nichols, The Nirvana Blues (New

19 Jerry Korn, ed., 1950-1960, This Fabulous

20 Milton Wiorst, Fire in the Streets: America

21 William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix:
Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana

22 Hite 95.

23 The close borrowings as well as the loose
appropriations of idiom from Lacan and Barthes will
be apparent to their readers.

24 Eugene O'Neill, In The Zone, The Moon of the
Caribbeans and Six Other Plays of the Sea, ed.

25 Pynchon uses the notion of the "hothouse"
to somewhat different effect, for the growing of
Counterforce bananas.

26 O'Neill 33. In this edition the pagination
starts over with each play.

27 For example, while critics have been largely
frustrated in their efforts to account for the name
"Slothrop," I am fascinated by the fact that when one
spells "Slothrop" backwards the result bears a
remarkable resemblance to "portholes."

28 Frank Kermode as cited in
Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and

29 Ludwig Wittgenstein, "The Philosopher in the
Twentieth Century," Sceptical Essays (London: Allen
and Unwin, 1935) 61.

30 Gertrude Stein, "Reflection on the Atomic
Bomb," Reflection on the Atomic Bomb: The Previously

31 Although the piece was not published until 1973—Oh God.


33 A second century Gnostic sect, the Ophites advocated a radical, nihilistic interpretation of Old Testament morality. Their reading of Genesis made the Serpent a noble teacher and Cain a rebel model. The "hedonism" we associate today with the Ophites, they themselves regarded as a positive assertion of their spirituality.

34 Hite 95.

35 Unless otherwise noted, my American Indian anthropology here comes from John Greenway, Literature Among the Primitives (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1964).


37 Bookchin 193.

38 Pynchon, "Luddite" 41.

39 This is the revolution that brings us a new edition of Edward Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang with illustrations by R. Crumb.

40 Pynchon, "Luddite" 40.

41 Pynchon, "Luddite" 40.


It has long been recognized that the novels of Thomas Pynchon are filled with ghosts and revenants of all kinds, but few critics have ventured to offer an explanation of this fact. To fill the lacuna, Douglas Fowler has recently devoted an entire book to an investigation of this supernatural phenomenon; he argues that Pynchon’s ghosts "adumbrate the malignant incursion into our world by a mysterious 'They,'" and he links Pynchon with writers like Ann Radcliffe and Bram Stoker whose main goal is to create an "effect" of "supernatural terror." Throughout his book, Fowler argues against those critics who would naturalize Pynchon’s ghosts into "metaphors" for "merely psychological" fears; he insists that the ghosts be seen as real embodiments of an evil supernatural force, as emissaries from an "Other Kingdom" whose mission is to destroy the human world.

But there is a realm between the "merely psychological" and the "supernatural," a world that includes and links the two: the larger physical world or biosphere. In seeing Pynchon’s ghosts as entirely supernatural and malignant, Fowler repeats the very mistake made by so many of Pynchon’s characters: he fails to see the physical connection between the dead and the living, the spirits’ affirmation of the interdependence of all things in this world. Pynchon has adapted the ghost story to the goals of the ecological movement in an effort to dramatize the interconnectedness of everything in the biosphere and the urgent need for an understanding of this mutuality. Pynchon’s ghosts represent a warning to the human race that, in destroying others in the physical world, one is really destroying oneself, for the lives of all species in the biosphere are interdependent and no single species in the system can be lopped off without shortening the life of those remaining. Pynchon’s ghosts are thus supernatural emissaries from this— the natural—world, spirits of the murdered and of their murderers who are now also dead, revenants who return with the message that to kill is to be killed. These ghosts are not malignant, but only appear so to potential murderers, for they represent in a way that the murderers can dimly sense but not understand the fact that the killers sign their own death warrants every time they send another to death.

Thus Pynchon’s ghosts only appear as wholly supernatural or merely psychological to one who misinterprets their affirmation of interdependence in the physical world as a malignant otherworldly force or as some entirely personal fear. But why would one’s own natural alliance with the things of this world appear to one as an alien force, either as an other completely different from the self (supernatural) or as an otherness within,
a separateness from oneself (a psychological fear)? The answer shows us that in these ghost stories Pynchon is not merely concerned to promote an understanding of ecology, but also wants to attack the barriers to that understanding—for what distorts his characters’ vision of their necessary dependence on others in this world is an ideology promoting division, a view of the whole earth as something to be divided up and devoured for the self’s own gain. Whether in terms of imperialism abroad or consumerism at home, political, economic, and religious institutions are shown by Pynchon as constructing an individualist subject who sees himself as above and apart from certain “others” and as dependent for survival on their incorporation or elimination. These “others,” whether colonized by the imperialistic subject abroad or bought, used, and discarded by the consumer-subject at home, are thus cast as aliens (foreign, consumable) from the very beginning, even before they return as ghosts. By attempting to cut the others off from the whole of which both it and the self are interdependent parts, the self inaugurates the very divisions whose forced closing will frighten it later on. The returning other looks alien only because the self, subject to various institutions and their ideologies of division, had originally designated the other as other, representing an ineluctable interdependence. These formerly living beings only return as death-dealing ghosts because the self killed them. The psychological fear that the self feels is indeed a return of the repressed, for these ghosts reassert a likeness which only looks uncanny because the self had itself denied it in the beginning. And their supernatural haunting only looks like an uncommon event because of the unnatural act of murder by which the self first attempted to divide nature in half.

That imperialist and consumerist ideologies are indeed self-destructive is thus the negative side of Pynchon’s positive ecological message, as we shall see in the three ghost stories to be examined, the first a passage from Gravity’s Rainbow (1973) and the latter two a combination of scenes, one embedded within the other, from V. (1963). I will also be making comparisons between these ghost stories and one of Pynchon’s short stories, “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” (1959). It is still considered unusual and unusual to make comparison of scenes from different works by the same author (in fact, most critical books and essays today are still unified around a single text); but I hope to show, not only that Pynchon’s main themes have remained strikingly consistent from his first published short story (1959) to his last fiction to appear so far (1973), but also that even a minimal understanding of each work can only come from a realization of the interconnections among them all. This last is especially true in Pynchon’s case because he writes a fiction of juxtaposition even more than of linear flow, and in juxtaposing scenes from different novels we can often see much more than we might in considering each as an isolated linear narrative.

We can begin by noting that the relation in Gravity’s Rainbow between Frans Van der Groov and the doothes has certain affinities with the relation between Siegel and the partygoers
in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." Frans, despite his sympathy for the doves indicated by the fact that he would give them a sporting chance ("don't I deserve a clumsy weapon for such a clumsy prey?") [GR 109]), nevertheless shoots hundreds of the birds as part of a Dutch hunting expedition on Mauritius. As with the murder of the partygoers, the doves are being killed because they cannot be "saved":

"If the species were not such a perversion," [Frans] wrote, "it might be profitably husbanded to feed our generations. I cannot have them quite so violently as do some here. But what now can mitigate this slaughter? It is too late . . . . Perhaps a more comely beak, fuller feathering, a capacity for flight, however brief . . . . details of design. Or, had we but found savages on this island, the bird's appearance might have then seemed so strange that that of the wild turkey of North America. Alas, their tragedy is to be the dominant form of life on Mauritius, but incapable of speech."

That was it, right there. No language meant no chance of co-opting them in to what their round and flaxen invaders were calling Salvation. (GR 110)

To the Dutch imperialists, the native doves seem too alien to be part of God's creation; they are like no other birds the Europeans have ever experienced. There are not even any humans--and thus fairly familiar--"savages" on the island who, speaking in explanation of the birds, might make the completely unfamiliar creatures seem less alien. The Dutch "make sense" of these seemingly unrecognized animals by treating them as enemies of sense; the unknown other is "understood" as a threat to be eliminated, a threat to the order of the Christian universe and to every individual Christian dependent upon that order:

To some, it made sense. They saw the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of Satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation. Was Mauritius some first poison trickle through the sheltering dikes of Earth? Christians must stem it here, or perish in a second Flood, loosed this time not by God but by the Enemy. The act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act, one whose symbolism they understood. (GR 110)

Ironically, even if the doves had been familiar enough to be "saved," Christian salvation would have meant for them exactly the same thing that persecution as the instruments of Satan brings: "In both, eventually, the doves die" (GR 111), only as part of the Christian scheme the doves would have been killed as food provided by God for human Christians. Both Justifications for murder find a parallel in Slager's reasons for killing the
partygoers, whom he eliminates as beyond salvation and as too
great a threat to the self, and whom he ingests (symbolically,
through Loon), after seeing them not as "human" like himself but
as edible "animals" ("beavers"). In these (non)relationships,
the other is seen either as so alien to the self that it can and
must be cut off, or as so compatible with and necessary to the
self that it can and must be incorporated. There is either an
extreme difference between self and other, or an absolute
identification—nothing in between.

The point of these (non)relations between self and other is
that they are meant to establish a (non)relation between the
self and God. The identification in the minds of Siegel and the
Dutch imperialists between themselves and God is dependent upon
the destruction of the partygoers and the dodos; Siegel and the
Dutch imperialists divide self from other and decide the other's
fate in order to feel that they, as God, can determine who will
live (themselves) and who will die (the others). Thus the self,
in killing the other in order to become God, destroys all
relationships: the other is gone; the self is God. This is the
self's attempt to introject all knowledge and power (I know and I
determine who will live) by projecting ignorance and weakness
onto the other who is to be killed. The partygoers and the
dodos become the scapegoats by means of which Siegel and the
Dutch imperialists attempt to embody their own mortality and put
death to death.

But one's own mortality cannot be isolated, separated, and
put to death; destroying the other as scapegoat, establishing a
(non)relationship, leads only to self-destruction because the
self is, always and in all ways, dependent upon its relation
with the other. The Dutch imperialist Frans, even as he joins
his fellow Christians in shooting the dodos, begins to feel
haunted by voices whose message he cannot decipher: "The
voices—he Insomniac, southern stars too thick for constellations
teaching in faces and creatures of fable less likely than the
dodo—spoke the words of sleepers, singly, coupled, in chorus.
The rhythms and timbres were Dutch, but made no waking sense.
Except that he thought they were warning him ... scolding,
angry that he couldn't understand" (GR 109). It is significant
that these ghostly voices, heard while Frans is awake yet making
"no waking sense," are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.
The voices belong to creatures "less likely than the dodo," and
yet these creatures speak what is very like Dutch, while the
dodos cannot speak at all. What Frans experiences is the
disturbing connection between almost unrecognizable beasts and
almost intelligible language; if he could decipher the message,
he might see that the ghost voices are trying to warn him that
there is a closer connection between strange beasts and his
fellow men, between dodos and Dutch Imperialists, than he has
ever realized.

Like the voices, Frans' gun serves to point the connection
which Frans nevertheless still fails to see:
Each hour he sighted down the barrel. It was then, if ever, he might have seen how the weapon made an axis potent as Earth's own between himself and this victim [the unhatched dodo], still one, inside the egg, with the ancestral chain, not to be broken out for more than its blink of world's light. There they were, the silent egg and the crazy Dutchman, and the hookgun that linked them forever, framed, brilliantly motionless as any Vermeer. (GR 109)

Before he shoots, before he uses the gun to destroy the link between himself and the dodo, Frans has the opportunity to see through the very instrument of destruction the importance of that link, to realize why it should be preserved. The dodo which Frans would separate from himself is in fact linked to Frans through their respective ancestral chains, both of which begin and end in the same place: the Earth. The Earth's axis is "potent" because it is that around which the Earth spins; the link between the Dutch imperialist and the dodo is potent because it is that which keeps both of them alive. The indivisible oneness which Frans would deny is that he and the dodo are parts of the single body of the Earth, no section of which may be cut off without damaging the other parts. The self's belief that it can become a self-sufficient body by killing the body of the other makes an axis potent as Earth's own between the self and the dodo. The attempt at self-preservation doomed to achieve its opposite because the entity destroyed is inside and vital to the body, not outside and dispensable.

The Dutch imperialists, then, fail to see the extent to which genocide is suicide. To kill the native dodo is not to break the link joining man and beast and become a god; to destroy these birds is to feel the chain pull with a vengeance, dragging the human species to the same undifferentiated mass to which the humans dragged the dodoes, the same Earth from which both species originally sprang. Like Siegel, the Dutch imperialists fail in their role as "host" when the only salvation they bring their flock is death; they fail in the very act of exercising the power over life and death that is supposed to connect them with God. "This furious host were losers, impersonating a race chosen by God. The colony, the venture, was dying—like the ebony trees they were stripping from the island, like the poor species they were removing totally from the earth. By 1688, Didus ineptus would be gone, by 1710 so would every last settler from Mauritius. The enterprise here would have lasted about a human lifetime." (GR 110).

The lives of human and dodo are connected in time as in space, for even as the Dutch imperialists abridge the dodoes' lifetime, they limit their own. Suddenly the species Didus ineptus will live no longer than its last individual member, whose life is further abridged to a minute or less: "egg of light into egg of darkness, within its first minute of amazed vision" (GR 109). The Dutch hunters do not realize that they and the dodoes share the same life line, belong to the same temporal
body, and that by cutting the line of Didus inepus at this
generation of dodos they are cutting their own species' life
line at their own generation: the Dutch settlers' tenure on
Mauritius is limiting "about a human lifetime." Thus Frans and
the dodo face each other, through the barrel of a gun, as
individual parts of the same spatial and temporal body, and when
Frans shoots a dodo, he destroys the very relation between parts
that allows each part to exist in space and time.

The way Pynchon describes Frans' failure to see his
connection with the dodo places great emphasis on the fact that
this failure, though very personally felt, is not Frans' alone,
but typical of the many men like Frans who have been so
thoroughly indoctrinated by imperialist ideology. As Pynchon
makes clear, Frans' personal failure has its historical roots in
the imperialism that conditions his view of the native as either
a resource to be exploited for the white man's gain (flash to be
eaten) or a commodity to be discarded because he can find no use
for it (a non-functioning limb to be amputated). The prevailing
notion that individual survival depends on incorporating the
other into oneself or on eliminating the other as a rival in a
world of scarcity makes it very difficult for Frans even to
imagine a relation with the "natives" that is not one of
economic exploitation. And a crusading Christianity only
reinforces the divisions between self and other fostered by
imperialism: the White Man's Burden is either to civilize the
natives, converting the other to one's own (faith), or to
exterminate the brutes, who, because they cannot speak the white
man's language, were obviously not made in the image of God (the
white man). A certain natural sympathy for the dodos leads
Frans to a fantasy of their having been given the "Gift of
Speech" which makes them capable of salvation (GR 110), but the
very assumptions that formed the basis of this fantasy are what
make the real dodos appear unredeemable: that natives who
cannot speak the word of God are damned. Unredeemable and
irredeemable, the dodos are defined for Frans as ungodly and
unmarketable; economic imperialism and crusading Christianity
combine to darken any dim perception he may have of another
possible relation with the dodos, to deafen his already
unattuned ears to the meaning of their ghost voices.

Already in the first of these ghost stories the pattern is
set: whatever small insight a character may have into the true
meaning of the ghosts haunting him, ideological blinders seem
always to occlude the ghosts' affirmation of interdependence and
to distort this into a threat from an alien other. Despite the
signs of a natural sympathy for the other running counter to the
hegemonic ideology, the institutionalized view of things
eventually displaces any other way of seeing the world, so that
what might have appeared as the natural connection between Frans
and the dodo can only be seen as a supernatural menace or a
psychological fear. Representing the natural law according to
which the self's unbounded acquisitiveness will leave it with
less material and not more, these ghosts are then systematically
misinterpreted by a materialist ideology that would deny their
physical force and render them merely immaterial ( unearthly) or just imaginary (hallucinated). Frans shoots because the political, economic, and religious institutions framing him make his felt response to the ghost voices seem like senseless superstition or unreasonable fear. But the fact that the imperialistic slaughter of the dodoes on Mauritius leads to the extinction of the very colonists who had sought to gain more space and time from the others' death shows that the ghost voices tell a truth stronger than any distorting materialist ideology; they speak of a reality that hegemonic discourse cannot so easily supernaturalize and conjure away, or psychologize and repress.

Our next two ghost stories bring the problem home. Set in America and in the near present, they communicate the same ecological message but focus their critique on the effects of materialist ideology as these are felt here and now. We can begin our discussion by considering some basic similarities between the previous scene from Gravity's Rainbow and the ones from V, to which we now turn; as before, references to "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" will also be brought in where they seem to clarify scenes that might remain opaque if considered alone.

Like Frans and Siegel, Benny Profane of V is a reluctant hunter. Stalking alligators in New York sewers, Profane is given the same opportunity as Frans to see the necessary connection between himself and the other: "He rounded the bend, the light from the pink sky was lost; now there moved only a sluggish ellipse with him and the alligator at foci, and a slender axis of light linking them" (V 117). The light is from Profane's flashlight which, like Frans' gunfire, enables the hunter to see his prey, but which could, if only the hunter were to shift his focus, allow him to recognize the essential link between self and other. This kind of perception is what Pynchon calls, in another yet strikingly similar context, "see[ing] through, not through but through through" (GR 668). It is characteristic of Pynchon to show how the very weapon by which self and other will be destroyed has that within it which, if recognized, could save them both.

If Profane does not recognize the meaning of the flashlight's "axis," he is also given strange lights similar to those unfamiliar constellations experienced by Frans:

Suddenly—so suddenly it scared him—there was light ahead, around a corner. Not the light of a rainy evening in the city, but paler, less certain. They rounded the corner. He noticed the flashlight bulb starting to flicker; lost the alligator momentarily. Then turned the corner and found a wide space like the nave of a church, an arched roof overhead, a phosphorescent light coming off walls whose exact arrangement was indistinct. (V 122)

The peculiar lights make the sewers resemble a church, make the alligator seem like a parishioner about to "receive the gift of tongues" (V 122); we recall that Frans had a similar vision of
the dodos being blessed with the "Gift of Speech." If Profane understood the lights, he would see that they reveal the essential likeness of the supposedly other, the way the alligators, if only they could speak, would declare these savers to be their church and themselves to be like human parishioners with lives worth saving.

And like Frans, Profane is haunted; where the Dutch hunter hears the voices of constellation creatures, Profane "feels the eyes of ghost-rats" which seem to tell him that this sewer/church is "no place to kill" (V 122). To understand the full meaning of these ghost-rats, we must examine the scene Pynchon has embedded within this passage about Profane and the alligators. The embedded scene, set in the same sewers but about twenty years before Profane's arrival, concerns the strange relation between a Roman Catholic priest and a group of rats. Father Fairing has journeyed underground and adopted rats as parishioners because he believes that the humans of New York are past saving. Yet salvation for the rats is at least in part a cruel joke because it means that they are to be killed and eaten by their "savior": "Before long [Father Fairing] would be spiritual leader of the inheritors of the earth. He considered it small enough sacrifice on their part to provide three of their own per day for physical sustenance, in return for the spiritual nourishment he was giving them. [ . . . ] The livers, 'he wrote, 'are particularly succulent' (V 118).

We recall that the "salvation" the Dutch hunters would have brought the dodos (could the birds only speak) and that the "salvation" Slagel brings the partygoers also involve killing and eating the "faithful." Whether killed for food like the Christianized rats and dodos or destroyed as a threat like the alligators and Satanic dodos, the other must die to ensure the self's survival. It is no wonder that the converted rat Veronica imagines guilt to be "a huge, white, lumbering beast, pursuing her, wanting to devour her" (V 121), for neither the priest nor Veronica sees that "Satan"'s most effective deception is to make what Fairing offers the rats look like salvation—theirs, and his. Cannibalizing his parishioners does not save them or the priest: "Rat meat didn't agree with the Father, in the long run. Perhaps there was infection" (V 119). Fairing's cannibalistic form of salvation helps no one, least of all himself; it was "really only a necessary delusion to protect himself from the bleak truth that his pale and sinuous parishioners [the rats] might turn out no better than the animals [the humans] whose estate they were succeeding to" (V 119)—protect himself, that is, from the fact that he, like all the rest, was doomed.

That Fairing was self-deceived in his method of self-preservation is precisely what the ghost-rats are trying to tell
Profane. The ghosts, like Frans' voices, attempt to warn the hunter that his life is bound up with that of his prey. Yet, although Profane feels the same sympathy for his subjects as Fairing felt for his ("Father Fairing talked to rats. Profane talked to alligators"), still, like Fairing, "He fired" (V 123). Thus Profane, who was given the opportunity to learn from his predecessor's failure, learns nothing. Significantly, the flashlight by which Profane might have seen his vital connection with the alligator dies with the death of the beast, goes out as theirs becomes a non-relationship, and Profane is left benighted, unable to see the other or himself. Just prior to this symbolic darkness, Profane watches streams of the alligator's blood form "shifting patterns" (V 123) which make no more sense to him than did the phosphorescent lights or the eyes of ghost-rats—another warning from the dead that the living only doom themselves by killing the other.

But, as in the case of Frans' ecological illiteracy, Pynchon traces Profane's and Fairing's personal failure to read the signs of their mutual dependence on the other back to the negative influence of historical context. The materialist ideology that commodified baby alligators as "others" to be bought, used, and discarded by the self is the same institutionalized attitude that can only see these live beings, now full grown, as menacing aliens to be destroyed, as objects that have outlived their usefulness and now, perversely, continue to assert an unwarranted claim on their owner's attention:

Last year, or maybe the year before, kids all over Nueva York bought these little alligators for pets. Macy's was selling them for fifty cents, every child, it seemed, had to have one. But soon the children grew bored with them. Some set them loose in the streets, but most flushed them down the toilets. And these had grown and reproduced, had fed off rats and sewage, so that now they moved big, blind, albino, all over the sewer system. [...] Since the sewer scandal last year, the Department [of Sanitation or Waste Disposal] had got conscientious. They called for volunteers to go down with shotguns and get rid of the alligators. (V 42-43)

Thus Profane, who must work in order to live, has his job and attitude defined for him by larger institutions. Is it any wonder that he fails to see a connection which every structure of belief surrounding him militates against his seeing? The alligators are like King Kong in Gravity's Rainbow—ripped from their native habitat by imperialist conquerors and dragged to the city as exotic attractions for commercial exploitation. A callous consumerism is here revealed to be the internal-affairs complement to an imperialistic foreign policy; the story of Frans and the dodoes and that of Profane and the alligators do indeed intermesh. The alligators' assertion of a menacing liveliness against the oppressors who tried to reduce them to marketable objects is very like Kong's uprising against his businessmen—
captors; and, in both cases, materialist ideology makes it extremely difficult for these animals to be seen any differently in the eyes from the way they were seen in the beginning; as "others" to be used till used up, collected for their exotic appeal, then ejected when this thrilling difference has been worn down to a dull sameness ("soon the children grew bored with them").

Profane's shooting of the alligators, like the climactic shooting of Kong, is thus the result of a more than personal failure to perceive likeness; it is triggered by a whole society's failure, an institutionalized distortion of perspective whereby other lives are misread as death threats, affirmation of interdependence misperceived as an otherworldly or nightmarish denial of the self's place in the world. Profane does not understand the message of the ghost-rats, the meaning of the ghost story he is told about Father Fairing and his rodent parishioners, because the very same divisive ideology that triumphs over Fairing's natural sympathy for the rats also extends its sway over Profane, making the rats appear as mere ghosts (supernatural, psychological) who seem to have nothing to do with the very physical relation between Profane and the alligators. This prevailing ideology occludes the fact that the ghost-rats embody a natural law: they appear to warn Profane that he has been led to mistake nature, to misunderstand the true nature of his relation to the rats and the alligators, which is one of mutual reliance rather than one of jaded consumer and waste product.

Even though Fairing and Profane are both disillusioned with society and want to see their life underground as a kind of refuge (Failing believes that the humans above are past saving; Profane thinks that life above street level involves too many dangerous connections with people), nevertheless society reaches down to structure both men's attitudes toward the other without their knowing it. The socially induced despair that Fairing feels about the humans above ground leads to and works with the consequent fear for his own soul that leads him to flee into the sewers rather than risk staying with his suddenly alien own kind; both continue to influence his behavior once he is below with the rats. His tendency, like Siegel's, is to put self-preservation before the salvation of his flock, even while he tries to convince himself that it is really they he is saving ("He considered it small enough sacrifice on their part to provide three of their own per day for physical sustenance, in return for the spiritual nourishment he was giving them"). Besides retaining this murderously self-protective attitude, Fairing also remains under the influence of an ethnocentric religion like the one that exerts such a force on Frans and the Dutch imperialists: the only way Fairing can see to save the rats is to persecute them for committing sins that are entirely of his own religion's defining, to punish them for being other when he has himself in his role as priest defined them as such. Profane too finds himself persecuting alligators because the Department of Sanitation has defined them as waste; his street-level fear of
dangerous connections, acquired from a society that encourages treating others as objects who sometimes rebel against being so treated, persists in Profane's defensive firing at possibly threatening, seemingly disposable "things."

That a divisive ideology triumphs in having so thoroughly constructed Profane, Fairing, and Frans as its subjects that they fail to recognize their connection with the other shows how very pessimistic these stories are about the chances for a new outlook. In scene after scene what are not in fact "ghosts" (supernatural, psychological, frightening) are distorted to appear as such, trivialized by the very ideology that it is the import of the "ghosts" to challenge. And yet the dodo voices and the rat eyes, the alligator blood and the phosphorescent lights, combined now with the "ghosts" of Frans, Fairing, and Profane, still speak to us in Pynchon's fiction, trying to communicate a potentially affirmative message about ecological interdependence. If that message appears frightening, it is only because it foretells what will happen to a society that refuses to recognize the importance of ecological balance, to see that using and discarding the other as so much refuse can only lead to the self's own downfall:

For we are a nation that can, many of us, toss with all aplomb our candy wrapper into the Grand Canyon itself, snap a color shot and drive away; and we need voices like Oakley Hall's to remind us how far that piece of paper, still fluttering brightly behind us, has to fall.\(^1\)

What Pynchon has said about the fiction of Oakley Hall applies equally well to his own work, to Pynchon's own voice and the ghost-voices in his fiction which disturb our aplomb, which speak a language of the dead that there is yet time for those still living to learn to understand.

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Notes

3. Fowler 11.
5. A brilliant exception, clearly revealing the strengths of cross-comparison, is John T. Irwin's
discussion of The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! in Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Reading of Faulkner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975).


7 The idea of the other as a scapegoat for the self's mortality is discussed by John F. Irwin in American Hieroglyphics (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980).

8 The passage concerns John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X. Pynchon wonders if, when they were young men and "Red" Malcolm was shining shoes, "Jack" Kennedy ever saw not just "through to" the black shoes and black skin that marked Malcolm in most white eyes as a threatening other, but "through through" blackness, seeing through the connecting link between them (the black shoes) the basic likeness between black and white, their interdependence. But, like the stories discussed above, this one ends with the occlusion of natural sympathy by hegemonic ideology (here, racism) and with the death of both oppressor and oppressed: "did Red suspend his ragpopping just the shadow of a beat, just enough gap in the moiré there to let white Jack see through, not through to but through through the shine on his classmate's shoes? [...] Eventually Jack and Malcolm both got murdered" (GR 668). Of course, the story is not entirely pessimistic because, as Pynchon takes great care to point out, "Slothrop's fate is not so clear."


10 Thomas Pynchon, "A Gift of Books" [an appreciation of Oakley Hall's Warlock], Holiday 38.6 (1965): 184-85. Equally descriptive of Pynchon's own ecological ghost stories is his support notice for Peter Matthiessen's Far Tortuga (cloth: New York: Random House, 1975, dust jacket: paper: New York: Bantam, 1975, back cover [abridged]), where natural beauty is described as "haunting" with a very physical strength: "a masterfully spun yarn, a little other-worldly, a dreamlike momentum . . . . It's full of music and strong haunting visuals, and like everything of his, it's also a deep declaration of love for the planet."
In his 1986 study of postmodernism, Andreas Huyssen noted that "while the postmodern break with classical modernism was fairly visible in architecture and the visual arts, the notion of a postmodern rupture in literature has been much harder to ascertain." The different accounts of postmodernist literature and its relation to modernist fiction that have been offered by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and John Barth, among others, hardly constitute a consensus, and none of these views has yet succeeded in becoming a definitive critical statement on the subject. In the midst of this confusion, Brian McHale has boldly attempted to differentiate between the poetics of modernist and postmodernist fiction in what he candidly acknowledges to be "a one-idea book." That idea is summed up in a single sentence from McHale's preface: "postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (xii). McHale elaborates what he calls this "descriptive poetics" of postmodernist fiction through a consideration of the various ontological issues that have been brought to the fore in the literature of a wide-ranging sample of American, French, Latin American, as well as other writers. He enumerates a variety of formal and structural devices used by such fiction to foreground the ontological status of the text: mise-en-abyme, trompe l'oeil, recursive structure, forking paths, excluded middles, multiple beginnings and endings, and intrusive authors, to name a few. All these paradoxes and illusions (many of the sort described by Douglas Hofstadter in his 1979 book Godel, Escher, Bach, to which McHale frequently refers) actually serve the function in postmodernist fiction of illusion-destroying devices that allow ontological issues—and indeed reality itself—to intervene in the literary text's closed, fictional world.

The empirical evidence that McHale presents, the diversity of texts that he is able to explicate and relate to one another with his ontological poetics, supports his account of the "postmodern rupture" that Huyssen found to be "much harder to ascertain" in the case of literature than in the fields of architecture and the visual arts. Once, however, we accept (as I am generally prepared to do) McHale's thesis of a neat shift from an epistemological poetics of modernism to an ontological poetics of postmodernism, the question then arises as to what the implications of such a profound shift in our conception of fiction (let alone literature) will be for the very practice of literary criticism and literary history in which people like
McHale are themselves engaged. Given their epistemological character, modernist texts lend themselves to critical analysis and interpretation. However, the ontological issues foregrounded by postmodernist texts may well prove opaque to the interpretive and ultimately epistemological interests of traditional literary criticism, while the radical discontinuities that typify these texts would seem to call into question the quest for continuity and order of the literary historian.

Although McHale sets out to offer what in fact could very well become the definitive postmodernist poetics, he may not pursue the implications of his thesis far enough—and for good reason. For when fiction becomes so self-conscious and self-critical that it questions and plays with its own ontological status (what is it?), rather than bringing to the fore epistemological issues so congenial to criticism (what does it mean?), isn't the task of formulating a non- or meta-fictional critical discourse, or a "poetics" that could comment on and consolidate such ontologically-obsessed "fictions," itself rendered impossible or irrelevant? Doesn't the very idea of a definitive critical account of such self-critical fictions—a statement of their ontological identity—become absurd? Hasn't postmodernist fiction, in other words, preempted criticism, and beaten the critic at his own game? In this essay I will suggest that McHale's basically sound characterization of postmodernist fiction as ontologically-obsessed, self-critical discourse ironically, in the end, precludes his own—and, I would go so far as to argue, anybody's—endeavor to formulate a definitive poetics of postmodernist fiction; hence, Huysen's observation about the difficulty of documenting a "postmodern rupture in literature." A poetics of such self-reflective and self-reflexive fiction could only be non-definitive and provisional—i.e., aware of its own fictionality as, it must be said, McHale's own book occasionally becomes when it begins to play with ontological paradoxes rather than present them in an expository dis-play. Here again Hofstadter's book may serve as an example of the kind of playful, essayistic approach that ontological investigations seem to require. For many the question must then become: can such essayistic play still be considered criticism?

It must be said at the outset that McHale's postmodernist poetics provides a valuable way to approach the heterogeneous "worlds" presented in a vast sampling of postmodernist writers' texts. While modernist texts tend to present relatively stable worlds mediated by unstable or unreliable narrators, in postmodernist texts it is the ontological status of the presented world or worlds that is itself problematic, rather than the narrator's point of view or his credibility. "To speak of 'world-views,' and the juxtaposition or confrontation of world-views, is to speak in epistemological terms; to take the metaphor literally, projecting worlds which are the realizations of discursive world-views, is to convert an epistemological motif into an ontological one" (166). Modernist and postmodernist fiction are not fundamentally opposed to each other; as
epistemology complements ontology, so modernist fiction gives rise to postmodernist fiction in what McHale describes as an inevitable succession:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (11)

Yes, we may agree, but isn't this ontological-epistemological see-saw applicable, not just to different works, but within one and the same text? McHale admits this possibility, but tends for the most part to see individual texts characterized by either an epistemological or an ontological "dominant" that in turn determines whether the work is either modernist or postmodernist. My own sense is that, while such categorization may work for many of the less significant texts of this century that McHale considers, more ambitious and complex literary works such as Joyce's Finnegans Wake and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (both of which McHale identifies as postmodernist) are not so neatly categorized as epistemologically- or ontologically-oriented fictions. Their complexity arises in large part from the fact that they resist such easy categorization, and rather set the epistemological-ontological pendulum swinging within their own fictional structures.

Underlying McHale's study is the historical assumption that modernist and postmodernist fiction are related insofar as both are reactions against the mimetic assumptions of nineteenth-century realism. Postmodernist fiction goes a good deal beyond modernism in this regard, however, and McHale argues that its radical anti-realism has the effect of exposing what might be called modernism's "closest realism." McHale views postmodernist fiction as "participating" in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as constructed in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems" (164). The way such fiction reveals the constructed nature of reality is to deconstruct that reality and to reveal it to be no more than a collectively fabricated world-view. Postmodernist fiction does this, according to McHale, by bringing the ontological issues inherent in literary representation to the fore. Instead of concealing its material substrate—pages, words, print, margins—in order to project an intentional, fictional world, the postmodernist text calls attention to its materiality. Thus, McHale gives the example of what he calls "concrete prose"—texts that extend the technique of "shaped typography" in the iconic concrete poetry of Apollinaire or the abstract concrete poetry of Mallarmé (poets whom McHale would probably regard as pre-postmodernists). Such "concrete" texts are only the most explicit instances of the general tendency of postmodernist fiction to highlight what
McHale calls the "ontological 'cut'": "on the one side of the cut, the world projected by the words; on the other side, the physical reality of inshapes on paper" (184). In other postmodernist texts, the "cut" divides the author into two beings: "as the vehicle of autobiographical fact within the projected fictional world; and as the maker of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it" (202). Whatever the particular means, postmodernist fiction invariably foregrounds the ontological "cut," while modernist fiction presumably conceals it or transforms it into an epistemological problem.

As "paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing" (16), McHale cites Fuentes' Terra nostra and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow insofar as these works are fantastic adaptations of the realist genre of the historical novel. In Fuentes' fiction, "familiar facts are tactlessly contradicted," thereby "convert[ing] the historical novel into a medium for raising ontological issues" (17). Along with "apocryphal history" and "creative anachronism," "historical fantasy" is, in McHale's view, a principal "strategy of foregrounding ontology in historical fiction" (94). Borrowing a tag from jazz pianist Les McCann, McHale aptly homes in on "the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?" (96). By giving the traditional literary genre of the historical novel a fantastic twist, postmodernist writers like Fuentes and Pynchon approach the opposite (and the good deal less respectable, subliterary) genre of science fiction, which, McHale maintains, "is to postmodernism what detective fiction was to modernism: it is the ontological genre par excellence (as the detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence)" (16).

Whether or not one agrees with McHale's account of a shift during the past generation from an epistemologically- to an ontologically-oriented poetics, most literary historians should have no trouble seeing twentieth-century fiction in general as a reaction against nineteenth-century realism. McHale proposes that we differentiate two phases of this reaction: where early twentieth-century modernism shifts the principle of literary representation away from "objective" reality to subjectively experienced worlds, more recent fiction has taken the more radical step of breaking with the tenets of realism altogether and adopting a fantastic mode of presentation. But what is the precise nature of this fantastic mode that we encounter in so much recent fiction?

In one of his most penetrating observations, McHale takes issue with Todorov's theory of the fantastic in literature as a tension or hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous—supernatural events either that are susceptible to rational explanation or that are not. Instead of hesitation in this sense of "epistemological uncertainty" [that is] the underlying principle of the fantastic according to Todorov" (74), McHale finds an "ontological hesitation [to be] the principle of all fantastic fiction" (95), by which he means a "frontier" or "zone of hesitation . . . not . . . between the uncanny and the
marvelous, but between this world and the world next door" (75).
Taking a passage from Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 as an
epigraph to a chapter called "A World Next Door" ("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."), McHale observes that, along with James's
Turn of the Screw, Lot 49 is notable as one of the few literary
works that manage to maintain Todorov's epistemological
hesitation for the entire length of the text; even at the end of
the work the reader does not know whether the strange events
described are uncanny and can be rationally explained or are
indeed marvelous and beyond rational explanation. Because of the
epistemological problematic it brings to the fore, Lot 49, like
V., is seen by McHale to be a late-modernist text. He notes that
"In the transition from Lot 49 to Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon
appears "to push past this point of poised epistemological
uncertainty" and "to exit the fantastic genre" altogether. But,
McHale insists that, at this crucial juncture in Pynchon's
career, "and as other postmodernist writers do at various stages
in their own careers" (74), it is not a question of resolving the
epistemological uncertainty of Todorov's fantastic by leaping
into the realm of the marvelous and the unabashedly supernatural
or sci-fi, but rather of moving from the epistemological to the
ontological uncertainty of a work like Gravity's Rainbow. This
work, according to McHale, presents us with the postmodernist
phenomenon of the "zone" in its "paradigmatic" form. Far from
being a realistic depiction of occupied Germany at the end of
World War II, the zone's
collapse of regimes and national boundaries, it
turns out, is only the outward and visible sign of
the collapse of ontological boundaries. As the
novel unfolds, our world and the "other world"
mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations
and fantasies become real, metaphors become
literal, the fictional worlds of the mass media--
the movies, comic books--thrust themselves into
the midst of historical reality. The zone, in
short, becomes plural:
Isn't this an "interface" here? a
meeting surface for two worlds ...
sure, but which two?
In fact, Pynchon's zone is paradigmatic for the
heterotopian space of postmodernist
writing ... Here (to paraphrase Foucault) a
large number of fragmentary possible worlds
coeexist in an impossible space which is
associated with occupied Germany, but which in
fact is located nowhere but in the written text
itself. (45)

McHale certainly hits on a key feature of postmodernist
texts by drawing attention to their juxtaposition or overlapping
of heterogeneous worlds in a multi-dimensional space. (I would
take issue with the claim that "Pynchon's zone ... is located
nowhere but in the written text itself; this reflects the unfortunate textualist tendency prevalent in criticism today which reduces historical reality—and, for that matter, historical fantasy—to the level of the written text. As texts as different as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Nabokov's *Ada* show, these "worlds" need not be the exotic domains of the historical novel and science fiction, but rather fantastic worlds in McHale’s sense of the world next door. We seem to be closing in on what postmodernist fiction is all about when we regard such texts as the zone where different, seemingly incommensurable cultures are made to converge (although again I am not as quick as McHale is to see this as a specifically ontological phenomenon that excludes, or simply overshadows, epistemological issues). Thus, the two "paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing" in McHale's view—*Terra nostra* and *Gravity's Rainbow*—seem to be fantastic variations of the historical novel precisely because of their amalgamation of different cultural levels. Fuentes collapses historical periods and geographical boundaries in his novel, while his writing shuttles back and forth between languages in a kind of literary lingua franca. Pynchon's writing is postmodernist principally because it cuts across, and back and forth between, high and low cultures (opera and vaudeville) and because it mixes media (movies and comic strips); instead of trying to create a specifically literary style in the manner of the high modernists, it brings various discourses such as army slang, mathematical equations, scientific and political discourse together in metaphorical and metonymic relations that are undeniably literary, but where the term "literary" is revealed to be inextricably tangled with other non-literary modes of representation and other informational, communicative, and entertainment media.

Huyssen argues that, where modernist writers valiantly sought to preserve the arts as an autonomous "world" from the encroachments of mass culture, technology, and commerce, postmodernist writers have no illusions regarding the feasibility and advisability of such a heroic defense of high culture. One only has to compare the novels and plays of Beckett with the performance art of Laurie Anderson to see that modernist and postmodernist art may be virtually identical in their formal use of language—fracturing human discourse with pauses and interruptions, questioning the possibility of any kind of communication, revealing the absurdity of any endeavor to produce meaning, reducing human action to the level of ritual or game—but quite different in the aesthetic effect they produce. Beckett depicts a world running down, a world whose time has come and whose time is up, a world that has exhausted itself by exhausting meaning and where play is essentially unproductive and negative; Anderson's performances, in contrast, disclose what seem to be limitless occasions for liberation, parody, subversion, and positive play amidst the mindless banalities of contemporary culture.

Because he restricts his field of inquiry to literature, McHale has a good deal to say about Beckett but nothing at all
about performance artists like Anderson whose work, however, is characteristically postmodernist, particularly in its play with the referential and communicative functions of language. Obviously, it is impossible for McHale to refer in his study to every practitioner of postmodernism, but the omission of such literature-related, or "para-literary" genres as performance art raises a question about the usefulness of terms like "literature," "fiction," and "narrative" in a postmodernist context. It may well turn out to be the case that the most interesting developments in postmodernist uses of language may be occurring outside of "literature" altogether, in the margins of literature, so to speak, or in the domain of multi- or mixed-media. If this is so, McHale's commitment to a traditional conception of literature in a study of postmodernist fiction may give the impression of being unnecessarily confining, and actually more in the spirit of modernism—with its concern for the autonomy of the arts, and for their separateness from mass culture—than in the postmodernist spirit.

We may fully assent to the assertion that sometime about the middle of this century a "postmodern rupture in literature" occurred that constituted what Huyssen calls a "break with classical modernism." We may, however, question whether McHale's "descriptive poetics" of modernist and postmodernist fiction finally does justice to the complexities of this rupture which can only be adequately described by moving beyond a poetics of literature altogether to a critique of culture or the mass-media. It is not clear, for example, that McHale regards the passage from modernism to postmodernism as a rupture in the first place. Both periods in his view are reactions against nineteenth-century realism; postmodernism differs from modernism only in the degree and mode of its desire. But as theorists like Huyssen and Lyotard have pointed out, postmodernism differs from modernism chiefly in the fact that it refuses, or is simply unable, to be anti-anything—anti-realism or even anti-modernism. By characterizing the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction as a shift from an epistemological mode of soft anti-realism to an ontological mode of hard anti-realism, McHale loses sight of the far more important difference between modernism and postmodernism as cultural conditions: namely, modernism's adversarial stance that pits it not only against realism but against mass culture, and postmodernism's non-adversarial stance that allows it to play (along) with realism, mass culture, as well as modernism without necessarily committing itself to any of their ideological assumptions. It might be possible to integrate McHale's view of modernist and postmodernist poetics with this view of modernity and postmodernity as cultural conditions. One could say, for example, that the epistemological orientation of modernist fiction is grounded in some form of cognitive certainty ("I think, therefore I am and everything else is") that is disposed to doubt everything of which it is not certain, while the ontological orientation of postmodernist fiction results from the lack of any epistemological or existential ground from which to express either certainty or doubt. But this is not so much an
orientation as a radical dis-orientation that ultimately makes it impossible for postmodernist fiction to oppose itself to anything—neither realism nor even to "reality." And if "reality" ceases to have much meaning for postmodernism, so, for that matter, does the category of "fiction" and the entire enterprise of delineating a poetics of postmodernist fiction.

The limitations of McHale's approach can be seen if we apply his epistemological-ontological polarity to his own way of treating the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction. Despite his evident appreciation and enjoyment of what he designates as postmodernist fiction, McHale's own critical approach to his subject is, in his own terms, unabashedly modernist. The problem stems from his use of the term "fiction." Although this term appears in the title of his study and is central to his analysis, McHale virtually passes over any discussion of the concept while he instead undertakes a lengthy interrogation of the term "postmodernist." The title of the study turns out to be a misnomer; the book ought to have been called Postmodernist Literature, or at least Postmodernist Fictions. For the meaning—or rather the validity, the function—of the term "fiction" is precisely what is at stake in the debate about postmodernism. By identifying fiction with literature, McHale drastically reduces the concept of fiction to those literary fictions that are customarily given a privileged cultural status, and he thereby maintains the modernist opposition between art and reality as two separate ontological realms. The literary work continues to be regarded as a heterocosm, a separate world unto itself. In contrast, the postmodernist text is notorious, as McHale himself shows, for violating all such ontological distinctions. "Literature" is merely one set of by no means privileged fictions, along with all the other media-mediated fictions that constitute our cultural existence: advertising, politics, fashion, and we might add such disciplinary fictions as history and criticism themselves.

McHale is certainly aware of the tendency of postmodernist writers to present multiple possible worlds, and even competing worlds, within one and the same fiction. He alludes to the claim raised by "possible worlds" theorists that "fiction's epidermis is not an impermeable but a semi-permeable membrane" (34). He even acknowledges that a symptom of ontological stress is anarchism, the refusal either to accept or to reject any of a plurality of available ontological orders. This, I would maintain, is precisely the postmodernist condition: an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural. (37)

And again, "what postmodernist fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures—and not only in the United States" (38). McHale expands on this point later in his study in a section called "Which reel?" where he writes, "Postmodernist fiction at its most mimetic holds the mirror up to
everyday life in advanced industrial societies, where reality is pervaded by the "minature escape fantasies" of television and the movies. . . . After all, if the culture as a whole seems to hover between reality and televised fictions, what could be more appropriate than for the texts of that culture to hover between literal reality and a cinematic or television metaphor" (128). Precisely. But even when he admits the anarchic ontology of the postmodern condition, McHale seems to cling to the modernist idea of fiction as a literary heterocosm that somehow stands apart from and above, in a mimetic relation to, some pre-existing reality. Throughout his study he expresses the mimetic concern about how real-life people and events are reflected and refracted within literary fictions. Only intermittently does he entertain the post-Wildean recognition that there is no longer anything natural about a "reality" that is never "given" in the first place, but that is always already constructed. Postmodernism entails an acknowledgment that "reality" necessarily models itself on, and is mediated by, literary fictions that are by no means privileged, or even autonomous, but that are in turn modeled on different kinds of non-literary fictions and non-verbal media.

Perhaps the best example of postmodernist fiction's modeling of itself on non-literary media is McHale's own illustration of Gravity's Rainbow as a text where

the movies serve as the background for spectacular metalepses, violations of the ontological hierarchy which foreground postmodernism's ontological themes (including the theme of control). Such metalepses occur throughout Gravity's Rainbow: cinematic images of copulation lead to the conception of two real girls; an Allied propaganda film apparently generates a real corps of Black African rocket troops; and, in a final, apocalyptic metalepsis, the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel hangs poised above the theater in which the film itself is being viewed. (130)

Cinema is functioning here neither as a metaphor for the world nor as a metaphor for literature; in Pynchon's text, literature has become inextricably enmeshed in the medium of film because, with no objective, non-mediated world for the literary text to mirror, the medium of fiction can only depict an alternate medium such as film, and vice versa. The medium is now the message because there no longer is (and may well never have been) any message, content, tenor, signified, referent, or world to be represented via a medium, form, vehicle, signifier, sign, or fiction. The various media only refer to each other.

In our post-literate society, when electronic technology and the visual media have largely taken over the traditional functions of language in both its literary and communicative modes, literature has necessarily had to accommodate itself to the new state of affairs, adopting techniques from the other
media. Literature needs to be flexible in this regard; for it to continue to insist upon its privileged status in the domain of public discourse at a time when, as Neil Postman suggests, the Age of Telegraphy and Television would only show how out of touch with reality it is—ironically at the very moment that reality is coming to be recognized as the interplay of assorted fictions. Works of literature that present themselves as mimetic imitations of reality without acknowledging their inter-medial status will end up becoming the content of the more recently developed medium of film, in the same way that film, according to McLuhan, has become the content of the yet newer medium of television and videotape. Where kids growing up in the '50s were still likely to have received their first exposure to the great works of Western literature in the admittedly debased, but nevertheless literary, form of the Classics Illustrated series of comic-books, today's generation of "readers" can cut its teeth on the classics in the televised form of Masterpiece Theatre. Which is the more "literary" form of presenting "literature"?

The interdependence of literature and the other media in the postmodern era may account for postmodernist fiction's affinity for the fantastic. McHale is right to point up the significance of the fantastic in postmodernist fiction, and he is particularly perceptive in his description of the postmodernist sense of the fantastic, not as an exotic, sci-fi marvel, but as the "world next door". He goes on to point out, however, and identify that next-door world in a literal sense as the medium of television which, beginning in mid-century, brought the external world indoors in every home in industrialized societies. It cannot be a coincidence that the first generation to have grown up with their view of the world mediated by TV happens to be our generation of postmodernist writers. Why not simply define postmodernist fiction as what happened to literature as a result of the advent of the mass-medium of television?

In the postmodern era, it no longer makes sense to differentiate literature and life based on a distinction between fiction and reality. Instead, as Baudrillard suggests, reality and the imaginary (fiction) are equivalent simulacra that endlessly mirror each other in the domain of the hyperreal. Thus, where the great monuments of modernist literature like Ulysses and A la recherche du temps perdu present an inner subjective world in opposition to, and superior to, external material reality, texts like Gravity's Rainbow and Terra nostra not only rewrite history but go on to expose history and fiction as homologous structures, neither of which can maintain itself independently. To continue to speak of literature as a closed canon of texts distinct from history, and to use the term "fiction" interchangeably with this literary canon or system of literary texts, clearly goes against the grain of the postmodernist enterprise. In Baudrillard's words, "There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victorious—It is reality itself that disappears utterly in the
game of reality—radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy." 

While McHale acknowledges this anarchoic condition of postmodernity, where the concepts of "literature," "fiction"—and indeed, "postmodernism" itself—cease to be useful categories of critical analysis, he retreats from this insight in his final chapter. Here he attempts to defend postmodernist fiction against the bad press it has received because of its radical anti-mimetic, anti-realist orientation. It is "postmodernist fiction's role in this project of unmasking the constructed nature of reality" that McHale claims has alienated critics afflicted with a "nostalgia for unproblematic mimesis" (164), such as Robert Alter, Gerald Graff, John Gardner, and Charles Neuman. For these and other critics of postmodernism, the project to unmask the constructed nature of reality is not a solution to our present problems, but part of the problem itself. As McHale characterizes their position, we live at a time when "everything in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality, in the interests of maintaining high levels of consumption. It is no longer official reality which is coercive, but official unreality; and postmodernist fiction, instead of resisting this coercive unreality, acquiesces in it, or even celebrates it" (219). But when he defends postmodernist fiction against Graff's charge that such ostensibly anti-mimetic fictions "are themselves mimetic of the kind of unreal reality that modern reality has become," McHale puts himself on the defensive by conceding that

There is no denying that "unreal reality" is a recurrent theme and object of representation in postmodernist fiction. It is the theme of postmodernism's revisionist approach to history and historical fiction, and of postmodernism's incorporation of television and cinematic representations as a level interposed between us and reality. But if this were postmodernist fiction's only object of representation, then Graff would be justified in wondering whether this doesn't make postmodernism as much a symptom of unreality as a representation of it. (221-22)

It turns out that "Postmodernist fiction may be antirealistic, but anti-realism is not its sole object of representation" (222). Instead of making a strong defense of postmodernist fiction by answering the charge of antirealism head on and arguing that postmodernism is actually not anti-anything, McHale simply concedes the point, and then goes on in the final pages of his book to reassure Graff, Neuman, and company that, while postmodernist fiction may indeed be in complicity with the hyperreal or unreal reality, nevertheless, the two "favored themes to which it returns obsessively are about as deeply colored with 'traditional' literary values as anyone could wish" (222). These "favored themes" that are supposed to prove postmodernist fiction's adherence to tradition and to compensate for its antirealism are the themes of love and death, which are
actually "meta-themes" referring to, not "fictional interactions in the text's world, but rather the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other." As meta-themes that bridge the world of the text and the world of the reader, love and death have the same function as all the other formal, structural, and stylistic devices of postmodernist fiction—namely, as "foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries" (227).

After McHale's lengthy catalog of all the devices postmodernist fiction exploits to "unmask . . . the constructed nature of reality," this last-minute move to appease postmodernism's more mimetic-minded critics by appealing to traditional thematic values must seem anticlimactic. More to the point, this appeal to the traditional themes of love and death sounds strange when we consider how the love-death relation is actually presented in key postmodernist texts. Thus, in Gravity's Rainbow—one of the texts McHale considers "paradigmatic" for postmodernist fiction—"world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry" denies the existence of the scientist Dr. Jant, who "was only a fiction" to help Slothrop "deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death. Anywhere McHale treats love and death as separate meta-themes in his analysis of postmodernist fiction, Pynchon's novel suggests that they cannot be separated, that they are inextricably related to each other. Moreover, the function of fiction is precisely to avoid the recognition of the inseparability of love and death. Christian and Romantic love are examples of such cultural fictions that offer the hope of transcending death. The character Dr. Jant may not be so much Pynchon's invention as the creation of Pynchon's fictional protagonist Slothrop, who could have quite possibly fabricated Jant and the story about the plastic implants in his genitals as a way of denying the horrifying reality of the love-death nexus. In fact, the entire population of characters who inhabit Pynchon's novel, the entire world of the novel itself, may be Slothrop's hallucination for all we know. Certainly Wuxtry-Wuxtry's hypothesis raises a host of ontological questions of the sort McHale associates with postmodernist fiction. But this is hardly to discount the epistemological uncertainty of the reader: the world of the novel may be a fiction of the fictional Slothrop's mind for all we know.

McHale's characterization of postmodernist fiction as literature that is primarily concerned with ontological rather than epistemological issues—i.e., as fiction principally concerned with its own fictionality—raises the possibility that literature itself (and the poetics that would describe it) may be a modernist category that postmodernism has rendered obsolete precisely through its ontological awareness that literature is only one set of fictions among all the others that make up the heterogeneous, composite fiction we commonly designate as the "real world." Even the one exclusive privilege that literary fictions may still claim—namely that they are the model for all the reified fictions that constitute reality—can no longer be
maintained when literary fictions are indistinguishable from the "real-life," "historical" fictions of which they themselves are mere simulacra.

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Notes


2 Huyssen makes a good case for drawing an analogy between postmodernism and pre-modernism (romanticism). The modernist theorist Theodor Adorno's extended critique of Wagner's romantic music for its unhistorical theatricality and mythology might very well, as Huyssen suggests (34-42), constitute the basis of a critique of postmodernist aesthetics. The "actual" pre-modern castle Neuschwanstein, built by Wagner's patron King Ludwig of Bavaria, becomes the model for the "fake" Sleeping Beauty castle in Disneyland, the postmodern phenomenon (even if unintentionally so) par excellence.

3 In this respect, I would also include William Gaddis's novel JR as a paradigmatic postmodernist text insofar as it brings together the seemingly separate discourses of art, advertising, and business—revealing them to be interdependent and even indistinguishable. Gaddis's fiction would seem to be pertinent to McHale's study since it explicitly documents the impact of modernization on the artist and his art. Gaddis's first novel, The Recognitions (1955), is a transitional work between modernism and postmodernism that treats the theme of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist in the form of Joyce's Ulysses. The protagonist is a painter, Wyatt Gwyon, who comes to question the romantic-modernist value of originality and artistic invention, and who realizes that the only truly authentic art is the reproduced artistry of the forger. Gaddis thus begins his career as a postmodernist writer where the modernist Thomas Mann ends his—with the confidence man, Felix Krull. The sixth-grader protagonist JR of Gaddis's second novel is the consummate con-artist, wheeling and dealing himself a corporate empire with dazzling skill because the business world—and, indeed, the world at large—is for him just a game with no referential reality and no practical consequences. Gaddis portrays the oxymoronic, hyperreal, world of commodity aesthetics where art has been reduced to mere commodity in a ubiquitous capitalist system of exchange, and where, moreover, all commodities are aesthetically designed and styled in order to enhance their contrived, media-mediated desirability.
4 Theodor Adorno's critique of mass culture and its threat to reduce the rich dialectical ambiguity of the artistic work to an easily consumed commodity or to kitsch anticipates the more recent work of the art historian and critic Michael Fried. (See, for example, his "Art and Objecthood," Art Forum [June 1967], which has been extensively reprinted.) After such radical deconstructions of the work of art as that of Derrida in his essay "Parergon," Fried's valiant defense of the work of art's objecthood lends support to McHale's modernist/postmodernist dichotomy by revealing what the modernist critic fears most: without a stable object to elicit—and anchor—multiple interpretations, art "degenerates" into objectless chaos where critical and interpretive analysis become irrelevant and impossible. All that remains to do when confronted with the absence of the art object is to theorize with Martin Heidegger, Roman Ingarden, Arthur Danto, and Brian McHale about the work of art's ontology.


Probably the experience most common to readers and students of Gravity's Rainbow is the conviction that Pynchon's novel possesses an ethical stability or center in spite of their being unable to find one. This is a book which seems to have no identifiable point of view, but which at the same time seems to coincide wonderfully with the New Left Age of Aquarius. Is it an overgeneralization to say that the resulting criticism has therefore tried to make a moral virtue of the novel's anti-systematic composition, its refusal to close or to champion (narratively or dramatically) a moral perspective?

In Pynchon's Mythography, Kathryn Hume attempts to conjure that ethical center more positively, to make "ordinary values" appear as more than a ghostly trail in a cloud chamber of wisecracks, burlesque routines and elegiac riffs. In her view, Pynchon criticism to date has too often focused upon the uncertainties and ambiguities of the text, its fragmentation and reader-subversion. These "postmodernist" and "post-structuralist" readings, which Hume calls "negative or disintegrative for want of a better term" (3), are fundamentally out of keeping with the persistent ethical aura of the text.

In contrast to these approaches, Hume calls our attention to those elements of Gravity's Rainbow that "can be deciphered" and are "traditional." "There is a vein throughout Gravity's Rainbow," she declares, "that counters all assertions of unknowability. Pynchon has, in fact, used mythology to give structure and values to his fictive world" (xi-xii). Pynchon's Mythography is the attempt to mine that "vein"—or, in a related image, to "disentangle" Pynchon's "mythology" from "the chaotic strands of narrative" (xv).

I confess to being powerfully attracted by this promise, for I was reading Gravity's Rainbow—as were many of us—in the days of Nixon's resignation, the aftermath of Cambodia, and the retreat from Saigon, and it was pretty difficult not to read the novel as an explosive subversion of that entire misbegotten enterprise and the capitalist history of the West which produced it. So why not a reading that eschews all the chicaneary and literary-critical humbug to reveal the text's zany but Aquarian values?

One of the considerable virtues of Pynchon's Mythography is that it answers that question and in so doing helps us to think
about what we do when we read. Hume has framed her project as an alternative to post-structuralism, and so makes the reader unusually conscious of the competing literary-critical methods that swirl about us and by turns frustrate and advance our work. Further, even if we don’t grant Hume’s assumptions about literature and interpretation—essentially New Critical and humanist—her book will serve for many years as the standard study of mythological elements in Pynchon’s novel. Whether those elements constitute a structure or express value, however, is a question directly related to critical method. As I shall argue in a moment, Hume’s claim to have discovered a mythological structure is not one I found compelling, but her efforts help clarify for me—not by a long shot a Derridean—just what the limitations of New Critical analysis can be.

Though attending to the “traditional,” Hume’s claim that Gravity’s Rainbow has a “structure” is about as radical a claim as one can make, and is sure to grab the attention of readers who have concluded that Gravity’s Rainbow—whatever else it may be—is certainly a mess, and has no interest in making its bed or putting its toys away. Hume identifies two types of structure in Gravity’s Rainbow. The first is the Biblical arc from Genesis (“Slothrop’s ancestors, like the patriarchs of Genesis, mark the unfolding of early cultural history”) to Revelations (the prophecy of destruction with which the book closes): “minds influenced by this grand template the Bible tend to demand something like its linear pattern in a mythology. When Pynchon creates stories to embody the values of Western culture, he uses that traditional structure” (21, 87).

In addition to this linear pattern, Hume identifies mythological “elements” common to both traditional mythologies and Pynchon’s novel. The invariable result of this syllogistic procedure is that Hume’s book becomes an exhaustive taxonomy, seeking to establish analogies or identities between mythologies (“aggregate” myths like the Bible or the Homeric epics) and Gravity’s Rainbow (mythological literature).

This procedure accounts for the clarity of the book’s organization, which begins (in Chapter One) by “separating [“disentangling”] cosmos from chaos” and then proceeds (in Chapter Two) to identify this “cosmos” as “mythological,” replete with “mythological actions” (Chapter Three) and a new mythological “individual” (Chapter Four). Each of these four chapters begins with a definition of the mythic element under scrutiny (cosmos, mythological elements of cosmos, action, individual) and then shows how Gravity’s Rainbow possesses comparable elements. In Chapter Five, “Chaos and Cosmos Integrated,” Hume argues that the mythological elements (having structure) “interrelate” with those of chaos, and that Pynchon’s readers should remain “open” to both. Under the roomy umbrella of this liberal pluralism, New Critics and post-structuralists can coexist, complement and enrich each other.

In this summary I have insisted upon the word “element” rather than “structure” because this is the word Hume so often
uses in its place and because her effort to "disentangle"
mythical structure from the chaos of Gravity's Rainbow
produces lists of mythic "elements" which she organizes, but no
"structure." So, for example, when we finish the chapter titled
"The Mythological Cosmos," we have a list of mythic elements in
this cosmos and a demonstration that this list (denuded, for the
most part, of its tonal differences—of parody, satire, farce,
burlesque) is comparable to one we may find in Dante's Commedia
or Beowulf, but we are no surer that this constitutes a cosmos—
declared in Webster's as "an orderly harmonious systematic
universe."

Nor does Hume's conception of myth address what is most
interesting about myths—how they function in a culture, or,
alternatively, how myths are an expression of culture. By this I
don't mean to ignore Hume's careful attention to myth's typical
social tasks. She cites Frye, for example: "It is one of their
functions to tell [a] culture what it is and how it came to be,
in [its] own mythical terms" (18). But this idea of mythic work
takes mythic narratives at their face value ("in [its] own
mythical terms")—or at the level of what Marcuse called "the
affirmative character of culture"—and thus steers clear of such
interesting questions as how "Hume's mythography"—not myth
or mythology, but writing-about-myth—is a contemporary
cultural product, not a transcendental (Archimedean) voice
speaking to Western culture, but what Jameson terms an "immanent
expression" of the text's cultural ground.

What Jameson means by "immanent expression" is explained in
the first chapter of The Political Unconscious, where he takes as
his "model" of interpretation "the readings of myth and aesthetic
structure of Claude Lévi-Strauss." In Jameson's readings, the
"individual" text is "reconstituted in the form of the great
collective and class discourses of which a text is little more
than an individual parol or utterance," and "the purely formal
patterns" of individual narrative are read as the "symbolic
enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic"
(Jameson 76-77).

Hume explicitly rejects this approach. In her view, myth is
primarily oral, evolving through a process of forgetfulness in
which the "idiosyncrasies, the traces of personal psychology" of
individual storytellers are eroded and lost. Because this is not
the case with "printed fiction" (such as Gravity's Rainbow), a
"direct transfer of Lévi-Strauss's techniques to literature" is
not possible. Instead, "some modification of the structuralist
approach to mythology would seem more promising" (26). At the
same time, Hume appears to recognize that in rejecting
Lévi-Strauss's approach she is also rejecting the common
denominator of much contemporary criticism, the idea that
"understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to
another!" (Lévi-Strauss, cited in Hume 25). All the critic would
uncover, using Lévi-Strauss's anthropology (or Marx's sociology
or Freud's psychology), would be "cultural anxieties . . . as
they are filtered through the individual author's consciousness"
(25-26). Hume is unwilling to entertain Marx's idea—in varying
degrees and versions the assumption of so much current theory—that "social being... determines consciousness" ("Preface" to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy). Instead, Gravity's Rainbow is Pynchon's writing, his message, which he sends (from "out there") to us (here), rather than a vast intertextuality "leaking" through the agency of a socially constituted subject.

By insisting that Gravity's Rainbow is the private creation of an autonomous self, however, Hume finesses her own project (the novel is fiction, not myth) and fails to isolate the kind of "mythology" which does govern so many of the novel's set pieces. Let's look at one example. As part of her demonstration that Pynchon has provided a "cosmos" and not a "chaos," Hume cites the famous passage addressing Marx (though excising the text's references to him): "Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil those cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts" (GR 317). Hume uses this passage to show that geography in Gravity's Rainbow has the symbolic character of mythic space ("we find values associated with the points of the compass") (40). But to the degree that such elements are at all mythic, they are so precisely because they aren't Pynchon's, but are instead cultural (and "collective") formulations which condition the way we think about social and political relations.

These formulations are part of an indeterminate intertextual weave (the "already read" of Barth's) whose brightest colors, in the passage above, are Marx, Freud and Conrad (modulated by the psychoanalytical revisionism of the 50s and 60s), rather than an author's private mythologizing. It is no accident that Conrad's Heart of Darkness surfaced as a revolutionary text during the Vietnam war. Already installed, in the 40s and 50s, as one of the great Modernist texts, it helped from the very beginning to condition the way US foreign policy was interpreted. Witness the similarity to Gravity's Rainbow of Coppola's mythic vision in Apocalypse Now, released only a few years after the novel's publication.

If Gravity's Rainbow has a mythology, or is a mythology—and I'm not convinced of either possibility, as Hume defines them—it would be the natural or unquestioned, the "what goes without saying," that motivates Pynchon. In the example above, it is a version of Modern European Thought (and an attitude toward it) which has informed a large subset of the literate Western public for seventy-five years or so (at a minimum). To read Gravity's Rainbow as an intertext, of course, takes the charisma out of Authorial genius. How can an artist be a critic, a subversive, a sage, if the text isn't his/hers? I don't have the answer to that, but my own critical sense (and my experience with the actual practice of intertextuality, especially in New Historical modes) tells me that some sort of compromise does exist between autonomy and cultural determinism in the creation of texts.
Of course, with Gravity's Rainbow the issue is further complicated by the fact that the text plumes itself as the voice of de-mystification—paranoia is its deconstructive "refracting lens" (to recall Mendelson's image). Yet Barthes himself asked this question of his own enterprise in the 1957 "Preface" to Mythologies: "is there a mythology of the mythologist?"—and answered, "No doubt, and the reader will easily see where I stand" (12). This "mythology" is just what the mythologist, the reader of Gravity's Rainbow as mythology, would uncover, and whatever values it has, and whatever political work it does would emerge from such analysis.

Hume's rejection of post-structuralist ideas, however, denies her access to this intertextual activity and leaves her looking for kinds of pattern Gravity's Rainbow doesn't have, because the book isn't threaded on a submerged story line as (in the simplest sense) "The Wasteland," "Ulysses," or, more recently, The Assistant is. Though Hume never attempts to discover something like the Fisher King myth inside the chaos of Gravity's Rainbow, that discovery seems to have been her unspoken desire. Certainly the image of her prey as something with a "structure" promises that a skeleton will appear beneath the x-ray of her analysis. Instead of a modified structuralist approach, her "pattern-seeking" (xvii) seems rooted in the postwar hegemony of Eliot and the New Criticism, when everyone read fiction as myth and many—Ellison, Malamud and Updike, to name three—built their narratives on a lattice of myth. For what is the point of trying to show that Pynchon has given Gravity's Rainbow "structure and values" (xii) except that for Hume, as for Eliot, a text cannot have "values" without "structure"? Mythic pattern, in Eliot's view, could provide narrative with backbone, as both structural support and sustaining values. Though Hume refers to Eliot only twice, in two footnotes, Eliot's defense of Ulysses (in The Dial review, which Hume cites) is clearly the model for her own study of structure in Gravity's Rainbow (see Hume 32 and 228, n. 27).

To find values in this way assumes an authoritative intent in the book as a bounded entity, and it ignores the system of signs in which both writer and reader are immersed and which makes any communication between them possible. "Structure" is the sign for Hume, of that authorial intention and its "stable" values. In contrast, post-structuralist criticism only contributes to disintegration: "Destabilizing structures and techniques," she declares, are not "conducive to ordinary values" (xii).

Even so, Hume attempts to mollify "post-structuralist" readers by including their approaches in a productive detente. She encourages the reader to "integrate" the "mythological" (i.e., the New Critical) and the postmodern or post-structuralist (xiii, 2), for each "has a different but interlocking function in the total effect" (32). This invitation is extended again in the final chapter: "When we find the standpoint from which the two perceptions—postmodernist and mythological—can be integrated, we will have exercised a kind of creativity as well" (186). But these exhortations fail to recognize that deconstruction admits
no privileged "standpoint" and likes nothing better than to show "integration" operating in behalf of division and hierarchy. Like post-structuralism generally, deconstruction denies any such "center," and neither can be subordinated to the liberal home of Anglo-American empiricism.

As a result of these misunderstandings, Hume's book misses the chance to address the theoretical questions it raises. For example: Can one demystify the metaphysics of presence and at the same time "make points," and "provide a new model for individual behavior"? How can a text be both "postmodern" and "traditional?" To put this in formalist terms, is it not precisely a feature of "postmodernism" that it may use "traditional techniques" as kinds of style among many available, as colors from a palette, so that this use itself is not in any way traditional because it is conditioned and transformed by the text (or textuality) in which it appears? Thus to see "traditional techniques" in a text is not, necessarily, to see "tradition" in a text—just as one cannot isolate the photographic elements in a collage as proof of its realism. This is an issue—a reality—that will never be confronted if the critic separates the traditional from the postmodern, the "positive" from the "negative."

Post-structuralism, as far as I can tell, is not opposed to values, even "ordinary" values. But because its energies are organized to overturn the self-promoting hierarchies and values of texts and their readers, it appears to oppose all values and to degenerate into mere cynicism (as in fact it does in some American practice). Still, we should keep in mind that Derrida is carrying on a war against transcendence and idealism that has a rather long genealogy predating post-structuralism. If we need to find something "positive" in these critical developments, we may heed their reminder that our values are self-interested and only seem natural because they express the mythology—in Barthes' sense as bourgeois ideology—we take to be truth. Readers may well subscribe to the mythology of Gravity's Rainbow, but they needn't think it has some transcendent or idealist source, in the Author's Imagination or in a miraculous insight of Pynchon's into the workings of the universe. Democratic (or better, "laid-back," gender-sensitive readers may find a lot to like in Gravity's Rainbow, but such sympathies, far from constituting Pynchon's mythology, are instead an expression of mythology "writing" Pynchon—and his readers.

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INTERFACES, TRANSITIONS, AND MOIRES

Kathryn Hume


We can classify new studies of Gravity's Rainbow by their quotations: do they focus on the juicy set pieces—the colonies as the outhouses of European souls, the vampirish lament of Technologies for their funding, the stout rainbow cock—or do they regale us with felicities we had passed over? Both approaches have virtues, but the latter is decidedly more refreshing, and to this group belongs The Style of Connectedness. Thomas Moore by no means ignores major issues, but his focus on connectedness directs attention to the interfaces, transitions, and "moirés" formed by the superimposition of systems and patterns. Being reminded of forgotten details is one of the pleasures this book offers the reader.

Connectedness is both the theme and the substance of this study. Moore moves associatively from one topic to another in apparent defiance of normal analytic framing. This can be disconcerting, and makes it difficult to remember where in his chapters (centered on film, character, Weber and capitalism, science, and "the Gods") any one subject comes up. The chapter on Max Weber and Capitalism is the most circumscribed in subject, yet Moore deals with charisma by discussing Christ, Hitler, Enzian, Slothrop, comic book heroes, Gottfried, Malcolm X and John Kennedy, Yardbird Parker, Roger Mexico and Seaman Bodine. He then moves to Puritans and quotes some important Calvinist texts. Then he mentions The Crying of Lot 49, Katja's ancestor Frans van der Groov, Slothrop's ancestor William, the ins and outs of election and preterition, Tyrone Slothrop as running parody of Bunyanesque Christian, grace, William Pynchon and his heretical tract, William Slothrop and his, and America's fork in the road. Moore then moves to the Capitalist World, discussing details of the structure and patents of the IG Farben cartel, the transnational dealings of the big companies despite the war, the Brocken, the Phoebeus cartel, the earlie light of naked lightbulbs which he associates with charismatic figures such as articulate doves, Messiah-pigs, and the immortal Bulb. The chapter ends with Marshall McLuhan.

Moore's study has two major strengths. One is the wealth of new background detail, such as the material on IG Farben and the suggestion that John Hawkes' [sic] western Red River provides a model for Crutchfield and Whoppo (John Wayne and Montgomery Clift). Moore also points us to possible sources for ideas: C. Wright Mills' The Power Elite, passages from William James, C. G. Jung, and Martin Buber. The other strength is Moore's
focus on Pynchon's morality and mysticism. Although I found the
morality being posited a bit bourgeois, the mysticism is
important, and has only recently received any detailed
attention. Moore's Pynchon keeps cool but cares, feels horror at
much of what he describes (including sexual perversion), and
embraces One rather than Zero, both/and rather than either/or.
Moore associates One with a mystic something and Zero with
nothing.

The study's chief weakness is Moore's failure to take much
previous criticism into account. I could find no reference to
the many articles in Pynchon Notes, and none to important and
highly relevant articles such as those by Brian McHale on the
mapping of characters onto each other, Joel D. Black or Peter
Brier on Pynchon's romanticism, Bertram Lippman on movies, Speer
Morgan and Robert L. Nadeau (both of whom touch on several of
Moore's major concerns), John A. Muste on mandalas and mysticism,
and Linda A. Westervelt on connectedness. These are only a few
prominent omissions, and none is a recent work. Responsibility
to predecessors and courtesy to readers demand that one locate
one's enterprise within the ongoing discourse. The value of
Moore's new factual material is unaffected by this failure, but
the discussion of morality would have seemed less arbitrarily
assertive had alternative readings been discussed more directly.

For obscure reasons, the University of Missouri Press
decided to Americanize "moiré" by dropping the acute accent,
stripping the mark even from within quotations. The word is one
of Moore's key terms, and had the preface not retained one sole
example with the accent, I would have found the text puzzling for
quite some time. Aside from that quibble, I must say that
Missouri has done a handsome job with The Style of Connectedness.
From the heavy silvered dust jacket with an appropriate Georg
Grosz painting to the crisp type and thick paper, the book makes
a pleasingly substantial appearance. Readers will enjoy rooting
about for newly identified Rilke influences and for information
about the historical Phoebus cartel.

—Pennsylvania State University
ON ORIGINS AND BEGINNINGS

Theodore Kharpertian


Seong-Kon Kim's Journey into the Past: The Historical and Mythical Imagination of Barth and Pynchon, the tenth in Seoul National University's American Studies Institute's monograph series, grounds itself on an analogy: that like Vico, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, Barth and Pynchon (whom Kim regards as central to their novelistic generation) have recourse to history and the myths of the past in order to repudiate them in a quest for "new order, new language, or new imagination" (1). According to Kim, postmodernist American fiction and post-structuralist literary theory "ultimately unite and correspond to each other in their perception and interpretation of contemporary reality" (1), one which Kim describes as "the nightmare landscape where the truth is absent" (32).

Kim divides his study into four parts: an introductory, theoretical pair of chapters based on Edward Said's distinction between "divine origins" and "human beginnings"; six chapters devoted to Barth; another six to Pynchon; and a final pair of chapters sketching the two writers' "Jungian" visions of ecstatic accommodation and concluding that the fictions' ultimate goal of renewal is realized in the process of the quest for renewal itself.

In the introduction, Kim explores the post-structuralist notions that an "anxiety of irrecoverability" (7) motivates the project of the postmodernists (and of such ancestors as Vico and Nietzsche) and that, because of a perceived absence of the absolute origin or center, postmodernism has been impelled to produce instead a discourse of provisional beginnings "with the intention and will to discover, new order to replace the old" (21). In Vico, Kim uncovers a "precursor" (7), whose importance lies in his "abandonment of sacred history in behalf of secular history" (8). Similarly, Nietzsche's rejection of "the idolatrous Absolute" (12) in all its conventional manifestations--morality, for example--results in a "genealogical exploration of the past and . . . Dionysian dance [that] eventually produce . . . Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida" (13). Foucauldian genealogy likewise offers an alternative to history, and Derridean theory provides a compelling conceptual terminology that reinforces the absence of a linguistic foundation upon which to base centered, determinate meaning.

Similarly, Kim sees in postwar American fiction an alien cultural stance by writers who recognize that "the Death of the
Novel means the end of a particular kind of fiction—in Kim's words, "the arrogant highbrow art form that had dominated the Western literary scene since the late nineteenth century" (23)—and create a new, subversive type of countertraditional fiction. In their search for novelty amidst exhaustion, these postmodernists "reexamine the past in order to understand the present reality" (26), and in Kim's titular terms, their journey into a demystified past of history and myth yields "historical and mythical imagination" (26).

In the chapters on Barth's fiction from The Floating Opera to Letters, Kim develops several themes: rejection of the dominant culture; the "spiritual orphanage" (41) of protagonists who rebel against yet ultimately seek reconciliation with the past as symbolized by absent fathers; the ambiguous postmodern condition of deferment; and, in Barth's term, "floating," alleviated only by the discovery of new language; and heroism as the effort to escape from the labyrinth of the present by searching for new order in the encounter with the past. Overall, these chapters are done systematically and thoroughly.

The four thematic patterns, however, serve Kim somewhat less consistently well in his corresponding chapters on Pynchon, which comprise about 25% of the text. (The chapters on Barth, on the other hand, comprise about 40%). Kim views the themes of paranoia and entropy, as well as Pynchon's reclusion, as signs of an "illegal and external stance" (104) necessitated by Pynchon's sense that "the whole of human culture... is a product of repression" (104) by a dead, Derridean center of "masculine energy" (105). Following this line of argument, Kim reads V., "as a powerful indictment of the history of this oppressive culture which transforms man into an inanimate plastic manikin" (106), The Crying of Lot 49 "as a book of denial of either/or construction in favor of both/and—that is, the denial of clarity and certainty in favor of ambiguity and uncertainty" (108), and Gravity's Rainbow as "a book about the charismatic authority which tries to rationalize and control the illegal energy and disorder into legal bureaucracy" (111). Such critical judgments are unexceptionable, but the section is marred somewhat by a weak chapter on苍白 (Kim acknowledges that the motif is "relatively less explicit" [117] in Pynchon than in Barth) and some questionable assertions. In particular, it is at least arguable that some of Pynchon's less attractive characters—Kim cites Benny Profare, the Whole Sick Crew, Mucha Maas, Metzger, and Hilarius—are not, as Kim suggests, "floating" in a state "different from the state of inertia or inanimation, or anti-paranoia" (122). Moreover, the inference that "it is, then, ultimately the triumph of the "preterite over the Elect that Pynchon celebrates in Gravity's Rainbow" (112) represents, I think, a serious misreading of Pynchon's text: a celebration, perhaps, but hardly a triumph. Finally, when Kim claims that "Pynchon's creative spirit... resists the gravity of the charismatic center of the dominant culture" (104), he offers no further suggestions that gravity and
charisma are terms in Pynchon's fiction that are likely fraught with ambiguity.

But on the whole, describing V. as "[p]erhaps . . . the most nihilistic among Pynchon's novels" (140), The Crying of Lot 49 as "problematic and ambiguous" (141), and Gravity's Rainbow as "a grim version of modern Revelation" (147) is reasonably on target, especially since Kim realizes that, despite a fictional world "often too grim and pessimistic" and characters "often powerless and helpless" (154), Pynchon's sense of "possibility" outweighs, however slightly, his sense of "despair" (142). Occasional stylistic infelicities aside, Kim's study is well written, amply documented (the bibliography is some thirty pages), and in sum performs a useful task in mapping affiliations between post-structuralism and postmodernism. It is a welcome addition to the Pynchon critical canon.

---Hudson County Community College
PARTIALLY UNDERSTANDING PYNCHON

Donald F. Larsson


Understanding Thomas Pynchon is one in a series, Understanding Contemporary American Literature, being published by the University of South Carolina Press and directed towards students and "good non-academic readers." The stated aim of the series, which so far has also covered Randall Jarrell, James Dickey, Bernard Malamud, and John Hawkes, is to provide "instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers--identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience." "Understanding" Thomas Pynchon is, of course, a significant challenge, and if Robert Newman does not exactly give "instruction in how to read" Pynchon, he can help beginning readers to meet that challenge. However, Understanding Thomas Pynchon also has serious flaws which make it far less helpful than it should be for its intended audience.

Newman covers most of Pynchon's major works and begins by identifying several persistent themes: the act of naming; the creation of characters as extremes (reflecting, for instance, the dual metaphors of the hothouse and the street); reaction to the cultural heritage of Calvinism; and the main characters' descents into the underworld of modern culture. The identification of these themes is not new, and Newman does not systematically trace them through all of Pynchon's writing, but he does offer helpful and interesting comments on some of them when dealing with each of Pynchon's individual books. Some of Newman's individual readings are quite good, especially his explications of "Low-Lands" and "Entropy" and portions of V. and The Crying of Lot 49. He correctly assesses "Low-lands" as a better story than given credit by Joseph Slade or Pynchon himself, and his discussion of the paradoxical nature of entropy is perceptive and concise. Although Newman relies heavily on the work of previous critics, his remarks on the self-referentiality of Gravity's Rainbow, noting that "the text of the novel coalesces around its refusal to coalesce" (132), are likely to be especially provocative to readers coming fresh to that novel. An annotated bibliography of major sources is included.

Unfortunately, these strengths are undercut by several major weaknesses. The first problem is organizational. Since Newman deals with Pynchon book by book, his thematic discussions lack a consistent pattern of organization. While he avoids a simplistic lockstep listing and explication of themes in each work, Newman also avoids analysis of some themes in works that seem to demand
it. For example, the act of naming is dealt with explicitly only in his discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow*, though naming is central to all of Pynchon's novels and most of his shorter works, beginning with "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," a story to which Newman gives just one brief mention.

The strengths of a book-by-book treatment ought to include the ability to provide a tracing of the author's stylistic and thematic development and a clear outline of each novel's action. Such considerations, though, are lacking in Newman's discussions. Pynchon's increasing politicization from "The Secret Integration" on and the sudden outbursts of lyricism which mark *Gravity's Rainbow* are pretty much ignored. Although Newman's treatment of the self-referentiality of *Gravity's Rainbow* implies artistic growth, he seems to assume that such reflexivity is a constant in Pynchon's work. Such an argument could be made, but only with clearer explication and support than Newman gives it. One thing a beginning reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* is likely to need is a clear outline of the novel's organization, difficult as that may be to provide. But Newman gives only some indications of relationships among different sections of the novel, and his own lack of transitions between topics in the chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to parody his assertions about the novel's deliberate lack of coherence.

The most puzzling organizational choice is the discussion of Pynchon's short stories only as collected in *Slow Learner*. Thus, Newman gives no consideration to "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (or to "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," either). The one advantage which discussing *Slow Learner* as a whole would seem to offer is a chance to evaluate and respond to Pynchon's own assessment of his stories in the Introduction, yet Newman offers only a few remarks on some of Pynchon's comments. In fact, the discussion of *Slow Learner* seems to have been written in haste, simply in order to include this relatively recently-published work among the books to be considered. Haste seems especially apparent in Newman's treatments of "Under the Rose" and "The Secret Integration," which offer little more than plot synopses. The metaphor of integration itself in the latter work is not analyzed in any detail, and Newman's treatment of the story also contains some egregious errors: the Hogan Slothrop of "The Secret Integration" is identified as Tyrone's brother (he is actually Hogan Junior, Tyrone's nephew), and Newman claims that Pynchon was raised in the Berkshires, when in the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon admits that he has never even visited the region.

There are other minor factual errors in *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, and one could quibble with some of Newman's interpretations. His treatment of *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, scant the chances for redemption suggested by Pynchon, ignoring the one leavening who is saved, the duality of the Hareo phrase "mba-kayere" ("I am passed over") which implies a sparing from destruction as much as an exile to preteritio, and the moral growth of Lott Pöökler (similar to that of Rachel Oulglass in *V*). Moreover, the implications of the narrative reflexivity
of Gravity's Rainbow are sometimes more complicated than Newman implies. For example, he perpetuates one common critical mistake, responding to Mexico's (the narrator's?) question, "Is the baby smiling, or is it just gas?" with the assertion that "Beliefs then are situational responses within the vast realm of uncertainty" (112). Yet the context of the quotation (the Christ child being given offerings by representatives of the cartels) and the sentence which follows it—"Which do you want it to be?"—make it clear that the choice being offered is a political and moral one.

Newman's own background as a Joyce scholar might also present problems for the beginning reader of Pynchon. While he takes care to explain and define a number of the more obscure references and symbols in Pynchon, Newman introduces others related to Joyce that are equally likely to be puzzling: the Hermetic tradition, the major arcana of the tarot, and Joyce's "Uncle Charles" principle go undefined though they are probably not familiar to many intended readers. At least once, the Joyce connection leads Newman astray in an interpretation: he cites Joyce and Flaubert as influences on the last section of Chapter 3 of V, but ignores that section's more direct debt to Robbe-Grillet.

The most irritating flaw of Understanding Thomas Pynchon, though, is stylistic. Misused words and clumsy, vague sentences occur throughout the book. Paradoxically, these become most exasperating beginning in the chapter on The Crying of Lot 49, where communication is a major theme. Some examples: "A morass of technological conveniences for disseminating information pervades the novel" (76); "Pynchon incorporates the preponderance of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in twentieth-century physics to sound the death knell of epistemological certainty" (78); "As things fall apart and the center ceases to hold, to quote W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming,' the Old Testament sign of God's covenant with man now traces the flight of the V-2 rocket and, by implication, the other technological rough beasts that are its insidious heirs as they fall toward man's self-inflicted apocalypse" (91-92). I could go on, but I don't wish to belabor the point. Such verbal sloppiness should have been caught and corrected in proofreading or editing. It is annoying (when not comical) and seriously undermines the book's credibility.

To summarize, the strengths of Understanding Thomas Pynchon are seriously undercut by its organizational and stylistic defects. More time, thought, and careful editing could have made it a useful book. As it stands, though, readers of Pynchon seeking an introduction to his works are better off being directed to some of the sources listed in Newman's bibliography, especially Joseph Slade and Thomas Schaub and the collections by Mendelson, Levine and Leverenz, and Clerc.

—Mankato State University
CHELSEA MOURNING

John M. Krafft


For several years Harold Bloom has been sprinkling his essays, reviews and interviews with tantalizing remarks about Pynchon's works and about his stature as the greatest living American prose writer. Bloom has seemed preoccupied if not obsessed with Pynchon in a way that suggested he was not merely indulging in trendy chatter but perhaps mulling over the production of a major critical essay on Pynchon. However, Bloom's slap-dash introduction (the same one appears in both volumes) to Thomas Pynchon and Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (hereafter IP and GSR) is not all his readers might have hoped for. It is unmistakably Bloomian in range and tone, but its nine pages lurch from the profound to the pedestrian and contain a hint of the hokey.

Bloom treats Pynchon as if he needed no introduction or could have no uninitiated readers. Eschewing elaborate conventional placing of Pynchon in a historical or literary context, Bloom simply declares Pynchon "the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West." Bloom actually defines the concept in terms of Pynchon: "We are now... in the Age of John Ashbery and of Thomas Pynchon"; "For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System." Bloom praises Pynchon's artistic invention, unsurpassed since Faulkner, the "vast control" which is his "greatest talent," and the "gusto" which is "his supreme aesthetic quality." But Bloom does not illustrate; he pronounces. Even readers who share Bloom's admiration for Pynchon (or especially such readers) might appreciate being let in on the reasoning which led Bloom to such judgments, and might also wish Bloom had elaborated on suggestive assertions like the following: "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." Or this: "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."
Gravity's Rainbow gets no conventional introduction either, though Bloom's comments bear most directly on it. (Bloom never mentions either V. or Pynchon's short stories, and mentions Lot 49 only once in passing, as quoted above.) Bloom refers quite casually to the Zone, "which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it," to Them, to the Counterforce, to the "apocalyptic rocket," and to Slothrop, "who remains more hero than antihero." Yet he provides no adequate context for these references. "Slothrop is a Kabbalistic version of Pynchon himself." And Gravity's Rainbow is a Kabbalistic novel because "its stories are all exegetical, however wild and mythical." Pynchon "always seems not so much to be telling his bewildering, labyrinthine story as writing a wishful commentary upon it as a story already twice-told, though it hasn't been, and truly can't be told at all."

Bloom devotes two-thirds of his introduction to what he calls a close reading of "The Story of Byron the Bulb." Two-thirds of this two-thirds is little more than a string of often lengthy quotations linked by brief, mostly non-analytical commentary. The rest is pure Bloom.

"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." Least problematic? In his Editor's Note to TP, Bloom calls his reading of Byron's story "a gateway both to Pynchon's Kabbalism and to his authentic nihilism, his refusal of the transcendental aspects of his own Gnostic vision." Is that refusal what is "least problematic"? Bloom would have done well to explain more fully, lest readers unimpressed by nihilism or skeptical of "Pynchon's achievement" take a cheap shot at it through such a breezy opening. Also, the yoking of "most vital and least problematic" itself seems problematic, even un-Bloomian, especially in a description of "the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time." Finally, we might have benefited from Bloom's observations on what else is problematic about (and in) Gravity's Rainbow—narrative strategies or attitudes toward history, for instance.

Bloom reads Byron, "Childe Harold in the Zone," as a "living reminder that the System can never quite win," but "a death-in-life reminder that the System also can never quite lose." "[H]is 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 a Gnosis without transcendence. There is a Counterforce, but there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return." In the fate of the "poor perverse bulb," Bloom sees "Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah"—the achievement of complete knowledge purchased by 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" for this Emersonian
visionary "is the studying of new modalities of post-
Apocalyptic silence."

The essay collections themselves are hard to praise without
reservation, since even their strengths are compromised. But
first for the strengths. Some of the essays reprinted here (the
volumes are made up entirely of reprints, apart from the
introduction—which is, however, itself in effect reprinted in
one or the other volume) are indeed first-rate. Louis Mackey's
"Paranoia, Pynchon and Preterition" (PGR) and Gabriele Schwab's
"Creative Paranoia and Frost Patterns of White Words" (PGR), both
lively and provocative, deserve wider recognition and a wider
readership. David Senn's "Order in Thomas Pynchon's Entropy"
(IP) is one of the best essays yet published on Pynchon's short
fiction. Since Levine and Leverenz's Mindful Pleasures has been
out-of-print for several years, readers will welcome back into
print Edward Mendelson's "Gravity's Encyclopedia" (PGR) and
Richard Poirier's "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" (IP).
Similarly welcome back is the excerpt from Frank Kermode's "The
Use of the Codes" (TP), re-reprinted from Mendelson's now o.p.
Pynchon, Smith and T.Blyen's "The New Jerusalem" (IP) and
Maureen Quilligan's "The Language of Allegory" (IP) are still
very much in print in Pynch's Critical Essays, but are
nonetheless important enough to be valuable additions to any
Pynchon collection. If I was at first surprised to see George
Levine's "Risking the Moment" (IP) and Catherine R. Stinson's
"Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism" (IP), both from Levine and Leverenz,
and Melvin New's "Profaned and Stenciled Texts" (IP) reprinted
here, I was pleased to discover how much they rewarded
rereading.

I do not mean to dispute the value to Pynchon criticism of
the other pieces Bloom has gathered—except for one abomination,
Josephine Hendin's "What is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?" (IP). My
concern is with relative value and with the optimal use of
available space, given what works might have been included.
Friedman and Puetz's "Science as Metaphor" (TP), however
appealing, strikes me as less valuable than Puetz's "History,
Self, and the Narrative Discourse" (not included), which contains
one of the most sophisticated and compelling discussions of V. in
all Pynchon criticism. Bloom includes one chapter from Tony
Tanner's Thomas Pynchon in each of the volumes, the chapter on
Lot 49 in IP, that on Gravity's Rainbow in PGR. To either of
these chapters I would have preferred Tanner's chapter on V. from
the same book, where Tanner manages to get beyond some of the
critical cliches about V. which he himself did so much to help
popularize. An excerpt from Craig Werner's Paradoxical
Resolutions seems a curiously modest selection for the one piece
chosen for inclusion in both volumes. Finally, given the
inclusion of Mendelson's and Poirier's essays mentioned above,
the inclusion of their reviews of Gravity's Rainbow (Mendelson's
in IP, Poirier's in PGR) seems superfluous.

Relative merits of the contents aside, the Gravity's Rainbow
volume is only half the length of the general Pynchon one, yet
sells for the same price. Could no more worthwhile essays on
Gravity's Rainbow be found to fill up the presumably available space? What about Brian McHale's "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text"—among the essays most frequently cited in recent Pynchon criticism, and perhaps the most conspicuous omission from Bloom's collections? What about Joel D. Black's "Probing a Post-Romantic Paleontology"? Neil Schmitz's "Describing the Demon"? Dwight Eddins's "Uriche Contra Gnostic"? (If PGR had been published a few months later, we would have looked for McHoul and Wills's groundbreaking "Gravity's Rainbow and the Post-Rhetorical." To suggest still other candidates is easy, and readers will be eager to suggest their own. Bloom's claim in his Editor's Notes that these volumes gather "what I consider to be the best criticism so far ventured" (IP) on Pynchon and "a representative selection of the best criticism yet published" (PGR) on Gravity's Rainbow rings false. I suspect that Bloom (or the Yale grad students said to have assisted him) has not done all the reading and considering a responsible editor should have. My suspicion is aggravated by the Editor's Notes' perfunctory annotations of the contents of each volume; they convey the impression that the editor may not even have read all these essays very carefully.

What flagrantly undermines the usefulness if not the integrity of the volumes is the vandalism which has been done to the selections. They have been stripped of their notes and even of parenthetical page-references. According to a letter from the publisher:

"It is Chelsea House's policy to omit footnotes from reprinted essays. Professor Harold Bloom (General Editor) feels that general readership may be put off by the footnotes and that scholars would already be familiar with the contents enough to use the bibliography alone. Since our titles are aimed at a wide range of readers we would not want to emphasize the scholastic points in these pieces."

But this explanation is preposterous. Who needs footnotes more than the general reader? And we are not talking about the Reader's Digest or Cliff's Notes variety general reader; we are talking about a Pynchon reader who is evidently expected to appreciate, not just Bloom's own introductory references to Pynchon's Gnostic Kabbalah and to Derridean dissemination, but also, for example, semiotic and post-structural analyses. Even a reader steeped in Pynchon and Pynchon criticism would probably rather have page references and notes there to ignore than not to have them there to resort to. The lack of references and notes will likely frustrate the general reader even more than it does...

* The omission of Schmitz has recently been made good in another of Bloom's Chelsea House projects, Twentieth Century American Literature. Volume 5 includes fifty closely-printed pages on Pynchon comprising a dozen reprints and excerpts, notes and all—a virtual third Pynchon volume in which only Kermode overlaps with the volumes under review here.
the scholar. (About the usefulness to any reader of Bloom's bibliographies, more below.) The serious reader, general or scholarly, won't want or have to go to other collections or original sources to find the selections intact.

Bloom's bibliographies would disgrace an undergraduate term paper. They are scanty, out-of-date, and poorly selected. The two bibliographies are really only one, since PGR's merely omits a few, but not all, of the items in IP's which treat only V. and/or Lat 49. The most telling difference between them is that each lists the Bloom volume in which the other appears. In each, the Bloom volume is the only listing of an item published after 1983. There is just one 1983 citation, one 1982. (In this light, the fact that the volumes, despite their 1986 copyrights, reprint between them only one place originally published after 1983 and only one other originally published after 1982 comes to seem a little less like a matter of editorial deliberation than it otherwise might.) Entirely omitted are Clerk's Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, Hite's Ideas of Order, Schaub's Pynchon, Fowler's Reader's Guide, McHale, Black, Eddins, Caesar, Davidson, Grace, Hayles, Herzberg, Holmes, Kappel, Steiner, Weisenburger, White—to name only some of the more obvious and accessible. The esoteric and the foreign, however valuable, are unthinkable. Neither the scholar nor the general reader supposedly so dear to the General Editor is well served. If Yale grad students and professors don't or won't make better use of card catalogs and standard indexes, pity the general reader who entrusts himself to their guidance.

These Chelsea House volumes seem intended more for sale than for use. Bloom's editorship is, of course, the gimmick that will sell them. It shouldn't be enough, being not just a gimmick but, as it turns out, an embarrassment. The selections, many of which are truly outstanding, are published better elsewhere. Bloom's introduction is sometimes brilliant but is also both regrettably under-realized and shamelessly bloated. Even if it were all Bloom at his best, its price would still be steep, especially at one introduction for the price of two volumes. Thus, the dubious introduction, the missing notes, and the execrable bibliographies give the volumes the air of a quick and dirty job. I suspect that libraries are the target market. They'll buy anything. We may apprehend the operation of Gresham's Law, especially in smaller, poorer libraries. We might have expected better from Bloom. Or perhaps such books are just what we might expect when even a Harold Bloom undertakes to edit nearly a thousand volumes in a mere three years or so.

—Suffolk Community College/SUNY
NOTES

On March 31, 1987, Little, Brown and Company announced that it would publish a novel (as yet untitled) by Pynchon in early 1989. No other information about the novel was given.

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The Spring 1986 MLA Newsletter reports that, on December 29, 1985 in Chicago, "Acting on nominations made by the Executive Council," the Delegate Assembly of the Modern Language Association elected Pynchon an honorary fellow of the MLA, subject to ratification by the membership. The Summer 1986 Newsletter reports the ratification vote and states that Pynchon "will be invited to become" an honorary fellow. Pynchon's name, however, does not appear in the subsequent membership directory, as do the names of the others to whom the invitation was extended at the same time.

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Louis Mackey writes:

Impalex G makes an appearance in Rudy Rucker's science-fiction novel, Software. It is used as "flicker-cladding" for autonomous self-reproducing robots on the moon. It acts as a heat-shield and also as a communication screen. Nothing is said of its erectile properties, but when the robot Ralph Numbers puts it on, it arouses in "female" robots a desire to "conjugate" with him. (See page 59 of the 1982 Ace Books edition.) Allusions to other writers' works occur often in Rucker's books.

The influence of Pynchon is very strong in the later work of Walter Jon Williams (Hardwired, Voice of the Whirlwind). But it is diffuse and not compounded of singular references.

Detective stories have a tendency to "work out." What I like about SF (and Pynchon) is that it usually leaves you hanging in indecision.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
(—1988)

We would like to remind our readers that they are invited to contribute bibliographic information about bibliographies, dissertations, books, chapters, essays, articles, reviews, interviews, translations, newspaper and magazine stories, fragments, oddments, stray comments, conference papers, and anything else of the sort which seems significant, interesting, or otherwise valuable and worthy of wider publicity with specific reference to Pynchon. We also welcome news of work in progress, circulating manuscripts, and forthcoming works.

PYNCHON:


CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


"It is not only the Asian or the African but also the American writer [e.g. Pynchon in GR] whose private imaginations must necessarily connect with experiences of the collectivity."


Considers the "normative" reading of Lot 49, "now regarded as a classic of postmodernist fiction," in order to suggest "the de-politicising effects which reading this text in the image of a self-parodic 'postmodernism' has had."


"Mailer is the most visible of contemporary novelists, just as Thomas Pynchon is surely the most invisible." "In what now is the Age of Pynchon, Mailer has been eclipsed as a writer of fictions, though hardly at all as a performing self."


Reprints essays and excerpts by Shorris, Schmitz, MacAdam, Platz, Fowler, Tanner, Meixner, Olderman, Davis, Kermode, Nadeau, and Henkie.


Mentions GR as an example of nuclear narrative and of the Oedipal nuclear Symbolic.


Includes a discussion of Lot 49.


Includes a discussion of Lot 49.


"GR is a fantasy about a war most of its readers don't really remember, whereas Dhaloren is in fairly pointed dialogue with the depressed and burned-out areas of America's great cities. To decide if Gravity's Rainbow is relevant, you have to spend time in a library... To see what Dhaloren is about, you only have to walk along a mile of your own town's inner city."


Lot 49 "is an oxymoronic apologue demonstrating, on the one hand, the ubiquitous human need to project meanings and the unavoidable human act of projecting meanings that cannot correspond to 'reality,' and, on the other, the consequences of that projecting—reduction of choices to binary ones, closure and ossification."


Peter Kahn, Professor of Fine Arts, recalls Nabokov's having been a "cult hero among the ambitious young writers like Pynchon and Sale and Curtis."


"...the most important novel to appear in America" since GR. "Unlike Pynchon and other contemporaries, McElroy is both fearful and hopeful about the survival of our species."

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Discusses Pynchon's paranoia themes and his syntax as conjunctive.


Lewis perhaps resembles Thomas Pynchon most closely among contemporary novelists. . . . [M]uch of his writing is inspired by what Pynchon calls 'operational paranoia.' . . . [C]onsidering the less a metaphor and more a reality for Lewis . . . [which] gives his fiction a less ironic and even darker tone.

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A work of "descriptive poetics" which mentions Pynchon (and many others) throughout by way of "mostly incidental interpretation." "Postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues."


---. "Reports Little, Brown's announcement that it will publish a new novel by Pynchon in 1989.


Derek Mahon admires Lot 49, "a very Sixties product."


Compared GR with Moby Dick and calls it "among other things, one of the great ecological novels of our time."


Discusses Lot 49.


Brief comparison with Lot 49.

---. Rev. of Tanner's Thomas Pynchon (and others). Notes and Queries 30 (1983): 381-82.


"For Pynchon, the thematic myths of western literature are one of several sets of archetypal patterns that the writer can use to describe and investigate the mass of events and impulses that compose American history and culture."


Occasional references to Pynchon, linking him to Melville, Heidegger and Kierkegaard.


Pynchon's Fictions never do purport to exonerate us from the force of historical circumstance. No—they're woven seamlessly into the stuff of a modernity that has conspired to count us in before we could ever hope to count ourselves out. It's that really frightening inclusiveness of Pynchon's genius that moves me most and convinces me of his ultimate place alongside the greatest American writers of the last century."

"After devouring the literature of William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and J. G. Ballard, Gibson said he eventually returned to his roots."


Steve Erickson has never read Pynchon: "My hunch is that Pynchon's influence is so pervasive, you're influenced whether you've read him or not."


Pynchon's novels appear to provide perfect examples of Bakhtin's thesis. The 'high' languages of modern America . . . are 'carnivalized' by a set of rampant, irreverent, inebriate discourses from low life. . . . But Pynchon does not simply amalgamate or relativize a host of different language-forms. He produces a dialogic confrontation whereby power and authority are probed and ritually contested by these debunking vernaculars. . . . Pynchon neutralizes the conflict of high and low language by framing it within narratives of enigma."


The central chapter is "An Intolerable Double Vision: Thomas Pynchon and the Phenomenology of Middles."


"Pynchon is Adams's "contemporary parallel." Lot 49 "offers readers a participatory myth of a redemptive subculture." OR "offers us no easy path to redemption."

FORTHCOMING:


CONTRIBUTORS

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