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**Pynchon Notes** welcomes essays and notes on all Pynchon-related subjects, written from all critical and theoretical positions. We welcome studies of individual texts and of Pynchon’s oeuvre, and studies of the texts in themselves or in their contexts variously conceived as Amerian, Western, or global; as literary, political, or historical; in postmodernist, postcolonial, or other terms. We also welcome essays on other subjects that may appear to particular advantage viewed through the lens of Pynchon’s writing. The book reviews the journal publishes will be solicited by the editors.

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V. Is for Varo Too:

Hispanic Elements in the Work of Thomas Pynchon

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When Maltese Pynchon fans (and others) decided to organize a conference in the early summer of 2004, they didn’t have to look far for a title theme: the planet Venus was conveniently in line to edge its way across the sun on the morning of the first day. In view of the significant role Malta plays in *V.*, “The Transit of Venus” was the perfect theme. Spaniards, on the other hand, did not have it so easy when, inspired by the success in Malta, they thought of organizing the next Pynchon Conference in Granada two years later. One has to admit that Spain has not figured large in Pynchon’s oeuvre. His protagonists go to Germany, Italy, France and England, but rarely to Spain. In his novel *Against the Day* some of the anarchist characters do make a brief visit to Barcelona, but nothing much happens there (and, of course, the novel had not been published yet). Almost all the Hispanic material in his novels, people and places, are Spanish American. No doubt this is due to the proximity of Mexico and Pynchon’s frequent visits there, plus the strong Hispanic flavor of the west coast in lands originally part of the Spanish Empire. These in themselves explain the dearth of Peninsular Hispanic referents.

But precisely because of, and on account of, one of Pynchon’s trips to Mexico, there is a strong Spanish presence in *The Crying of Lot 49*. This presence is the work of the Spanish painter in exile, Remedios Varo. The coincidence of the Spanish origin and the V in the surname (also, she was from Vascongadas) led us to the title of “V. Is for Varo Too: Hispanic Elements in the Work of Thomas Pynchon.”

Pynchon has not yet exhausted the V-value. In *Against the Day*, the Vibe family are at the vortex of the novel, with their Vormance Expedition, and much action in Vienna and Venice. (Why didn’t Pynchon send the anarchists further down the coast to Valencia?) In organizing the Granada Conference, the vantage point of the V was not, however, taken to extremes, nor was the Hispanic angle; it was stressed that papers could be offered on any topic related to Pynchon’s work.

As often happens (and would happen again at the next Conference in Munich in June 2008), a Pynchon Conference coincides with an important football fixture. The Granada Conference was held in the same week as the opening rounds of the 2006 World Cup finals. Sessions had to be planned,
therefore, around key matches and the obligatory visit in Granada, which is to the Alhambra. This explains the fact that the reading of the twenty-odd papers, which under more normal circumstances might have been heard in two days, took place over four days.

Speakers came from far-flung places—such is the Pynchon craze: from Australia, the Pacific coast of the United States, Canada and Latvia, as well as from places closer to Spain: Italy, Germany, Ireland, France, Belgium and Poland. There were four speakers from the host country, and they did, in fact, speak mostly on issues related to Remedios Varo or other Spanish aspects of *Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Mason & Dixon*. Other speakers focused either on these aspects or on themes which draw Pynchon close to certain Hispano-American writers. The rest of the speakers fanned out to cover all Pynchon novels published by 2006, from those of the 1960s, *V.* and *Lot 49*, to the major work of the 1970s, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which seems to be inexhaustible, to Pynchon’s two works of the last decade of the century: *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*. In this selected collection of the papers read in Granada, we have opted to group them in the chronological order of the novels they deal with.

Andrei Vasilenko’s “Apocalyptic Quest in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*” focuses upon Pynchon’s seeming obsession from the beginning of his career with a possible end to the world as we know it, and a similar concern in a recent (2004), posthumous work by the writer of Chilean origin, Roberto Bolaño—a work which, at twelve hundred pages, is even longer than Pynchon’s latest (*Against the Day* is a mere pamphlet at 1,085 pages). In Pynchon, the pending doom menacing the planet comes from the slow entropical forces of the physical laws that govern the cosmos, from possible human disruption of balances, and from a process of dehumanization. The quest for the mysterious female V. has as a counterpart in Bolaño’s work in the quest for the reclusive German writer Benno von Archimboldi. The revelations that emerge in the course of the quest point toward some of the things that have gone wrong in the twentieth century. The narrative tells of a string of murders of women in the Mexican town of Santa Teresa, and this slaughter of the most vulnerable—female and poor—parallels the different genocides we see portrayed in Pynchon’s work, whether it be the Jews and Hereros under the Nazis or the victims of Stalin. Of course, we did not know it at the time, but Pynchon had created a character in *Against the Day* who is a serial murderer of women: Frank Traverse should have shot Deuce Kindred rather than Sloat Fresno, and he would have saved many lives, but then, he did not have any choice in the matter. Vasilenko sees a coincidence in the symbols used to suggest Apocalypse, indicating that the Hispanic world shares some of the most serious concerns voiced by Pynchon.

William Day’s research on entropy, focusing on the Spanish painter Remedios Varo, has a much more optimistic message. Day suggests that we
readers can counteract the negative process of entropy through appreciating the creative energy of Remedios Varo which invigorates Pynchon’s second novel: “Countering Entropy in The Crying of Lot 49 with Reader Involvement: Remedios Varo as a Role Model for Oedipa Maas.” It is Day’s thesis that Oedipa Maas “is nothing less than the novelistic projection of the heroines of Remedios Varo, who are in turn the artistic alter egos of the exiled Spanish painter.” He points to Rifkin’s interpretation of entropy, that “The Entropy Law is also a statement that all energy in an isolated system moves from an ordered to a disordered state.” Oedipa’s quest leads her from ignorance to a seemingly endless confusion. But Day asserts that the reader does not necessarily have to share that confusion. The attentive reader, who is prepared to look outside the text (ignoring il n’y a pas de hors-texte), and follow the tracks of Remedios Varo in real life, will find an explanatory pattern that Oedipa, caught up in the web of the “tapestry” being embroidered (bordando), cannot appreciate. With the help of Janet Kaplan’s explanations of Varo’s paintings, Day elucidates the predicaments of Varo’s various female figures and traces the parallels the reader can imagine in Oedipa’s life and possible background (about which we are told next to nothing in the novel). At the end of the novel she may have come full circle and therefore got nowhere, but Day opposes this, saying that “the epic journey of self-awareness” is what matters here rather than the solving of the mystery of Pierce Inverarity’s legacy, thus she has made a circuit but has risen to a higher level, as suggested by Varo’s painting Spiral Transit. The journey is more important than the goal for most of Varo’s figures, and Day shows how this is also true of Pynchon’s heroine.

The concept of Entropy is again the object of analysis in the essay by Francisco Collado: “No either/or. The Stagnation of Forces in Pynchon’s Universe: Ethical and Gender Undecidability in Two Spanish Cases.” The binary opposite energy/entropy is suspect, and Collado shows Pynchon inviting his readers to look at in-betweens or liminal areas. He demonstrates the symbolic play and disruption of the categorical binaries energy/entropy and male/female in just two examples, both Spanish: Remedios Varo in Lot 49 and the Spanish Foreign Legion in Gravity’s Rainbow. Collado agrees with Day that “the figure of the historical personage Remedios Varo adds many nuances to Oedipa’s quest for final revelatory meaning.” He reminds us that she was (la Virgen de los Remedios Varo) Remedios Varo and just as the Virgin Mary can provide a remedy, Remedios Varo’s work rouses Oedipa from her entropic lethargy and brings about the regeneration of her life, as she becomes the Virgin of the Pietà with the old sailor. Jung’s female anima in Oedipa struggles against the negative male energy of the shadow, seen in Pierce Inverarity. Like Day’s assurance of the importance in Lot 49 of “the epic journey of self-awareness,” Collado speaks of Jung’s “integration of the personality.” In Gravity’s Rainbow, too, we find the binaries energy/entropy, male/female, good/evil, and anima/shadow. In this novel, Collado homes in on one of their symbolic manifestations: the
reference by Brigadier Pudding to the anthem of the Spanish Foreign Legion: “El novio de la Muerte” (“The Bridegroom of Death”). Pudding mentions the hymn when recalling the battle for Badajoz in Extremadura in August 1936, upon the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Pudding inverts the concept, calling the spy Katje his “Mistress of the Night,” the female equivalent of the Lord of the Night or Bridegroom of Death, where Death is female, as it is in Spanish. Collado feels the reference to the anthem of the Legion is appropriate within the historical context portrayed in Pynchon’s novel because the Spanish Legionnaires of the Civil War were the equivalent of the German SS in World War II, on account of their bravery, but also their renowned cruelty. The ambiguity of Katje, as at once the victim of men and also the terrifying incarnation of the female Death, is yet another example of Pynchon blurring the usual discrete nature of the binary elements.

Like Andrei Vasilienko, who had found in recent South American writing, specifically a novel by Roberto Bolaño, themes dear to Pynchon’s heart, David Kelman finds that Argentinian Ricardo Piglia shares Pynchon’s interest in secret societies and conspiracy, as well as his related story-telling practice. In “The Form of the Conspiracy: Ricardo Piglia’s Reading of Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49,” Kelman shows how Piglia’s “paranoid” novels, Artificial Respiration (1980) and The Absent City (1992), share the North American fascination with secret societies, while his non-fictional work, in the form of essays and interviews, serves as a theorization of the political form of novels such as Lot 49. In his two essays, “Theses on the Short Story” and “New Theses on the Short Story,” Piglia asserts the conspiratorial structure of the form of the short story or novella, with its overt story and the hidden one, antagonistic and often political: “a double story that encloses a destabilizing secret,” as Kelman puts it. Applying this theory to Lot 49, Kelman finds that the Trystero, as secret society, “is a hidden figure that operates within Pynchon’s text as a disruption.” He sees parallels between the Trystero and the Nefastis Machine, a “criminal machine,” insofar as it gets something for nothing: “Both the Nefastis Machine and the Trystero are, therefore, criminal economies that oppose an official economy.” He goes on to discuss the concept of “metaphor” in the short novel and such concepts as absence, withdrawal or waiting, and counterfeiting, and their narrative development and consequences.

Conspiracies involve groups and can create like-minded communities. In her paper “Ideas of Community in The Crying of Lot 49” Paula Martín Salván discusses the second half of Edward Mendelson’s comment: “The processes of V. isolate; those of Lot 49 create community.” She follows a double approach, sociological and rhetorical, to examine how communities are described in the novel, what tropes are used to refer to the relationships between members of those communities, and what roles they play in the development of the narrative. She first traces those communities Althusser called “Ideological State Apparatuses,” such as family, government, or educational system. Then
she looks at their opposites: those forms of collectivity described in the novel as opposed to or alternative to officially sanctioned institutions, all those that use the services of the Trystero. Indeed, it is the muted horn symbol of the Trystero that unites these disparate communities in the development of the story, leaving Oedipa uncomfortably in the middle. Martín explains the catch-22 situation of both paranoia: inclusion/exclusion, and of the form of the parable. J. Hillis Miller’s analysis of the metaphor of the line or thread as visible sign of community links is brought to bear on a discussion of the narrative development of the novel. The metaphor of the thread establishes a logic of contiguity among the varied constituents of both communities and individual representations in the plot. Martín finally postulates a new community, of which Oedipa has become a part by the end of the novel: those who apparently belong to an ISA, but also know about the Trystero. They are not in one community to the exclusion of the other, they are partly in both. Solutions are not found, but knowledge is acquired. The “epic journey to self-awareness” again.

Tracing links that form communities or at least set up communications is the object of Celia Wallhead’s paper. In “Using Schema Theory to Trace the Connections between the Different Aspects of the Conflicting Roles of Oedipa Maas and the Intertext of Remedios Varo,” she gives a brief overview of all the roles in which the heroine of Lot 49 is involved, from suburban housewife to the Virgin Mary, passing through Rapunzel, Alice in Wonderland, and Marilyn Monroe. She examines the different ways in which these roles within the narrative have been described: laminations, or, according to Charles Hollander, maaswerk, “magic eye,” enthymemes or jazz improvisations or variations on a theme. Wallhead suggests an alternative approach, that of schema theory. This linguistic method of analysis through recognizable frames enables us to see connections the reader will make in his or her mind between the disparate elements. By setting out the roles linearly, or by analyzing juxtapositions, common elements emerge which account for similarities and even opposites which cause schema “disruption” and defamiliarization. A very brief description of Guy Cook’s model for analyzing schemas through a hierarchy of levels is given and then applied to a couple of examples: Oedipa Maas as Oedipus and again as the Virgin Mary. Disruptions of the familiar schemas add dimensions to character and plot. Studying Pynchon’s use of familiar schemas in terms of both world knowledge and text types helps us to see more clearly how readers understand his works in all their complexity, and confirms what we intuited. Throughout the discussion of the roles of Oedipa Maas, Wallhead points out the similarities with paintings by Remedios Varo. Her findings back up those of William Day: that Varo is a far greater unifying presence in Lot 49 than anyone not acquainted with her work would suspect.

If the papers on Lot 49 explored community and connection, binaries and excluded middles, Steven Weisenburger’s paper “In the Zone: Sovereignty
and Bare Life in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” looks at excluded middles, but particularly as individuals. He begins with a question: Who or what are the political subjects of *Gravity’s Rainbow*? Just as Pynchon has always discussed binaries and forms of entropy in his works, according to Weisenburger, he has always explored the relation between the individual and the state: “This is Pynchon’s great subject even from his earliest stories, especially when it involves how powers transform persons into stuff, into objects.” Weisenburger focuses on the passage in Part Three, “In the Zone,” shortly after the opening of episode twenty-five, beginning, “The nationalities are on the move.” The long, 370-word sentence which lists all the displaced people in Poland and Germany in the months following V-E Day starts with the émigré Germans, names the different groups of Germany’s “enemies” but sometimes just rejects, no doubt inspired, says Weisenburger, by Hannah Arandt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and ends with a beaten Wehrmacht soldier. Within this frame come those dehumanized persons, the unwanted middle of human trash. Yet they are both excluded and included, for they are at once rejected and yet needed as slave labor. Weisenburger discusses Pynchon’s critique of the Romantic chronotope, so clearly aligned to the concept of colonial spaces of domination, as in South West Africa, South America, and Soviet Central Asia, imported back home. Weisenburger’s conclusion shows how, back in the Vietnam era, and writing about the Second World War, Pynchon was describing a political situation which has become even more prevalent and sinister today, at the start of the twenty-first century: “One reason, then, why *Gravity’s Rainbow* stakes its claim to enduring significance is that Pynchon so powerfully identifies and satirizes this persistent, essential paradox of modern statecraft: politics churn out ever-greater masses of non-political subjects.”

Robert Holton, in “Useless Lumpens in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” also addresses “those groups who appeared to remain outside the powerfully centripetal forces of cultural hegemony.” He argues that Pynchon was growing up in a postwar period that was dominated by escape narratives in both literature and film. He was interested in, possibly participated in, the desire to escape to an alternative life-style of low-life, *Lumpenproletariat*. Holton recognizes that “this centrifugal narrative dynamic structures much of Pynchon’s work as well,” citing particularly Oedipa Maas with the old sailor in the rooming house. But his paper is dedicated to an analysis of those scenes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that illustrate this centrifugal desire. Beginning with the Webley Silvernail soliloquy to the lab animals, the speaker bears on freedom, enclosure, and behavior modification. Pynchon draws parallels with human life: no hope and no mercy in the utilization of the powerless (and useless?) by the powerful. As Holton says, “this zone of refuse and refusal blurs the line between rejecting the system and being rejected by it.” The increasingly eccentric Slothrop lets himself go, in a seeming rejection of modernity, of modern subjectivity, and even of history itself. The dominant cultures belong to history, while the
marginalized appear immune to the rise and fall of powers in history. Holton shows how, at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the fledgling Counterforce, in the form of Roger Mexico, Seaman Bodine, and the albeit deceased Brigadier Pudding, offer their bodily waste products as a sign of opposition. But it is an opposition that is given no hope and in itself offers little hope, it seems, in Pynchon's mind, for the successful countering of totalitarianism, either of the right or of the left.

Christopher Leise's paper “Presto Change—o! Tyrone Slothrop's English Again!' Puritan Conversion, Imperfect Assurance, and the Salvific Sloth in *Gravity's Rainbow*” also discusses resistance against dogmatism. Leise goes back to Thomas Pynchon's first American ancestor, William Pynchon, who published a Puritan pamphlet in the mid-seventeenth century, which was rejected by the ecclesiastical authorities. Through the figure of the lumpen Tyrone Slothrop, cast as a Puritan Pilgrim figure with similar ancestors (“Slothrop's Progress”), the capital sin of Sloth is seen to pit this suppressed strain of Puritanism against the hegemonic brand, bringing the past into the present. Slothrop exhibits the conventional initial stages of the conversion experience; however, his deviations create in the novel a modern Puritan world view opposing orthodoxy through its stress on acceptance, inclusion, and expanded tolerance. Sloth, the sin of the lukewarm Christian, condemned by Calvinist Thomas Hooker, translates, in Pynchon's present-day view as “the moral malaise of inactivity in the face of injustice and iniquity.” Franz Pökler is, in Leise's opinion, the best example of this: “Pökler exemplifies the danger inherent in Hooker's kind of Puritanism: believing too strongly without questioning or deviating from the predominant moral order, he sinks into despondency because of the fatal mixture of belief and doubt.” Slothrop, as Leise shows us, even in his name, is neither Elect nor Preterite, so he disrupts “the American binary image of success or failure, of good or evil, of saint or stranger.” Perhaps, if the Pilgrim Fathers had taken this alternative spiritual route, America today would be a very different place from what it is. This, according to Leise, is the implicit message of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Moving from politics to genre, Birger Vanwesenbeeck looks at the formal categorization of the novel in “*Gravity's Rainbow*: A Portrait of the Artist as Engineer.” While some critics have seen the novel as falling within the tradition of Menippean satire, and others as an encyclopedic narrative—Steven Weisenburger combines the two in “an encyclopedic satire,” acknowledging that the two have common elements—Vanwesenbeeck offers another reading of the novel, that of the *Künstlerroman*, as it thematizes the creative process as a central element of its plot, as in the major proponents, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. But the creative process does not have as an end result literature or music or painting, but the rocket, a technological artifact. As Vanwesenbeeck says, Pynchon plays with the reader, alternately showing us the aesthetic qualities of the rocket’s machinery parts, while never failing
to keep us attuned to the destructive nature of the “artifact.” Following Joseph Tabbi, Vanwesenbeeck suggests Pynchon wants to question the concept of “technological sublime” through the paradigm art + technology = death + destruction: “Immune to both the forces of mechanical reproduction and exchangeability, the creative gesture and death thus share what Pynchon calls a ‘moment of stillness.’” The creative gesture and identity formation and assertion is seen in the Hereros working on the 00001 rocket. But here Pynchon diverges from Joyce and Woolf. The Hereros represent, not the individual creator, but a group, or community, and their work is not original, but a repetition of an earlier model. Vanwesenbeeck concludes that Pynchon, as a postmodernist, not a Modernist, through *Gravity’s Rainbow*, shows how an “endorsement of art as copy is less a pessimistic verdict on the impossibility of creating original art, however, than that it serves as a reminder of the distinctly communal horizon within which every artwork operates.” But for artwork, Pynchon means technology and science, for, like Don DeLillo’s artist-character Klara Sax in *Underworld*, he believes the contemporary world is a “postpainterly age.”

The step from literature to philosophy is a short one, says Ludwig Wittgenstein; indeed, “Philosophy should only be done as poetry,” quotes Sascha Pöhlmann in his comparison of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “Silences and Worlds: Wittgenstein and Pynchon.” He argues that “they are related in their interest in the problematic relation between language and the world, in the uses of silence, in the construction of possible worlds, and in causality.” Pöhlmann delves deeper than previous writers: William M. Plater, showing in *The Grim Phoenix* Pynchon’s debt to the *Tractatus*, and Petra Bianchi’s essay on Wittgenstein and V. Pöhlmann feels that, just as Wittgenstein said that human beings can think things that cannot be said—the unsayable—Pynchon’s novels convey the idea that words cannot represent things fully. The desire to express through words is there, but accompanied by the realization that what cannot be represented through language must be shown, hinted at, outlined from the other side: “showing the limits of language and representation, both Wittgenstein and Pynchon force their readers to deduce that something lies beyond that limit.” Roger Mexico realizes that scientific discourse is unable to address the problems really bothering them, like the chances of a bomb falling on them. The answer to this is silence: the bomb has hit you before you are aware of it. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is full of silences. Pöhlmann shows that these areas where thought has gone beyond language are often typologically signified in the text, and this is done in the form of the dash or ellipses points.

Some of Pynchon’s dashes and ellipses points function normally, to indicate insertion, pause, or disruption, but others suggest speculation, possibility rather than certainty, as in the line that ends the novel: “Now everybody—”. Others represent the type of omission which can only signify
that the thoughts are unspeakable, whether over a single death (Slothrop) or mass death on an unknown scale (Pökler entering the Dora camp). In considering the first statement of the *Tractatus*: “The world is all that is the case” (where *case* can be interpreted in thirty different ways, some of them negative), Pöhlmann asserts that “the *Tractatus* is about the conditions of possibility, not about actual states of affairs.” Similarly, he feels that “the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is more than what is the case, it is also what is not the case, and most importantly what could be the case.” Both subscribe to possibilism, and while Wittgenstein’s is philosophical, Pynchon’s is political. Finally, Pöhlmann shows how Slothrop’s disappearance or scattering at the text’s end manifests Wittgenstein’s “the solipsist’s ego is an entity without an identity.” Both Wittgenstein and Pynchon share an awe for silence, which, again typologically, can appear in Pynchon’s text as Silence with a capital S.

Terry Reilly and Steve Tomaske’s paper “Medicine and the Paranormal in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: Epheyre, Anaphylaxis, and That Charles Richet” comes very appropriately after Pöhlmann’s consideration of Wittgenstein’s connection to the novel for two reasons: because Richet, like Wittgenstein, always challenged the relation of cause and effect, and, as the authors say, “commentators on Pynchon’s writing have often found themselves in uncomfortable and sometimes ridiculous positions where they are forced to argue about the importance of something although or because it is not explicitly in Pynchon’s text [. . .] often concluding that something’s present because it’s absent,” and indeed, Richet is absent from the text. In spite of this, they conclude that Richet is “perhaps one of the most important historical figures not mentioned in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” The early part of the paper offers a brief biography of Richet (1850–1935), a Parisian physiologist and student of the occult and paranormal, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize for Medicine for his discovery of anaphylaxis and anaphylactic shock. The *Institut Métapsychique International*, which he helped set up, also not mentioned, is an actual historical version of the “White Visitation” of the novel. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon explores some of the ideas Richet wrote about in his myriad articles, and Pynchon also addresses larger questions, like those Richet contemplated, about what happens after death to people in general and to Tyrone Slothrop in particular. Pynchon twice uses the term “ectoplasm,” coined by Richet to refer to the white gaseous or plasma-like substance (“white visitation”) that occasionally emanated from the bodies of mediums during séances and signaled both the presence of spirits and their willingness to communicate. Reilly and Tomaske speculate the naming of the medium Carroll Eventyr as a veiled version of Charles Epheyre, a pen-name Richet used when he wrote stories. Also, the many references in the novel to latex-based or synthetic latex-based products, which are the most common and widespread cause of anaphylaxis and anaphylactic shock, point to Richet too, since he did pioneering work in this area, as his Nobel Prize testifies.
In his essay “Seeing the Wood for the Trees: Levels of Reading and Intertextual Mythmaking in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” Mark Quinn argues that certain sections of the novel represent closed systems, with implicit rules and codes that are intended by the author to limit the number of possible interpretations of his work. He also suggests that one of the key practices underlying Pynchon’s poetics is the kind of literary symbiosis that Modernists such as Joyce and Eliot advocated, that key building blocks of Pynchon’s text can best be described as Modernist. He is thinking particularly of the metafictional and self-reflexive nature of the novel, its concern with its own form and structure. Following Umberto Eco’s detection of *doublecoding* in postmodernist texts, where the writer addresses an elite reading public on one level and a popular one on another, Quinn believes the astute reader should see in the scene of Slothrop’s descent into the Toilet World a pastiche of the western, pointing specifically to Sergio Leone’s 1968 *Once Upon a Time in the West*, starring Henry Fonda. “Authorial” intrusions alert us to the idea that Pynchon might be prompting and testing our interpretive abilities and at the same time attracting attention to his craft. These intrusions can easily be mistaken for free indirect style, so the reader has to be particularly alert. Also referenced in the scene is another Henry Fonda movie, that of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, both united by the music for the song “Red River Valley.” The figure of the Kenosha Kid at the beginning of the scene is traced by Quinn, through Harold Bloom’s *kenosis* (“emptying out” or incarnation) in his 1974 book *Anxiety of Influence*, to the idea of Pynchon the author as god. By laying bare his mythmaking, Pynchon gives us an insight into his methods and intentions in this most complex of novels.

As we have seen, the allegedly most complex novels attracted most papers at the Conference. There was just one on *Vineland*: Jeffrey Severs’s “In Fascism’s Footprint: The History of ‘Creeping’ and *Vineland’s* Poetics of Betrayal.” Severs agrees with Jerry Varsava’s view that *Vineland*, although it may appear more like *Lot 49* in its smaller scope and accent on “domestic politics,” in fact has deep connections to the big novels, *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which Pynchon diagnosed American politics through analogy to international fascism. The fascist enforcers in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Tchitcherine and Blicero, are seen as werewolves, whereas Brock Vond in *Vineland*, as his name in Old English signifies, is a mere badger by comparison. Yet the novel is nonetheless about fascism: not so much what America would be like under fascism, as how it could come about, with individuals, like Frenesi Gates, “flipping” or turning through betrayal, possibly even inscribed in her genes, and usually connected to sex. (Severs asks us to see “Be–Tray” or “Be–Trayers” in the combined names of her grandparents: Becker–Traverse.) Her daughter Prairie’s name is Wheeler, suggesting, according to Severs, “that American family inheritances are on a wheel of fortune, with no predictability to how each generation will turn.” The adjective “creeping,” in the form of a gerund, in the opening sentence of the
novel is as important as the opening and closing gerunds of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Lot 49* respectively: *screaming, crying*. It refers not only to the tentacles of fascist power, but to the “low-to-the-ground, insect-like persistence through which *Vineland* identifies and celebrates its Counterforce.” It also refers to slow time, the stubborn, slow creeping of the underdog, as opposed to the vibrant action of the “creator” of history, the totalitarian of the right or the left, with his boot crushing everything beneath it. Severs places two epigraphs at the head of his essay: one is dystopian—of the boot stamping on a human face in Orwell's *1984*—and the other is the utopian grass pushing up under the boot-soles in Whitman's “Song of Myself.” He shows how Whitman is the “presiding poetic presence who shapes the particular kind of Romanticism Pynchon dissects and discredits in the text.” Severs concludes, as Quinn and the others do about *Gravity's Rainbow*, that *Vineland*’s references, in this case to grass and leaves, which can be paper leaves as well, are “about texts, full of elliptical, highly literary connections to other books and, as importantly, Pynchon’s own.”

In *Vineland*, Pynchon suggests that the children might not be innocent, and we cannot assume that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon them, as they may have greater sins of their own. The patriarch Jesse Traverse of *Vineland* is a child in Pynchon’s new novel *Against the Day* (2006), and both this novel and his previous one, *Mason & Dixon* (1997), are, in the words of Tom Schaub “the remembered futurity of a nation about to be born.” Sofia Kolbuszewska reminds us that since Romanticism, the remembered futurity has been considered to be embodied in the image of the child. In her essay “Childhood as a Metaphor, Motif and Narrative Device in *Mason & Dixon*” she applies Peter Brooks’ approach to narrative in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narratives*, where the operating logic can be described as anticipation of retrospection. She asserts that in *Mason & Dixon*, the writer’s narrative desire, fuelled by his efforts to explore and question contemporary nostalgic representations of the rise of America’s vision of itself, is carried through the narrative process by means of the child metaphor. The narration in *Mason & Dixon* starts with the historicized child audience of Rev. Cherrycoke, the Le Spark children, and ends with the Romantic vision of the mythic redeemer children, Charles Mason’s sons, “arrested in the timelessess of the American pastoral vision,” as Kolbuszewska puts it. She shows how, in between, in the course of the long novel, Pynchon explores genetic conditioning—the reference to “Helixxx”—the possible potential inherent in the “genome” of the infant nation, and the parallel growth of the nation’s identity and the new genre of the novel, often contributing to that identity, bearing witness to its birth. The Oedipal relation of fathers and sons gives us children as both the prodigal son and the pilgrim. Family-life and family-relations metaphors figure prominently in the cultural and political discourse in colonial and, later, Revolutionary America. Through the American Revolution, a watershed in the
nation’s history, America was at once the new-born child and the young adult attaining manhood. Pynchon’s parodying of eighteenth-century Gothic in the novel goes hand-in-hand with the denunciation of slavery in America’s past, disrupting the national narrative of innocence, purity and equality.

This selection of the talks given at the Granada Conference shows the wide and full range of the novels and topics covered. Individually, they delve deep into the discussions about America and the world in which Pynchon asks the reader to join him. As they all confirm, Pynchon demands astute and well-read interlocutors, and they make their contribution to helping readers appreciate the width and depth of Pynchon’s myriad concerns.
Apocalyptic Quest in Thomas Pynchon’s V. and Roberto Bolaño’s 2666

Andrei Vasilenko

Chilean author Roberto Bolaño’s last (posthumous) novel 2666 (2004) has some aspects intriguingly in common with Thomas Pynchon’s V. A full comparative analysis of these two novels would be a daunting task for two reasons. Pynchon’s V. has been so thoroughly analyzed that it is next to impossible to say anything new about it, whereas the novel of recently deceased Bolaño (1953-2003) has not yet received due scholarly attention, and therefore there is scarcely any critical material to lean on or to take issue with.

V., published in 1963 and a product of its time, is extremely voluble about the major anxieties of the Cold War era. These anxieties receive additional weight as the novel revisits those historical events that were instrumental in dragging the world to the brink of a global catastrophe, presentiments of which keep cropping up in the narrative. Several critics have stressed that the tone of V. is rather more mock apocalyptic than apocalyptic, as many of the gloomy apprehensions sketched out in the novel do not materialize (see Celmer), its all-pervasive irony not admitting the possibility of a “real” end of the world. In David Seed’s words: “The possibility of Armageddon which hovers constantly in the background of V. . . . remains firmly in that background” (110). The same could be said of any final revelation about this dreadful event. The sewer alligator does not receive the gift of tongues and the spheric message to Kurt Mondaugen says that there is no message. I would still argue that despite the ironic tone and slapstick humor, V. is imbued with a genuine concern about the future outcome of the political and social processes described in it. This concern is inherent in all Pynchon novels, though it seems most pronounced in Gravity’s Rainbow. It is true that one does not find any concrete description of the End; however, we should not dismiss the fact that one of the major preoccupations of this novel is the chain of events which seems to be leading to the possible nameless (to borrow the term used by Derrida, 31) destruction of the planet. Pynchon’s treatment of entropy, for example, has nothing optimistic as compared to the views expressed by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in their 1984 study Order Out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature—according to which entropy may be regarded as a positive force for change. As Peter L. Cooper has noted, besides the “fast apocalypse” of a global catastrophe there is also the “slow
apocalypse” of entropic decline (64). The force of entropy, one of Pynchon’s favorite themes, is conspicuously at work in V., whose world is slowly but surely running down. There seems to be less and less space for humanity and human feelings, as the inanimate gradually encroaches into all spheres of life. David Seed is less categorical in this respect. Although admitting the presence of entropic decay in the events related by Pynchon, he emphasizes the ambiguity of the author’s approach to this process, as he seems to be “both suggesting” and “contradicting it” (115). However, despite these ambiguities it is difficult to perceive V. as an optimistic narrative. The famous phrase of the electro-mechanical doll Bongo-Shaftesbury—“humanity is something to destroy” (79)—possesses the sinister ambivalence that should not be taken too lightly. It is not only humane attitude but also the human race which is at stake in this gradual process of dehumanization whose figurehead is the mysterious woman called V.

The frightening revelations about the destiny of the twentieth century, including the past events and the possible occurrences in the future, come about in the course of Herbert Stencil’s obsessive quest. Led by this character we embark upon the search for an enigmatic figure who embodies, among other things, the transition of the Virgin into the Dynamo, as described by Henry Adams, the attributes of the White Goddess as described by Robert Graves, as well as reminiscences of a character called “V” pursuing Sebastian Knight in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941), to name but a few of the findings of Pynchon scholars.

The search for the elusive V. is a tiresome and unsatisfying experience. We can never be sure if it is one and the same person, if she is indeed Victoria Wren gradually turned into an automaton. It is remarkable that the common features that all these women share are the easily replaceable inanimate objects like the artificial eye, or the ivory comb rather than some unalterable trait of the living body. In a way, the reader is faced with the same dilemma as Franz Pökler in Gravity’s Rainbow, who is only allowed to see his daughter at distant intervals, and therefore he is unable to tell whether this constantly changing person is his real daughter or simply one in a succession of impostors. Different incarnations of V. may also be construed as a collective image of the inanimate and decadent, and about whose insidious activity we learn through Herbert Stencil’s “specialized” vision of history.

Much has been said about the abundance of words that begin with “V” in the novel: Veronica the rat, Vheissu, Volcano Vesuvius, Venezuela, Valetta, and so on. The omnipresence of this letter suggests to us that V. must be something more than simply a woman. What is important is that the pursuit of V. allows Stencil, and the reader as well, to look at certain moments in history where the tragic and yet sometimes farcical aspects make us wonder what has gone awry in the twentieth century, and ask ourselves why the destruction of humanity has become for some of its representatives not simply a cynical motto but a command to be carried out.
Many critics take Benny Profane’s statement “offhand I’d say I haven’t learned a goddamn thing” (491), as symptomatic of the static, unalterable nature of his character. For example, Frederick R. Karl argues that Profane always “end[s] up in stagnation” (303). I believe that this phrase has been taken too literally on the one hand, and too casually on the other. Should we really believe this answer? In my opinion, it is wrong to say that Profane didn’t learn anything in the course of his seemingly useless peregrinations, as opposed to the purposeful search of Stencil. The fact that Profane remains a schlemiel and a human yo-yo, that he does not settle and have a career of sorts, is not evidence of his having learnt nothing. I would say that a person who has had the disturbing conversation with SHROUD cannot be sincere in claiming ignorance. Profane’s phrase might be interpreted as wishful thinking, as a deliberate lie he utters to Brenda Wigglesworth’s enquiry about his experience. Maybe it is precisely because he has learnt too much that Profane refuses to change his lifestyle. Everybody learns something during the quest for V. and how to cope with this knowledge is one of the major concerns of the novel.

Roberto Bolaño’s 2666 definitely shares themes explored in V. In Bolaño’s novel, the mysterious figure whose destiny appears to provide the clue to the tragic events, past and present, as well as to the emergent uncertainties expressed by many at the end of the twentieth century, is the reclusive German writer Benno von Archimboldi. Like the search for V., the quest for Archimboldi leads to a series of dramatic revelations that can explain to us or at least give us a hint of what has gone wrong in the twentieth century. 2666, like Pynchon’s novel, has a fragmentary narrative. It consists of five more or less autonomous parts, all of which converge on the fictitious Mexican city of Santa Teresa as well as lead to the discovery of the enigmatic German writer’s biography. In the first part, appropriately called La Parte de los Críticos, we learn about four critics from Spain, Italy, Great Britain, and France who build their academic careers by interpreting, translating, and popularizing the works of the “difficult” writer and perennial Nobel Prize candidate, Benno von Archimboldi. It is hard not to notice that Bolaño’s portrayal of these four critics is a subtle satire of the inevitable emergence of academic industries around such writers as James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon. The critics are not satisfied with merely the works of their hero, and they decide to hunt down the reclusive genius in person, an explicit nod toward those frustrated pynchonologists who seem to have despaired in their attempt to transcend the texts and aspire to come into contact with the human agency that has given birth to them. The search of the critics, like that of Stencil, proves to be unsuccessful. The journey itself, however, acquires great importance. Following some scraps of information obtained from a Mexican student, the critics arrive at the pivotal point of the whole novel, the city of Santa Teresa. They know that Archimboldi should be somewhere in this place, although the purpose of his sojourn in the city remains unclear to them. The discovery of this fictional place that, according to Juan Carlos Galdo is a carbon
copy of Ciudad Juárez (24), and its relation to the fate of Archimboldi, triggers
the apocalyptic quest that we readers need to undertake in the course of this
twelve-hundred page novel. This study, therefore, far from attempting a general
comparison of the two books, limits itself to an analysis of the similarities within
the area of the theme of the apocalyptic quest.

Santa Teresa is a Mexican city on the border with the United States in
which several hundred women have been viciously murdered since 1993.
Most of the victims have been raped. Their abandoned corpses—either burnt,
or badly mutilated, or in an advanced state of decomposition—keep cropping
up in the vast rubbish tips of Santa Teresa, in vacant lots, and in the desert. In
the fourth part of the novel, Bolaño undertakes what can only be compared
to Vladimir Sorokin’s description of the methodical and brutal extermination
of the whole Russian village by the title character of the novel Roman (1994)
which has not yet been translated into English. With forensic detachment,
Bolaño describes in minute detail the bodies of numerous female victims,
paying attention to the ways in which they have been raped and disfigured,
telling us where their corpses have been found and giving a glimpse into their
background. The majority of the murdered women prove to be poor workers
at the maquiladoras, foreign-owned assembly factories. Some of the victims
are prostitutes. There are even schoolchildren amongst the murdered. The
local authorities and the federal government are pathetically helpless, being
unable to stop the series of merciless crimes or catch the main culprit. The
police do succeed in some cases, catching men who took the life of their own
wives or partners and arresting a gang of thugs, Los Bisontes (The Bisons),
who have been emulating the elusive multiple murderer of Santa Teresa, but
most of the cases remain unsolved. The police also fail to detain El Penitente
(The Penitent), an eerie man whose desecration of churches causes quite
an outrage even against the background of the ongoing slaughter of the
innocent. The growing mountain of female corpses acquires a metaphysical
dimension and, as the final part of the novel shows, there are reasons to
believe that these crimes are a link in the long chain of the actions carried out
with an eye to destroying humanity and bringing about apocalypse.

There are various ways of bringing about the inanimate condition
described in V. It may be self-induced, as is the case with different re-
incarnations of lady V., who replaces her eyeball with a watch, and inserts a
star sapphire in her belly, to name but a few of the inanimate objects she
incorporates into her anatomy. The action may have sexual connotations as
the relationship between Rachel Owlglass and her car shows.

The condition, however, may have more sinister undertones. These may
be found in the evocation of a staggeringly large pile of human bodies as the
symbol of the dehumanizing impulse some representatives of humankind
have proved to possess. This subject is introduced in a silent conversation
between SHROUD and Benny Profane. The radiation output test dummy
compares a pile of junk cars with the amassed bodies of concentration camp victims: “Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It’s already started” (314). SHROUD’s revelation harks back to Mondaugen’s story in which we learn about the rehearsal of the Holocaust, undertaken by the German colonizers in South-West Africa. The same terrifying metaphor may be applied to the dead bodies of the Hereros, who have lost about eighty percent of their population in the retaliatory action triggered by Lothar von Trotha. As the narrator bitterly observes, “This is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good” (259).

The image of piles of murdered women’s bodies found in peacetime at the end of the twentieth century in Santa Teresa fits in with the major scheme of decadence delineated in Pynchon’s novel. There is another logic of wickedness behind this extermination, which, with reference to the actual crimes in Ciudad Juarez, the prototype of Santa Teresa, has been dubbed **feminicidio** or homicide of females. In Bolaño’s work, **feminicidio** takes on the proportions of a new kind of genocide. The Hereros were decimated after their uprising, which had been triggered by the wish to stop the colonial exploitation. The Jews were of a race doomed to extinction by Nazi ideology. The women of Santa Teresa are abused and slaughtered because they represent the most vulnerable group of population in the era of globalization: they are poor and they are women. In the symbolism of these murders it is possible to read the dreadful prospect of a genocide on the basis of class and gender, and it appears that the dark allegory of Santa Teresa warns us precisely of that.

The coincidences existing between the victims of Santa Teresa and of the Holocaust and Stalinist repressions become obvious in the fifth part, in which we finally come to learn about the life of Prussian-born Hans Reiter, who is to become the world-famous writer, Benno von Archimboldi. The fate of this man is at once ordinary and extremely extraordinary, and this strange combination has been, in all probability, the decisive factor in his development as a writer. Hans Reiter is an autodidact, who educates himself by reading books. The first book he is exposed to, by the way, is a treatise on the flora and fauna of the European coastline.

Reiter drops out of school and for a while works as a drudge in the country house of a rich aristocrat, whose large library gives him access to the treasures of world literature. Reiter’s conscription into the German army as a young man and his participation in World War II indicate a common destiny of German males at the time. Hans Reiter is not a Nazi criminal, he is an ordinary German citizen caught in the whirlpool of that particular historical period. At the end of the war, Hans Reiter is taken prisoner and is kept for some time in a POW camp, upon his release, he moves to Cologne and embarks upon a writing career. The crucial event that takes place in the camp and that will haunt forever the would-be writer is the only crime he commits. Hans Reiter strangles
a certain Sammer, a functionary responsible for sending forced foreign labor from Poland to “las fábricas del Reich” (“the Reich’s factories”) (940, hereinafter my translation). Due to some mistake, he is put in charge of a train full of Jews that should have gone to Auschwitz. He is ordered to execute them himself, which he carries out, after a short spell of moral hesitation, by forwarding the order to his underlings. Although perfectly realizing the enormity of his crime, Sammer tries to come up with extenuating circumstances that sound abysmally lame to his interlocutor: “Otro en mi lugar—le dijo Sammer a Reiter—hubiera matado con sus propias manos a todos los judíos. Yo no lo hice. No está en mi carácter” (“‘Somebody else in my place,’ said Sammer to Reiter, ‘would have killed all those Jews with his own hands. I didn’t do that. It’s not in my character.’”) (959). Sammer’s narrative, which evokes the horrors of the Holocaust, is a revelation which transforms the life of Hans Reiter, who then becomes a murderer and a writer. The Reich functionary’s story opens Reiter’s eyes to the real stakes of this war, making him aware that there is darkness in human nature that has to be faced, and the best way to do it is to create art, in his case, to become a novelist. Archimboldi’s career as a writer may be viewed as a polemical response to Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz. What Hans Reiter realizes is that you must write poetry after Auschwitz, but it should be done in a certain way, it should bear the scars left by the crimes against humanity in order to promote humanitarian values.

The writer Benno von Archimboldi is a man without country and without a whole, integral identity. He willingly transforms himself into a collage made up of different shreds and pieces, like the portraits by the Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, about whom Reiter learns while leafing through the notes left by the Russian-Jewish writer Lev Ansky. Archimboldi constantly changes the place of his habitation, retaining all but a flimsy connection with his editor. But his trajectory, like that of most of the characters, is programmed to home in on the Mexican city in which the rehearsal of a new Holocaust is taking place. Having learned about the murders of the women and about his nephew being suspected as the main perpetrator, the eighty-year-old Archimboldi realizes that at the end of his life he has to face once again the problem that he has dedicated his entire life as a writer to trying to exorcise. His journey to Santa Teresa, which is about to begin on the last page of the novel, is an apocalyptic quest of his own, the results of which we never learn, but we might guess that it will lead him to the realization of the impending danger that might bring about the end of our civilization and bury it in the cemetery of the year 2666, which serves as the title of the novel. In the note to the first edition of the novel, Ignacio Echevarría points out that this date has been borrowed by Bolaño from his previous book, Amuleto (1999), in which Avenida Guerrero is compared to “un cementerio de 2666, un cementerio olvidado debajo de un párpado muerto o nonato, las acuosidades desapasionadas de un ojo que
por querer olvidar algo ha terminado por olvidar todo” (“a cemetery of 2666, a cemetery forgotten under an eyelid, dead or unborn, in the dispassionate wetness of an eye that, wishing to forget something, ended up forgetting everything”) (qtd. in Echevarría 1124).

The apocalyptic imagery in both novels deserves our attention as well. As has already been mentioned, in V. these images are infused with a certain degree of irony. For example, the apocalyptic anxieties over the impending World War, whose shadow hangs over the Egypt episode of the novel, are conveyed through several references to the end of the world. The solemnity with which these references are sometimes charged is undercut by the humor or impropriety of the narrative. In the fifth part of this episode there is an evocation of the main dramatics personae in Islamic eschatology: Mahdi the redeemer, Dejal the antichrist, and Asrafil the angel who will sound the coming of the Last Judgment. However, the apocalyptic tone adopted in this reference is somewhat undermined by the subsequent description of Gebrail, an atheistic namesake of the archangel, contemplating the backside of his horse: “A poor horse’s ass. He nearly laughed. Was this a revelation then from God?” (83). Nevertheless, one should not perceive such conjunction of eschatological imagery and cynical commentary as the mere dismissal of apocalypse as something that will be forever postponed. Even when apocalyptic discourse is made light of, it is possible to discern genuine anxiety: will it be postponed forever, taking into account our knowledge of twentieth century history?

The rat as the inheritor of the depopulated earth is another unmistakably apocalyptic image, especially relevant in the Cold War context, where the rat becomes culturally appropriated as the sole survivor of the nuclear war. The grotesque story about Father Fairing’s enterprise of converting rats to Christianity during the Great Depression as the successors of the soon-to-be extinct New Yorkers suggests to us another instance in V. of a dress rehearsal. This time, it is the rehearsal of a truly apocalyptic event: nuclear holocaust. What is remarkable is that there is also a rat in Bolaño’s 2666. This rat, called Nikita, is the last bosom friend of the Soviet science-fiction writer Efraim Ivanov, with whom he holds long conversations in a prison cell before being wiped out by Stalin’s regime:

Ivánov le contaba a la rata cosas de su madre, en la que solía pensar a menudo, y cosas de sus hermanos, pero evitaba hablar de su padre. La rata, en un ruso, apenas susurrado, la hablaba a su vez de las alcantarillas de Moscú, del cielo de las alcantarillas en donde, debido al florecimiento de ciertos detritus o a un proceso de fosforescencia inexplicable, siempre hay estrellas.

Ivanov told the rat about his mother (he often thought of her) and about his brothers, but he avoided talking about his father. The rat, in its turn, in a barely whispered Russian, told him about the sewers of Moscow, about the sky of the
sewers which always had stars in it thanks to the blossoming of certain debris or to a process of inexplicable phosphorescence. (909)

The entropic symbols in V., like the hothouse or the clock, could also be attributed to the set of apocalyptic images invoking the above-mentioned “slow apocalypse” of gradual universal decline. The mysterious land of Vheissu appears to possess apocalyptic significance as well, encoded in the Vheissu spider monkey found by Hugh Godolphin at the South Pole. Judith Chambers believes that with the Vheissu spider monkey Pynchon allegorically refers to a destructive nuclear energy: “The blue-green spider monkey frozen in the ice at the heart of unexplored territory, like Einstein’s energy locked into structures in a ‘frozen state,’ tells the awesome tale of the thrilling struggle for knowledge . . . Godolphin sees in the Antarctic the discovery of the properties of uranium and thus its natural power” (73).

The apocalyptic symbols present in 2666 are also extremely important. The desecrator of churches who emerges out of nowhere and equally mysteriously disappears could well be the Antichrist of the New Age, who begins his noxious activity by triggering off the female homicides of Santa Teresa. A sinister figure with an enormous bladder that goes from church to church defiling them with his urine and excrement seems to be de-converting Santa Teresa from Christianity, establishing there his reign of terror and injustice inaugurated by the series of female homicides.

An eloquent comment on the world being in the process of dissolution is professor Amalfitano’s “ready-made” gesture, when he attaches a treatise on geometry to the clothes line. The book that purports to describe the earth is subject to the natural elements loose in the primary object of its enquiry. The slowly disintegrating pages of the geometry textbook symbolize the gradual decline of the world around.

The test mannequins SHOCK and SHROUD, as well as the switches in the arms of Bongo-Shaftesbury and Fergus Myxolydian, can be perceived as the symbols of the secular apocalypse to come, in which human beings will be ousted by inanimate forces. A similar attitude towards the danger of losing one’s human properties may be found in the story of Edwin Johns, a mad artist in 2666. He realizes that the only direction left for contemporary art, if it is to remain true to the current precarious situation, is to convert the animate into the inanimate and use it as the material for art. His last painting, or, to be more precise, collage, is the poignant illustration of the distrust of the live human body as the agent capable of slowing down the overall degradation with the power of art. Edwin Johns would not subscribe to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous phrase: “the world will be saved by beauty” (402). The world has little chance to be saved in Bolaño’s novel. Edwin Johns stresses this fact by cutting off his own hand (reminiscent of Van Gogh cutting off his own ear), mummifying it and pasting it onto his self-portrait. Paradoxically enough, in
order to make his representation more true-to-life he reduces the humanity of the original. The creating hand of the artist has become a dead object to be used as a mere detail, no matter how spectacular, in the painting that claims to be the masterpiece of contemporary art. One can see uncanny parallels in the inanimate arms with the switches of Pynchon’s characters and the mummified hand of Bolaño’s mad artist.

2666 is a novel that, by the apocalyptic number in its title and manifold references in the story, tries to awaken us to the realization that we should not treat lightly any sign indicating that there is something amiss at the present moment, for it may have consequences of such great proportions that it will be well nigh impossible to cope with them. The perspective of this book is that of the beginning of the twenty-first century. This period is unavoidably being interpreted as a watershed impregnated with ominous significance due to the experience we had at the fin-de-siècle a hundred years ago. Roberto Bolaño has written a book that does not leave much hope, as it makes us ask ourselves the notorious question from V. as the gratuitous mass murder of women in Santa Teresa seems to be on the wane: “What next? What Apocalypse?” (510).

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Works Cited

The Crying of Lot 49 is often relegated to a sort of secondary status within Thomas Pynchon’s novelistic production. It has been highly criticized for its lack of resolution, and students reading it were said to fall into one of two groups: “those who hated the novel, and those who hated it a lot.” And yet, its manageable size and tightly (dis)organized focus make it the most accessible of Pynchon’s novels, if not the best understood. To a great extent, failure to understand the novel is the result of insufficient reader involvement. Pynchon requires far more from us than careful reading, he compels us as readers to go outside the novel and in this way participate actively in its construction. Entropy is frequently addressed by the author in his short stories and novels, and receives particular attention in Lot 49. Could reader input possibly serve to counterbalance entropy? Are we as readers expected to participate actively in the construction of Thomas Pynchon’s work and in so doing enable its uniqueness? The input of additional effort required on the part of the reader in researching areas for proper understanding of the novel may well be Pynchon’s way of combating the entropic nature of communication. Typically, Pynchon never overtly tells the reader to look outside the confines of the novel. The act of reading Lot 49 therefore proves either a highly exhilarating or deeply stressful experience, depending on the type and extent of reader involvement.

Constructed and scripted in the guise of a detective story, it comes as no surprise that the key to unlocking the mystery is presented early on and is clearly stated. After introducing Oedipa and her disk jockey husband, Wendell Mucho Maas, Pynchon offers background on Oedipa’s relationship with former lover Pierce Inverarity, now deceased, and of whose estate she has been named executrix:

And [Oedipa] had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of
Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she’d happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass. But dauntless, perhaps using one of his many credit cards for a shim, he’d slipped the lock on her tower door and come up the conchlike stairs, which, had true guile come more naturally to him, he’d have done to begin with. But all that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower. In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre,” were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, with all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (20-21)

Coming, as it does, so early in the novel, the reader is likely to overlook what constitutes the novel’s real theme. What elicits Oedipa’s reaction on viewing the central panel of the Remedios Varo triptych “Bordando el manto terrestre”? The answer is that Oedipa Maas is nothing less than the novelistic projection of the heroines of Remedios Varo, who are in turn the artistic alter egos of the exiled Spanish painter. Oedipa is brought to tears by the central personage in the triptych because she identifies completely with the heroine, as well as with situations revealed in Varo’s other paintings which logically would have been displayed in the same exhibition to which Pynchon refers. The author’s dissatisfaction with his publisher at the publishing of Lot 49 is common knowledge, and it has been suggested the novel was hastily thrown together to meet the terms of Pynchon’s contract. All that may well be, but Pynchon shows a stroke of genius in appropriating the person and artistic personages of Remedios Varo with their multifaceted eccentricities for use in fashioning the character of Oedipa Maas, the only fully developed figure in the novel, much in the same tradition of the “ready made” art objects of French surrealist Marcel Duchamps.

Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she’d wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry. She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple of thousand miles
away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape. What did she desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (21-22; emphasis added)

“Bordando” refers of course to the act of embroidering, but in most languages, by extension, it also refers to a complicated fabrication of half-truths and untruths. As the novel unfolds, Oedipa becomes entangled and lost in the weave of her own investigation. Instead of elucidating, her efforts at detective work produce only greater and greater layers of investigation, more and more foci and the labyrinth grows and grows: “Though she (Oedipa) 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” (81; emphasis added).

In Entropy: A New World View, published some fifteen years after Lot 49, Jeremy Rifkin explains the reason for this confusion:

There is still another way to view the second law [of thermodynamics], the most profound way of all. The Entropy Law is also a statement that all energy in an isolated system moves from an ordered to a disordered state. [...] It must be emphasized that whenever the entropy increase is reversed in one place, it is only done by increasing the overall entropy of the surrounding environment. (43)

Akin to the advice the Red Queen gives to Alice in Alice in Wonderland, “Hereabouts it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast” (Act Two, Scene 3: The Garden Path 66), the more Oedipa (and the reader) delves into the estate and legacy of Pierce Inverarity and explores the Tristero, the greater becomes the resulting entropy and confusion.

“Bordando el manto terrestre” is the name of the central panel of the triptych. Pynchon purposely limits his comments to this tableau, because the bracketing first and third panels provide additional information that immediately reveals the course and plot of the novel. In the same way Pynchon
elaborates on the clever forgeries of texts (*The Courier’s Tragedy*) and artifacts (US postage stamps), he also “forges” (both by omission and also by deliberate misrepresentation) the true meaning of the Remedios Varo paintings that drive *Lot 49* from start to finish. (See endnote for Remedios Varo websites.)

Pynchon’s subterfuge may seem quite unfair, breaking faith as it does with novelistic and particularly detective story tradition which has the reader placing his trust in the author to impart all information necessary for the reader to follow the action, understand its message, and finally solve the crime. But such sleight of hand (or pen) is precisely what makes reading Thomas Pynchon both a mindless pleasure and a challenging (although frustrating) intellectual experience. Pynchon leaves a breadcrumb trail of clues, à la Hansel and Gretel, but we must go outside the author’s text if we are to fully appreciate Oedipa’s situation. Further into the novel, Pynchon specifically equates Oedipa’s role with that of a classic detective: “Where was the Oedipa who’d driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery. But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on” (124). As we shadow Oedipa’s progress in attempting to resolve the enigma of Pierce Inverarity’s estate and resulting legacy, we as readers function in much the same capacity. In retrospect, we can’t say that we weren’t warned.

The left-hand or first panel of Remedios Varo’s triptych is titled *Hacia la Torre,* ‘Toward the Tower,’ and provides additional details. In her engaging and masterful biography *Remedios Varo—Unexpected Journeys,* Janet Kaplan explains it thus:

Varo shows her self-portrait character as one of a group of identical uniformed girls bicycling away from a beehive tower in which they were being held captive. Led by a “Mother Superior” figure and by an ominous man from whose bag fly birds that hover overhead as a guardian cordon . . . The tone may be somber, but she laced her painting with whimsy, inventively constructing the girl’s bicycles from the stiffened materials of their own clothing. She also championed independence, placing in the first row of the group mesmerized by its leaders a girl who rebels, her gaze reaching out defiantly, resisting what Varo termed “the hypnosis.” (18)

Much of the interest and value of *Lot 49* is the result of Oedipa Maas’ transition from the role of domestic housewife, attendee at Tupperware and fondue parties and young Republican to the intrepid traveler on an unexpected journey, a scenario literally lifted from the art of Remedios Varo. Kaplan continues:

In the central panel of the autobiographical triptych, *Embroidering Earth’s Mantel / Bordando el manto terrestre,* Varo offered a closer look at the life of a convent
student. The same young girls, here captive in a tower, work as in a medieval
scriptorium, embroidering the mantle of the world according to the dictates
of a “Great Master.” This hooded figure reads from the catechism of instructions
while stirring a broth boiling in the same alchemical vessel from which the girls
draw their embroidery thread. Each girl works alone, embroidering images onto
a continuous fabric that spills out from the table-height battlements around
the facets of the tower. Together they create a landscape with houses, ponds,
streams, boats, animals and humans, all nestled within the folds of the fabric.
Their is the traditional work of the convent, where needlework was deemed a
skill appropriate for cultured young women. . . .

Characteristically, Varo treated such tradition with irony. Among the girls
working diligently, each at her own table, guarded by a comical veiled figure who
lurks in the background playing a flute, Varo’s rebellious heroine has “embroidered
a trick in which one can see her together with her lover,” their rendezvous subtly
visible in a rendering hidden upside-down with the folds that flow from her table.
In a masterful variant on the myth of creation, she has used this most genteel
of domestic handicrafts to create her own hoped-for escape. Unlike Rapunzel
and the Lady of Shalott, Varo’s young heroine imprisoned in the tower is not
merely a metaphor for confinement, but also an agent of her own liberation.
To free herself from the strict academic tradition of faithfully recreating nature
according to preordained rules and from the anonymity of being one among an
indistinguishable many (all the girls have the same face), she connives to flee the
tower that isolates her from the very life she is expected to create.” (19, 21)

The angst and shared frustration Oedipa experiences on viewing the
central panel has its outward manifestation in the tears welling up behind
her bubble shades. It should be noted that Oedipa’s initial reaction is that
of identifying her current status in life with Remedios Varo’s heroines and it
may also reflect postmodernist angst, since she accompanied Pierce to the
exhibition and of course was not occupied with the details of his “legacy” at
the time. Kaplan summarizes the final panel of the triptych as follows:

The title of the third panel, The Escape / La Huida, attests to her success. Here
she is shown with her lover fleeing to the mountains. Again, fantasy builds on
autobiography. Varo did escape at the age of twenty-one in 1930, by marrying
Gerardo Lizarraga, a fellow artist, whom she had met while both were attending
the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid. In Varo’s fanciful depiction, the couple
flees in a magical vehicle that looks like a furry inverted umbrella floating on a
foggy mist. Their capes billow out behind them, catching the wind and acting as
sails. This vehicle is one of many that she created, each differing in design from
the others but all bearing the Varo touch of fantastic yet plausible detail. (23)

Unlike the description Pynchon provides, the denouement of Remedios
Varo’s triptych is clearly optimistic: Varo’s rebellious heroine has escaped the confines of the tower with her lover and is free. In point of fact, the author lies to the reader when he writes: “there’d been no escape” (CL 21). Not only had there been escape, *The Escape* is the title of the third panel. By withholding mention of the first and third panels of the triptych, Pynchon prolongs the suspense of Oedipa’s eventual escape from the tower of the central panel. Some twenty pages ahead, following her first tryst with the lawyer Metzger, Oedipa muses: “Things then did not delay in turning curious. If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something’s secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night’s infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically. That’s what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together. As if (as she’d guessed that first minute in San Narciso) things were revelation in progress all around her” (44).

The passage above refers to the oft-cited arrival of Oedipa in San Narciso. The technique of “mise en abime” generates a sense of disorientation and impending doom, and causes both the reader and Oedipa to pause and reflect on her state of mind. Pynchon maintains this same mood of prescience and foreboding throughout the entire novel. Also, despite Pynchon’s admission “things were revelation in progress all around her,” this revelation fails to reveal itself in any meaningful way to Oedipa or the reader and on the contrary heightens frustration and paranoia:

She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all around the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. She suspected that much. She thought of Mucho, her husband, trying to believe in his job. Was it something like this he felt, looking through the soundproof glass at one of his colleagues with a
headset clamped on and cueing the next record with movements stylized as the handling of chrism, censer, chalice might be for a holy man [. . . ]? (24-25)

Additional clues both to Oedipa’s character as well as to incidents in the novel and its ultimate denouement are provided by other Varo paintings probably included in the same exhibition viewed by Oedipa and Pierce in Mexico City.

Of Rupture / Ruptura (1955), Kaplan writes: “Reflecting on the break that she had found it necessary to make with the institutions and traditions of her past, she (Varo) depicted a cloaked and hooded figure descending a long flight of stairs, leaving a building from which dead leaves and old papers flutter” (23). This painting may have served as inspiration for the futility of Oedipa’s “paper chase.”

Sympathy / Simpatía (1955) is a likely source for the hair-spray incident in the bathroom of the Echo Courts motel as Oedipa prepares for the game of “Strip Boticelli” with Metzger. This all too bizarre tableau had to come from somewhere and the random action portrayal of uncontrolled objects and animals (cats) is a repeated motif in Varo’s work. The incident serves to foreshadow Oedipa’s zigzagging investigation of Pierce Inverarity’s legacy and forewarns the reader that its progress, like the trajectory of the zooming hair-spray can, is beyond her ability to determine: “The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn’t fast enough” (37) The term “web” at first appears an odd choice, until we consider that a spider weaves its web, bringing us back to the initial metaphor of weaving or “embroidering earth’s mantle / bordando el manto terrestre.”

The Useless Science or The Alchemist (1955) repeats the theme of the author becoming the very subject of his composition, paralleling the possibility the deceased Pierce Inverarity has somehow constructed the entire paranoid universe that Oedipa seeks to resolve. Pynchon simultaneously casts doubt on this possibility when he says of Inverarity: “he’d slipped the lock on her tower door and come up the conchlike stairs, which, had true guile come more naturally to him, he’d have done to begin with” (20). This same concept is found in director of The Courier’s Tragedy Randolph Dribblette’s statement: “You guys, you’re like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you’re looking for, but’ —a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head— ‘in here. That’s what I’m for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? They’re rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor’s memory, right? But the reality is in this head. Mine. I’m the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also” (79; emphasis added). Oedipa dutifully notes in her memo book as “Under the symbol she’d copied off the latrine
wall of The Scope into her memo book, she wrote *Shall I project a world?* If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help” (82). Such statements support the premise that it is the role of the reader to determine what constitutes the reality of the novel.

About Varo’s painting *To Be Reborn* (1960), Kaplan explains:

The setting is a sacred room deep within a forest. A woman again bursts through a wall, coming to her revelation in naked innocence, as if newly born [think “Birth of Venus” which parodies Oedipa’s rebirth during the “Strip Boticelli” incident]. Looking into a chalice filled with liquid, she sees reflected not her face but a crescent moon. She is ecstatic, her eyes wide with wonder; for she has been allowed a secret wisdom—a glimpse of the Holy Grail allowed only to the initiated. It is as though the fertile vegetation of the room, the magic of the chalice, and the magnetic power of the moon have pulled her forth, releasing her from confinement. Varo’s painting *To Be Reborn* (1960) reflects the personal quest for spiritual awareness that she herself had undertaken.” (166-67)

Kaplan’s evaluation ties in nicely with *Lot 49* on several levels. The Paranoids’ Serenade: “As I lie and watch the moon / On the lonely sea, / Watch it tug the lonely tide / Like a comforter over me, / The still and faceless moon / Fills the beach tonight / With only a ghost of day, / All shadow gray, and moonbeam white. / And you lie alone tonight, / As alone as I; / Lonely girl in your lonely flat, well that’s where it’s at, / So hush your lonely cry. / How can I come to you, put out the moon, send back the tide? / The night has gone so gray, I’d lose the way, and it’s dark inside. ? No, I must lie alone, / Till it comes for me; / Till it takes the sky, the sand, the moon, and the lonely sea. / And the lonely sea … etc. [FADE OUT]” (39-40). Oedipa’s rebirth results from too many libations and she alone has the chalice: “‘Come in,’ she said [to Metzger], ‘but I only have one glass.’ ‘I,’ the gallant Metzer let her know, ‘can drink out of the bottle.’” (29)

Remedios Varo’s heroines provide us with a ready-made portrait of Oedipa Maas. In fact, there is no physical description of Oedipa anywhere in the novel. Specifically, there are five references to shoes, which at first would appear arbitrary, but as the experienced reader of Thomas Pynchon’s novels is aware, few if any details are ever arbitrary and none ever occur by
happenstance. For instance, when Oedipa dines with her lawyer Roseman, he “tried to play footsie with her under the table. She was wearing boots, and couldn’t feel much of anything. So, insulated, she decided not to make any fuss” (19); or when Oedipa visits Yoyodyne: “Heads came up at the sound of her heels, engineers stared until she’d passed, but nobody spoke to her” (84); or when Oedipa tracks the young W.A.S.T.E. mailman, she congratulates “herself on having thought to wear flats, at least” (130); or when she prepares to visit Emory Bortz: “Oedipa showered, put on a sweater, skirt and sneakers, wrapped her hair in a studentlike twist, went easy on the makeup” (148); or, lastly, when Oedipa finally realizes Pierce Inverarity is really dead and the “spell” is broken: “She turned, pivoting on one stacked heel, could find no mountains either” (177). The last reference is of particular importance and takes the reader back to Oedipa’s first encounter with Remedios Varo’s *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle / Bordando el manto terrestre*. The phrase “pivoting on one stacked heel” indicates both a radical change in course and direction—this is the moment Oedipa realizes the quest is over—and the multifarious details and false leads had perhaps been “stacked” against her.

Oedipa’s lack of physical attributes (other than those “lent” by Remedios Varo’s heroines) is deliberate, for she is everywoman—once again the object of the quest is also the means used to approach it. Also, Oedipa drinks copiously throughout the novel, which trait, while working well within the plot, may also be a tip of the hat to *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (1959).

On *Spiral Transit*, Kaplan writes:

> Similar travelers bound into vehicles of varying design appear, where they carefully navigate a spiraling course through the waterways of a medieval walled city. They, too, are embarked on a journey beyond the realm of mere navigation. As with the river explorer [*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*], theirs is a spiritual voyage, tracing the spiral of unfolding consciousness in egg-shaped boats that resemble the vessels in which the alchemical transformation takes place. This entire composition is also remarkably similar to a Renaissance alchemical drawing of the Lapis Sanctuary, in which the tower at the center of the maze hides the Philosopher’s Stone (a key element in alchemical transformation). Although it is possible that Varo might have come across a reproduction of this seventeenth-century Dutch rendering in her alchemical reading, it is more likely that such congruence of imagery (as with her visualizations of scientific speculations) reflects her intuitive understanding or (in terms closer to Varo’s way of thinking) her magic envisioning of a phenomenon never seen. (169)

Oedipa Maas is reading book reviews in *Scientific American* at the start of *Lot 49*. This detail seems somewhat incongruous, given her attendance at Tupperware and fondue parties. The spiraling, circular construction of the
novel is unmistakable—the novel ends with its very title, “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49.” She seems to have gotten nowhere. When she decides to “track down” the Tristero mail delivery system, she winds up back at her starting point, the house of John Nefastis. The GI's bones return home to the USA from Italy to be used in the charcoal filters of cigarettes.

Even the most cursory comparison of the referenced Remedios Varo paintings and the painter herself shows a perfect overlapping with Oedipa. There results a transfer of character, personality and traits from Remedios Varo’s paintings to Oedipa. The reader who has traveled outside the novel and viewed Remedios Varo’s paintings will not be bothered in the least by the omission of details concerning Oedipa’s past, since everything the reader needs to know in order to understand Oedipa's character and steadfast application in her search/quest is already present in Varo's work.

Central to the question of entropy in the novel is a machine invented by John Nefastis that purportedly contradicts the concept of entropy. Approximately halfway through the novel, Oedipa visits the inventor intent on learning whether or not she is a “sensitive.” Nefastis explains the phenomenon to Oedipa in this way:

“Communications is the key,” cried Nefastis. “The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The Demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information….”

“Entropy is a figure of speech, then,” sighed Nefastis, “a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true.” (105-6)

Despite her best efforts, Oedipa cannot connect with the Demon, and leaves frustrated. The Demon is evoked again, near the end of the story, to demonstrate a lack of ability to transfer information. “But as with Maxwell’s Demon, so now. Either she could not communicate, or he did not exist” (162).

Oedipa’s lack of success with Maxwell’s Demon serves as a metaphor for her similar lack of success at breaking the code and revealing the secret of the Tristero. In light of the open ending, with Oedipa awaiting “the crying of lot 49,” the reader is literally back at the beginning of the novel, as paranoid and frustrated as Oedipa. The Demon also serves as metaphor for the reader’s inability to resolve his/her reading of the novel in a satisfactory manner. Lot 49 offers multiple possible endings and an equal number of hypothetical interpretations or readings of the story. Readers and critics alike are divided on both plot (Communications Overload / The Whoring & Narcissism of
Southern California / Paranoia / Condemnation of American consumerism) and outcome (darkly pessimistic and negative / ambiguous — can’t determine / hopefully optimistic but lacking proof).

If this were not enough, the reader still has to comprehend what constitutes the REAL meaning of Pynchon’s novel, which derives its plot engine from the work of Remedios Varo whose inspiration can be traced back to the Spanish Golden Age.

Lot 49 is heavily invested with mythology. The feeling of “all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair” (14) that Mucho Maas experiences with the defective used cars traded in at the lot where he worked might also refer to the reader’s predicament on confronting a veritable salad of mythology and historical facts. There are classical references to Rapunzel, hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning evoking Egyptians and other ancient rites, the Birth of Venus (a recurring artistic reference in Pynchon’s work, first seen in V. and later in Gravity’s Rainbow), Narcissus, passing through the Pony Express, the first USSR vs USA confrontation, and so forth.

Then, to our “salad of despair” are added references to the Southern California cultural landscape of the period, American cultural values in general, as well as a thorough discussion of the Scurvhamites, Jacobean revenge dramas, and the history of the postal service, from its inception to the present underground replacement in use by opponents to “their” regimented system. Pynchon introduces the reader to the concept of applied entropy and invites or rather compels the reader to assist in combating what Jeremy Rifkin claims to be the operational philosophy of the twentieth century by actively engaging in the construction of the novel. Instead of a simple explanation of the phenomenon of entropy, Pynchon transfers the very anxiety of entropy itself directly to the reader, who experiences the same existential angst as the heroine Oedipa.

Immediately following the religious moment and near revelation on arriving in San Narciso, Oedipa chooses by chance the “Echo Court.” We are told that her dead lover Pierce Inverarity, had literally built the entire city, complete with its own freeway, in his own likeness. That’s über narcissistic (Southern California’s self-love is one of the plots advanced by some readers and critics). Greek mythology relates that Narcissus was such a handsome, self-absorbed young man that he literally fell in love with himself, and spent all his time admiring his own reflection. Among his admirers was a nymph who fell head over heels in love with him, but she could not compete with Narcissus’ self-love, and so she slowly pined away, until all that was left was her name—Echo:

A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air; the sign, lit up despite the sun, said “Echo Courts.” The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa’s, which didn’t startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph’s gauze chiton in constant
agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker’s but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. (26-27)

A closer reading of the preceding paragraph provides the following information:

- The term “nymph” (Echo) occurs four times.
- The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa’s.
- Like the nymph, Oedipa’s breasts and legs are constantly appreciated throughout the novel.
- The nymph is wearing a gauze chiton [“a loose garment of varying length, similar to a tunic, worn by both men and women in ancient Greece” – Webster’s]
- Her smile was . . . nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love.

Unlike Narcissus’ nymph, Oedipa consummates her love with the narcissistic Metzer, child actor and now actor-turned-lawyer, where he acts in court. But instead of dying from love, the game of Strip Boticelli with Metzger, as we saw, liberates her (The Birth of Venus) and frees her from the tower, allowing her to proceed with The Escape (final panel of Remedios Varo triptych). Later, when Metzger deserts her and elopes for Las Vegas with Serge’s “depraved 15-year-old girlfriend,” the now liberated (that is, released from the tower) Oedipa shows a reaction of unusual strength: “No word to recall that Oedipa and Metzger had ever been more than co-executors. Which must mean, thought Oedipa, that that’s all we were. She should have felt more classically scorned, but she had other things on her mind” (148).

The doppelgangers/role models of Remedios Varo and Echo come together with Oedipa’s arrival: “in the Berkeley hills at a sprawling, many-leveled, German-baroque hotel, carpeted in deep green, going in for curved corridors and ornamental chandeliers. . . . The clerk took her to a room with a reproduction of a Remedios Varo in it, through corridors gently curving as the streets of San Narciso, utterly silent” (101). The presence of the Remedios Varo is another deliberate touch by Pynchon to take the reader back to the initial scene of Oedipa at the exhibition and to underline the relationship Oedipa = Remedios Varo’s heroine.

Given the upward spiral (Berkeley Hills), and the deep green (forest green?) carpet and curved (spiraled?) corridors, Oedipa is in fact climbing the mountain to attain spiritual self awareness, the journey evoked in the final panel of the triptych, The Escape. Later, at the same hotel, her dancing with the deaf-mutes would have been called an Anarchist miracle by Jesús Arrabal. (131). Oedipa first checks into the hotel and “escapes” from her
metaphorical tower imprisonment a little more than halfway through the novel. She will use the rest of the novel to attempt to solve her quest for meaning.

Shortly prior to the end of the novel, Oedipa again finds herself alone, but this time her isolation is in fact liberation. Her mood may well coincide with that of the Remedios Varo heroine of *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (1959). Kaplan writes,

The intrepid traveler is a most determined woman who bears particular resemblance to Varo herself. A courageous heroine, she has set out on a solitary journey to find “the source.” Although she is dressed in a marvelously adapted English trench coat and bowler hat, carrying wings overhead that seem to have been borrowed from a theatrical production, the seriousness of her purpose is not compromised. The playfulness of her vehicle—a waistcoat transformed into a fragile little ship with notes in the side pocket [sound familiar?] and a compass instead of a watch fob [at the end of the novel, Oedipa is said “to have lost her bearings”]—does not negate the intensity of her expression nor the somber watchfulness of the dark birds that attend her from the hollows of nearby trees. What she confronts in a simple wineglass, set on a modest table in a hollowed-out tree. A magical liquid flows out of the goblet, becoming the source of the river on which she travels. (168-69)

The beauty and magical attraction of Remedios Varo’s paintings is that they always provide resolution that can be easily grasped by the viewer. In the case of *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*, the “intrepid traveler” has in fact journeyed to the source of the Orinoco River alone and succeeded in identifying that source, an overflowing wine glass. Much as the young girls in the tower, “bordando el manto terrestre” which will become the world and everything in it, and Oedipa viewing the painting, crying in despair until her tears fill up her eye sockets and the space behind the bubble shades, such solutions speak to our emotions, and provide a surrealist, if not logical, solution. Like Remedios Varo’s heroines, Oedipa, too, has embarked on a solitary, unexpected journey, the destination of which remains unforeseen:

They are stripping from me, she said subvocally—feeling like a fluttering curtain in a very high window, moving up to then out over the abyss [“mise en abime”]—they are stripping away, one by one, my men. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband, on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of the elaborate candy house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever for love; my one extra-marital fella has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the Trystero has taken a Brody. Where am I? (153)
And for a while, things appear even bleaker:

She (Oedipa) stood between the public [phone] and the rented car, in the night, her isolation complete, and tried to face toward the sea. But she’d lost her bearings. She turned, pivoting on one stacked heel, could find no mountains either. As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land. San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant, spherical, the sound of a stainless orchestral chime held among the stars and struck lightly), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle. Pierce Inverarity was really dead. (177)

The added value of Remedios Varo’s multiple and important contributions to the novel inform the character of Oedipa Maas and further enable her to overcome the Narcissus complex at Echo Courts. The strengthened and fortified personality of the heroine allows the reader to appreciate her triumph. Oedipa has, in fact, reached the summit of the magical mountain and completed her quest: “She (Oedipa) had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America” (178).

In this sense, the ending of the novel is only mildly ambiguous. Oedipa is ready for the outcome, whatever it may be. The way the novel ends, restating its title, is a source of great frustration for many, who point out that we are literally back at the start of the novel. Not so. The circular nature of the final sentence “Oedipa sat back to await the crying of lot 49,” is just another in a long series of circular references in the novel, as in Varo’s Spiral Transit. What is important to see is that with each lap of the circuit, the traveler increases in experience and spiritual enlightenment.

The dissatisfaction evoked by readers with Pynchon’s failure to end the novel properly, and his failure to provide an explanation of the enigma of the Trystero indicates a basic misreading of the novel itself, which has little to do with solving a detective type mystery and everything to do with the epic journey of self-awareness. Kaplan writes of the sense of a female vision [that] pervades Varo’s work. It informs her choice of symbols (the crescent moon reflected in the chalice, figures emerging out of vaginal slits surrounded by labial folds) and her depiction of the figures who experience psychic awakening as specifically female. Women are central to these compositions, and Varo makes their experience paramount, reflecting the personal quest for spiritual awareness that she herself had undertaken. (166-67)

Like the journeys of Remedios Varo’s heroines, Oedipa’s unexpected journey is a quest for spiritual awareness and self-knowledge. This sacred mission also explains the virtual absence of the “F-word” in Lot 49. In fact, there are
very few occurrences of what appears to be Pynchon’s favorite American vocabulary item in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and both are obscured or hidden. The first is in the reversed call letters of the radio station where Mucho is a disk jockey—“KCUF”—most appropriate given the sublimated sexual urges of the station’s musical message. The second is the name of the publisher of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, Da Chingado, which we may take as “screwed” which again is most appropriate for Oedipa’s condition given her fruitless research on the text.

Such a spiritual journey also evokes Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, when the Don advises Sancho Panza, “has de poner los ojos en quien eres, procurando conocerte a ti mismo, que es el más difícil conocimiento que puede imaginarse” (“you have to look at who you are, trying to know yourself, which is the most difficult knowledge that can be imagined”) (2.42).

To conclude, additional reader input is required to achieve adequate understanding of Oedipa’s state of mind at the denouement, a term which is in fact inappropriate, because there is no “unknotting” of the story. We, as readers, cannot change the text. As Dribblette said: “Puritans, hung up on words.” But our input does, in a sense, counteract the latent entropy that results from such a rich text. As elected readers of Pynchon we participate actively in the final construction of the novel, with all the rights and privileges attached thereto. Perhaps Thomas Pynchon has reserved a special award for the close reader, much as we give pets a special treat after they perform a clever trick. “‘Your fly is open,’ whispered Oedipa. She was not sure what she’d do when the bidder revealed himself” [Mindless Pleasure] (183).

Over the course of the novel, Pynchon has introduced the reader to the wondrous, haunting, surrealistic world of Remedios Varo and provided opportunity, encouragement and motivation for introspection and self-examination of values. Oedipa is caught in the vortex of this introspection and the reader is invited to accompany her on the journey. Only in one Varo painting, *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*, does the (female) quester find the goal (and a surprising one at that). The goal is not what matters, only the journey.

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**Works Cited**


Websites devoted to Remedio Varo y Uranga:

http://www.angelfire.com/hiphop/diablo4u/remedios.html
http://www.hungryflower.com/leorem/varo.html
(contains many links to other sites)
http://www.turingmachine.org/remedios/expo.html
Throughout the pages of his literary universe, Thomas Pynchon has frequently shown a meticulous interest in the notion of entropy. Many papers have been written on the subject. Elsewhere, I have stressed the authorial play, pervasive and ironic, on the binary constituted by “energy” and “entropy” that exists in what I defend as Pynchon’s evolving literary project (Collado Rodríguez 2004). Binaries—and energy/entropy is probably the most important one, because it refers directly to our condition of mortality—are always categorical, and even if we are aware of them, we cannot escape from their rule. Language, in the postmodernist sense, is our trap, a trap that produces social hierarchies by means of its categorical implications. Such implications, as many critics now understand, cannot be avoided, precisely because language is a tool also exposed to the arrow of time, that is to say, to the rule of entropy. When we talk, we do it in time, and therefore we have to choose our words—excluding the use of many other words—and produce our selected words one after the other, following the temporal line.

However, as my reading of Pynchon’s novels suggests, we can try to keep a certain ironic distance from the social implications that language always transmits or creates.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the advent of relativity theory and its cultural impact, the notions of energy and entropy had also forced their entrance into the discourse of the humanities and the social sciences. Even a few years earlier, by the turn of the century, as readers of Pynchon’s fiction know, the American historian Henry Adams had already dramatized the search for energy (whether as Virgin or Dynamo) in a universe of forces threatened by entropy. In the second half of the twentieth century, Thomas Pynchon follows Adams’s intellectual quest in a parodic and postmodern vein where energy, which Adams roots in the mythic Spirit of Life, is reiteratively symbolized as a female principle frequently subjugated by a male entropic bond. Throughout his novels and short stories, Pynchon textualizes energy in different forms: it is spiritual and religious (Venus and
the Virgin), it is informational (messages and communication), it is cabalistic (anthropologist James Frazer’s undefined zone between religion and science), it is scientific (mechanical, electrical, radioactive, and cosmic), it is literary (parody and intertextuality), and it is political (freedom and democracy). Meanwhile, entropy represents disorder, loss, or disjunction, and therefore poses a constant threat to the free flow of the manifestations of energy in the different textual symbols that Pynchon has used to represent the notion in his novels: political conspiracy, fascism, consumerism, or posthumanity.

However, Pynchon’s complex texts are provocatively ambiguous. That is to say, by offering no clear conclusions and by being located in uncertain contexts, they also warn readers not to fall easy prey to binary thinking and to its corresponding categorical understanding of life. Not surprisingly, in the Pynchonian universe, entropy also manifests itself as debris, social rubbish, as the symbol that represents woman, the queer, the victim of the system, or the dark side that has never occupied the discursive center—a throne only reserved for the WASP. One of the main intertextual notions at the back of this anti-categorical strategy in Pynchon’s fiction is, as some critics have pointed out, Jungian theory, especially the psychoanalyst’s beliefs in what he denominated the archetypes of the Christian Divine Tetrarchy. The notion of a female energy at loose throughout human history reads in Pynchon’s pages both as a positive and as a negative anima, a beautiful but terrifying siren or nixie. Meanwhile, dark male forces, hetero or homosexual drives, or hidden conspiracies emanating from the shadows of history continuously interrupt or deter the free flow of vital energy. However, in modernist Jungian terms, it is only by the combined intervention of female and male, anima and shadow, spirit and instincts, that the ultimate archetype of meaning or revelatory Logos can ever be attained. Furthermore, Jung himself insists that the anima is the female side conceived in the personality of all males, and that females also have a harmonizing male principle in them, the animus (Jung 24-31).

Nonetheless, postmodernist Pynchon suggests that if the male suffocates the female, the vital spirit or energy represented by the anima cannot flow, and entropy finally rules. Within the invisible author’s complex universe, I intend to exemplify his symbolic play and disruption of the categorical binaries male/female and entropy/energy by addressing two specific but apparently very dissimilar Spanish elements respectively found in The Crying of Lot 49 and in Gravity’s Rainbow. They deal with the real-life painter Remedios Varo and with the Spanish Foreign Legion.

The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) is Thomas Pynchon’s second published novel but, within his fictional universe, this small book contains what we might call as the third chronological manifestation of the female energy represented by V.: first, we have the Lady V. of the eponymous first novel (1963), dealing with the early part of the twentieth century; secondly, her manifestation as the “V2” of the Second World War in Gravity’s Rainbow (1973); thirdly, here the novelist
takes us to the mid-1960s, that is to say, to the period of the counterculture and Governor Ronald Reagan’s California. It is then and there that the figure of the historical personage Remedios Varo adds many nuances to Oedipa’s quest for final revelatory meaning. Remedios is itself a Spanish name traditionally given to girls to commemorate one of several manifestations of Mary in Christian iconography: the Virgen de los Remedios (Virgin of the Remedies). The name fits perfectly in Pynchon’s universe and more so when we consider that even the family name of the Spanish painter, Varo, offered the writer an extra possibility to further his game of the capitalized V., the letter that—as suggested by Henry Adams in “The Dynamo and the Virgin”—symbolically stands for spiritual and physical energy in the writer’s textual universe. Readers of Pynchon’s first novel may remember that the narrator had left the first female embodiment of V., disguised as the Bad Priest, dead in Malta, paradoxically killed by a bomb dropped by the fascists she was working for. Energy, in the early post-war world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, has already become the force of the rocket that may take humans to the moon or destroy the whole planet, a clear categorical either/or trap; from the electricity generated by the dynamos, the Pynchonian text has moved to the rule of atomic energy and into the prelude of the Cold War. Energy in this third novel can have a clear positive application but it also exposes its darkest, most dangerous side. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the way Pynchon portrayed the condition of the symbolic V. in the story described in his second novel, a story set years later in the new period of hope brought about by the counterculture, the new feminisms, and the Civil Rights movement. Is Oedipa a representation of the 1960s revolutionary ethos? Is she a new manifestation of the female energy represented by the V. of Virgin?

At the beginning of *Lot 49*, Oedipa certainly looks like the embodiment of a weak female type of energy because the narrator describes her as a Republican housewife, fond of liquor and subject to the neo-religious surveillance of the dead eye of the TV tube. In those early moments of the story, her weakness and emotional stagnation are obvious, as she had herself realized when she viewed Varo’s triptych *Bordando el manto terrestre*, a cultural icon that comes into the fictional territory of the novel from the world of factual life. Oedipa sees herself reflected in the girl in the pictures, a figure who apparently is a reflection of the real painter [Virgen de los] Remedios Varo. If we associate the protagonist’s sociological description in the first page of the book to Pynchon’s use of Adams’s metaphor of the principle of life as female energy, it follows that the modernist tower of solipsism—in which both Oedipa and the painted girl/Virgin of the Remedies are enclosed—symbolizes the element of entropic stagnation in the protagonist’s life, her lack of mobility, and her necessity to break out and, by so doing, bring about the regeneration of life.

Such necessity for free energy flow motivates Oedipa’s quest, manifested in a series of adventures that will transform her explicitly into the Virgin of the
Pietà (87) and, eventually, into the new womb for Pentecostal revelation at the end of the book, if she can ever escape from the trap of textuality. From a Jungian perspective, both the Virgin in the context of Christian religion and Oedipa in the fictional world of the novel, are representations of the anima, the female principle trapped by the status quo but expecting to be released. Meanwhile, Hernando Joaquin Tristero, also of Spanish stock—and the alleged founder of the dark non-official postal system of the Trystero—represents, together with Pierce Inverarity, the fictional adaptation of a male Jungian shadow (Jung 20-23). This archetype is a primordial source of instinctual energy symbolized by Satan in Jung's writings on the Christian Divine Tetrarchy. Correspondingly, in *Lot 49*, the shadow comes from the pre-consumerist past symbolized by Tristero and his organization, but also from the world of dreams manifested in Pierce's interruption of Oedipa's sleep, as reported almost at the beginning of the story, when the protagonist's former lover explicitly tells her through the phone, using one of his many parodic "tongues," that he is the Shadow (6), the hero of a popular radio serial and comic strip.

From a Jungian perspective, though, this complex amount of apparent male “negative” energy represented by the shadow needs to be assimilated and re-conducted by the heroine in order to reach the expected revelation that might bring about the release of her contained vital energy, that is to say, the revelation in the form of a new(born) life.1 It should be stressed here that, as happens to the anima, in Jungian terms, the shadow is a principle which is negative and positive at one and the same time, in open contradiction with Aristotle's categorical Law of the Excluded Middle. The assimilation of this apparently evil principle is basic for Oedipa's understanding of her own role as Virgin and defender of the marginal human preterite.

In fact, in *Lot 49* textual connections between Jungian criticism and Oedipa's pre-ordered mythic path of regeneration are sometimes presented explicitly. After dealing with the archetype of the anima in his influential essay “The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” Jung discusses the symbol of the old sage or benevolent old man who, in his views, represents the archetype of meaning. This principle, Jung writes, is “like the anima, an immortal daemon that pierces the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning” (37, emphasis added). Readers may notice that the passage recalls the name of the shadowy Pierce, and realize the fact that it is his decision to name Oedipa executrix of his estates that compels the heroine towards her modernist-parodic adventure for self-recognition. The Jungian shadow compels her along a sustained quest for meaning, "yo-yoing" up and down the State of California, where Oedipa steadily tries to pierce the dark chaotic forces of Trystero.

While so doing, (narcissistically) following the reflection of the girl in *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, Pynchon's protagonist looks for a male
counterpart, a knight of deliverance or Jungian *animus* that may help her come to the understanding of a final meaning. In one of her adventures, she actually has to deal with a *daemon*—as announced by Jung in the passage above: Maxwell’s. It should be noted here that the real Scottish scientist Clerk Maxwell, in devising his demon, formulated a hypothetical way out (or escape) of the rule of entropy or thermodynamic death by facilitating an ordering, within the chaotic behavior of the molecules, according to their temperature. That is to say, Maxwell intended, from a Jungian perspective, to replace “the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning,” which is what Oedipa systematically tries to do throughout her quest till she finally realizes that “excluded middles [. . .] were bad shit” (125).

We can harness Jung’s well-known essay, “The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” to throw some more light on Pynchon’s difficult novel from a modernist-anthropological angle through his definition of the archetype that stands closest to his notion of the revelation of the power of life. The anti-categorical position of the famous psychoanalyst is obvious in the following passage, as is his updated perspective on the human capacity to impose an interpretation on life and even his glimpse at the dynamics of universal chaos:

> When you come to think about it, nothing has any meaning, for when there was nobody to think, there was nobody to interpret what happened. Interpretations are only for those who don’t understand; it is only the things we don’t understand that have any meaning. Man woke up in a world he did not understand, and that is why he tries to interpret it. *Thus the anima and life itself are meaningless in so far as they offer no interpretation.* Yet they have a nature that can be interpreted, for *in all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order,* in all caprice a fixed law, for everything that works is grounded on its opposite. (31, emphasis added)

Once again, Oedipa reflects, in her adventures, on the quest for the sense of life that Jung associated with the process of revelation that he denominated the “integration of the personality.” However, there are some other layers of significance in the protagonist’s quest for meaning and for imposing order on the apparent chaos of life. Once more, Pynchon makes use of ambiguity to complicate the reader’s apprehension of any final single meaning and to expand Oedipa’s adventure to its political implications. Revelation is never granted in the world external to her mind, that is to say, outside the tower of solipsism of her previous life that—evoking Varo’s girl in the picture—she escapes when leaving home. But in her adventure Oedipa is forced to visit the dispossessed—metaphorically the margins of society—and finally encounter the old sailor, that transforms her symbolically into the new Virgin of the Pietà. Facing the ancient mariner, Oedipa

> was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him,
or would not remember him, without it. Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was
doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held
him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. She
felt wetness against her breasts and saw that he was crying again. (87)

As the narrator explicitly suggests, there is also the possibility that she
might be pregnant. However, at the end of the book, readers cannot be
sure of what might be revealed to her in the auction, or metaphorical Final
Judgment, because the novel ends right at its very beginning, repeating
the words of its title: The crying of lot 49. In other words, neither Oedipa
nor the readers can advance beyond the threshold of the forty-nine and
into the fifty of revelation, into the announcement of the Pentecost or
apocalyptic Second Coming. The protagonist, together with the narrator
and the readers, are all textually trapped by many undecidable moments,
lost in a written labyrinth that pervasively suggests that there is an order
underneath its apparent chaos, while at the same time affirming that,
through the trap of language, seven times seven is all we can aspire to have.
Such a suggestion is what probably impels readers and critics to read Lot
49 again and again and to impose on young students all over the world
the task of dealing with Pynchon’s little novel and its heroine, the Anglo-
Saxon bourgeois housewife who attempts her escape from Varo’s solipsistic
tower and becomes a Virgin of the Remedies for all of us, a symbolic positive
representation of the energy of life itself.

Within the more expanded literary zones of Gravity’s Rainbow—whose
story, let us remember, chronologically represents the second manifestation
of V. in the twentieth century—readers may also recognize the importance
of one of the most powerful motifs in the novel: the alternation of male
and female figures that play different parts in the transgressed binaries
energy/entropy, male/female, good/evil, and anima/shadow. In one of these
symbolic manifestations, one of the male characters, Brigadier Pudding,
briefly refers to the hymn of the Spanish Foreign Legion, a song called “El
novio de la Muerte”—literally the bridedgroom of Death. Pudding does so
when remembering a real historical event in which, readers might guess, he
could have taken part as one of the members of the International Brigades
who came to help the Spanish Republic in her fight against the fascist troops
commanded by General Francisco Franco. However, readers may be misled
here because the real event of the Spanish Civil War that Pudding refers to
is the battle for the city of Badajoz in Extremadura, an episode that took
place in August 1936, only a few days after Franco and other Army generals
started their rebellion against the Spanish Republic. The rebellion started
on July 17th, that is to say, when the International Brigades had not yet been
created. Actually, the first of the International Brigades was not formed until
October 1936. Furthermore, the XV Brigade, which agglutinated volunteers
from Great Britain and North America, was not founded until February 1937. Notwithstanding this misleading chronology, there are other historical reasons that perfectly fit in the context of Pynchon's book.

At the moment in the novel when the Brigadier makes the comment on Badajoz, he is paying a sexual masochistic visit to a woman he names as his “Mistress of the Night”—the female counterpart of the Lord of the Night. This mistress is none other than Katje, a V-2 spy and later operative for the White Visitation who becomes, in Pynchon's third novel, one of the most obvious representations of the uncertain and undecidable figure of the Jungian anima. This is Pudding’s reference, ambiguously presented by the narrator in free indirect discourse before the Brigadier refers to his own memories:

Here is his worst moment. She has refused him before. His memories of the Salient do not interest her. She doesn't seem to care for mass slaughter as much as for myth, and personal terror . . . but please . . . please let her accept . . .

“At Badajoz,” whispering humbly, “during the war in Spain . . . a bandera of Franco’s Legion advanced on the city, singing their regimental hymn. They sang of the bride they had taken. It was you, Mistress: they—they were proclaiming you as their bride . . . .” (234)

Some historical information may help readers clarify Pudding’s recollection. Actually, as reflected in the narrator’s words, history books refer to the battle for Badajoz as a combination of myth and massacre. One of Franco’s aides, Lt. Colonel Yagüe, marched against the Republican-loyalist Extremeñian city with a column—later baptized as “the column of death”—integrated by a regiment or bandera of the Spanish Foreign Legion and by a battalion of regulares or Moorish troops from North Africa.

Even if, from a historical perspective, the presence of Pudding at such an early battle of the Spanish Civil War could be considered unlikely, it seems clear that Pynchon knew about Badajoz and the massacre that Franco’s legionnaires and Moorish troops carried out once they took the city from its Republican defendants. Both legends and history books agree on the fact that at least several hundred, perhaps up to four thousand civilians and prisoners of war were massacred by Lt. Colonel Yagüe’s troops by the walls of the cemetery and in the Badajoz bullring. Some apparent witnesses maintained that prisoners were killed the way bulls are in the Spanish national sport. Some (questionable) records allude even to the existence of a musical band that played the typical Spanish pasodoble songs while Franco’s soldiers were slaughtering people with their bayonets, in a way that clearly emulates the matador’s killing of the powerful bull. Pynchon’s minor reference to the event is, therefore, quite appropriate within the ideological and historical context of Gravity’s Rainbow and, more specifically, of the chapter in which Pudding mentions the battle.
The martial hymn that the British Brigadier mentions is even now considered to be characteristic of Spanish patriarchal patriotism, as it officially stands as the hymn, not only of that particular regiment of the Legión that participated in the battle for Badajoz, as Pudding says, but also, the hymn actually represents the whole military corps. The Spanish Legion is a tough unit created early in the twentieth century to fight against the natives in the colonial wars of North Africa. Readers of Pynchon’s first novel, *V.*, will not miss the colonial link. There is also an aspect in Pynchon’s third novel which is most relevant for many Spaniards: the Foreign Legion was a very active military force in supporting Franco’s rebellion against the Spanish Republic and his subsequent dictatorial regime. In fact, the would-be Generalissimo was for some years a close friend of General Millán Astray, the actual founder of the Spanish Foreign corps. The future dictator cooperated with Astray in the creation of the Legion in 1920, and three years later, although still only a major, Franco became the commanding officer of the African corps. When the Civil War broke out in July 1936, the Spanish Foreign Legion had already fought in a number of African battles and was considered to be the toughest unit in the whole Spanish Army. They immediately became fully loyal to Franco and to the other rebel generals, supporting the military insurrection by landing with Franco in the Peninsula from their quarters in North Africa and the Canary Islands, together with several battalions of *regulares* or Moorish troops. The reference to the anthem of the Legion is, then, again very appropriate within the historical context portrayed in Pynchon’s novel because, in a sense, the Spanish Legionnaires were in the Civil War the equivalent of the German SS in the Second World War, on account both of their bravery and their cruelty.

Furthermore, Pynchon’s allusion to *the bridegroom of Death* also fits in with the double-faced sexual and Jungian parameters of the story. In the hymn, the male voice of a legionnaire boasts about being the bridegroom of a female Death—because, in Spanish, Death is always female. The voice of the soldier also affirms that he is ready to join her in matrimony, that is to say, to dissolve in the final entropic condition of human mortality. The issue, of course, offers an element of anticipation within the context of the novel’s entropic pull, but also a reflective gender contrast with other well-known instances of the book in which the carrier of death is a sadistic male, his victim being a weak target: either an exploited female, or a homosexual lover or, as the case was in Badajoz, many innocent civilians and prisoners of war.

As careful readers of *Gravity’s Rainbow* may recall, the fact that in English Death is often given the male gender is repeated several times in the book before Pudding takes us into Spanish folklore. Thus, soon in the narrative, the writer combines humorous literary parody with Slothrop’s alleged Puritan ancestry to offer his readers some epitaphs such as the following:
Adieu my dear friends, I have come to this grave
Where Insatiate Death in *his* reaping hath brought me.
Till Christ rise again all His children to save,
I must lie, as His Word in the Scriptures hath taught me.

Or the plagiaristic words (from a poem by Emily Dickinson) dedicated to the protagonist’s grandfather Frederick Slothrop, deceased in 1933:

Because I could not stop for Death
*He* kindly stopped for me

(27, emphasis added)

A male gender for death clearly helps in the Pynchonian demotion of Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, symbolically condensed in the abreaction of the Lord of the Night. This male mythological figure anticipates, on several occasions, the role of Katje as his counterpart, the Mistress of the Night in Pudding’s submissive interpretation. In this way, the Brigadier’s reference to the *novio de la Muerte*—the bridegroom of a female Death—confirms both Pynchon’s use of the Jungian notion that archetypes are never one-sided, and the novelist’s insistent ethical notion that, from the post-war world onwards, binaries cannot be taken at face value any more. Pudding, a high-ranking officer who fought in the First World War and is now in command of the White Visitation, chooses—falling into Pointsman’s trap—to be subdued by a female figure who for him openly symbolizes death. However, readers know Katje to be at least a double-agent who can be a passive object of male sexual sadism or, as is the case here, a dominant female used by Pointsman to finally satisfy Pudding’s coprophagic impulses, an obsession that eventually brings about the death of the old General due to intestinal problems. The feces he eats, from his Mistress of the Night, literarily infect Pudding’s guts. Readers might infer that Pynchon condemns him to die in such an unusual way, so that symbolically the old soldier has to pay for his active support of the British colonial Empire. With Pudding dies the old colonial regime, at a moment in which information is explicitly becoming the new gold or Grail searched for by all the servants of the post-nuclear era.

In contrast to Oedipa’s archetypal role in the previous novel but still fulfilling her Jungian assignment, the actual role of Katje throughout the pages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is extremely complex as well as ethically undecidable, and she frequently appears as a victim of men but also as the terrifying incarnation of the female death or Mistress of the Night, a role that even Slothrop feels when making love to her:

He lies on top of her, sweating, taking great breaths, watching her face turned ¾ away, not even a profile, but the terrible Face That is No Face, gone too
abstract, unreachable: the notch of eye socket, but never the labile eye, only the anonymous curve of cheek, convexity of mouth, a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being, of Katje’s being—the lifeless non-face that is the only face of hers he really knows, or will ever remember. (222)

Katje is life and death in Slothrop’s quest for the new Grail of information represented in the G of the plastic “Imipolex G,” but also in Greta, Geli or Gottfried, carriers of another undecidable letter that, in the author’s cabalistic literary universe compels us to go on looking at different faces of the same Jungian archetype, be it a “positive” Virgen de los Remedios or the “evil” entropic bride of the Spanish Foreign Legion.

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Notes

1 According to Jung, behind the “meaningful nonsense played out by the anima” lies the archetype of meaning, “just as the anima is the archetype of life itself” (32, emphasis added).

2 “Waves of nausea, lasting five or ten minutes, would strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then nightmares, menstrual pains. One day she drove into LA, picked a doctor at random from the phone book, went to her, told her she thought she was pregnant. They arranged for tests. Oedipa gave her name as Grace Bortz and didn’t show up for her next appointment” (118).

3 In his influential book on the Spanish Civil War, Hugh Thomas refers to this possibility as totally untrue and argues that this interpretation of the massacre was invented by the Republican newspaper La Voz de Madrid: “Véase el reportaje de Jay Allen publicado el 30 de Agosto en el Chicago Tribune, reproducido por Robert Payne en The Spanish Civil War, Nueva York 1962, págs. 89-91. El 27 de octubre de 1936, en La Voz de Madrid, se publicó una versión completamente falsa de esta ‘matanza’, en la que se acusaba a Yagüe de haber organizado una fiesta en la que había fusilado a los prisioneros ante la flor y nata de la sociedad de Badajoz, y que tuvo efectos desastrosos, pues provocó represalias en Madrid” (Thomas 246).

4 See Tenorio “Las matanzas de Badajoz”, Espinosa La columna de la muerte. El avance del ejército franquista de Sevilla a Badajoz, and Calvo Trenado “La masacre de Badajoz por el ejército franquista en 1936.”

5 The shift from goods to information as the ultimate center of power is made explicit on some occasions in the novel, such as the moment in which Slothrop arrives in Zurich and goes to visit a Russian contact who offers him the possibility of buying a number of valuable things:
“First thing you have to understand is the way everything here is specialized. If it’s watches, you go to one café. If it’s women, you go to another. Furs are subdivided into Sable, Ermine, Mink, and Others. Same with dope: Stimulants, Depressants, Psychomimetics . . . What is it you’re after?”

“Uh, information?” [. . .]

A tragic sigh. “Information. What’s wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world’s gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?” (258)

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The Form of the Conspiracy: 
Ricardo Piglia’s Reading of 
Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* 

David Kelman

The mysteriousness to me . . . of one fellow standing at the beginning of a century, and stretching out his hand as an accomplice towards another fellow standing at the end of it, without either having known of the other’s existence,—all that did but sharpen the interest of wonder that gathered about the general economy of Secret Societies. —Thomas De Quincey, “Secret Societies”

In an 1847 essay on “Secret Societies,” Thomas De Quincey speaks of the curious effect produced by any story about a secret society or conspiracy of individuals. By referring to the “wonder that gathered about the general economy of Secret Societies,” he expresses both the fascination and confusion often produced by conspiracy narratives. In effect, De Quincey’s essay presents the following problem: What would it mean to tell a story about the invisible relationships that constitute a secret society? That is, what would it mean to relate the unrelatable, to tell the untellable, to create a narrative that could link together the accomplices of a secret society? Furthermore, to what extent can we say that a conspiracy narrative produces a specific effect, such as the effect of wonder that De Quincey describes?

To answer these questions within the context of twentieth-century American literature, it is useful to turn to the most emblematic voice of conspiracy fiction, Thomas Pynchon. In fact, his 1966 novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, can be read as a commentary on what it would mean to tell a story about secret societies. As in De Quincey’s description, Pynchon’s Trystero¹ is constituted by invisible relationships that reach across large expanses of space and time in order to accomplish a secret communication or to tell a secret story. Of course, a large part of the mystery of the Trystero has to do with its secrecy, or more precisely, its strange invisibility, the way it continuously withdraws from the scene. While this secrecy is certainly a thematic element in Pynchon’s novel, I would like to argue that it also signals a storytelling practice that *Lot 49* shares with other conspiracy novels from the Americas. In what follows, I will suggest that the mysterious structure of the secret society is not only a theme in *Lot 49*, but it also describes Pynchon’s storytelling technique. Furthermore, it is precisely this
storytelling technique that constitutes the political effect of conspiratorial writing.

Whereas many studies have usefully drawn attention to the importance of conspiracy theory for a reading of American culture,² I would like to enlarge the scope in order to include texts outside of American culture. In fact, for writers such as the Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia, this position outside of American culture makes possible a critical reading of the various conspiracy theory traditions within the United States. While Piglia is most famous for writing such “paranoid” novels as Artificial Respiration (1980) and The Absent City (1992), his critical work points to the way Argentine literature shares with the United States a certain fascination with secret societies. In a series of essays and interviews, he suggests that the conspiracy narrative produces particular effects that are important for political writers in these two countries. Piglia’s work can therefore serve as a theorization of the political form of novels such as Lot 49. By reading Piglia’s theory of narrative in relation to Pynchon’s novel, we will see that De Quincey’s sense of wonder is, in fact, a mark of the political effect of conspiracy narratives.

In the “Afterword” to the English translation of his 1992 novel La ciudad ausente, Piglia puts forward the theory that politics takes place in contemporary fiction as conspiracy. He briefly notes that his theory could be applied to both American writers (such as Don DeLillo and Philip K. Dick) and Argentine writers (such as Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Arlt). However, he also briefly alludes to Lot 49, though without naming Pynchon’s novel explicitly:

[politics enters the contemporary novel through the model of a conspiracy, through the narration of an intrigue—even if this conspiracy is devoid of any explicitly political characteristics. The form itself constitutes the politicizing of the novel. The conspiracy does not necessarily have to contain elements of a political intrigue . . . for the mechanism of utilizing a conspiracy to be political. It can be a conspiracy involving the delivery of mail . . . or any other invention. (145-46)]

In this suggestive remark, Piglia insists that what defines the politics of a conspiracy narrative is not necessarily a certain theme or ideological content, but rather its form. He locates this form in, among other places, the postal conspiracy that lies at the center of Pynchon’s novel: “a conspiracy involving the delivery of mail.” Certainly, one of the central “themes” in Pynchon’s novel is the possible existence of the Trystero, the postal conspiracy that Oedipa Maas stumbles upon while executing the will of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity. However, rather than view the Trystero as a theme, Piglia suggests that it is more important to view the secret society as a figure of the novel’s political structure. Although Piglia’s theory might certainly refer to Pynchon’s 1966 novel, he does not further develop this allusion to Lot 49. For this reason,
it is important to follow the traces of this reading in texts that seem to have nothing to do with “paranoid fiction.” An unlikely place to begin this analysis is Piglia’s two essays on narrative theory collected in his *Formas breves* (2000): “Theses on the Short Story” and “New Theses on the Short Story.” These two complementary essays do not theorize conspiracy theory per se, but rather focus on the conspiratorial structure that Piglia finds in the *cuento* or short story. It is therefore important to turn to these texts in order to develop a reading of conspiracy as the effect of a political form that potentially takes place in all stories.

In the first essay, “Theses on the Short Story,” Piglia emphasizes the way every *cuento* is a double structure that contains two stories: a visible story and a hidden or secret story. He begins his theory with a diary entry in one of Chekhov’s notebooks, which tells the story of a man who goes to a casino, wins a million, then returns home and commits suicide. In this undeveloped story, Piglia focuses on the paradoxical nature of its intrigue: “The anecdote tends to disconnect [desvincular] the story of the game from the story of the suicide” (105). Rather than the conventional story of a man gambling, losing a million, and going home to commit suicide, this story introduces a strange fork in the narrative: the man wins. By focusing on this split between two stories, Piglia defines the double character of the *cuento*, and states: “a *cuento* always tells two stories” (105). In this case, the visible story would be the story of a man who wins money while gambling, whereas the secret story would be the surprising story of a man who commits suicide.

Chekhov’s diary note is therefore an emblem of the double structure of the *cuento*. However, Piglia offers a second thesis that troubles this double structure: “The *cuento* is a story that encloses a secret story. . . . The strategy of the story is placed in the service of the hidden story: How to tell one story while another story is being told [mientras se está contando otra]?” (107-08). The second story is therefore not simply another story narrated in the *cuento*, but rather something “other” that subsists as a secret, something that is never fully told. The challenge is then to tell a visible story that nevertheless also tells a second story (without ever really telling it). Although the visible story must, in some sense, lend itself to the insinuation that another story is present, Piglia also emphasizes the antagonistic relation between the two stories: “Each of the two stories is told differently. To work with two stories means to work with two different systems of causality. The same events enter simultaneously into two narrative logics that are antagonistic” (106). Piglia therefore significantly revises his notion that a *cuento* is simply a narration with two stories. By stating that the same events are told simultaneously, but antagonistically, Piglia emphasizes the radical split that constitutes the structure of the *cuento*. Strangely, the two stories that constitute the *cuento* are in some sense repetitions of each other, and this kind of repetition produces an antagonistic difference. Previously, we saw that the first or visible tale can be figured as the
story of a gain (winning a million), whereas the second or hidden tale is the story of a total loss (committing suicide). However, Piglia now says that the second story is in fact an antagonistic repetition of the first story; that is, it is told simultaneously and uses the same material but according to a different logic, an antagonistic logic. If in the first story the man wins, in the second story that logic is not only symmetrically reversed (he doesn't simply lose the game). Rather, in the second story the man kills himself, thereby enacting an essential loss that cannot be recuperated in the game told in the first story. In this way, Piglia suggests that the two stories are radically antagonistic: one story cannot be simply negated and assimilated by the other story. Piglia's theory avoids the speculative machine that would allow one story to be “eaten up” by the second story. Instead, the two stories are irreducible: a radical split divides the two stories into antagonistic logics. Piglia suggests, therefore, that the cuento is only constituted in the very incommensurability of the two stories that give rise to the narration in the first place.

One of the reasons for the antagonistic structure of the cuento has to do with the way the second story “appears” in the cuento as completely other. In Piglia's second essay, “New Theses on the Short Story,” he first talks about this secret element as a hidden figure: “The sense [sentido] of a tale has the structure of the secret (which goes back to the etymological origin of the word se-cernere, to place apart): there is something hidden, separated from the totality of the story, reserved for the end and in some other part [en otra parte]. It is not an enigma; it is a hidden figure [es una figura que se oculta]” (127). Strangely, Piglia places these two seemingly contradictory phrases together: the secret is reserved for the end and in some other part. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that the secret is indeed a textual figure, only that it is hidden until the end of the story. But precisely right at the end of the story, when it appears, it appears not there, at the end where you would expect it, but rather somewhere else, in an unspecified elsewhere, en otra parte. For that reason, Piglia refers to the secret in paradoxical terms: it is indeed a figure, but it is a hidden figure, a figure that hides itself away. The second story only “appears” in the cuento as disappearance, as a hidden figure that in some way disrupts the visible story. The antagonistic structure of the cuento is therefore due to this incompatibility between two different orders of appearance: on the one hand, a visible story; on the other hand, a secret story that never fully appears.

This structural antagonism is essential to the form of the cuento and defines its unique effect. In Piglia's theory, this effect takes place as a “voice” that suddenly comes to the surface towards the end of the first story. This voice has an artificial and mechanical quality; it is a “machination” that ends up controlling the cuento as a whole. Piglia further writes in “New Theses on the Short Story,"

This kaleidoscopic and double-bottomed structure [of the cuento] is sustained by an imperceptibly small machination [una pequeña maquinación imperceptible].
The intimate voice that . . . has marked the tone and verbal register of the story is identified and comes to the fore; this voice defines the tale from the outside and concludes it. The arrival of this voice is the very condition of the ending. It is that which has plotted the intrigue [el que ha urdido la intriga] from the other side of the frontier, beyond the closed circle of the story. Its appearance, always artificial and complex, inverts the meaning of the intrigue and produces an effect of paradox and conspiracy [un efecto de paradoja y de complot]. (133-34)

The voice that suddenly appears at the end of a cuento is therefore not the storyteller’s voice, but rather an “imperceptibly small machination,” a set-up that has been operating since the beginning of the tale. In fact, the very appearance of this machinated voice stands as the “unique effect” of the cuento: it is the effect of paradox and conspiracy. In this way, Piglia personifies the structural antagonism that defines the form of the cuento as an internal agent—a “voice”—that controls the narrative. The sudden appearance of this voice produces a paradoxical effect, since the second story ends up reconfiguring the first story completely, although the second story never appears as such. For that reason, the second story is not only incompatible with the first story; rather, the second story ends up machinating against the first story, undermining and inverting it even as the first story reaches its end and goal. This antagonistic battle then retroactively posits the existence of a voice or “imperceptibly small machination” that seems to have plotted the intrigue from the beginning. In this way, the antagonistic relation of the two stories produces a prosopopoieia: the structural antagonism is given a voice and an agency. In Piglia’s theory, the antagonistic relation constitutive of the cuento is figured as the voice of the enemy, a “secret agent” who threatens the stability of the first story. If the conspiratorial effect of the cuento produces an image of the enemy, then ultimately the form of the cuento tells the story of an internal relation between two enemies engaged in a conspiratorial struggle.

In this way, Piglia theorizes conspiracy as an effect produced by a certain kind of narrative: a double story that encloses a destabilizing secret. Although he calls this narrative “el cuento,” in fact this structure can take place in any narrative that has this double structure. Most importantly, the constitutive trait of this structure is the formation of an antagonistic frontier between two discourses. This antagonism is not thematic, but rather structural: an official or visible discourse is steadily undermined by an other discourse that cannot be assimilated by the first discourse. The two discourses are therefore irreducible, in part because the other discourse is never “there” as such, but rather takes place as a kind of internal “virus” that brings about the subversion of the official discourse. In Piglia, this overturning is figured as “suicide,” as in the story by Chekhov, but also as a “hidden figure” that disrupts the very visibility of the first story. The effect of this disruption is the “voice” of the cuento: the constitutive antagonism produces the effect of paradox and conspiracy.
With Piglia’s theory in mind, we can now turn to *The Crying of Lot 49* to see how Pynchon’s novel is constructed on the basis of this conspiratorial structure. However, the point now is not simply to apply Piglia’s theory to *Lot 49*, but rather to show how Pynchon’s novel theorizes, in turn, this same kind of mechanism in the (non)figure of the Trystero. By calling the Trystero a “(non)figure,” I am emphasizing the way the secret society appears as a name with the promise of meaning (thus a figure), but at the same time the Trystero disfigures itself through a continual withdrawal from the scene (thus a [non] figure). The Trystero, as secret society, is a hidden figure that operates within Pynchon’s text as a disruption, not only in terms of the plot that concerns Oedipa Maas, but also in terms of the narrative effect that Pynchon’s novel produces through its very form.

In a sense, my argument follows a very traditional line that would emphasize the way *Lot 49* is based on a series of metaphors from which is derived the essential plot mechanism of Pynchon’s novel. However, “metaphor” has a very specific meaning within the context of *Lot 49*. In fact, a close reading of Pynchon’s definition of “metaphor” is also an approach to the question of what it would mean to construct a novel on the model of a secret society. In an often-quoted passage in the book, “metaphor” appears as a way to theorize both the Trystero and the Nefastis Machine. The latter is named after its inventor, John Nefastis, whom Oedipa Maas finds while pursuing a lead in her search for evidence of a postal conspiracy that seems to be communicating outside of the US Mail system. The Nefastis Machine refers to a utopian device that allegedly can sort hot from cold molecules without expending any energy, with a little help from an invisible “Demon.” A friend of Nefastis’s, Stanley Koteks, explains that the Demon is “a tiny intelligence” that sorts fast molecules from slow molecules, thus creating a heat differential, since the fast molecules have more energy and thus more heat (68). Because the Demon is doing all the work, the machine violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics, “getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion” (68). The Demon is therefore a non-human element that exists within the machine as a sorting mechanism. In this way, the Demon produces a rupture in a theoretical “law”: the machine can produce a pure gain without any corresponding loss. It is the model of a perfectly ordered system in which loss is never needed in order to produce a gain.

The Nefastis Machine is made possible, therefore, by a certain belief in the existence of a non-human sorting element, the Demon. In fact, Nefastis insists that the Demon is not simply a fiction. Without the Demon, the machine is only held together by an accidental event that happened in the 1930s, when it was discovered that the equation for heat entropy happens to look like the equation for information entropy. Nefastis explains that his machine was made possible precisely because of this mere coincidence, but that this coincidence—which he calls a “metaphor”—is literalized, so to speak, by the existence of the Demon. He explains: “Entropy is a figure of speech, then . . . a metaphor. It connects
the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true” (85). The important point here is not the way Pynchon’s novel puts into play these conflicting theories of entropy (or how they are “resolved” in the fictional Nefastis Machine), but rather the way Nefastis theorizes “metaphor.” Traditionally, this term in rhetoric has come to mean a figure that mediates between a literal meaning and a “figural” meaning: a word normally used in one context (its literal meaning) is now used in a foreign context (its figural meaning), in order to transfer some of the literal meaning into a new context. For example, to say that “the world is a stage” is to take a certain aspect of the meaning of “stage” and transfer it (meta-pherein, to bear across) to “world,” which is now thought of as similar to a stage. However, in Nefastis’s explanation of what makes his machine possible, the literal-figural content is emptied out, and instead what is emphasized is the mechanism of transference that takes place within the figure. Metaphor is therefore a general structure that connects two dissimilar elements, in this case, two equations that refer to two incompatible “worlds.” If the Nefastis Machine is a sorting machine, then there is also a prior sorting mechanism that makes this sorting machine possible: the metaphor that transfers heat entropy to information entropy and vice versa. In this founding metaphor there is no distinction between a literal and a figural content; rather, what defines the metaphor is simply this transfer or connection between two different worlds. Regardless of the existence of the Demon, the Nefastis Machine is therefore made possible because of this metaphorical connection between two equations.

However, what is indeed strange about this metaphorical connection is that the Nefastis Machine posits the existence of a tiny intelligence that allows this connection to function in reality, and not just as a metaphor. As Nefastis notes, “the Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true” (85). There are, therefore, two connections taking place through the Nefastis Machine: if the Demon allows a connection to take place between heat entropy and information entropy, then this metaphorical connection also produces a relation between the world of fiction or rhetoric and the real world. What should be emphasized about the Nefastis Machine is not only the supposition that this machine breaks a law of thermodynamics, but also that it produces incomprehensible connections. As many critics have noted in exasperation, Pynchon’s use of two theories of entropy in order to model his Nefastis Machine is confusing at best.\(^5\) As we will see, the point is not simply that entropy seems to be a confused and therefore meaningless concept in Pynchon’s novel, but rather that the confusion about Pynchon’s use of the term “entropy” is in fact a transposition of the constitutive non-relation that enables the Nefastis Machine to “work.”

In this way, the Nefastis Machine not only models a certain notion of incomprehensible relations, but also stands as a figure for the
incomprehensible relations that constitute the postal conspiracy that lies at the center of *Lot 49*. In fact, the narrator explicitly compares the Nefastis Machine and the Trystero—both are constituted by incomprehensible relations that come together by coincidence:

> For John Nefastis . . . two kinds of entropy, thermodynamic and informational, happened, say by coincidence, to look alike, when you wrote them down as equations. Yet he had made his mere coincidence respectable, with the help of Maxwell’s Demon.

> Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together. (87)

Thus, Pynchon’s minimal definition of conspiracy is that it is a device that makes possible an impossibility: it allows a transfer to take place between “accidental” events that should have nothing to do with each other. Conspiracy—or secret society—is therefore a metaphor, in Pynchon’s sense of the word: it forges a contingent relation without uniting the two (or more) parts in a unity. The only thing holding together the accidental parts of the conspiracy is a name, the “Trystero.” This name refers to the agent or “Demon” that invisibly ties everything together and keeps the machine running. At the same time, this demonic agent also lends its name to the organization as a whole: the Trystero is both the invisible demon and the structure of incomprehensible relations held together by the demon. Conspiracy therefore takes place precisely as a metaphor; however, this phrase (“as a metaphor”) no longer means a merely linguistic reality that has no relation to “nonverbal” reality. Rather, “metaphor,” as we have seen, designates a connection that is *really* produced through an incomprehensible relation between dissimilar elements. This real connection happens because of a name: in the case of the Nefastis Machine, this name is the “Demon,” and in the case of the postal conspiracy, the name is “Trystero.” In each case, the name stands as something like an “empty signifier” that allows an equivalent logic to occur between completely dissimilar elements. In the Nefastis Machine, the Demon connects the unrelated fields of thermodynamics and information flow; in the postal conspiracy, the Trystero connects a series of heterogeneous elements that normally would not constitute a “community.” The Nefastis Machine is therefore not simply an example of bogus science, but rather functions in the novel as a model for the structure of conspiracy.

What complicates this scheme is that the Trystero is not simply a metaphor that connects dissimilar elements but also seems to be a postal delivery service that sorts messages. Oedipa notices the structural similarities when talking to Stanley Koteks about how it is not necessary to introduce work into the Nefastis Machine because of the Demon’s sorting mechanism.
Oedipa asks, ""Sorting isn’t work? . . . Tell them down at the post office, you’ll find yourself in a mailbag headed for Fairbanks, Alaska, without even a FRAGILE sticker going for you” (68). Although Koteks insists that mental work is not the same as work in the thermodynamic sense, Oedipa's point is clear: there is an analogy between the operations of the Nefastis Machine and the operations of the Trystero, in that both operate as a system of communication between heterogeneous elements. However, the Trystero is not just another postal delivery service, just as the Nefastis Machine is not just another heat engine. In the latter, the completely unrelated equations that constitute its structure do not simply join together around the full presence of a name (the Demon), but rather come together as an oppositional configuration, pitting themselves against a common enemy: they are against the law that says it is “illegal” to get something for nothing. The second law of thermodynamics sets up an economy of loss and gain: for a thermodynamic engine to work, energy must be introduced into the machine from the outside. This means that energy must first be lost in order for any gain to be possible. The two types of equations within the Nefastis Machine bind together, not because of their coincidental resemblance, but rather because of the way they go against the economy of loss and gain. The intervention of the Nefastis Machine—the innovation that would define it as an “invention”—is that it articulates the possibility (never realized within the novel) of an energy gain without any corresponding loss. In other words, the Nefastis Machine posits itself as an anti-economy that is not simply different from an economy of loss and gain, but rather disrupts the possibility of economy as such.

Therefore, the Nefastis Machine only models the structure of conspiracy insofar as both “machines” are criminal machines: they constitute themselves through an antagonistic relation to an official economy. After all, the Trystero mail conspiracy is by nature a secret or clandestine system: the transfers that happen within the Trystero system are mysteriously clandestine and operate outside the law. The Trystero is explicitly not the official sorting machine; it is rather a criminal machine that operates against the official sorting machines (the U.S. Mail, the European Thurn and Taxis system, etc.). For that reason, the Nefastis Machine is again the model for the Trystero: “Nefastis” is not just a name; it is also the etymology of the word “nefarious”: “ne-fas” means “unlawful.” Both the Nefastis Machine and the Trystero are therefore criminal economies that oppose an official economy.

However, the similarities end here, since Nefastis would like his machine to produce a kind of pure presence (a “gain”), even if that presence is momentarily absent for the time being, since it seems that no one can actually get the machine to work. Nefastis, then, is “a believer” in the full presence of his machine (85). The Trystero, on the other hand, shows that this momentary absence of pure presence is actually the condition of its structure. Even in the case of the Nefastis Machine, the fact that the “metaphor” that connects
disparate elements is “objectively true,” as Nefastis says, does not mean that its existence can be proven without a doubt (85). The incomprehensible relations put forward by the name (“Demon” or “Trystero”) prevents “the metaphor of God knew how many parts” from being verified with certainty. This unverifiability is not a lack that would conclusively argue against the existence of a conspiracy. Rather, as Oedipa finds out, the apocryphal nature of the conspiracy is constitutive of the Trystero’s structure. After all, Oedipa’s access to the Trystero always happens in the novel by means of apocryphal texts and counterfeit objects. The central “clue” is the stamp collection that Pierce Inverarity left behind after his death, and which is, therefore, part of the estate that Oedipa was originally assigned to execute. Within Pierce’s legacy are the stamps that Genghis Cohen, the philatelist, finds are filled with “irregularities” and which he judges to be “counterfeit” (75, 78). However, “counterfeit” in Pynchon’s novel does not mean a mere fiction that posits itself as true or believable. Rather, as Genghis Cohen notes, each stamp has a visible error, “a deliberate mistake . . . laboriously worked into the design, like a taunt” (78). Oedipa finds that these counterfeit products are not simply part of a systematic postal fraud (a trick or sleight of hand), but rather connect to a generalized strategy of counterfeiting (a taunt).

But what does it mean for these counterfeit stamps to act “as a taunt”? It helps to notice that the counterfeit in Lot 49 is defined as a particular kind of relation: there is a “counterfeit” object only in relation to an original with which it does not quite coincide. The counterfeit object posits a relation to an original that is based on similarity (the stamps look the same at first glance), but which in fact are completely opposed to the original (there are deliberate errors). In the case of the first stamp found by Genghis Cohen, the error takes the form of an anarchist attack: “The picture [on the stamp] had a Pony Express rider galloping out of a western fort. From shrubbery over on the right-hand side and possibly in the direction the rider would be heading, protruded a single, painstakingly engraved, black feather” (78). This black feather represents the mysterious Trystero agent who would attack any official postal carrier throughout history. The counterfeit stamp therefore offers this scene of potential violence “as a taunt.” This taunt is not only an innocent addition to the stamp, but rather intervenes in a particular relation of power. After all, the power of the state is not only represented by a stamp but rather happens as the capacity to authorize written statements (stamps) that, in turn, attest to the power of the state. The counterfeit object interrupts this self-replicating process, but not through simple resistance or even by violent uprising. Rather, the counterfeit disrupts the economy of state power through a kind of false repetition: the counterfeit stamp establishes an antagonistic relation to the official “writing” of the state and therefore interrupts this economy-power. The counterfeit is thereby defined as a relation to a more official artifact that it disfigures and disrupts.
In this way, the conspiracy of the Trystero establishes itself as a counterfeit discourse that antagonistically relates to the official documents that certify the power of a centralized form of communication.

Unlike Nefastis's belief in the full presence of his machine, the Trystero is constituted only so far as it takes place as a counterfeit replication of the official economy. The conspiracy of the Trystero does not simply set itself up as a parallel economy that impossibly produces gain without loss, but rather inserts itself into the official economy as counterfeit. At the same time, the Trystero is not only a loss that the official economy suffers; after all, an economy is defined as this relation between a loss and a gain. Rather, the Trystero constitutes itself as a total loss—a kind of “suicide”—that disrupts the loss and gain of the official economy. This shift in the definition of the Trystero occurs within an appropriately speculative history of the Trystero system, in which the secret society is theorized precisely in terms of this strategy of the counterfeit. Oedipa learns that, as the US Postal Service began to crack down on alternative mail delivery, the Trystero decided to “stay on . . . in the context of conspiracy,” which meant a new “emphasis now toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance” (143). The Trystero conspiracy is therefore defined not only as a strategy of counterfeiting; rather, the secret society only takes place as the counterfeiting of any kind of official discourse that authorizes itself as power. Although this might seem a strange way to construct a conspiracy, in fact Pynchon suggests that this structure defines the very form of any kind of conspiracy. A conspiracy does not take place through the negation of power by means of power, but rather through the interruption of the economy of loss and gain that structures political power. A true conspiracy, it would seem, is one that forges a counterfeit economy: by definition, this kind of economy interrupts the official economy and therefore cannot be reappropriated by the official economy as simply another negative moment to be assimilated. In fact, Oedipa realizes that if she ever dreamed of trying to produce a settlement in a court of law between the United States government and the Trystero, she would be laughed out of the court (149-50). Between the Trystero and the US Mail there is an incommensurable divide that cannot be resolved through a differential logic, that is, as if the Trystero were a recognizable and isolated group that differed from other distinct groups. The Trystero is therefore not a concrete party wishing to take power; it is rather a non-conceptual event that takes place as an interruption of the normal networks of power.

Throughout Pynchon’s novel, the interruption that constitutes the Trystero is figured as a strange kind of absence. This interruption is not thematized as a violent explosion, but rather as a withdrawal, as a silence. Oedipa begins to notice the Trystero’s strange mode of “appearance” as she wanders around San Francisco in the hopes that she would certainly not find—by coincidence—any more signs of the Trystero. However, everywhere
she goes she sees references that seem to indicate the postal conspiracy, especially the muted post horn and the letters WASTE. As the narrator notes during Oedipa's meanderings around San Francisco: “Decorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn” (100). The counterfeit nature of the conspiracy, therefore, begins to articulate itself as a kind of “visible” withdrawal. The narrator, filtered through Oedipa's consciousness, notes:

If miracles were . . . intrusions into this world from another, a kiss of cosmic pool balls, then so must be each of the night’s post horns. For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (101)

The post horn and the withdrawal that this emblem figures are therefore not simply signs of the conspiracy, but rather real intrusions into the machinery of the Republic. Paradoxically, these intrusions take place as a withdrawal into a kind of silence. However, “withdrawal” here does not mean an absolute disappearance. Rather, within the context of conspiracy, withdrawal means opposition masquerading as allegiance. This counterfeiting strategy can be seen in the very emblem of the Trystero, the post horn, which resembles the sign of the official European postal service, Thurn and Taxis, except for the introduction of an almost imperceptible mute within the horn’s opening. This imperceptibly small mechanism, to paraphrase Piglia, is itself the mechanism of withdrawal: it stands as an intervention into the power of the centralized or official economy of the post. To “withdraw” from the life and machinery of the Republic is to remain behind and endure within the context of conspiracy, as an oppositional force that feigns a kind of loyalty or faithfulness. Yet this very impersonation is thought in terms of an impossible community: just as the Trystero was figured previously as “a metaphor of God knew how many parts,” the postal conspiracy is now figured as “God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail.” The basis of their community is precisely this antagonistic relation to the power of the official economy, here figured as the US Mail. Conspiracy therefore is not a full presence that can be known or understood, but rather takes place, as an event, as the intrusion of a total loss that cannot be recuperated at the level of an economy of loss and gain. The conspiracy takes place in every moment of withdrawal, for instance, in the “rituals of miscarriage” that one “member”
of the “community” continuously enacts, “dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum” (100). Conspiracy is this intervention into the reigning power—an interregnum, an event that takes place by not taking place.

We can now summarize the structure of conspiracy as it is narrated in Pynchon’s novel. The Trystero is a way of organizing the social field as a kind of positive negativity: it takes place as withdrawal, secrecy, waiting, or silence. This positive negativity means that the Trystero operates according to the logic of the counterfeit by repeating the official system in an antagonistic way. The Nefastis Machine still stands as the figure of this metaphorical structure, only not in terms of the belief that characterizes Nefastis’s relation to the machine, but rather in terms of Oedipa’s own relation of waiting. After all, her experiment with the machine exactly corresponds to her attempt to find the Trystero: as the experience of a withdrawal. In terms of the Nefastis Machine, Oedipa sits, “waiting for the Demon to communicate” (85). In relation to the Trystero, Oedipa is left at the end of the novel at the auction of Pierce’s counterfeit stamp collection (as lot number 49), hoping that a Trystero agent might appear: “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49” (152). Therefore, at the end of the novel, Oedipa herself is inscribed in this experience of withdrawing and waiting, that is, the very experience that constitutes the (non)relation between every member of the WASTE postal conspiracy. Waiting is both the sign and the enactment of conspiracy; one of the emblems of the Trystero, the acronym WASTE, stands for: “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire” (139). Oedipa steadily finds herself inscribed within this WASTE system, not because she formally joins some sort of official community, but rather because of the experience of withdrawing or waiting for something to appear. We can see this process begin towards the end of the novel, when her “investigation” into the conspiracy slowly turns into something else: “Even a month ago, Oedipa’s next question would have been, ‘Why?’ But now she kept a silence, waiting, as if to be illuminated” (125). The expectation of an illumination gradually loses its revelatory aim and becomes a kind of empty structure of waiting. She begins to reply to any sign of evidence with a version of the silence that we have come to associate with the Trystero: she begins to be marked by a reluctance (“Having begun to feel reluctant about following up anything” [137]) or a waiting (a feeling that she is “waiting on something truly terrible” [140]; “[t]he waiting above all” [150]). As with the Trystero in general, Oedipa’s “silence” does not refer to a lack of communication; instead, it points to another mode of communication, a mode that is characterized as withdrawal and waiting. Her silence is therefore not simply a negative response, but rather the positive announcement of negativity: she is marked by the expression of silence. This positive negativity is what defines the Trystero as a secret society or hidden figure. As we have seen, the conspiracy only takes place as withdrawal or silence, as a counterfeit
object or counterfeit experience. At the same time, to become a member of this secret society is not to enter into a consensual agreement, but rather it happens at the moment of becoming the WASTE of America, that is, those who await Trystero. The waste of America are therefore not only those who have been left behind, which is perhaps a constituent feature of any economy of loss and gain. Rather, Pynchon’s novel points to an experience of community based on a radical loss or withdrawal that cannot simply be recuperated by the official economy. The WASTE are constituted not by any kind of positive appearance, but rather by the experience of waiting for something other to appear.

“The art of narration,” Piglia notes, “is the art of sensing the unexpected [lo inesperado], of knowing how to wait [esperar] for what comes, clear and invisible” (“Nuevas,” 137). Pynchon’s narration of the secret society takes this kind of waiting as a structural principle. This principle is what Pynchon calls a “metaphor,” a structure that produces unbelievable relations and takes place only as absence. The model for this kind of metaphor is the Nefastis Machine, but the structure of the Nefastis Machine can present itself at any moment, as long as there are two movements: first, a conjunction of incomprehensible relations; second, an antagonistic repetition of an enemy discourse. This antagonistic repetition is not thematic, but rather structural: an official or visible discourse is steadily undermined by an other discourse that cannot be simply assimilated by the first discourse. The two discourses are therefore irreducible, in part because the other discourse is never “there” as such, but rather takes place as a kind of internal “virus” that brings about the subversion of the official discourse. Pynchon’s novel figures this overturning as the counterfeit repetition of the official discourse; this antagonistic relation comes together in a voice or name—the Trystero—that serves as the retroactive ground of the conspiracy. In fact, however, this “voice” is continually produced by the antagonistic relation and therefore stands as the “unique effect” of the conspiratorial figure. Pynchon’s novel, therefore, tells the story of a secret, counterfeit voice that takes place as a constitutive absence.

In this way, Piglia and Pynchon suggest that the story about a secret figure is in fact a story that contains two incommensurable stories: a visible or official discourse that is steadily undermined by a secret or counterfeit discourse. Thus, when Piglia says that the conspiracy narrative is the form of the political, he is focusing specifically on the conspiratorial effect produced by the narration of a secret society (the narration of a cuento). This effect is that minimal mechanism or small machination that forms an antagonistic relation with an official discourse. In contemporary political theory, especially in recent discussions of populism, this minimal mechanism is called the underdog. For instance, Ernesto Laclau points out the significance of the underdog, not only for populism, but more generally for an understanding of the political:
Populism means putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent—i.e., an agent which is an other in relation to the way things stand. But this is the same as politics. We only have politics through the gesture which embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it (or, conversely, when we defend that system against existing potential alternatives). That is the reason why the end of populism coincides with the end of politics. We have an end of politics when the community conceived as a totality and the will representing that totality become indistinguishable from each other. ("Populism" 47-48)

A full analysis of the relation between Laclau’s theory of politics and conspiracy narratives will have to wait for another occasion. For now, we can merely point to the structural similarity between populism and the form of conspiracy. In both, the narration of a destabilizing element—the “underdog”—defines the condition for any kind of political experience. Politics does not depend on a prior ideological content, but rather takes place as an effect of narration: as the narration of a legitimate discourse that is undermined by a counterfeit or illegitimate discourse. Therefore, when De Quincey marvels at the mysteriousness of secret societies, he is in fact amazed by the strange economy that rules any kind of political narrative. To read a narrative about secret societies is to enter into that mysterious relation called the political.

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Notes

1 Pynchon uses two spellings to refer to the postal conspiracy: “Trystero” and “Tristero.” Because I begin my reading of the postal conspiracy from the narrator’s comparison of the Nefastis Machine and what is called the “Trystero,” I will use this spelling throughout, except for those cases when the narrator explicitly uses “Tristero.”

2 Two insightful studies on the relation between conspiracy narratives and American culture are Mark Fenster’s Conspiracy Theories and Timothy Melley’s Empire of Conspiracy. Fenster’s study is especially useful in the way he relates conspiracy theory to Ernesto Laclau’s theory of the discursive structure of politics, a relation I begin to develop towards the end of this essay.

3 The first essay, “Tesis sobre el cuento” (Theses on the Short Story), was originally published in the 1986 edition of Crítica y ficción. The second essay, “Nuevas tesis sobre el cuento” (New Theses on the Short Story), was originally given as a lecture in 1998. They were first published together in Formas breves (2000). Because of the specificity of the subject, I will use the Spanish term whenever referring to the “cuento” (tale or short story). Whenever I refer to a “story,” I am referring to Piglia’s term “historia” or “relato.” All translations of Piglia’s essays are mine.
4 For example, N. Katherine Hayles’s essay on *Lot 49* asserts that metaphor is the “engine” that drives the novel. However, Hayles’s approach relies on the definition of metaphor presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whereas my study will focus on the way Pynchon’s novel provides its own idiosyncratic definition of metaphor.

5 J. Kerry Grant provides one of the best overviews of the critical reaction to Pynchon’s use of the term “entropy” (Grant 81-95).

6 For a discussion of the “empty signifier,” see Ernesto Laclau, “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” According to Laclau, an empty signifier takes place when all differences become equivalent insofar as they all belong to one side of a frontier of exclusion: difference still exists between each element, but this difference is suspended by entering into a system of equivalence. This system of equivalence—the empty signifier—takes place as the exclusion of a threat, which means that all differences are the same insofar as they all antagonistically oppose an enemy: “the various excluded categories have to cancel their differences through the formation of a chain of equivalences to that which the system demonizes in order to signify itself” (“Empty Signifiers” 39). In terms of a political movement, all partial struggles, despite their individual differences, must be “seen as related to each other, not because their concrete objectives are intrinsically related but because they are all seen as equivalent in confrontation with the repressive regime. It is not, consequently, something positive that all of them share which establishes their unity, but something negative: their opposition to a common enemy” (“Empty Signifiers” 40-41). Laclau goes on to develop the notion of the empty signifier in relation to populism in his book *On Populist Reason*.

7 Thomas Schaub notes that the metaphorical connections described in the Nefastis Machine also pertain to the description of Oedipa’s search for the conspiracy “Trystero”: “Many of the connections which Oedipa establishes are bogus. Like the metaphor of ‘entropy’ in the Nefastis machine, the links created by her on the basis of ‘sound’ . . . often join realities which bear no literal relation to one another. On a metaphorical level, however, they do. . . . Language, as metaphor, becomes the source of connection; and the connection has reality only in the language itself” (98). While I agree with Schaub that the metaphorical structure defines the way conspiracy is presented in Pynchon’s novel, I do not find that this structure only obtains at the level of Oedipa’s search, or that the connections only take place at the level of language (if language is, as he suggests, in opposition to “reality”). Rather, conspiracy—as a structure that produces and is produced by incomprehensible relations—happens in “reality”—that is, as a political fact—precisely because of its linguistic nature.

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Ideas of Community in *The Crying of Lot 49*

Paula Martín Salván

1. We, They and Oedipa

In his famous essay “The Sacred, the Profane and *The Crying of Lot 49,*” Edward Mendelson wrote, “The processes of *V.* isolate; those of *Lot 49* create community” (114). The main aim of this paper is to assess the second half of that statement. I intend to analyze some ideas of “community” that can be found in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49.* To do so, I will follow a double approach, sociological and rhetorical, in order to examine how communities are described in the novel, what tropes are used to refer to the relationships between members of those communities, and what role they might play in narrative development. My analysis will draw on some recent writings by Maurice Blanchot, Jean Luc Nancy, Alphonso Lingis, and J. Hillis Miller, all of whom have proposed models of community that seem particularly relevant for the analysis of the kind of collectivity portrayed by Pynchon in *Lot 49.*

Forms of collectivity that might be initially called “communities” are countless in Pynchon’s second novel. The first two of them can already be found on the first page of the book, namely, the “tupperware party” Oedipa comes from and the law firm Warpe, Wistful, Kubitschek and McMingus. The general definition of community as “a body of people who have something in common” (*OED*) is wide enough to include those two and of course all the other communities any reader might have in mind (Inamorati Anonymous, The Peter Pinguid Society, and, obviously, Trystero).

Following early critical perspectives on the issue, I will trace an initial broad distinction between two groups of communities in *Lot 49,* a distinction that is embedded in the novel’s story itself. In the first group, I include what Louis Althusser called “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs), tentatively corresponding to institutionalized communities such as the family, the government, the educational system or the media. These institutionalized communal structures are best summarized in the novel as “the Republic” (86) or “the American community of crust and mantle” (123). According to Althusser, what characterizes these institutionalized communities is the fact that admission to them is fulfilled through a performative speech act or “calling,” so that “the individual is addressed as a (free) subject in order that
he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (182). This condition is expressed in the American civil order in Uncle Sam’s “I want you,” a symbol brought in by Oedipa’s vision during her first conversation with Dr. Hilarius in the novel (10). As a reward for his subjection to ISAs, according to Althusser, man is provided with a unified vision of himself as subject. In Oedipa’s case, she is given a unified vision of herself as a young Republican “suburban housewife” transmuted into a princess locked away in her ivory tower waiting for her prince to rescue her from solitude.2

John Johnston rightly asks who the representatives of this sort of institutionalized community are in the novel, and concludes that there are actually none worthy of mention, except Pierce Inverarity, who is dead, and Oedipa herself (70). I would claim, quite to the contrary, that several other characters represent this order in *Lot 49*. There is, in the first place, the triad of husband, lawyer and shrink, representing different aspects of Oedipa’s subjection to civil order: her husband, representing family links, her lawyer, Roseman, representing the legal system, and her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, responsible for her inclusion into the category of “suburban housewives” (10). Of course, there are others representing scientific-technological, academic, artistic, and historical discourses. Most of the characters who are of any apparent help to Oedipa in the course of her quest share the feature of their being, at the same time, both inside and outside the system. They seem to be linked to the Trystero in some way, but they are also part of the civil order it supposedly opposes.

The second group of communities I have mentioned comprises all the other forms of collectivity described in the novel as opposed or alternative to officially sanctioned institutions, and could be encompassed by the Trystero. Most of them are listed by James Nohrnberg in the article “Pynchon’s Paraclete” (155-57): Inamorati Anonymous, The Peter Pinguid Society, Conjuración de los Insurgentes Anarquistas, the Scurvhamites, the Alameda County Death Cult, etc. Tony Tanner has described these communities as “the kind of protoanarchic group with which Pynchon’s work shows sympathy” (70), and they could be identified with other groups in Pynchon’s fiction such as “the Whole Sick Crew” in *V.* Critics such as Frank Kermode, John Farrell, or James Nohrnberg have used different sociological and anthropological models in order to describe these groups as “socially segregated subuniverses” (Kermode 164; using Berger & Luckmann’s model) or “liminal communities” (Nohrnberg 154; using Victor Turner’s).

What the members of these communities share, what they have “in common,” might be completely different in each case—political ideas, cosmologies, suicidal tendencies. However, they all share some features that allow us to include them in the same group; from a sociological perspective, they are all secret societies and opposition to official ideas or socio-political structures defines them. They are, in Pynchon’s own terms, “counterforces” (as in *V.* or *Gravity’s Rainbow*). From a rhetorical point of view, they are
conspiratorial communities described as dark, underground, marginal, or peripheral to the Republic. Finally, from the point of view of the novel's story, they all gather around the muted horn symbol used as leitmotif in Oedipa's quest. In this sense, it can be claimed that if they somehow constitute a community of communities it happens so by virtue of “epistemological contiguity” in the hermeneutic chain favored by the quest structure.

The divisions I have traced between groups of communities in the novel underline the dialectic or oppositional structure (Tanner 56) according to which there is an “Us/We” and a “They,” each one depending on the existence of the other. Pynchon himself in *Gravity’s Rainbow* best explained the workings of this dialectics: “Of course a well-developed They system is necessary—but it’s only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system” (638).

In *Lot 49*, this dialectical structure is complicated by Oedipa’s unstable position between the two opposing systems. For Oedipa, who is the main focalizer in the novel, “They” means entirely different things at different moments. When she first meets Metzger, the narrator uses the capitalized “They”: “Oedipa thought at first that They, somebody up there, were putting her on’ (17). Be it the underground Trystero—“they’ve saturated me” (122)—or the civil order composed by “the innocent, the virtuous, the socially integrated and well adjusted” (84), the fact remains that Oedipa never gets to become part of a “we.” It seems that her problem is not so much one of confronting “otherness,” as some critics have claimed, but of becoming incorporated into some sort of “we.” She rejects becoming part of ISAs (by rejecting participation in Dr. Hilarius’s experiment, for instance) but she does not get to become part of the Trystero either. By the end of the text, Oedipa is still on the verge of becoming part of the Trystero, as she ponders: “Perhaps she’d be hounded someday as far as joining Trystero itself” (125). As Johnston points out, Oedipa’s quest only enlarges her isolation, which is expressed through the recurrent phrasing: “There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world” (118); “her isolation complete” (122); “you have nobody else to tell this to” (77).

The passage in which Oedipa lists the alternatives for her quest in terms of the invention or the real existence of Trystero has been analyzed by some critics as a dichotomy between paranoia and conspiracy. This dichotomy can also be read as one between solitude (the paranoid is one who thinks everyone else is “in on it” but him or her) and community (if the Trystero is real and she knows about it, it means she can become part of it). If conspiracy means, etymologically, “breathing together,” Oedipa’s exclusion from the community of conspirators is formulated in the novel in terms of her breathing in the void: “teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, Oh God, was the void” (118).
Patrick O’Donnell uses the term “paranoid community” (14), but term is contradictory because paranoia necessarily implies being alone, not being part of the community whose existence can be only hinted at. According to Deleuze and Guattari in their seminal work *Anti-Oedipus*, the paranoid is precisely the one who creates communities in which he is not included: the paranoid, they claim, is the artist of great molar formations, of gregarious formations and organized masses. The idea of Oedipa being just “paranoid”—etymologically “out of herself,” echoed in the text as “out of your skull” (118), and according to O’Donnell, elsewhere, the most popular social disease during the sixties—would confirm her role as creator of a community to which she longs to belong.

2. Being “In on it:” The Intent to Communicate

As already stated, Oedipa Maas does not belong to any of these communities at the beginning of the novel, but during her inquiry about Inverarity’s estate, she learns about them. Her search can be interpreted as a quest to find new community links after the conventional ones start to fail. From this perspective, what triggers Oedipa’s quest is not so much curiosity about Pierce Inverarity’s estate, but her need to establish some contact, her “intent to communicate” (15).

The communities Oedipa meets, moreover, qualify as “epistemological collectivities”: their existence depends upon shared knowledge. In order to become a member of any of them, Oedipa would need to be “in on it;” that is, to have enough information about the group’s existence to grant her membership. The difficulties of being accepted in any of these alternative communities is stressed in the novel in terms of what she is allowed to know, to hear and to see: “You weren’t supposed to see that” (35), says Mike Fallopian when she witnesses the Yoyodine inter-office mail delivery at The Scope. Her frustrated attempts to enter the realm of secret communities by talking about them to others is cut off again and again by the “ritual reluctance” she perceives around her (48, 54).

Oedipa’s craving for information about the Trystero is repeatedly interrupted in the novel, and in each case, she is finally rejected as an alien to each community.3 She is then caught in a catch-22 situation: she cannot become a member of the secret communities unless she knows about them, and she will not learn about them unless she is part of them. Tony Tanner summarized this epistemological contradiction with the phrase “Those Who Know, know” (Tanner 59). According to J. Hillis Miller, this kind of paradox is typical of parabolic writing. According to Miller, a parable is “a mode of figurative language which is the indirect indication, at a distance, of something that cannot be described directly, in literal language” (Tropes 135). The Trystero in Pynchon’s novel fits that definition of what cannot be named
directly, but only through indirect representation, that is, through parables. A parable needs to be decoded according to a key only a few people know about and this, according to Miller, is what constitutes its paradoxical nature. Writing about Jesus’s parable of the sower (Matthew 13: 1-23), Miller claims: “Unless you understand the Word already as such, unless you are already fertile grounded in it, which means somehow already grounded in it, sown by it, you will not understand it when it is expressed in parable” (Tropes 140). In other words, “if you can understand the parables, you do not need them. If you need them, you cannot hope to understand them” (141).

Oedipa’s recurrent feeling of being on the verge of revelation can be read, in this light, as the imminence of rupture in this circularity. In all the underground communities that populate the novel, the circular sharing of information is what makes visible the existence of the community. We should also remember that community and communication come from the same etymological root. Moreover, they share the prefix “com-,” indicating reciprocity, with other recurrent terms in the novel such as contact, consensus, conspiracy or connection. All these images are incarnated in the circle of children Oedipa meets in Golden Gate Park: “The night was empty of all terror for them, they had inside their circle an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own unpenetrated sense of community” (82).

In all cases, what brings together a group of people in the novel is the sharing of information or knowledge, thematized in the plot by means of the Trystero, a postal system. It should not be forgotten that, above all, the Trystero is a mechanism to exchange messages in situations where physical contact is not possible. According to Jean Luc Nancy in The Inoperative Community, the verbal activity in which the members of a community are involved is precisely what constitutes their status as a community. A community, claims Nancy, is born in the act of telling the story of its own origins, what he calls the “mythical scene”:

They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed. [. . .] Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately. Nothing is more common, nothing is more absolutely more common than myth. [. . .] [M]yth is the unique speech of the many, who come thereby to recognize one another, who communicate and commune in myth. [. . .] Myth communicates the common, the being-common of what it reveals or what it recites. (Nancy 50)

In the case of Lot 49, the community of conspirators is born in the verbal act of talking about themselves. Belonging to the community is signaled by knowing about it, which in turn gives you the right to share your information: if you are “in on it,” you are part of the group and you can exchange information with
other members. Communities in *Lot 49* are communities of secret-sharers. In the light of Nancy’s ideas, Oedipa’s longing for “the cry that might abolish the night” can be read as her desire to enter the community of conspirators, a community that is unnamable: “that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, *The Word*” (125).

Sometimes the exchange of messages is the only ostensible activity for these communities. In *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Alphonso Lingis presents his model of community in terms borrowed from information theory, claiming that an irrational, alternative form of community is born between human beings in situations where “what is said is hardly important, but the saying itself is the essential requisite” (109). This is the principle on which groups such as Inamorati Anonymous or the Peter Penguuid Society seem to work, communities in which the phatic function of language is taken to its extreme (35).

### 3. Weaver or Woven?

The epistemological and the communitarian logics operating in *Lot 49* are brought together by means of a recurrent rhetorical device. The novel uses metaphors relating the notions of community and communication to threads. The opening scene features a brief flashback in which the reader learns of Oedipa’s last conversation with her former lover Pierce Inverarity. Pierce’s call comes from an unknown location—“from where she would never know” (6)—a fact that is underlined in the novel while at the same time pointing to the idea that the telephone line unites the two characters at both ends while the conversation lasts: “That phone line could have pointed any direction, been any length” (6). The phone line works in the novel as the first of a series of metaphors related to threads, wires or cords of all sorts joining characters together. Princess Rapunzel throws her plaits down from a window for her prince to climb up to her (12), the party by the pool in Chapter 2 brings together The Paranoids “after plugging extension cords into all available outlets in the other rooms and leading them in a bundle out a window” (25), and the muted horn sign is said to work as a “cuff-link” (85) between the disinherited of America.

To justify why this “thread” imagery is relevant for my topic, I will briefly address Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibile*. In the city called “Ersilia,” its inhabitants lay threads from window to window to indicate the relationships existing between them. Each kind of relationship—family, business, friendship—is signaled by a different color. When there are so many threads that they can no longer walk or see anything, they leave, taking their houses with them, but leaving the threads as evidence of the community patterns
created throughout the years. The threads in Calvino’s story remind us of how often they are used in common language as a metaphor for the relationships between human beings.

In *Ariadne’s Thread*, J. Hillis Miller analyzes the metaphor of the line or thread in connection with the notion of visible links among human beings, but also as a metaphor for narrative development (20). In *Lot 49*, the fields of interpersonal relationships and narrative development are brought together by using metaphors of the line. Terms such as web, net, yarn, or tie are used in the novel as images of connection in this double sense (“complex web” [24], “tie in with the word Trystero” [65]); other recurrent images include knitting or weaving, starting obviously with Remedios Varo’s painting “Bordando el manto terrestre” (13; see also “woven into the Trystero” [56]). The term “connection” itself comes from the Indo-European root “ned,” meaning “to bind, to tie” (“I want to see if there is a connection” [52]).

It is my claim that, in *Lot 49*, both uses of this metaphor are interwoven in such a way that narrative development is only possible through the tending of threads from one character to another. The two meanings of “thread” are united in a single metaphor, just as the two interpretations of “entropy” are brought together in Maxwell’s Demon. The two fields are mixed in the quest structure following the conventions of the Prüfungsroman. This has been analyzed in detail by John Johnston (though he does not use that term) and it can be summarized as the notion that plot development in the novel takes place as a series of encounters with different men, each one representing an epistemological position, as in allegories of knowledge such as Boetius’ or Langland’s (Johnston 54-55).

The metaphor of the thread, moreover, establishes a logic of contiguity among the constituents of the plot or community in the novel. The repeatedly frustrated exchanges of information between members of the secret societies and Oedipa work as knots in a rope that brings her closer and closer to actual affiliation, to the disentanglement of the Trystero mystery and to narrative denouement.

In *Design and Debris*, Joseph M. Conte claims that “Pynchon’s fictions (including Herbert Stencil’s pursuit of the eponymous character in *V.* and Oedipa Maas’s inquiries after the Trystero System in *Lot 49*) do not attempt to unravel plots but to become complicit in a process of intrication” (172-73). In Pynchon’s own words, “this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into” (*GR* 3). Talking specifically about *Lot 49*, I would claim that the quest structure of the novel depends at the same time on Oedipa’s disentanglement of the Trystero mystery and on her becoming “woven” into it. Thomas Schaub noted in *The Voice of Ambiguity* that Oedipa “is not sure whether she is weaver or woven” (34). This inclusive logic corresponds, as I will claim, to what J. Hillis Miller calls the “auto-immunitary logic” of the communities described in the novel.
The thread, moreover, can be seen as an “extension of man” in McLuhan’s sense, so that it allows, in the metaphorical realm (the thread is a physical vestige of presence), to keep the idea that communication among human beings is a question of touching the other. Touch is precisely the second metaphorical field most widely used in the novel to refer to communication, including all the expressions using the idea of physical contact as metaphor for communication processes. The expression “to keep in touch” is used at least four times in the novel in the sense of keeping connected or related to someone (80, 102, 116, 126). Correspondingly, “losing touch” is used in the reverse sense (110). Metaphors of communication as physical contact are relevant to my analysis because they impose a rhetorical regime of presence as the condition for the transmission of information. In our Baudrillardian world, this sort of metaphorical expression reveals some nostalgia for modes of communication requiring physical presence of the parts involved. Moreover, this rhetorical regime suggests a metonymic logic, that is, one operating by contiguity among elements, so that the connection that guarantees the information exchange is established thanks to physical proximity.

From this perspective, it should be considered that communication within the communities portrayed by Pynchon is presented in the novel in hierarchical relationship with other kinds of communication as a truer, deeper sort of contact: “A network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system” (117; emphasis added). This hierarchy is reproduced by many critics (not necessarily in a conscious way, I would say) who have read the novel as a nostalgic claim for the need to reinstall pure reality that has been clouded by the realm of simulacra in the postmodern California of the 1960s. The Trystero, in this reading, represents the promise of return to a communitarian pre-lapsarian status of the sort described by Jean Luc Nancy.

When Oedipa faces the old sailor, close to what Nohrnberg calls her “pietà” (153), she suddenly feels the need to touch him: “She was overcome all at once by the need to touch him” (87). Oedipa’s feeling of empathy is here literally expressed as a need to touch the other person. More important than that, however, is the way in which Pynchon finishes that sentence, turning her into a “Doubting Thomas”: “as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him, without it” (87). The literal and metaphorical senses of “being in touch” are fused in this passage as Oedipa enacts the exchange of information with the old sailor in terms of a close embrace.

4. Miracles of Consensus

Physical proximity is the realm of metonymy in rhetoric. The epistemological regime of conspiracy is also one of contiguity among constituents—breathing
together—possible only because those involved exchange words/breath. All the elements that constitute the literary description of communities in the novel have to do with touch and physical proximity. Both elements are felt to be lost in the contemporary world. When Oedipa claims that people are truly communicating through the Trystero, she is implying that other conventional forms of communication—telephone, official mail and so on—are less “true,” thus reinforcing the hierarchical structure.

Waste is the final metaphor for the workings of WASTE, also operating through a metonymic logic working on contiguity, contact, contagion, like a chain or thread linking together its members. The alternative communities in the novel bring together people who are normally excluded from the other, institutionalized communities: isolates, disinherited, the Preterite. In the rhetorical-sociological structure created in the novel, those who are expelled from the institutionalized community (the Republic) are gathered together in several underground communities, “a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (86). The excluded ones belong to the underground, live in darkness (while the official institutionalized communities take place “in public light”) and belong to the margins (whereas the ISAs constitute the core of the system, the city center, etc.).

*Lot 49* exemplifies through this centrifugal mechanism what J. Hillis Miller calls the “auto-immunity” logic of all communities, an idea that he takes from Jacques Derrida’s late work. In order to keep itself safe and pure, the community needs to expel everything that threatens it—Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* expressed the same idea in anthropological terms. In doing so, however, the community threatens and exposes its own vulnerability as a unified whole. The paradoxical structure Miller talks about “is like that of the body’s immune system repelling foreign invaders and then turning its immune system against itself in what is called ‘auto-immunity’” (“Postmodern Ethics”). In *Lot 49*, the official community “of crust and mantle” expels all those individuals who appear as a threat to it, disinheriting those who seem to have nothing in common with the rest of its members and dooming them to isolation.

What Pynchon’s novel proposes is that a new community can be born among the disinherited and the isolates in a spontaneous way, like Jesus Arrabal’s “anarchist miracle” of consensus (82). Arrabal’s formulation is quite close to some recent theorizations of alternative communitarian forms, like Maurice Blanchot’s in *The Unavowable Community*:

> They are there, they are no longer there; they ignore the structure that could stabilize them. Presence and absence, if not merged, at least exchange themselves virtually. That is what makes them formidable for the holders of a power that does not acknowledge them: not letting themselves be grasped, being as much the dissolution of the social fact as the stubborn obstinacy to reinvent the latter in
a sovereignty that law cannot circumscribe, as it challenges it while maintaining itself as its foundation [. . .] Inert, immobile, less a gathering than the always imminent dispersal of a presence momentarily occupying the whole space and nevertheless without a place (utopia), a kind of messianism announcing nothing but its autonomy and its unworking. (33)

This description of a community of the disinherited also matches Lingis’ idea of “a community of those who have nothing in common.” It is similar to something Schaub had already hinted at: “the word ‘community’ here is a metaphor for the lack of community we all share” (40). Schaub’s description of what he called “the communion of withdrawal” (41) shares many features with recent theorizations of what a community is beyond the institutionalized limits of ISAs.

According to Lingis, a community of those who have nothing in common is born out of the exclusion of some of the members of the rational, institutionalized communities: “The community that produces something in common, that establishes truth and that now establishes a technological universe of simulacra, excludes the savages, the mystics, the psychotics” (13). The same idea is described by Blanchot when he claims that “[it] differs from a social cell in that it does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as aim” (11).

Unlike the official, institutionalized address performed by ISAs to include citizens in the life of the Republic (Uncle Sam’s calling), becoming knotted into the Trystero is an apparently spontaneous act on the part of a number of people. The mere existence of this kind of community can be seen as a threat to the official, institutionalized ISAs because it questions their apparent omnipotence by challenging the idea that an individual can be such only if he is recognized by ISAs and that America is a “true continuity” (either us, or nothing). After Oedipa’s night rambling, during which she meets countless bits of evidence of the WASTE community’s existence, she concludes that the underground margins of the world are a real place: “Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world” (86). The fact of their being ignored by power structures makes the members of this community deliberate in their attempt to definitely withdraw to this alternative space beyond America’s “true continuity.” Again, in Blanchot’s words, “That is what makes them formidable for the holders of a power that does not acknowledge them: not letting themselves be grasped, being as much the dissolution of the social fact as the stubborn obstinacy to reinvent the latter in a sovereignty that law cannot circumscribe, as it challenges it while maintaining itself as its foundation” (33).

In my reading of Lot 49 as presenting a model of community, the final question to be answered necessarily is whether Oedipa’s quest does finally bring her out of her tower and into some form of community with others
(Johnston 53). Keeping in mind the strict dialectical structure I have analyzed up to this moment, the answer to that question would be “no.” A wiser Oedipa does not return to her place as subject defined by ISAs at the end of her quest, nor does she definitely abandon her suburban housewife life to join the underground crusade against The System. A third possibility might be proposed, however, one which depends upon the acceptance of one of those “excluded middles” mentioned in the novel.

A third sort of community might be identified, one that stands in between the two other groups, participating in both yet escaping the closed dialectical structure they propose. This community would be based on the epistemological structure that has been described in this paper and it would include most of the characters that are of any help to Oedipa during her quest. They all share the feature of their being, at the same time, inside and outside the system, linked to the Trystero in some way, but also part of the civil order it opposes. At first sight, they all seem perfect representatives of different ISAs and their official discourses: lawyers, scientists, university professors, doctors, war veterans, playwrights, etc. On the other hand, all of them provide Oedipa with clues and hints about the Trystero, thus proving that the conspiracy is not a perfectly sealed, closed system, but one with many leaks. They become threads in Oedipa’s own “tapestry of the Trystero” by virtue of the quest structure she sets in motion in her inquiry about Inverarity’s legacy.

In trying to disentangle the Trystero mystery, Oedipa contributes to the weaving of a new net into which she is herself woven (Schaub 34). Moreover, the fact that the plot remains open, that there is no closure to Oedipa’s quest, suggests that this new form of community can extend indefinitely as long as a new connection can be made, a new person can be knotted into it by bringing in a new piece of information. A final connection can be made, I would claim, by paying attention to the metaleptic turn by means of which each of us is included into Oedipa’s quest in each of our readings, thus joining the community of searchers triggered by Pynchon.

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Notes

1 Thomas Pynchon. *The Crying of Lot 49*. 1965. London: Vintage, 2000. All further references are to this edition. However, I would like to acknowledge the variations between “community” and “continuity” in this passage in different editions of the novel.

2 For an analysis of the connection between Oedipa’s reverie and Remedios Varo’s painting “Bordando el manto terrestre” in terms of the character’s feeling of isolation, see Cowart, 23-30.

3 The term alien is used at the end of the novel—reinforcing the way in which
she is cut off from any community; she is the “fully other,” which is the etymological meaning of “alien.”

4 In *The Art of Allusion*, David Cowart analyzes the influence of Remedios Varo’s paintings in *Lot 49*, pointing to the use of the embroidery metaphor in the novel. He does not mention, however, the recurrent symbols related to sewing and embroidering in Varo’s work, of which “Bordando el manto terrestre” is only one example.

5 Miller draws on Derrida’s *Foi et savoir* (“Faith and Knowledge”) to claim that every community operates on a paradoxical logic and borrows the term “community as common auto-immunity” (cf. Derrida 87): “What Jacques Derrida calls the auto-co-immunity logic of the community, in which those who should protect the community’s safety endanger and damage it, in which the community turns destructively against a group within itself, part of itself” (“Postmodern Ethics”).

6 The spontaneous gathering together of this community, together with the need to find a way of *truly communicating* finds an echo in Pynchon’s statement in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”: “Far from a sickness, violence may be an attempt to communicate, or to be who you really are.”

7 I would claim that this community, however, is never fulfilled in the novel. The power that emerges from it is kept on a potential realm, as a pre-lapsarian state to be recovered, represented in the romantic image of the circle of children Oedipa meets in Golden Gate Park (82) or as the prophecy of an Apocalypse at the end of the novel (125).

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Using Schema Theory to Trace the Connections between the Different Aspects of the Conflicting Roles of Oedipa Maas and the Intertext of Remedios Varo

Celia Wallhead

1: Introduction: Oedipa Maas's Conflicting Roles

From a purely theoretical stance, Pynchon's widely taught *The Crying of Lot 49* proves to be an excellent text for illustrating to students the postmodern concept of the end of essentialism, seen through the multiple point of view and the fragmentation of identity in the characters. From the very first lines, students accept that the protagonist is torn between being, at once, a fairly anonymous suburban housewife living in California and a sort of female version of the mythical Oedipus. They also accept easily enough that the reference to Oedipus implies two things: that she will be sent on a quest which will require going away and learning something (with or without coming back and—the sexual reverse of the Greek hero—killing her mother and marrying her father); and secondly, that she may be related in some way to the Freudian psychological interpretation of this sexual situation.

The dream element of this latter aspect appears clearly in the opening pages when Oedipa's distinction between the real and the dream is shattered, as her nights are interrupted, first by Pierce and his many voices at the time he changed his will (6), and then by Dr Hilarius, with his demand that she take part in his LSD program—LSD, a drug that also blurs the line between the real and the dream. Hilarius tells Oedipa that he is a Freudian (93), that he used hypnotism in Buchenwald (95), and that he chose, not Jung, but Freud, the Jew: “the dreamer whose puns probe ancient foetid shafts and tunnels of truth” (89). Remedios Varo has a (surreal) painting of a woman visiting a psychiatrist.

Students accept readily that Oedipa is the wife of a disc jockey, and that, in spite of this fact, which ought to make her life livelier and more connected, she saw herself as an isolated, entrapped, Rapunzel figure (12). Like Rapunzel, and like Remedios Varo, who paints lots of long-haired damsels in Gothic towers, Oedipa has long hair (102) and she is held fast by a sort of magic (though this does not extend so far as converting her hair into a wig): “anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all” (13). There are many magician figures in Remedios Varo and all the women have long hair.
At the part when Oedipa recalls her visit to Mexico with Pierce, where she had cried before a painting, one can show students the middle panel of the triptych, *Bordando el manto terrestre*. They will understand the Existential angst of the void (associated also with the Modernists E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad) and Oedipa’s heartfelt cry, “Shall I project a world?” (56). David Cowart’s explanations of Pynchon’s debt to Remedios Varo in *Lot 49*, especially chapter 2, are essential reading, and vital though they are, even he says that he has not exhausted all the possible presences of Remedios Varo in the novel. Students see how *Bordando el manto terrestre* makes Oedipa question her life on Earth, and upon waking up from a nightmare in her Berkeley hotel room and seeing her own face in the mirror beside a Remedios Varo reproduction on the wall, she questions her identity (69-70).

The figures associated with Rapunzel in her tower and with other embroiderers or weavers—Arachne, Philomela, Procne and the Lady of Shalott—are also easily added to Oedipa’s image, though I don’t usually go into the Borgesian implications with the students as Debra Castillo does (in her “Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art” in O’Donnell 1991): “The reflexivity of a text on a painting depicting a tapestry that describes an interior state through allusion to textualized myth (Rapunzel, Arachne, Philomela and Procne, the Lady of Shalott) is essential” (39-40). But students can no doubt see the synaesthesia of Remedios Varo as a mixture of genres and detect its underlying presence in the novel. Oedipa is told she could take up embroidery (13) as an option. Arachne weaves and embroiders, but for defying the goddess, she is turned into a spider, the symbol of female industry through spinning and weaving. The two sisters, Philomela and Procne, suffer similar fates: the former has her tongue cut out or mutilated (like Domenico in *The Courier’s Tragedy*), but is able to point the finger of guilt by weaving a tapestry of her abduction by her brother-in-law. Betrayed by her husband with her own sister, Procne kills their son and serves him up to her husband for supper, and both are turned, by magic, into birds. Hints of cannibalism occur in *Lot 49*, albeit in a much more surreal way, through the bones transformed into cigarette filters and wine. Birds often figure in Varo’s work too, and in the first part of the triptych, *Hacia la torre*, the nun-like figures seem to be kept in thrall by birds. The Lady of Shalott is locked up for different reasons. She has to choose between life and art. She weaves a web (like the webs or wrinkles around Driblette’s eyes [54] or like Mr Thoth’s knitting [64]) and when the mirror breaks, as with Oedipa in the Echo Courts motel (24), disaster is on its way. (The mirror is associated with maaswerk and narcissism.) Since we never learn Pierce’s true sentiments towards Oedipa, we do not know whether the whole point of the job as executrix of the legacy is to benefit her or to cause her harm. But in all these cases, the tapestry is a cryptic form of the word. These women cannot speak directly; they have to use clandestine means, like the underground communications system in the novel.
Looking back at the Remedios Varo tryptich, I tell my students that the surrealists saw woman as a magical figure, a mediator between reality and mystery. The artist, the painter, is an alchemist, who converts colours into images, as in one of Varo’s paintings. The surrealists, therefore, were concerned with the female arts of sewing and tapestry, so Varo’s *Bordando el manto terrestre* (painted in 1961) is a ritual recreation of the world by the artist. Varo paints the marvellous, the sublime, and females predominate by far. The triptych was apparently influenced by her friend Leonora Carrington’s *Nunscape* of a few years earlier, 1956, of nuns on a boat in the sea, and is also reminiscent of Ángela Santos’s *Un mundo* (1929). Oedipa is nun-like in several ways: while isolated, she is still part of a collective, she is indistinguishable from the crowd of Californian housewives, until she is sent on her quest; she receives, or thinks she almost receives, sacred illuminations or epiphanies; and she appears to want to be chaste, for Pierce had told Metzger that Oedipa “wouldn’t be easy” (28)—whatever that means. There isn’t much sex with Mucho Maas, in spite of his name; even less towards the end with Pierce, who preferred his stamps; and she has to be drunk, or excited by scenes of impaling (she has an Impala car), to acquiesce to the sexual advances of—the albeit wonderfully handsome—Metzger.

The figure of Oedipa embraces, therefore, both sacred and profane love. When she tries to escape from the omnipresent evidence of the Trystero in San Narciso and heads up to San Francisco, she only finds more signs. Coming across the dying sailor and feeling an impulse to touch him, to offer him love, she enters yet another, but entirely different, role and phase. The expansive phase of the quest gives way to a reductive phase. The need to touch—she “took the man in her arms” (87)—suggests that she can no longer rely on the evidence coming from the senses of sight and sound. She has to be totally involved and, against the further evidence of the void, she almost refuses to go on *looking* for evidence of the Trystero and searching for meaning.

When I tell students that the scene with the old sailor is a sort of *pietà*, or *Virgen de los Dolores* or *de las Angustias* (the Virgin of Granada), they understand, they see it in their mind’s eye, but they begin to protest because she had so far been associated with very different roles, even opposing roles, either innocent, virginal figures, or women of ill repute, rather like the “angel of the house” and the whore in Victorian literature: a mummy (26),¹ a stripper (26-27), and a Barbie doll (27), Alice in Wonderland (“Things then did not delay in turning curious” [29], “Rabbit” Warren [96], and Genghis Cohen’s succession of doorways [65]), Marilyn Monroe (16), and a Jewess (“Edna Mosh” [96], “kosher” [120]; see also Hollander’s references [75]). Students find it hard to believe that Oedipa can be all of these things. But, indeed, she can, and after the mention of Dallas (35), if we follow Hollander’s theory, that the whole book is riddled with tacit references to the assassination of President Kennedy, then, as *pietà*, she is also a Jackie Kennedy figure.
As regards Marilyn Monroe (the nymph on the sign at Echo Courts motel has billowing skirts reminiscent of Monroe’s skirt in *The Seven Year Itch*), recently accessed documents indicate that Monroe had Communist friends in Mexico City (like Oedipa and Jesús Arrabal and Remedios Varo, of course), and she went straight from pillow talk with Jack and Robert Kennedy to something similar perhaps with her friends in Mexico City. Hollander, again, has suggested how close the young Pynchon was to inside information on the assassination of Kennedy.

### 2: Ways of Viewing Oedipa’s Roles

Oedipa becomes all of these things, indeed, Collado sees the metamorphoses of *V.* as also present in different ways in all Pynchon’s novels (83). Alternatively, this multiplicity of roles Oedipa is forced into, and the many examples of layers or surfaces, as in Remedios Varo, suggest that Pynchon may have created his protagonist along the lines of William Burroughs’s “laminations.” This theory would be backed up by the belief that Oedipa had the potential to be all these things. One of the ways of interpreting Pierce’s comment that Oedipa “would not be easy” is to reject the sexual sense and embrace the moral one: that she slammed the door of the hotel bedroom in Mazatlán because she did not agree with his unethical and undoubtedly illegal means of getting rich. Pierce might therefore have seen in her the potential for feeling, perhaps on his behalf, for the underdog, if only she could see him or her (though it is almost always a him), and for that, she needed to be forced out of her comfortable house in Kinneret-Among-The-Pines.

If Oedipa has the potential for all these things, then the necessary traits are within her, growing steadily, almost organically, as a tree progressively adds rings to its trunk on the outside. Laminations are thin layers superimposed one upon another. But this model does not allow us to see Oedipa simultaneously in several or all of these roles; it suggests that one or more are hidden or outgrown.

Hollander suggests the metaphors of embroidery (69)—the *maaswerk*—represent the overside and underside or overt and covert: “But a comprehensive reading of *Lot 49* must account for how Pynchon’s themes, tropes and narrative strategy interweave, must demonstrate how Pynchon structures the narrative (or overside) and allusions (or underside) of the novel into a unified whole” (66). He also suggests the “magic eye” as a metaphor to illustrate the need to adopt a different visual stance to grasp the hidden meanings. A third approach he mentions is Pynchon’s deployment of the enthymeme, “a logical construct with the conclusion unexpressed—to be drawn by the reader or listener” (81), especially if the conclusion is comic. Fourthly, Hollander suggests that a jazz player’s improvisations or variations on a theme could be an apt metaphor for understanding Pynchon:
In each of these cases (comic, jazzman, painter [he refers to Dalí’s Voltaire in the Slave Market]), the audience has to perform mental operations, fill in blanks, catch wordplay, recognize referents, complete syllogisms or analogies, bring a working knowledge of history to the artistic experience, understand enough to reach the right conclusions. Pynchon is a master at leading us on, then leaving us historical-political blanks to fill in. If we follow the trail of the indicators he carefully lays down for us we will arrive at answers that unify on the underside what seems like disunity on the overside. (83-84; emphasis added)

3: Schema Theory and Oedipa’s Roles

An alternative approach, I suggest, is to set the roles out linearly and chronologically, so that they can be compared as a whole. I prepare sheets for my students (see Appendix 2) not in terms of the relating of the narrative, but of the reconstructed narrative time-line, starting with Oedipa’s flashbacks and recollections. Even this method can fail to reflect the reality unless one realises that the roles are cumulative and not discrete. As Oedipa enacts the Pietà role, she does not cease to be a quester, though she does reduce and limit that aspect of her life at that point.

This approach leads towards a comprehensive model for understanding Oedipa’s capacity for enacting these roles, and especially for seeing the connections between them, and that model entails a form of cognitive frame theory. For imaginative writing to be successful, the writer must have some control over the imaginations of his or her readers to carry them along. Pynchon runs the path of the imagination in leaps and bounds, taking us, in this instance, from Oedipus to Rapunzel, to the Virgin Mary, via Alice in Wonderland and Marilyn Monroe. Pynchon is able to make these leaps and carry us along because he works with frames, or schemata, which are recognisable to the reader. He may jump from one field to another, there may even be apparent incompatibility of schemata, but because they are inherently structured, the writer knows that some element in the structuring of one schema will tie in somehow with one or more elements in the other schema or schemata evoked in the reader’s mind. And what is most important: according to schema theory, once a schema has been triggered in the reader’s mind by a specific word, the whole schema is evoked, including aspects that are not mentioned. The schema comes complete, and the reader, with his or her knowledge of that schema, fills in the unmentioned or “default” elements, which are latent or subconsciously present. Things can also link up by being opposite, like a virgin and a whore.

A model for analysis which my students and I find very useful and straightforward, is that invented by Guy Cook to detect, analize, and describe the functions of schemata in texts. It sets up frameworks in the form of scenarios in which the events are re-enacted. Through the re-enacting, the similarities are
pointed out, but so too are the *dissimilarities*; and it is quite often through schema disruption—using but *subverting* a scenario, by showing things to be lacking or different—that important points are made, and especially, humor is created.

The main work in which Guy Cook describes his findings and elaborates his model is *Discourse and Literature*. The model goes back to Minsky and to Schank and Abelson’s prototype set out in *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*. He also draws upon Charles Fillmore and his “frames” (Oedipa finds the Trystero symbol in a laundromat “somewhere near Fillmore”! [84]) and George Lakoff’s work in the 1980s with his “cognitive model,” and Lakoff and Johnson’s “experiential gestalt.”

Cook shows that the basic claim of schema theory is that human understanding, and here, text understanding, can be represented as a hierarchy of levels of schemata in which failure to understand on one level can be corrected by referring to the level above. A theory of coherence may be extrapolated from this, whereby failure of correction at a lower level may be referred to a higher one. The levels are set out paradigmatically by Schank and Abelson as in the diagram:

**Schank and Abelson’s Levels in Schemata**

- **THEMES (3):** role themes, interpersonal themes, life themes
- **GOALS (5):** satisfaction, enjoyment, achievement, preservation, crisis-handling (all objectives of possible plans or scripts; departure from expected goals the usual focus of literary writing)
- **PLANS (unlimited):** novel and unpredictable, but recognize and carry out goals
- **SCRIPTS (3):** situational, personal, instrumental (structures that describe appropriate sequences of events in a particular context. “Slots” where participants have roles, props, entry conditions, results, scenes and their sequence.)

(Schank and Abelson)

Coherence is created when the reader perceives connections between schemata. The connections may be causal, or inclusive, in that one schema may be contained in another, whereas excluding processes may signal deviance. The schemata represent the *norm*, or expectation once it has been triggered, and so any unexpected factor or detail can cause schema disruption and/or refreshment.
Defamiliarization (to use the Russian formalist notion) can make a crucial contribution to a theory of the relation between a literary text and the reader’s mind at work on the text. A writer may introduce a schema only to disrupt and radically alter it. In its static nature, an altered or subverted schema suffers the foregrounding of certain of its components or aspects. The deviation may have a meaningful or aesthetic effect that contributes to the power of the text. For example, when Metzger suggests playing “Strip Botticelli,” the word “Botticelli” triggers a schema which is both verbal and visual, which takes us back to Pynchon’s *V.* and Venus as the classical ideal of feminine beauty. But Oedipa subverts the concept of naked beauty when she puts on her naked body layer upon layer of clothing, turning herself into a coloured beachball with legs. The concepts are opposite and comic, but the painting and the beachball coincide in their common ground of the sea, so there are odd connections. The deeper meaning of the whole scene may be that you cannot trust the word of a lawyer.

According to Cook, the levels at which the defamiliarization may take place are at those of language schemata, text schemata, and world schemata. The attitude towards lawyers, for example, would fall within world schemata. Cook demonstrates three aspects to the introduction of changes in schemata: existing schemata may be destroyed; new ones may be constructed; and new connections may be established between existing schemata. This is what Cook calls “schema refreshment,” and disruption is a pre-requisite. The different procedures are reinforcing, preserving, and adding, while the disruptive procedures are refreshing through destroying, reconstructing, and connecting. The primary function of certain discourses, particularly literary and publicity, is to make a change in the schemata of their readers. Our schema of “Oedipus” will never be the same again since we have come across a twentieth-century female version of him.

To help students understand the way this functions, I give them sheets (see Appendix 1) which itemize the ways in which the Oedipus schema has been refreshed through Oedipa Maas. Foregrounded are her gender—since we have a female Oedipus, we receive some message about the roles of women in ancient Greece and the middle of the twentieth century—and her socio-economic status, which says something about the different social hierarchy. Also foregrounded is Oedipa’s failure to answer the enigmas with which she is faced, which, compared with Oedipus, removes a potential nobility and heroism from her character, preparing us for the foregrounded genre difference in text purpose: comedy rather than tragedy.

As the students compare Oedipa Maas to the schema of the Virgin Mary, again, they appreciate the differences rather than the similarities. Oedipa, at age 28, is not a mother, and certainly does not pretend to the honor of being the Mother of God, but, in this profane age, she may receive a sacred message (like Moses) and has the potential to succor those in need. To give succor is a
plan Oedipa and the Virgin Mary do share. Also, they share escape narratives, even if they are not voluntary, as in Mary and Joseph’s flight to Egypt. But again, the texts are different: the disciples of the New Testament are executors, after Pentecost, of the Word of God, as indeed, was Mary Magdalene (Oedipa shares the long hair, tears, and adultery), while Oedipa doesn’t know what she is the executor of (see Quilligan 188), though there may be common ground, as the disciples at first didn’t see things at all clearly, yet went on to do the best communications exercise in the history of the world.

The main point of setting out the schemas and showing how they are subverted and refreshed is to demonstrate exactly how the different connecting words and ideas (which form the vertical line on the table in Appendix 2) function. One could go on to set out all the schemas I have suggested on the horizontal axis. And, I must add, the list of roles I have drawn up for Oedipa is not exhaustive, one could add Androgyne, Young Republican, or Rose of Sharon Joad, for example.

The point of all this is that we can be more precise than just saying that Oedipa is deeply impressed by and identifies with a painting of the Earth’s crust (manto in Spanish) and plays the role of the Virgin Mary, who wears a mantle (also manto in Spanish, one being a metaphorical extension of the literal usage.) We can say, with more linguistic precision, that mantle is a prop in the schema of the Virgin Mary and it is also part of an image which is a prop to the traveller Oedipa Maas. Furthermore, this image partakes in the general scheme of “crisis-handling” in the life of the individual. The Virgin Mary had no Existential angst; she was worried in that she was not married, but had faith in the God of the Old Testament and asked no questions when taken along new paths. Oedipa lives in an age in which there is no unique authority accepted unquestionably by everyone. It is for this reason that some people see Oedipa also as a female version of Everyman. But again, this would not be limiting as an essence, it would be, rather, another discrete role that could yet be found to have connections with her other roles.

Conclusions

Setting out the connecting factors as plans (for example, to execute a will, or to communicate knowledge of the Logos, to achieve liberty—the Virgin Mary and Christ sought freedom from sin and also subverted authority) helps us to see the big ideas in the novel and to see ways in which certain factors may unite more than one schema. Both the Virgin Mary and Alice in Wonderland ventured, like Oedipus and Oedipa, into the unknown. Strange worlds and languages, with new authorities, were encountered and had to be dealt with. Students enjoy trying to find the connections themselves, and end up with lots of crosses in the different boxes. For example, music unites several schemata, and in Lot 49—and all of Pynchon’s other works—there is music everywhere.
Curiously, Remedios Varo includes different musical instruments, the piano, a guitar, a flute, etc, in her paintings. Travel and transport also permeate her work, often with characters that have their transport incorporated in the form of wheels or sails. Oedipa is at one with her vehicle: “She and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd, religious instant” (15). As Cowart observed, Pynchon was no doubt fascinated by what he saw in Varo’s paintings of strange worlds where the stars communicated with the creators of art or of the world itself. The reader makes the connections, and the student can analyze the connections within each schema and across schemas; but while for Oedipa, the making of connections aims at ontological meaning but leads to paranoia, for the reader, connecting is a lexical game, and the serious meanings involving how to live the individual life within the community, on earth, in the cosmos don’t necessarily do much more for us than entertain the brain. One can hold discussions on the potential moral purpose of Pynchon’s fictions, but ultimately, what prevails is their overt multivocality and marked variance from the Oedipal epic with its univocal ethical purpose. Studying Pynchon’s use of familiar schema in terms of both world knowledge and text types helps us to see more clearly how readers understand his works in all their complexity, and confirms what we intuited.

—University of Granada

Notes

1 The Egyptian connection—with its papyri, hieroglyphs, cryptic codes and mummies coming to life—Hollander notes is part of the “sacred” aspect of the novel, had been traced earlier by Meikle to a story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “Lot No 249.” Both the mummy and Pierce’s stamps are referred to as an auctioneer’s lot. But Miekle thinks this connection is a smokescreen for a more important debt to H. P. Lovecraft’s story “The Call of Cthulhu” (288).

2 Mosh is like Moses, who received the Divine Word in the Ten Commandments. Remedios Varo was not Jewish, but was obsessed by her large nose and did a painting of a woman going to the plastic surgeon for a nose job, like Esther does in V. Varo knew all about Jewish persecution through Leonora Carrington’s relationship with Max Ernst during the war. Perhaps the obliterated background also points to Oedipa’s Jewishness.

Works Cited


Doyle, Sir Arthur C. “Lot No. 249.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 85 (1892): 525-44. (Consulted through University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center.)


Appendix 1. Schema Refreshment

1. Oedipus

WORLD SCHEMATICA

INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas, of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
IS: without family; becomes self-sufficient (default element: disinherited?)
   BUT NOT a man; NOT child of king; NOT inhabitant of ancient Greece;
   IS married
EVENTS: sent into “exile”; has adventures; faces the unknown;
   watches a film which has “a merry old Greek fisherman” (19)
   BUT does NOT solve enigmas, kill father (mother?) and
   marry mother (father?)
PROPS: HAS long hair
   BUT HAS car*

*Just as the horse became identified with its rider in the past, giving rise to the centaur in Greek literature, Oedipa’s car is part of herself—“she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant” (15)—just like her husband Mucho’s customers when he worked at the used car lot. Curiously, in several of Remedios Varo’s paintings of travellers, the mode of locomotion is incorporated, reminding us of Nefastis’s “To keep it all cycling.” (72) and Pierce’s “Keep it bouncing” (123).

TEXT SCHEMATICA

INSTANCE: The Crying of Lot 49
IS: intended to entertain
   NOT intended to edify
   NOT a tragedy; NO tragic flaw in hero/heroine

LANGUAGE SCHEMATICA

INSTANCE: The Crying of Lot 49
IS: NOT univocal heroic epic; IS multivocal (acc. to Bakhtin’s distinction of the novel)
2. THE VIRGIN MARY

WORLD SCHEMATA

INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas, of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
IS: young woman; Jewish?; goes into “exile”; NOT a mother
EVENTS: is informed she has been chosen for an important purpose;
the purpose is NOT to give birth to the Son of God;
she goes to San Narciso; it is a Sunday;
does NOT go to the Biblical Kinneret
she is told tales or sees a play about Lago di Pietà (41);
sees “nuns” in Remedios Varo’s tryptich;
sees the “mantle” of the world being woven;
experiences or almost experiences epiphanies;
holds the dying sailor “as if he were her own child” (87);
sees in the rooming-house “A picture of a saint,
hanging well-water to oil for Jerusalem’s Easter lamps” (88)

PROPS: HAS long hair;
Wears blue and black (apart from her knickers, which are of “assorted colors” [23])

TEXT SCHEMATA

INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
IS: NOT a figure in a sacred text; NOT an icon;

LANGUAGE SCHEMATA

INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas
IS: involved in a scene with language of Biblical overtones:
“embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world” (13).
## Appendix 2. The Varying Roles of Oedipa Maas Schemata

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Who or what are the political subjects of *Gravity’s Rainbow*? Put differently: What defines the novel's represented humankind in their relations with modern states? Such relations always entail whether subjects are represented as having certain rights, privileges, and immunities, blessings hinging on whether one is a citizen or a non-citizen, always a matter of historical contingency. Those determinations of citizenship, especially in modernity, are further reckoned by the shifting identifications of race or ethnicity that sovereign powers use in legitimizing and conditioning the subjection of persons. This is Pynchon's great subject even from his earliest stories, especially when it involves how powers transform persons into stuff, into objects.

Consider the example of a passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* that one may well have read multiple times, but without much thoughtfulness—just another of Pynchon's laundry-lists, it seems. The scene unfolds shortly after the opening of episode twenty-five of Part Three, “In the Zone.” Slothrop has just awakened in a village locksmith’s somewhere near Rostock and, walking out the door dressed in Tchitcherine's Red Army uniform, he gazes over a landscape seemingly reverted to Viking times, a Europe with “no clear boundaries.” Then begins this long catalogue:

> The nationalities are on the move. It is a great frontierless streaming out here. Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what’s forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenberg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniols, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pajamas, footsteps light as waterfowl's in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins
failing, horses dying, families leaving their vehicles beside the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, over the white hot Autobahns, trains full of their own hanging off the cars that lumber overhead, squeezing aside for army convoys when they come through, White Russians sour with pain on the way west, Kazakh ex-P/Ws marching east, Wehrmacht veterans from other parts of old Germany, foreigners to Prussia as any Gypsies, carrying their old packs, wrapped in the army blankets they kept, pale green farmworker triangles sewn chest-high on each blouse bobbing, drifting, at a certain hour of the dusk, like candleflames in religious procession—supposed to be heading today for Hannover, supposed to pick potatoes along the way, they’ve been chasing these nonexistent potato fields now for a month—“Plundered,” a one-time bugler limps along with a long splinter of railroad tie for a cane, his instrument, implausibly undented and shiny, swinging from one shoulder, “stripped by the SS, Bruder, ja, every fucking potato field, and what for? Alcohol. Not to drink, no, alcohol for the rockets. Potatoes we could have been eating, alcohol we could have been drinking. It’s unbelievable.” “What, the rockets?” “No! The SS, picking potatoes!” Looking around for his laugh. (549)

Reading those lines invokes a familiar aesthetic experience. Gravity’s Rainbow often gives the feeling that we are being buried under a rubble of words naming things, concepts, techniques, and peoples; words with no clear reason for being tumbled together and that challenge us therefore to seek meaningful order and readerly control, a task all the more vexing because Pynchon draws so many nouns from technical jargons, chronotopically specific slangs, as well as foreign languages. Now, while reading a text like Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” having that kind of reading experience brings forth the new, variegated democratic body politic Whitman intended for us to celebrate. But what then shall we make of Pynchon’s passage? It begins with the expelled ethnic Germans or “Volksdeutsch” trekking westward out of liberated Poland and it ends with the Wehrmacht soldier telling the bitter irony of his fellow refugees’ collective starvation, then he waits in vain for them to reward his black humor with a “laugh.” It is framed on one end by émigré Germans, on the other by German citizen-soldiers. Grammatically in between—set forward in a 370-word sentence that embodies an in-betweenness crucial thematically—are the Reich’s former enemy aliens.

With their deep-set eyes and emaciated “white wrists and ankles,” and in their “numb” and silent “drifting” on waves of “momenta” generated from somewhere deeper than any potential or actual “nationalities” signified in this catalog, Pynchon’s refugees, denationalized families, former concentration camp inmates, and prisoners-of-war collectively represent the multitude of stateless persons streaming over occupied Europe in the months following V-E Day. What is their relation to those “Imperial” powers on whose cauldron-surface they drift? Put differently, what form of body politic might one’s
reading bring forth from this text? The figures set before us in this passage are “white,” a sign that skin color alone cannot account for the ethno-racial marking of bodies that modern state powers have demonized and interned. So in this sentence their ethnic identities pile up like blasted bricks: Tosks, Ghegs, Vlachs. English-speaking readers might read such ugly, tongue-stopping monosyllabic proper nouns as exemplary “material typonyms,” what McHoul and Wills define as post-rhetorical, semiotic prostheses for that which is absent but that could (or should) fill the space between western culture’s over-determined binaries: white and black, law and anarchy, and—especially in this passage—sovereign power and its subjects.

But here is a hitch in their approach. McHoul and Wills regard Pynchon’s practice as bringing forth the positive potentiality of critique to cleanse the “bad shit” of binary rhetorics by opening speech to formerly excluded middles. Yet the passage above implies that a sovereign authority has reckoned these persons through the lens of an ethnic type of humankind, and deployed the name for their kind within a mode of statecraft dedicated to their abjection, to the “bad shit” of their dehumanization. Thus they represent an excluded middle well along the way to becoming a midden, mere human trash. In fact, the grammatical subjects of this compound-complex sentence are represented as no longer standing in a relation of citizen-subjects to any sovereign power; the Imperium has abandoned them to what the text depicts as long and “deep” waveforms practically beyond reckoning, and according to whose inertias they are “supposed” to do this or that mindless labor. For sovereign authority still needs them after all, needs especially their reduction to menial, naked life; and needs them not only as slave labor but just thus, as an index of its total power. Historically grounded figures, still human but non-subjects vis-à-vis the state, these refugees represent a paradoxically included-excluded middle. Politically, they embody the staggering consequences of a modern biopower hell-bent on producing ever more of them. Alienated from homelands, banned from membership in a citizenry, denied the protective tent of any nation-state, and therefore beyond protection of constitutions and authorities warranting their claim on human rights, such persons figure a humanity apparently outside of the political yet posing the core political problematic of modernity.

This was Hannah Arendt’s thesis in her magisterial study of 1951, The Origins of Totalitarianism, a book whose chapters on statelessness most likely suggested some of those ethnic names to Pynchon (e.g. Arendt 354). Yet that discrete intertextual connection pales beside Arendt’s strong yet unrealized influence on Gravity’s Rainbow as a work of historical and political fiction. Especially significant I believe are Arendt’s claims about European colonialist outposts as seedbeds for the concentration camps, themselves understood as spaces for the manufacture of bare life—in all, a process and result vital to Pynchon’s novel. My own approach to Arendt is further indebted to her
contemporary Walter Benjamin as well as to more recent theorists of biopower and total sovereignty. The following paragraphs draw specifically from Michel Foucault’s Collège de France lectures, and particularly from Giorgio Agamben’s recent work on sovereignty’s juridical bases, on the topology of the camp or zone, and on the juridical (non)status of persons captured in those spaces of abandonment.

Always lacking character names in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and appearing most frequently in parts three and four, these figures of bare life have walk-on roles throughout Pynchon’s novel. Yet even some of its major characters become stateless and rightless in the same sense, though under a more expansive sense of camp and zone. Take Leni and Ilse Pökler, for example, as well as Miklos Thanatz and the Schwarzkommando. Still more: what is Slothrop’s Progress? Or the reader’s? For we open the text in mid-December 1944 with “fantasist surrogate” Pirate Prentice dreaming that he is seated in the “velveteen darkness” of a railway car and surrounded by other London evacuees such as “derelicts,” “drunks,” “old veterans” and “exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone.” Where is this train taking these passengers and why, as they “pass under archways,” is their destination figured as “a judgment from which there is no appeal”? Where is this train taking these passengers and why, as they “pass under archways,” is their destination figured as “a judgment from which there is no appeal”? Indeed a judgment of dereliction seems to rest upon them all, Prentice included; in the post-Holocaust moment of this novel’s writing, these figures seeming to have been “stacked” in the railcars imply a deeply ominous answer to our questions (3). Thus the Camp shadows things from the novel’s beginning. And then at the last, as our reading approaches its terminus, in the “Orpheus Puts Down Harp” section of the final episode, our narrator represents just outside the windows of the “black Managerial Volkswagen” carrying Pynchon’s thinly disguised Richard M. Nixon a host of countercultural “freaks . . . swarming in . . . in full disrespect for the Prohibitions,” and showing most of all their disrespect for the sovereign Nixon (755-56). But “Relax,” the Manager advises Richard M.: “There’ll be a nice secure home for them all, down in Orange County. Right next to Disneyland” (756). So the *Konzentrationslager* stalks 1973 America as it goes global.

Why then has “The Zone” as chronotope of statelessness and bare life remained practically invisible to critical analyses even while it may be read as standing formally, thematically, and politically at the book’s core? In a rare moment when criticism has verged on treating such matters, Stefan Mattesich in his 2002 study remarks that the Dora concentration camp “would seem to be a radical limit to Pynchon’s strategies, the arrest or suspension of the joke.” He further argues that “the holocaust is never submitted to its parodic mutations of form” and even remains an “exteriority or muted presence in the background” of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (159). While I agree that Pynchon suspends parody (but not irony) in treating holocaust subjects, I nonetheless find the camp-space and its modes of violence haunting the novel’s foreground in
zones or spaces where invisible sovereign agencies have suspended law, where war's demands have been used to invoke a profound anomie whose instrumental purpose is the increased production of bare life. These zones of political action punctuate the entire novel. They are certainly not the topoi of chaos or even anarchy, per se. Only a too-limited definition of exterminationist holocaust violence—the Auschwitz model—stands in the way of one's recognizing the dire significances of these spaces in Pynchon's narrative, hence the novel's potentials for political critique, as even a cursory reading of Arendt would have suggested. Moreover, I find Pynchon's text generally quite self-conscious about just where, in relation to actual camp realities, it should suspend the wise guy narrative voice's jokes. At the end of that 370-word sentence, for example, those starving DP's don't give even a nervous laugh to the Wehrmacht soldier's black humor.

We should first be clear about what these zones are not. The irrepressibly nostalgic Tyrone Slothrop, for example, considers the Zone a space where, "maybe for a little while, all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up" (556). To him as to many others, the Zone symbolizes the seeming suspension of bad rhetorical binaries and the promise of a Return to primal homelands where some originary historical and cultural singularity might promise a way out of current political dilemmas. In sum, this passage (like many others in the novel) describes what we might name The Romantic Zone: a cleared ground blooming with chthonic potential, an atavistic yet opportunistic wilderness space where the individual subject and individualism itself seem sovereign.2 "It's so unorganized out here," Geli Tripping tells Slothrop soon after he's entered the Occupied Zone of Europe. But the novel clearly represents that as a delusional view, as if persons like Geli were watching their own movie, grooving to some intersubjective fantasia. Slothrop, chief among them, imagines that he might be “as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days” (290-91), a fantasy of the self-reliant soul figured repeatedly in the novel's pop-cultural riffs; figured, as one song-lyric puts it, as a westwarding hero “Zoomin' through the Zone, where the wild dogs roam” (522). In Gravity's Rainbow, other instances of the Romantic Zone are the American southwest of fiction and film, the nineteenth century Argentine Pampas of the Martin Fierro epic (specifically, Fierro's first avatar, before he sells out to General Roca's Indian hunters); or the desert wastes of Südwest Afrika, where Lieutenant Weissman hunts Hereros; or the high deserts backgrounding Tchitcherine's sojourn in the “wild East” steppes of Kirghizstan.

In the novel's narrative trajectory, its plot, the point is that all such desiccating, bare spaces have been re-imported from far-flung colonial outposts back into Europe, into the homelands. Thus Margherita Erdmann
tells Slothrop that in northern Europe near the war’s end, Blicero, having earlier brought his Südstil-style colonialism home to the Reich, now at War’s end had transported her, like his other subjects, “across a frontier. He had injected me at last into his native space,” a Teutonic and fascist chronotope in which, Greta concludes, “I was free… I could do whatever I wanted” (487). Yet this zone for the free-play of romantic individuality also entails, as Slothrop learns from Ensign Morituri, a paradoxical “liberty” binding one to the Reich’s work of hunting and murdering Jewish boys (477-78). The virus of total power having thus been “injected,” re-imported to Europe and its subjects, it is (they are) legion. As are its agents, though Blicero stands for an extremity other colonists such as Mondaugen, Prentice, Tchitcherine, even good old Frans van der Groov may variously approach or reject. As his family name suggests, Weissman simply represents metonymically their white supremacist ideology taken to its logical exterminationist final solution.

So that we might be properly undeluded, Gravity’s Rainbow typically inscribes signs of domination and extermination either within or immediately adjacent to scenes of the Romantic Zone. Just before Geli Tripping’s remarks about the Zone’s “unorganized” and liberating spatiality, for example, Slothrop notices emaciated old refugees flitting nearby, along with former Dora camp “slave laborers” and homosexual inmates still wearing “175 badges” on the chests of their camp pajamas (289). With such instances of total dominion thus stalking the edges of perception, the incisive question is: How are the apparatchiks of absolute sovereignty served by such romantic fantasies? Late in part 4, the narration says of Gottfried that he “believes he exists for Blicero . . . that in the new kingdom they pass through now, he [Gottfried] is the only other living inhabitant” (721). And this passage further illustrates precisely what Arendt and then Agamben, fifty years later in Remnants of Auschwitz, define as the apotheosis of the slave’s or camp inmate’s mentality: a person inculcated with and disciplined to the perverse belief that submissive abjection constitutes his proper and just condition, and ultimately that his transformation into what Arendt names “inanimate man” (569) and Agamben the homo sacer, will join one to something singular and transcendent.

In Gottfried’s case, the narrative represents this fantasy as growing from Blicero’s schooling the boy in late-romantic Jugendstil fantasies of the solitary Wandervogel alone in his mountain wilderness, precisely the anti-industrial ideology encapsulated by Rilke’s lyrics yet made to serve the project of this boy’s total immachination.

In a telling observation, Agamben warns that the spaces sovereignty carves out during colonialist adventuring as well as during emergencies and wars must never be mistaken for some originary, preromatic state in which a fullness of executive power seemingly anterior to law enacts all by itself the functions normally reserved to other governmental branches. He shows that all such spaces are always already coded into law as emergency powers, the
“state of exception.” Hence any belief that they are just returning power to its full and originary juridical condition amounts to nothing other than “a legal mythologeme analogous to the idea of a state of nature” (State of Exception 6). As a particular chronotope of state power, the Romantic Zone constitutes the sort of myth that will, we are told in one of Pynchon’s moments of second-person address, make “you lindy-hop into the pit by millions, as many millions as necessary” (472).

Pynchon shares with Arendt and Benjamin a critical (and in his case, satirical) rejection of the Romantic chronotope. The Zone is for him, as for Arendt, always historically contingent; and ever since V. he has taken pains to depict accurately the Germans’ inaugural Konzentrationslager in Southwest Africa, just as in Gravity’s Rainbow he further details the Dora camp. Represented in Part 3 as a space to contain and regulate the flows and labors of stateless persons, the Zone unfolds more generally in the novel as the topology within which late-modern biopolitics demolishes individuality and realizes its deepest desires for control and dominion. It is the space wherein sovereignty denationalizes and denaturalizes the subject, then achieves its abject devolition, transforming the human into a laboring machine until, its productivity exhausted, comes the time for its extermination. The novel also represents the global extension of such spaces. The “White Visitation,” so aptly named, constitutes a kinder, gentler version of The Zone, especially as it supports Edward Pointsman’s Pavlovian conditionings, a topic I want to pick up momentarily. Related to the White Visitation: that Harvard lab where Dr. Jamf evidently conditioned Infant Tyrone’s penis. The Kamikaze training facility in wartime Japan (690-91) may be read as an Asian cultural variant on the same structure. Back in northern Germany, the Dora KZ-lager clearly epitomizes such a space at the exterminationist extreme. But then there is Zwölfkinder, a mirror-image of Dora (call it a ZK-lager), yet a Zone that a society of the spectacle sets aside for the “leisure for torturing” with agonies of incest “a minor engineer” like Franz Pökler (431). Zwölfkinder even features a mock “African desert” where, “every two hours exactly the treacherous natives attacked an encampment of General Von Trotha’s brave men in blue” (422)—a reminder that all of the novel’s colonial territories in South America, Southwest Africa, Soviet Central Asia, and even Franz van der Groov’s island of Mauritius, constitute such a Zone. On Mauritius, they hunted Dodos to extinction, but in Argentina, General Roca campaigned “to open the pampas by exterminating the people who live there, turning the villages into labor camps” (387). In Südwest Afrika, Von Trotha’s soldiers hunted the Herero nearly to extinction, while “the rest were used like animals” (323) in Konzentrationslager virtually invented by those “brave men in blue.” In Kirghizstan, Russian colonists “hunted Sarts, Kazakhs and Dungens . . . like wild game. Daily scores were kept . . . [while] their names, even their numbers, were lost forever” (340). These are the principal colonial spaces where the
novel represents technocratically sponsored biopower hard at work, each one a seed-crystal for the exterminationist logic of biopower reimported to Europe during the twentieth century, as Arendt had argued. Back home they assume a myriad of avatars: for example, Gerhardt von Göll’s movie-sets and film work, with their extraordinary uses of sadomasochism. Indeed, sadomasochism appears throughout the novel as an allegory of fascist sovereignty.3

As a mode of biopower, this topology of dominion must finally be inscribed on bodies and programmed in mentalities. Slothrop, remarks Sir Marcus Scammony at the close of Part 3, was first sent out in the Zone “to destroy the blacks”; indeed as a kind of terminator robot he was, says Marcus, “a good try at a moderate solution” to the Herero Problem (615). As an instrument of state power, Slothrop’s body reproduces at a micro-level the spatial logics of Imperialism. With his well-conditioned cock working “like an instrument installed, wired by them into his body as a colonial outpost” (285), and thus with his penis programmed to signify in the “kingly voice of the [A-4 rocket] itself” (470), it should have taken Allied powers straight to the quintuple zero rocket and the Herero who seek its duplication. By the end of Part 3, however, Slothrop’s constant sidetrackings, his “mindless pleasures,” have demonstrated that, in the words of Sir Marcus, “it’s obvious . . . he won’t do the job” (615). By novel’s end he’s become a hunted prey like those Hereros and Kazakhs, just another instance of naked life to be “broken down instead, and scattered.” It’s a plotline for which, our narrator remarks, “there ought to be a punch line . . . but there isn’t” (738).

Aside from these functions of control and extermination, Pynchon is also quite specific about the form of politics emerging from the Zone. In a telling remark at the end of Part 3, set on a Lüneberg Heath where the streaming of “skeleton-functional” refugees (611) is punctuated by well-fed Soviet and American rocket and Herero hunters, our narrator frets over the fate of a makeshift DP village amalgamating “A dozen [former] nationalities.” Considering its hybridity and spontaneity he wonders, with an eye on coming repressions, just what the Zone’s new authorities will “think of such a community like this in the middle of their garrison state?” (613). Will such groups “crystallize into sects,” eliminating themselves through infighting; or will it be necessary “to send in combat troops” (614)? Thus even beyond May 8th, as Pynchon writes elsewhere, The War as sovereignty’s ultimate, state-of-exception logic continues the work of subjection in new guises, continues especially as a series of police actions revealing how “truce” was merely a dissimulating public ritual.

This realization—or rather, prediction—one of the total state’s perpetuation of “emergency” was a principle thesis of sociologist Harold Lasswell’s influential 1941 essay, whose title first introduced to political theory the concept of “The Garrison State.” Lasswell realized even before the United States had joined
the conflict that world powers had entered an age of permanent strife in which militarized modern states, including western democracies, would radically revise and extrapolate the monarchical/imperial form of sovereignty. Looking to the garrisoned territories of colonial empires, Lasswell theorized a new “national security state” whose driving needs are a ceaseless defense posture combined with aggressive expansion. This new polity would synthesize the industrial state, operating on a basis of contract, with the military state that operates according to coercion. Lasswell’s garrison state would centralize government bureaucracies, create a universally regulated, military-driven economy, and establish state-monopolization over all means of coercion including police power and “compulsory labor camps” (460), an effort requiring especially the expertise of elite industrial managers capable of fully rationalizing production and effectively deploying materials and forces. Wimpe, the IG Farben agent or Verbindungsman, catches the essence of Lasswell’s argument when he looks out over The Zone with Tchitcherine and prophesizes to his communist counterpart that “our little chemical cartel is the model for the very structure of nations” emerging from the War (349). In Gravity’s Rainbow, chemical cartelization and Rocket manufacturing are models of this synthesis, and the Zone is precisely the “cauldron” out of which this newly synthesized, post-imperialist state emerges. Twenty years to the month after Lasswell’s essay, in his Presidential Farewell Address of 1961, Ike Eisenhower warned against this synthesis, under the now-familiar rubric of the “military-industrial complex.”

This emergent corporatized power has little to do with traditional forms of sovereignty and explains why the figures of Churchill, Truman, and Stalin appear in Gravity’s Rainbow only as simulacra: as enormous chromolithographs decorating Berlin’s Potsdamerplatz (373), or—still more satirically—as figures on “square after square” of toilet paper on board the Anubis, each decorated “with caricatures of Churchill, Eisenhower, Roosevelt” (450). Pynchon’s text thus understands all too well the ways that heads of state in late-modernity merely encapsulate, or may just dissimulate, sovereignty’s real workings. In fact, I think this is just where Arendt’s 1951 study offers so much, when read alongside Pynchon’s novel. Her principal goal was to rebut claims that, after all, concentration camps were superfluous because unnecessary strategic facets of Nazi totalitarianism. And she accomplishes this aim first by leaving almost entirely aside the figures of Hitler and Goebbels and then by arguing that the camps must be seen as forms of bureaucratized sovereign power developed in European colonies, particularly those in South Africa, then imported back home. “Continental Imperialism” is her term for this return, which answered the problem of European “Minorities” left uprooted after World War I. Then examining how the major continental powers all moved to denationalize their own minority populations in the 1920s and ’30s, Arendt narrates how the re-importation, especially from Africa, of colonialist white supremacy
served the project of legitimizing not only the newly imposed statelessness of Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies, but of deploying “race” as the core issue of post-Great War power struggles. As a prescient early example, Arendt points to the 1922 decision by French authorities to garrison the occupied Rhine River zone with twenty-thousand black troops imported from Africa, forces intended to humiliate German racial sensibilities as well as to remind them of their lost colonies in the Südwest—a moment Pynchon mentions in the text (377). More importantly, the power to denationalize whole populations implied a state structure which, Arendt argues, even if it were not yet a fully totalitarian garrison state, had already constituted itself around the essential operating principal of such a state. Denationalization and forced emigration demonstrated that not only in times of war, but even during a supposed peacetime, the rights of legalized citizens could be zeroed-out. The camps, Arendt argues, were thus not only spaces for quarantining newly rootless former citizens but also for making the state of exception permanent and for realizing the principle that stateless persons (in her words) “belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to humans” (582). Arendt variously names these inmates “living corpses” or “inanimate man” (569), apt synonyms for what Agamben, using Roman juridical discourse, terms homines sacri: the being who cannot be sacrificed to divinities because he bears within him no human spark of transcendence, and who may therefore be killed with impunity because he lacks that human spark. The homo sacer is, therefore, just that form of humanity against whom all citizens are sovereign like their emperor, in being authorized to eliminate the homo sacer by whatever means: exclusion, enslavement, incarceration, or mass murder.

Arendt analyzes how realizing this form of the total state necessarily entailed a vast bureaucratization of power, when managers inevitably rationalized the instrumental value of “inanimate man.” His necessary “devolition” as camp inmate would suit him perfectly to the work of enslaved labor, she recognizes; and here Arendt makes a move that must have resonated deeply with Pynchon. As she puts it, in realizing the devolition of inmates the camps constituted a “ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something even animals are not; for Pavlov’s dog, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang” (565). In the last chapters of Origins Arendt returns repeatedly to the trope of Pavlov’s dog as exemplary case of the total state’s desire, as she puts it later in the book, to mobilize on behalf of the military-industrial complex great masses of men constituted as “bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way” (587).

Indeed I think that, when read alongside Gravity’s Rainbow, Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism must be seen as seminally important to the political subjects of Pynchon’s novel. Origins yielded up a host of minor as well as
certain major figurations for Pynchon’s great story, from its lists of stateless refugees in the Occupied Zone of 1945, to the 1922 *SCHWARTZE BESATZUNG AM RHINE* (327) allusion, and even the all-important trope of Pavlovian-style pseudo-sciences of control. More significantly, Arendt’s core analysis of the Third Reich’s re-importation of colonialist domination and how that promoted both a white supremacist ideology and a vast bureaucratized project for the ever-expanding sovereign production of *homines sacri*, offers a cognitive map for reading many of the novel’s essential plot moves: its analepses to colonial territories as well as its many excursions into operant conditioning and the full immachination of the human subject, to mention the most obvious.

Finally, too, I think Pynchon’s novel joins hands with Arendt’s text in another critical respect. She concludes her study with a warning that statelessness, the space of the Camp or Zone, and extermination are all realizations of a new mode of total sovereignty, a corporatized garrison state likely (in Arendt’s concluding phrasing) “to stay with us from now on” (616). *Gravity’s Rainbow* shares this dark pessimism, despite or perhaps even because of what is represented by the humorous movie-theater hand-holding and blithe yet mechanically orchestrated chorus of its closing page.

These stark forecasts of Arendt and Pynchon are important just now, when thinkers are predicting that a rapidly globalizing capitalism ultimately spells the demise of sovereignty. Yet Arendt’s and Pynchon’s historical masterworks insist that capitalism is like the transmission linked to the engine of sovereignty, which together drove events through epochs of colonialism and cartelization. The question today is whether those epochs have ended, or merely morphed. Pynchon clearly represents the latter interpretation. Like Arendt (and others), Pynchon’s novel represents statelessness and camp existence in terms of a topological paradox which continues to function as the axe of state power. Again: in exchange for his merely nominal representation within the order of the human, *homo sacer* pays by being totally stripped of any symbolic representation. Thus Arendt’s understanding of such persons as being reduced to existence on a sort of sub-psychological plane is telling; indeed, it tells why Slothrop is eliminated from the aesthetic form representing him.

Analogous to Slothrop’s representational zeroing-out, the ever-expanding multitudes of *homines sacri* streaming within the twenty-first-century global marketplace spell the expulsion of entire constituencies from politics as such, and now in exponentially rising numbers that need have nothing any longer to do with ethno-racial identities. Not even whiteness, as we noted from Pynchon’s long sentence, offers a sure sanctuary. This is precisely why camps threaten to proliferate outside the one-way windows of Richard M.’s aptly selected *Volkswagen*, as it leaves behind the Watts ghetto for the Los Angeles suburbs. Indeed, those satirical scenes put the sharp accent on liberalist political economies as the new, post-war sovereigns of The Zone. Such representations point out how, these days, the still-increasing
global production of *homines sacri* or “surplus humanity” in second- and third-world exurban slums follows directly—as Mike Davis’s recent *Planet of Slums* so powerfully demonstrates—from the collusion of global businesses, transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and neoliberal political economies such as the United States or the European Union.5

When we look closely, *Gravity’s Rainbow* reveals its grasp on that collusion, which originated during the 1950s and ’60s. In the novel, whenever Pynchon capitalizes the word “State” it is because he intends to specify a similar transnational sovereign entity wielding ultimate powers over natural dominions and human life and death, powers reserved traditionally to kings and presidents. Often his usage points unequivocally to emerging, multiplexed global interests, in phrases like “corporate State” (419) or “a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome” (566). Moreover, Pynchon consistently ascribes to these new corporate powers expansionist, post-colonialist desires extending beyond the animate and into the inanimate. Thus Laszlo Jamf lectures students at the *Technische Hochschule* against covalent bonding, against the weak sovereignty of organic syntheses, and ultimately for the replacement of Carbon by Silicon—all occurring in what Franz Pökler envisions as “a Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power” (577-78). Developing Imipolex-G as an electrically responsive prosthetic skin for purposes of control, instrumentalizing the “consciousness of rock,” or even colonizing the Moon each illustrates this broader thematic, involved finally with the corporate-technological elimination of Nature as last remaining ground of singularity and mystery. Or, as a last hope for justice.

One recurring allusion in Pynchon’s work is to a paragraph from an 1878 Ralph Waldo Emerson essay entitled “The Sovereignty of Ethics.” At a key moment in *Vineland* the passage is quoted at length, a replay of it after a more veiled usage in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. There it’s used to introduce a “balancing” act of justice ostensibly visited on Lyle Bland for having called upon “machineries committed to injustice as an enterprise” (580) in the plot to sell Infant Tyrone into the bondage of his operant conditioning. The Emerson essay recycles familiar themes from the breadth of American romanticism, as he poses in the place of divine justice a wellspring of balancing forces in Nature, imagined as source of a “latent omniscience not only in every man but in every particle” (175). This organic omniscience invests all natural being with sovereign powers to rectify Evil. For Emerson, indeed, Nature’s beneficent sovereignty was ultimately attested in the history of warfare, from “Savage war” that gives way to strife predicated on “limitations and a code,” thus to yield in a utopian twentieth century “the finer quarrel of property, where the victory is wealth and the defeat of poverty” (179). I have argued that *Gravity’s Rainbow* militates against this dream. The rise of a fully corporatized garrison state, its
deployments of biopower, and finally its extensions of this instrumentalizing sovereignty over all of Nature, including atomic particles whose detonation haunts the novel ... all of this attests to the fully realized, ghastly sovereignty of Dominus Blicero—a stubborn survivor and clandestine immigrant to corporate, post-war America, and himself a symptom we ought not forget, for he reminds us how the romance of capital rendered “Nature” a ravaged husk.

No more can “Nature” save us. Romantic fantasies of all-powerful sovereign subjects still plague political thought, both then, during the Vietnam era when *Gravity’s Rainbow* was written, and as we read it now, while another US executive tries to prop up a sovereign state—another bloody fantasía that might be entitled *Die Weise Sandwüste von Iraq*, with race and ethnicity yet again haunting the spectacle. One reason, then, why *Gravity’s Rainbow* stakes its claim to enduring significance is that Pynchon so powerfully identifies and satirizes this persistent, essential paradox of modern statecraft: polities churn out ever-greater masses of non-political subjects. Nations have become machines for making ever more bare life. What Walter Benjamin wrote in 1942, as challenge to his own political thought, remains just as immanent today: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that accords with this fact” (qtd. in Agamben, *State of Exception* 57).

Death rules. “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.”

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Notes

1 Khachig Tölölyan was the first to treat the Camps at any extent; in “War as Background in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” To date however, the most historically well informed and theoretically careful treatment of the figure of the Camp in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the essay by Luc Herman and Bruno Arich-Gerz, work that shows the closeness of Pynchon’s research on that Nordhausen KZ-Lager.

2 See also the remarks of Der Springer, filmmaker Gerhardt von Göll, to the Argentine anarchist Squalidozzi: “I can take down your fences and your labyrinth walls. I can lead you back to the Garden you hardly remember” (383).

3 Consider especially Miklos Thanatz’s ruminations on how state power regulates sado-masochism because it “needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away” (731). On masochism in its relations to nostalgia, sentimentality, and the political see Attewell (esp. 38-43).

4 See for example the 2005 special issue of *Foreign Policy* devoted to sovereignty’s reputed demise. In general, the approaches of historians and policy experts range from the argument of J. L. Gaddis that the only essential change in the mode of sovereignty during an age of counter-terrorism is that the principle of the absolute sanctuary of
an executive or of individual groups within the borders of a nation-state has been evacuated; to the call by Hardt and Negri for an eviscerated sovereignty that would yield to a constituent democracy. In between these poles, the research Nordstrom has reported in her essay is especially interesting for how she describes transnational flows of capital and persons, occurring wholly outside the authority of international law and amounting to shadow sovereignties that effectuate the needs and policies of global conglomerates, even to the extent of sponsoring private, mercenary armies and of putting themselves in the service of traditionally constituted sovereign states.

5 See also David Harvey, who argues that since 1970 the deeply authoritarian, antidemocratic regimes propped up by first world powers together mask the “highly racialized” (202) nature of poverty and disfranchisement with “utopian rhetoric” (203).

6 On the intersections of race, sovereignty, and the masking of U.S. proto-fascism see my essay “Faulkner in Baghdad.”

Works Cited


In the postwar period, as debates about modern conformism and the emerging technologies of psychological conditioning and social control gained momentum, much attention was given to those groups who appeared to remain outside the powerfully centripetal forces of cultural hegemony. The desire for an escape to some space outside was frequently addressed in the narratives that proliferated during the postwar period. Perhaps the best known was Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which alienated Holden Caulfield makes a run for it but ultimately has nowhere to go and suffers a mental collapse. Ten years later, in Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, the alienated Rabbit Angstrom also makes a run for it, but he too is unable to figure out where to go and, instead of getting away, he returns for three more Rabbit novels spread over a few decades. In both the novel and the movie version of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Randle Patrick McMurphy initially seems well-suited to a successful escape, but in the end it's nothing that a lobotomy can't cure and Nurse Ratchet takes care of that. Other popular movies had already worked this theme. *The Great Escape*, for example, made Steve McQueen a star, while Hilts, the character he plays, ends up back in custody after a dramatic but abortive escape attempt leaves him tangled up in Nazi barbed wire. Played by Paul Newman, *Cool Hand Luke*—the man who would not conform, according to the movie's blurbs—seems to have a good chance at first, but (a) he doesn't have anywhere to go and (b) he is hunted down and killed. *The Misfits*, with its cast of stars, its Arthur Miller script and John Huston direction, tells a story of modern American containment and defeat. Sepia-toned and nostalgic, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* follows a pair of loveable outlaws as they run all the way to Bolivia, where they are finally shot down. Lesser known perhaps, but equally unequivocal, is *Lonely Are the Brave*. Based on a novel by Edward Abbey, the movie features Kirk Douglas as an anachronistic modern cowboy non-conformist misfit who breaks out of jail and makes a run for Mexico on horseback but is killed on a highway by a truck loaded with bathroom fixtures.

Paranoia aside, in most of these cases, the modern system is clearly out to get them—and, in fact, it gets most of them. The centrifugal thrust of these escape narratives—repeated so often as to suggest a form of cultural repetition compulsion—is a significant indicator of the cultural climate of the postwar period and the need to imagine some habitable space outside what
David Riesman called “The Lonely Crowd,” Paul Goodman called the “closed room” (159) of modern culture, and C. Wright Mills characterized as the realm of “Cheerful Robots” (233) programmed for efficient use. In the introduction to Slow Learner, Pynchon writes of the “centrifugal lures” (8) he experienced as he developed into a mature writer amid the rebellious atmosphere of “post-Beat” America (9). Two texts he cites are Mailer’s “The White Negro” (which urges whites to become “Negro” psychopaths to escape) and Kerouac’s On the Road (which encourages a wide range of unacceptable behavior but ultimately holds out little hope of escape either on the personal or on the social levels). Mailer’s predictions include nuclear holocaust and/or the onset of a concentration camp model of social organization. Having glimpsed the approach of an apocalyptic convulsion in the form of nuclear war that would destroy modernity, Kerouac’s Sal Paradise ends the novel staring out into the darkness and contemplating the “forlorn rags of growing old” (310).

Still, writes Pynchon, the result was a desire to explore “the wider range of life to be found outside” (8), as “Some of us couldn’t resist the temptation to go out and see what was happening”—particularly to seek out the “alternative lowlife” that persisted out there. In fact, most of the escape narratives mentioned above involve “alternative lowlife,” also known as the lumpenproletariat, and this centrifugal narrative dynamic structures much of Pynchon’s work as well: when Dennis Flange (“Lowlands”) and Oedipa Maas (Lot 49) leave the comforts of their middle-class suburban lives and go in search of a space on the outside in a garbage dump, a skid row rooming house and so on, for example, or when Benny Profane explores the New York City sewer system and other social topographies referred to by Rachel Owlglass as “[p]laces I won’t know” (27). Indeed, one of Pynchon’s earliest works, the unpublished “Minstrel Island,” posits a totalitarian world run by IBM and a rag-tag lumpen opposition made up of street musicians and prostitutes.

In Gravity’s Rainbow, the stakes are even higher and there are a number of scenes that illustrate this centrifugal desire. One of the most evocative is the soliloquy Webley Silvernail delivers to the lab animals as he returns them “to the cages and the rationalized forms of death”:

I would set you free, if I knew how. But it isn’t free out here. All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few. . . . I can’t even give you hope that it will be different someday—that They’ll come out and forget death, and lose Their technology’s elaborate terror, and stop using every other form of life without mercy . . . and be like you instead, simply here, simply alive . . . (230)

Pynchon’s image locates these lab animals in an extended version of what Foucault calls the “carceral archipelago” (301), as arbitrary victims of their own use value in a merciless system. They are being conditioned—a
process with obvious implications for humans. In *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman makes the lab rat analogy clear: “So imagine as a model of our Organized Society: An apparently closed room in which there is a large rat race as the dominant center of attention. And let us consider the human relation possible in such a place” (159-60). The threat of behavior modification is explicit in many postwar narratives: in *The Great Escape*, the McQueen character is told that the prison camp will teach him some manners. The school Holden Caulfield flees claims to mold boys into “fine young men” (2). Cool Hand Luke is told “You gonna get used to wearin’ them chains after a while” as part of the process by which he will “get his mind right”. Ken Kesey’s McMurphy is subjected to a variety of techniques including electroshock therapy and lobotomy.

The possibilities for human freedom and the merciless operations of the modern system were seen as vital issues in the postwar period and this same set of concerns animates *Gravity's Rainbow*. As an infant, Tyrone Slothrop’s use value was exploited in a series of conditioning experiments whose effect on him is, quite literally, incalculable. It is this usefulness that ultimately leads to his being hunted across the Zone in a merciless pursuit against the backdrop of postwar devastation that exemplifies the system’s consequences on the macro level just as Slothrop’s situation demonstrates it at the level of the individual. The man in charge of Pavlovian conditioning in *Gravity's Rainbow* is Pointsman, and while his attempt to capture a dog for use in the laboratory is rendered as an episode of slapstick (42-47), the implications are clear. His willingness to use others is absolute, and, if he is successful, “There will be precious little room for any hope at all” (86). A little later, Roger Mexico’s response to Pointsman’s unexpected smile is unequivocal: “it will haunt him—as the most evil look he has ever had from a human face” (89).

There are a number of similar issues compacted in the Silvernail passage. First, he offers no hope. Second, there is the question of mercy, a term that recurs several times throughout the novel, for example when Slothrop hears the American MPs at his hotel door: “American voices, country voices, high-pitched and without mercy” (256). As merciless in their assertion of power as those who rule over lab rats, they (They!) force Slothrop to realize for the first time what it must be like to witness power, in this case American power, from the outside. Whatever these country boys might once have been, they are now enforcers for that “elite few” who, according to Silvernail, use “every other life form without mercy.” The same phrase is used by Enzian to describe the ravages of von Trotha, one of Pynchon’s chief villains, in his genocidal campaign against the Hereros: “The thumb of mercy never touched his scales” (362). From colonialism to chemistry, modernity’s fixation on use value is portrayed as relentless and ultimately suicidal. The central principle is “to violate” as a means of maximizing efficient use:
Taking and not giving back, demanding that “productivity” and “earnings” keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. . . . [The System] sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide. (412)

When Franz Pökler enters Dora, he witnesses the end result of this suicidal logic. The slave labor that produced such startling breakthroughs in military technology, and thus enabled the maximization of death, also produced as a by-product “odors of shit, death, sweat, sickness, mildew, piss” and great numbers of “naked corpses being carried out . . . to be stacked in front of the crematoriums” (432).

While the degree may vary, the principle of merciless use characterizes modern power in Gravity’s Rainbow. When Leni Pokler poses the following rhetorical question, no answer is forthcoming: “They know how to use nearly everybody. What will happen to the ones they can’t use?” (155). It is a complex question. It tends to be the case that the useless ones exist on the outside as social waste (W.A.S.T.E., to borrow a well-known Pynchonian acronym from Lot 49) and this overlaps considerably with the “alternative lowlife” that is identified in Slow Learner as making up the heterogeneous “wider range of life to be found outside” (8). The useless ones might be incarcerated or exterminated by arbitrary genocidal fiat. In addition to the Hereros, Pynchon includes a number of instances: the natives of Argentina exterminated by General Roca, the 1916 massacres of Kirghiz and others in central Asia. One might even add the story of Frans Van der Groov and the annihilation of the dodoes: “What were they good for?” (108), he asks in frustration. On the other hand, the useless ones might simply go on, ignored and unnoticed. In any case, some creatures—including some people—just seem to be good for nothing, and prominent among these we find the useless lumpenproletariat.

The Lonely Crowd, David Riesman’s hugely influential 1950 study of social psychology, divided Americans into groups such as the adjusted (also known as the other-directed or the conformists) and the anomics, the “ruleless [and] ungoverned.” The adjusted are those who “fit the culture as though they were made for it,” he notes, “as in fact they are” (287)—that is, they have responded appropriately to the conditioning techniques of the culture. The anomics include all the misfits, the maladjusted, those who can’t or won’t fit in, that assortment of individuals existing beyond—or beneath—the reach of conformity: drug users, sexual deviants, criminals, lunatics and so on. “Taken all together,” estimates Riesman, “the anomics—ranging from overt outlaws to ‘catatonic’ types . . .—constitute a sizable number in America” (290). Whatever
their actual numbers, this category appealed to the centrifugal imaginations of artists and writers. The Beat literature that influenced Pynchon is permeated with an eccentric and anomic sensibility, yet one that articulated, he writes, “a sane and decent affirmation of what we all want to believe about American values” (9).

In his discussion of anomia, Riesman refers explicitly to the lumpenproletariat, an unwieldy rubric designating a heterogeneous category that seems largely to escape categorization and thus poses a challenge to analysts such as Marx who prefer more conceptual order. While the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, and the aristocracy are clearly defined groups, the lumpens resist taxonomy. By contrast, they comprise a group of people who have, willingly or otherwise, more or less slipped out of the ordered class system—or as is sometimes the case in the Zone, find that the ordered system has slipped away from them. Often, but not always poor—the German word lumpen means ragged—they nonetheless exist uselessly outside the economic structures of labor that constitute the industrial working classes. In a famous passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx attempts to list the members of this group—and the line up sounds a bit like a *Gravity’s Rainbow* catalog or list of characters:

Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni [disreputable street people], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call la bohème. (149)

An “indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither” is a difficult entity to comprehend (and sounds more and more like life in the Zone.). They are the “scum, offal, refuse of all classes,” writes Marx, and, in remaining outside the normative structures of social ontology, this promiscuous and disorderly lumpen mix, as Jeffrey Mehlman has pointed out, constitutes “the site where that heterogeneity, in its unassimilability to every dialectical totalization, is affirmed” (13). The characterization of the lumpen as a site of an unassimilable heterogeneity suggests that this might continue to be a space in which forms of non-conformity and non-compliance might persist off the grid of conditioned sociality. In *Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas wonders whether the derelict old man in the skid row rooming house might possess forms of knowledge and experience unavailable to more conventional citizens, and this wondering is related to the condition of lumpen social withdrawal: “It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (92-93).
The attraction to these non-bourgeois lumpen spaces is an important element in Pynchon’s fiction, and, according to Jeffrey Mehlman, a similar attraction can be located in Marx—despite his explicit rejection. The linguistic exuberance of Marx’s prose when he discusses the lumpens registers an “exhilaration,” an “almost Rabelaisian verve,” and a “certain proliferating energy” (13), a positive tone that contradicts his overtly condemnatory attitude. Perhaps in response to this ambivalence, there seems to arise a compulsion to make lists as a way of containing the anarchic energy and heterogeneity that threatens taxonomic, and perhaps social order. The Encyclopedia of Marxism (online) provides another Pynchonesque list: the lumpens include the “outcast, degenerated and submerged elements . . . beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables, persons who have been cast out by industry, and all sorts of declassed, degraded or degenerated elements.” By admitting their inadequacy, these lists signal that the sublime diversity of individuals may be finally neither subsumed under the unity of an abstract category nor controlled by the totalizing and homogenizing forces of modernity.

Marx’s famous catalogue of lumpens concludes with “la bohème” and the overlap between the lumpenproletariat and the bohemians is important. In 1848, the year of Marx’s Communist Manifesto, Henri Murger’s Scènes de la Vie Bohème enshrined the free-spirited bohemians in modern cultural iconography. Like Marx, Murger attempts a list, but he too seems undone by the bewildering mixture: along with a variety of artists, pickpockets, murderers, he includes “bear-leaders, sword-eaters, vendors of key-rings, inventors of ‘infallible systems,’ stockbrokers of doubtful antecedents and the followers of the thousand and one vague and mysterious callings in which the principal occupation is to have none whatever and to be ready at any time to do anything save that which is right” (xvii). A few pages later, he asserts again that “it may be worthwhile to enumerate and classify” this group for those who “cannot have too many dots on the i’s of definition” (xxiv), but the task inevitably remains incomplete. Again, this non-totalizable and unassimilable heterogeneity borders at times on incoherence, a quality found also in the characters and plot of Pynchon’s novel.

This anarchic meeting ground of artists and the insane, students and criminals, the decadent and the devout, substance abusers and sexual adventurers, scum and refuse, provided centrifugal cultural spaces in the midst of a centripetal and dangerous cultural moment. In addition to the novels and films mentioned above, there were many others besides Pynchon exploring this terrain. Although the term lumpenproletariat was not so common, interest among disaffected postwar Americans was strong from Steinbeck’s idyllic Cannery Row or Nelson Algren’s lumpen Chicago to the Beat Generation writers, Hubert Selby Jr.’s depraved Brooklynnites, Hunter S. Thompson’s Hell’s Angels, Charles Bukowski’s alcohol-drenched
autobiographical fiction, Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*. As useless to capitalism as to socialism, this zone of refuse and refusal blurs the line between rejecting the system and being rejected by it, and it is precisely this disorder that allows a sense of possibility—however tentative—to emerge. The enemy is neither capitalism nor communism, but modernity itself as a fundamentally confining and homogenizing structure that, by mid-20th century, seemed headed either toward totalitarianism (whether of the right or the left) or toward some apocalyptic end of history.

In the face of such a fate, this lumpen space of social waste, scum and refuse could even, paradoxically perhaps, be transformed into an outside space, writes Fredric Jameson, “of misfits and oddballs in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature” (99). This relation to nature—and thus to the pastoral, a more conventional literary escape mechanism—is borne out, for example, in the scene late in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when an increasingly eccentric Slothrop lets his hair and beard grow and “likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountains, getting to know shrikes and capercaillies, badgers and marmots” (623). Lumpen heterogeneity here merges with a rejection of modernity, of modern subjectivity, and even of history itself.

Both Marxism and capitalism are animated by a narrative of history as progress, and just as the lumpens play havoc with orderly social taxonomies, they also threaten this historical narrative. Engels complained of the ahistoricity of the lumpens since they are found in every culture and indeed, as Peter Stallybrass concludes, the category seems “to emerge as the very negation of historicity” (84) and thereby threatens to “undo the imagined progress of history and the historical dialectics that [Marx] proposed as the privileged means of understanding history” (79). Indeed, lumpens reside as far from the major currents of modern history as from the channels of efficient productivity. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri observe that the lumpens are “thought to be dangerous—either morally dangerous because they are unproductive social parasites—thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the like—or politically dangerous because they are disorganized, unpredictable, and tendentially reactionary.” The useless lumpens exist as “merely a residue . . . a kind of historical refuse” (130). The sense of refuse and disorder resonates throughout lumpen discourse as well as throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, subverting any commitment to orderly class struggle or to narratives of historical progress. But this lumpen refusal (or inability) to be assimilated is precisely its attraction to those seeking alternatives to the merciless power structures of modernity.

As far to the right as Marx was to the left, Oswald Spengler had an equivalent notion of an ahistorical group: the fellahin. His model of history, explicated in *The Decline of the West*, traces the historical trajectory of world powers, their rise and fall in a parabolic model familiar to readers to *Gravity’s*...
Rainbow. Pynchon’s admission in Slow Learner that he experienced a “somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline” (13) seems directly related to Spengler’s influential theories. According to Spengler, for the Faustian culture of The West, brennschluss occurred some time ago and history’s gravitational pull was already well underway by the early twentieth century. But, he argues, the rise and fall of great powers primarily affects those who are part of that racial and cultural group and share in its historical destiny. Those unassimilable groups who exist outside the borders, on the margins, and in the interstices of a great imperial civilization remain largely untouched by its historical rise and occupy the ruins after its inevitable fall. The citizens of an imperial culture—the Elect as opposed to the preterite, those Webley Silvernail calls the “elite few”—these are “the peoples whose existence is world history” argues Spengler (105), while the others exist in an adjacent ahistorical space. For those alienated moderns searching for the promise of a way out, these lumpen spaces seemed to afford the possibility of an exit, a way to get off the “bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide” (412)—that is, the bus of history.

Spengler notes that when imperial cultures go into decline “cosmopolitan” intellectuals—whom he dismisses as “wasteproducts” and “inefficients” (185)—lose their belief in the nobility of war and their imperial destiny and instead affiliate with the useless ones on the margins of the imperial culture, the “residue,” the fellahin, the outcasts, the dregs. So, although Marx strongly disapproves of the lumpens, Spengler has utter disdain for those who ally themselves with the fellahin, and Riesman breezily dismisses the anomics, a significant minority of postwar Americans actively sought out precisely these spaces of residue and waste, drug use and “perversion,” of skid row, criminality and lunacy, of racial exclusion and vagrancy. As we see in Gravity’s Rainbow, these can become the raw materials for a desperate sense of possibility in a modernity that seemed to have run amok, enabling the imagination—perhaps merely delusion—of a counterforce or counterculture. Nicholas Thoburn argues that beginning in the late 1960s and increasingly by the late 1970s, the lumpenproletariat became a focus for a liberatory politics of difference and heterogeneity (435-37). This is echoed in Slothrop’s meditations on the counter-theology of his ancestor, William Slothrop, whose On Preterition leads Tyrone to wonder: “Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot?” (555-56). Mercy, as Webley Silvernail makes clear, is in short supply.

In its heterogeneous disorder, its promiscuous mixture of genres, its apparent incoherence, and its celebration of “alternative lowlife,” Gravity’s Rainbow is an exemplary lumpen text. Its uncontainable cast of heterogeneous lumpen characters is as unassimilable as its plot. As Spengler notes, the actions of the imperial culture constitutes History, while the actions of the fellahin amount to no more than “a planless happening without goal . . . wherein
occurrences are many, but, in the last analysis, devoid of signification” (170-71). Ironically, as the representatives of the great powers hold their historic meeting to discuss the carving up of postwar Europe, lumpen Slothrop, in pursuit of mindless pleasures rather than participating in significant plans, is hiding from the guards and scratching around in the bushes looking for dope. In the Zone, there is a sense in which almost everyone is reduced to lumpen status, living outside the law because there is no law in effect. Without official structures in place, people instead have “arrangements”: as Geli Tripping tells Slothrop, “It’s so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements. You’ll find out” (290). Some arrangements take place on the scale of History, such as the arrangement that leads to a provisional government in Germany, but most, “[n]o more or less real . . . [remain] private, silent, and” like the “planless happenings” of the lumpens themselves, “lost to History” (291).

Images of waste are inevitably associated with the lumpens, from Marx’s “scum, offal and refuse” comments onwards, in a tendency to connect unproductive and unusable people with literal waste and garbage. Similarly, references to garbage and body wastes are certainly not infrequent in Gravity’s Rainbow, and the circumstances range from the sublime to the ridiculous. At one point, for example, Slothrop (a.k.a. Rocketman at this point, and dressed in a pig costume) is hidden in a garbage dumpster beneath “a pile of eggshells, beer cans, horrible chicken parts in yellow gravy, coffee grounds and waste paper” (598). Waste, by definition, is not subject to the violations that are a consequence of usefulness. If, as Webley Silvernail emphasizes, They are willing to use every form of life without mercy to further Their own interests, one strategy, then, is to be useless. “To be unique or grotesque, a cartoon figure, an obsessive,” writes Jameson, “is also . . . not to be usable in efficient or instrumental ways”(101). Not being usable, in these circumstances, can be the closest thing to safety that remains available. Leni Pökler’s “early dream” for her daughter Ilse is that “She will not be used” and this aspiration is connected to the hope—“never quite to be extinguished”—that “a few small chances for mercy” may persist (610). On the next page, this hope is juxtaposed with a scene in which Tchitcherine is told that he is considered “useful,” and the implications are immediately obvious: “It was a death sentence” (611).

In a 1969 essay, Susan Sontag acknowledged that those in power are themselves the “living dead,” adding that in a culture dominated by the “inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian, it becomes a revolutionary gesture to be alive.” This echoes Webley Silvernail’s plea for being “simply here, simply alive,” but the question then becomes how to assert life within a culture of death, whether a political response could ever be effective. “The revolutionary response,” Sontag continues, “can’t be sabotage: blowing up the great corporate institutions. We are too few, too divided; and the violence they monopolize is formidable” (186). It is interesting to note that Sontag rejects violent revolution not on principle but due to insufficient means. The solution instead lies
elsewhere: in lifestyle, in culture—perhaps counterculture. Sontag concludes that “Bending the mind and shaking loose the body makes someone a less willing functionary of the bureaucratic machine. Rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature... unfits, maladapts, a person for the American way of life.” In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, of course, while direct references to rock music would be slightly anachronistic, drugs, sex, outlandish attire, and nature are frequent preoccupations, and the American way of life is the subject of considerable critique. Still, however imperfect it may have been as a political strategy, one widespread postwar response was a willed anomia of unfitness and maladaptation, uselessness and waste—a lumpen way of life.

The inefficient and non-productive nature of the eccentric lumpen bohemians is one of their defining traits, and Georges Bataille associates this directly with unassimilable heterogeneity:

> the heterogeneous world includes everything resulting from unproductive expenditure (sacred things themselves form part of this whole). This consists of everything rejected by homogeneous society as waste. . . . [T]he waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter . . . the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate . . . those who refuse the rule. (142)

When, toward the end of the novel, the fledgling Counterforce begins to assert itself, it is logical that it does so through, as Bataille puts it, the waste products of the human body. “We piss on their rational systems,” declares Osbie Feel, and Roger Mexico not only urinates on the board room table where They are in the process of making decisions—no doubt merciless decisions—he urinates even on the merciless people sitting there. He and Seaman Bodine—a lumpenproletarian *par excellence* if ever there was one—then disrupt a dinner party with a prodigious display of filthy humor, disgusting most of the guests with their litany of menstrual marmalade, snot soup, mucous mayonnaise and so on. And, presiding over the gathering, there is the presence of Brigadier Pudding. Though deceased, he is nonetheless a member of the counterforce and his remarkable appetite for human feces earns him a special place in the pantheon of lumpen waste imagery.

One problem that arises concerns the effectiveness of this lumpen counterforce. Given the destructive power of Them, an important point conceded by Sontag, one would nevertheless like to believe that the counterforce has some means of acting effectively against Their merciless use (and abuse) of all the animate and inanimate forms They encounter. And further, one would like to think that the marked tendency They demonstrate to exhaust and destroy everything could be thwarted. But the counterforce is not in a good “position to disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man” (712), Pynchon writes, and if we look back to the history of debates about the lumpenproletariat, it is difficult
to maintain much hope. Marx was scathing in his condemnation, arguing that if the lumpens have any political potential at all, it is more likely to be manifested in support of reactionaries, the extreme right. Since by definition it is impossible to organize them around any productive long-term strategy, their political potential is, in any case, quite limited—another manifestation of their uselessness. If any political position could be ascribed to them at all, it would most likely be some very loose form of anarchism—a position which does seem to have appealed to Pynchon. Pirate Prentice admits that the Counterforce may amount to no more than a delusion and perhaps the fate of Byron the Bulb is what awaits: knowing, but powerless to do anything about it. He burns on in the “poor sections, Jewish sections, drug, homosexual, prostitute, and magic sections” (651-52) of the city—that is, the lumpen zones—and his youthful dreams of organizing resistance have been abandoned.

Despite Marx’s critique of the lumpens, the cultural and political possibilities afforded by the existence of lumpen zones were examined very seriously in the postwar period. As Nicholas Thoburn observes, the lumpen refusal of work in any organized form and their position outside bourgeois morality and respectability seemed to indicate that an oppositional mode was in effect (435). If, as Herbert Marcuse maintained in *One-Dimensional Man*, the homogeneity of modern culture compromised the very possibility of serious social critique, the persistence of lumpen spaces, even within totalitarian regimes, appeared to provide increasingly rare dimensions in which alternative thoughts and behaviors could at least persist. Marcuse argues that while “the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” (256) is at best politically unstable, this lumpen refuse nonetheless “exist[s] outside” and “violates the rules.” The distance between the leftist agenda for the lumpens and their actual behavior becomes clear in Marcuse’s observation that the “their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not” (256).

The possibility that lumpen alienation might eventually turn to revolutionary consciousness was nonetheless an important concern for some radical groups in the 1960s. Without the established proletariat in the colonial context, Frantz Fanon had little choice but to place his hope in the lumpens—particularly those uprooted by colonialism and migrating in great numbers to the emerging shanty-towns. “It is within this mass of humanity,” he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “at the core of the lumpen-proletariat, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the lumpen-proletariat . . . constitutes one of the most spontaneous and radically revolutionary forces” (103). Similarly, in the 1960s, the Black Panthers, who were well aware of Fanon’s work, did not have much of a proletarian base from which to recruit, but did have access to a huge number of what subsequently came to be called the underclass—criminals, drug dealers and so on. As they struggled to strategize
a way forward, there were many intense debates within Panther circles about the potential for mobilizing the lumpens. There was even a Motown-style pop band made up of Panther members called The Lumpens, who substituted radical lyrics for the apolitical content that filled the charts—an impulse to make pop lyrics that would have interested Pynchon perhaps. But in the end, the problems with the authorities that the Panthers ran into in their attempts to organize effective resistance were exacerbated by their own lumpen roots as drugs and violence weakened their position. As Fanon argued, the lumpens, including pimps, hooligans, prostitutes, and petty criminals, are “like a horde of rats: you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they’ll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree” (104). This is clearly a kind of oppositional position, but—despite Fanon’s hopes—not necessarily one from which alternative political structures can be built.

The closed system of modernity, as so many postwar writers perceived it, allowed few opportunities for significant opposition. In general, its centripetal pull holds us inside the homogenizing system of control where we continue to be “who the Caesars say [we] are” (GR 136). Despite our attempts at resistance, it most often remains the case that “the Man has a branch plant in each of our brains,” and that despite everything “They will use us” and “We will help legitimize Them” (712-13). Bataille, in the passage cited earlier, refers to the relation of the sacred to the zones of waste and refuse, human (lumpen) and otherwise, and this is manifested inGravity’s Rainbow as well—both in the references to the Angels but also in the many references to magic. Tyrone Slothrop, at one point, tries a lumpen spell of his own—a counter-spell really that sums up some essential spirit of lumpen philosophy: “‘Fuck you.’ whispers Slothrop. It’s the only spell he knows, and a pretty good all-purpose one at that” (203). It may even have the power to ward off death itself, Pynchon suggests in the opening scene (10). On the other hand, it may just be useless lumpen cursing.

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In 1650, Thomas Pynchon’s first Anglo-American ancestor, William Pynchon, published a pamphlet entitled The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption. Its 158 pages constitute a dialogue between a “Tradesman” and a “Divine” arguing that Jesus did not suffer God’s wrath in atonement for the sins of the Elect, nor did he descend into hell, as the Nicene Creed holds. Rather, according to William, Christ endured the worst of what the devil could dish out, though God did allow Satan to do so. In a sense, William claimed Christ’s suffering on the cross in the gospels resembles Job’s experience in the Old Testament. Most Puritans disagreed with his conclusions: it is clear that New England’s first Pynchon was a far better merchant than a Puritan religious scholar.

Historically, Pynchon’s treatise has been largely overlooked; his name rarely appears in the most significant studies of New England’s religious roots. But recent scholarship has shown that his attempted contribution to Puritan theology, like most controversial texts, tells us much about the time in which it was published; and what the controversy tells us about colonial America is vital. As Michael P. Winship points out, the English Puritans were not used to real political power, and prior to the Cromwellian coup in England forged ahead as a loosely configured group bound by mere resemblances in orthodoxy but essential equivalence in oppression and suffering. As history shows countless times, shared margins can help mediate many differences, but centers often feel quite small when finally occupied:

An ever increasing common repression before the civil wars of the 1640s perhaps put a brake on the escalation of theological confrontations among Puritans, but within a decade after the civil wars removed that brake[,] the putative doctrinal unity of the movement was visibly and finally sundered. (Winship 799)

The struggles for orthodoxy in England had an instructive influence on the American Puritans, and intensified what was already a long history of extreme intolerance in the face of controversial opinions: witness Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and various ill-placed Quakers. The reactions of New England’s religious leaders were swift and unequivocal—and for that, often imprecise.
Based in part on its title page,² many denounced William Pynchon’s very mild foray into orthodoxy debates as a kind of Socinian heresy: that is, a heresy that denies the divinity of Christ, settling instead on the opinion that he was an exemplary human being, but no more a part of God than any other human being was. To quash the spread of such dangerous ideas, the books were quickly rounded up and burned at Market Place in Boston by the town executioner (Gura). Shortly thereafter, in the terms used by his more famous descendant Thomas Pynchon when describing the treatment of the fictional William Slothrop, Pynchon was “86’d” from Massachusetts.

This essay argues that Gravity’s Rainbow finds opportunity in the complexity of America’s religious history by revitalizing a suppressed strain of Puritanism rejected by the ruling elite, recovering an excised liberal offshoot from the main trunk of the past to reimagine the novel’s present. In so doing, the narrative refigures the capital sin of Sloth into a context wherein its characteristic ambivalence becomes a productive stance of resistance against dogmatism. By recovering William Pynchon’s Puritanism from history’s scrap heap, Gravity’s Rainbow ultimately challenges many of the presuppositions about the past, presuppositions which then ground so many of our assumptions about the present.

No one really knows exactly how influential William Pynchon’s Puritanism was on the writing of Gravity’s Rainbow: perhaps not even Thomas Ruggles himself. After all, its William Slothrop is portrayed as a mere ship’s cook cum pig farmer; a hillbilly espousing theological conclusions derived from his observations of the movements of swine; an outsider that as John Krafft notes was “presumably one of the saints,” but that “stood in a subordinate relationship which was theological as well as social to the ‘more Elect’” (58). But this representation of William Slothrop is not enough, if it purports to represent the historical William Pynchon. As Robert Daly argues,

Pynchon was a prosperous merchant and influential member of the Puritan community, so influential that when, in the winter of 1629-30, Winthrop makes up his short list of those he hopes will come with him to America, Pynchon is on it; so influential that, sailing aboard the Ambrose, he is brought over to the Arabella to dine with Winthrop and the captains of the fleet, the only person named in the account; so influential that, in 1640, the town of Agawam changes its name to Springfield in honor of Pynchon’s home town back in Essex. He is one of the authorities, and he may be the only person in American history to have defied Thomas Hooker, of whom it is said he could have put a king in his pocket. (206)

In short, William Pynchon and William Slothrop are not identical, or even equal.

We also know for certain that there was not one, but many Puritanisms.
The proto-fundamentalists who provided much of the material and spiritual energy for New England's establishment shared many commonalities, particularly as regards their ideas and attitudes towards the Catholic and English churches of their day. Edmund Morgan explains, “[w]ith so large an area of agreement about the nature and organization of the church, disagreements were confined to details; and as long as Puritans remained powerless to establish the desired organization, details could not be important” (12). William Pynchon's experience reaffirms that Puritanism was multiple, and these differences came to the fore after these radical reformers obtained sufficient political power to effect their desired organization of Church structure, both in England and New England. Though not expressed anywhere in the text of the *Meritorious Price*, an implicit argument is that Puritan orthodoxy was far from settled, and open to wide interpretation. Winship argues,

> Approaching old age in Massachusetts, Pynchon saw in the flux of the civil wars period and in the reemergence of issues he had grappled with more than a quarter of a century earlier the opportunity to publish his views. The resulting controversy . . . reflected orthodoxy's now openly fractured state. Pynchon thus provides . . . continuity between contestations for the slippery center in Jacobean England to the shattering of that center, felt all the way from London to Frontier English North American Villages in the middle of the seventeenth century. (799)

While the disagreements between allied Puritan reformers may have existed only at the level of detail, those details could be crucial aspects of an obviously unsettled orthodoxy. Thus although there seemed to be widespread agreement as to how faith ought to be practiced (that is, a relative agreement of what the organization should be) the very tenets of that faith were left unresolved.

The controversy surrounding the *Meritorious Price* also reminds us of a fact evident at many points in history: that hitherto loosely allied leaders are often at the apex of agreement in the face of something with which they all most vehemently disagree. In many senses, American Puritanism was and is best defined by what its proponents opposed: the limits of orthodoxy were most clearly drawn by self-identifying Puritans whose interpretations of scripture offended or upset more powerful ecclesiastical authorities.

In retrospect, then, it is evident that the spiritual project we know as Puritanism was far from a stable entity, exhibiting markedly varied beliefs, both within any given period and across time. And these variations require acknowledgement before proceeding with *Gravity's Rainbow*’s treatment of the historical phenomenon. So while we cannot know for certain how much Thomas Pynchon was actively influenced by his ancestor’s writing, it is my contention that the colonial “heresy” nevertheless shines an illuminating
light on the contemporary masterpiece. Altogether, the novel brings with it a very sophisticated knowledge of America’s Puritan roots—roots that warrant greater examination than Pynchon scholarship has hitherto executed. This essay also suggests that Slothrop’s experience in the first third of the novel exhibits many of the characteristics of the Puritan “conversion experience,” affording a reading of the novel’s present within and then against the framework of a Puritan worldview. As Gravity’s Rainbow then rejects the binaries of conservative Puritanism’s reductive method of reading reality, and the painful paradoxes of imperfect assurance, the novel embraces a positive ambivalence found in a positive practice of Sloth: what for the Puritan was a sin becomes, in Pynchon’s novel, a necessary position to adopt in the face of so much uncertainty in the post-war world.

1: Slothrop’s Morphology of Conversion

Tyrone’s engagement with his family’s Puritan tradition emerges early in the novel’s account of his wartime experiences. Tracking rocket strikes in England, the narrator explains that Slothrop

hangs at the bottom of his blood’s avalanche, 300 years of western swamp-Yankees, and can’t manage but some nervous truth with their Providence. A détente. Ruins he goes on daily to look in are each a sermon on vanity. That he finds, as weeks wear on, no least fragment of any rocket, preaches how indivisible is the act of death . . . Slothrop’s Progress: London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable. (25)

The allusion to John Bunyan’s A Pilgrim’s Progress, emphasizes the Puritan tradition’s influence exercised on Slothrop’s view of the world. The parallels are instructive—much like the Puritan who has never communicated with God (since it was believed that direct revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle), Slothrop has never seen any of the rockets whose strikes he is charged with investigating. Yet neither doubts the existence of their driving force.

Slothrop is also at least partly aware that the pattern of rocket strikes mirrors his movements through London. But he is not quite ready to accept God as the ultimate arbiter of Providence. The above passage makes clear that Slothrop has some begrudging belief that Someone, Somewhere has a plan for him: and he’s terrified of this plan, has “conviction,” that fate is ominous, demonstrating that his secular present is still inflected by his past’s Puritanism as a hermeneutic of events in the world: “He’s become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it—if they’re really set on getting him (‘They” embracing possibilities far beyond Nazi Germany) that’s the surest way, doesn’t cost a thing to paint his name on every one, right?” (25).
Slothrop tries to explain the complexity and influence of his Puritan heritage to Tantivy, his sole friend and confidante; but the British intelligence officer cannot comprehend the American’s genealogical predisposition, what is later described as a “Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia [. . .]” (188). Mucker-Maffick admits value in his friend’s pretending to such a practical fiction to keep him sharp, but Slothrop remains resolute, querying, “Who’s pretending?” (25).

Though Tyrone refrains from explaining the full character of his fear to his office-mate, the narrator spares little detail:

> It’s nothing he can see or lay hands on—sudden gases, a violence up in the air and no trace afterward . . . a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever. Beyond its invisibility, beyond hammerfall and doomcrack, here is its real horror, mocking, promising him death with German and precise confidence, laughing down all of Tantivy’s quiet decencies . . . no, no bullet with fins, Ace . . . not the Word, the one Word that rips apart the day. . . . (25)

In his anxiety, Slothrop sees in the pattern rocket falls a similar power to that of the Puritan’s God. There is more to it all than the deadly force of a bullet fired from a gun: it is the Word; the Word of the Gospel of John, Chapter One; the Word that creates the world by dividing the void; the Word that “rips apart the day” when creating night, just as this Word sundered the heavens from the earth by separating the waters above from the waters below (Genesis 1: 9-10).

This type of fear, an all-consuming terror of the power of something greater than one’s self, is the second stage in the conventional Puritan conversion experience. Though scholars disagree as to the exact point of origin, at some point in the history of early New England, the colonies’ churches began to demand a narrative of the ostensible Saint’s assurance that God had bestowed his Grace freely on the Puritan’s soul as prerequisite for full membership.³ According to Edmund Morgan, “the outlines of the pattern are plain: knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance” (72). For the sake of brevity, I will paint the steps with rather broad strokes: first, the saint comes to the knowledge of God’s greatness and the “power of the word” (71), while accepting God’s preordained plan for the world; next, he suffers with the conviction that he is hopeless to remedy the situation on his own (otherwise known as “legal fear”); then follows a desire and hope for God’s salvation, manifested in the faith that God has chosen him for regeneration in the afterlife; finally, however, he must remain skeptical of his own knowledge of God’s salvation, producing an internal conflict commensurate with his external conflict with the devil and his agents in his effort to erect God’s kingdom on Earth.

Slothrop clearly exhibits his knowledge of the faith of his ancestors, and
exhibits, as above, a familiarity with their belief in the “power of the word.” Accepting that there may well be some preordained plot for the world, as the knowledge of Providence effected in the converted Puritan, Slothrop develops a sincere fear and conviction that he is helpless to do anything about his situation, although precisely to what this “legal fear” is directed—Them—remains uncertain.

Thus, Slothrop exhibits the conventional beginning stages of the conversion experience; and while the conversion that he undergoes displays significant parallels to the “morphology of conversion” detailed by Morgan, it also deviates from the form in substantial and telling ways. It is through these deviations that we can begin to see how Pynchon’s novel creates a modern Puritan worldview against which to consider the present: one that views history providentially but without a God; one that ultimately allows Slothrop to recompose the conventional narrative of American Puritanism by eschewing the conservative strains most familiar in American history, which led to fear, despair, and intolerance in favor of recovering a more liberal (but deemed heretical by the conservative factions of New England) approach to orthodoxy that encouraged acceptance, inclusion, and expanded tolerance.

From the stages of knowledge and fear, Puritan conversion generally progresses into faith and combat, which is to say that the convert develops full faith in God, but suffers from a conflict marked by desire and hope for God’s saving Grace and the concomitant despair that it may not come. This element of Slothrop’s own peculiar conversion comes shortly after rescuing Katje from the trained Octopus Grigori on the beaches of the Casino Hermann Goering. To understand the “Puritan reflex” called paranoia, however, one must first recall that the tenets of that reflex hinged upon the belief that “[t]here were, according to Augustine, two churches. One was pure but invisible; it included every person living, dead, or yet to be born, whom God had predestined for salvation. The other was visible but not entirely pure; it included only persons who professed to believe in Christianity” (Morgan 3). By extension, there were also two worlds. First, in order and priority, was the invisible world of God, his invisible church, and the devil that opposed that church’s authority. Second was the visible world, material existence, which was a medium for that interaction. Perry Miller also insists that for the Puritans

the visible world was not the final or the true world; it was a creation of God and it was sustained by Him from moment to moment. Deeper than belief in the more obvious articles of their creed lay the sense of the world as a created fabric, held together by a continuous emanation of divine power. . . . “All creatures are dead Cyphers, of no signification, except the influence of God adds a figure to them.” . . . God not only gives being to the world, but, Himself the supreme intelligence, directs it to intelligible ends. (14-15)
Like his Puritan progenitors, Tyrone is beginning to perceive an alignment between things as they seem to be, and things as they “really are” (in a neo-platonic, idealist sense): “For a minute here, Slothrop, in his English uniform, is alone with the paraphernalia whose presence among the ordinary debris of waking he has only lately begun to suspect. [...] Meaning things to Them it never meant to us. Never. Two orders of being, looking identical... but, but...” (202). In the landscape of Slothrop’s Progress, this identification of “orders of being” moves him forward through the steps of conversion—from knowledge, to conviction, to full faith and combat. But the conversion is yet incomplete.

Shortly every institutional marker of Tyrone’s identity is stolen, and everything that can identify him as American—even as Tyrone Slothrop—disappears: papers, uniform, Hawaiian shirts, and all. Essentially moving backwards to the time when the colonists on American soil were still English (“American” being a term reserved for discussing the continent’s indigenous peoples), he is given an English uniform, and “Presto change-o! Tyrone Slothrop’s English again! But it doesn’t seem to be redemption that this They have in mind...” (204). With this recognition, Tyrone thinks back to his first ancestor to reach American soil, William Slothrop, and muses on the not-yet heretic’s journey across the Atlantic. The language and concepts of Puritanism flood these pages: they refer to “the text of the day, where footnotes will explain it all,” alluding to the Puritan tendency to “read” the world as an expression of God. They single out the world’s “strangers”; they, as ever, see “grace.”

Slothrop’s experience of conversion, however, is not quite identical with the morphology Morgan articulates. Slothrop does not so much accept the power of God as he does give himself over to an idea of Providence, a force manifested by a Them that he never identifies or defines. Secondly, he determines himself to be preterite—something no Puritan would ever imagine (indeed, why would one subscribe to a religion that figures one’s self as damned: what could be more hopeless?)—but, contrary to many critics’ thinking, he does not believe that conclusion for very long. Significantly, however, Slothrop’s experience underscores and seeks to redefine the problematic doctrine of “pure, imperfect assurance.” But for that, we’ll need to look farther back into Slothrop’s family history, and into the history of the American colonies as a whole.

2: Thomas Hooker’s Garden of Despair

To understand more fully the difficulties of imperfect assurance, Gravity’s Rainbow cites Thomas Hooker. Quoted twice in the novel, and both from the same text, “Spirituall Love and Joy,” this sermon attempts to explain the source and experience of true love for and joy in God. Since Pynchon cites
Hooker expressly, and Hooker alone, one might read this move as Pynchon playing one of his typically arcane jokes: presenting a criticism of Hooker's theology some 330 years after the fact is a resumption of the “family feud” noted by Daly above that had Springfield removed from Connecticut’s—and thus Hooker’s—control, and under John Winthrop’s in Massachusetts.

In summary, March 1638 brought a major corn shortage in the colonies, and then-Governor of Connecticut Hooker assigned William Pynchon the task of purchasing corn from the indigenous peoples close by. Pynchon found them reluctant to sell and quoted Hooker a very high price: despite the clear opportunity for profiting presented to the Native Americans, Hooker accused Pynchon of gouging and fined him a significant quantity of corn. So Pynchon took his city (Springfield nee Agawam) away from Hooker, and attached it instead to Winthrop’s Massachusetts. It remains there to this day.

But there is more at work here than trampling the graves of old family enemies. Gravity’s Rainbow sees a danger in Hooker’s Puritanism, particularly as outlined in “Spirituall Love and Joy,” and uses the Slothrop family experience to articulate it. In so doing, Slothrop moves far beyond the stark and reductive simplicity of conservative Puritanism into a new way of embracing the world’s complexity, rather than reducing it to stark opposites.

Hooker’s sermon first appears very early on in the novel, in an oft-cited passage: “I know there is wilde love and joy enough in the world,’ preached Thomas Hooker, ‘as there are wilde Thyme, and other herbes; but we would have garden love, and garden joy, of Gods owne planting.’ How Slothrop’s garden grows” (22). To have the kind of Love that Hooker wants one to have (or at least the Elect to have, his concern is not with the Preterite, for there is no hope for the predestined unregenerate4), Hooker outlines a process whereby the chosen can ready their souls for God’s divine seed.

First, Hooker cites the doctrine: “The Spirit of the Father kindles in the soule of the sinner, truly humbled and inlightened, love and joy, to entertaine and rejoyce in the riches of his mercy, so as becomes the worth of it” (Hooker 180). He then interprets this doctrine by asserting that the single most important prerequisite for the accepting of the Love that Jesus may bring is a humbled heart. A heart thus composed would suffer tremendous despair for having sinned against the Lord: a despair that is near debilitating. In this state of suffering, one can come to realize that there must be a better state of being, and the humbled heart will yield hope and desire. The torture of having realized one’s wrongs, and thus one’s unworthiness, naturally leads to the hope for a pardon from God. Such a reprieve cannot be earned, however, as that would be the effort of works, and not of a grace freely given by God. When one hopes that something so great as God’s grace is available to the poor sinner’s heart, one desires said grace: so if and when it comes, one is fully able to recognize it and accept it for what it is. Having desired grace, and knowing the tortures of living without it, Hooker continues, grants insight
into a soul. Thus, if and when God comes to this soul, it is able to identify its salvific operation and responds with *spiritual love* characterized by pure *joy*, a joy that is commensurate with the greatness and goodness of God.

However, behind the prospect of a loving and joyful soul lurks the genuinely terrifying paradox of assurance. In order to be a member of a Puritan church, one needed assurance of one’s own standing in God’s good graces: but asserting total assurance would claim absolute knowledge of God’s divine workings, which is blasphemy, and a sure sign of a sinner. So when Hooker enumerates the four purposes in the application of his doctrine, serious problems become apparent. He claims that the uses of Spiritual love and joy are “Instruction,” “Consolation,” “Reprehension,” and “Exhortation.” For instance, Instruction teaches us a simple lesson: namely, that there is nothing *in the world* that can bring love, or that we *can* love, like God. This goes back to the predominance of neo-platonic idealism in Puritan thinking, and the belief that the world is just shadows of the Real that is God. Not surprisingly, this can be a painful lesson: “It is an unconceivable misery, that any man should be so farre deluded, as to think that he can [attain the highest Love] by his own strength and power. . . .” (207), he writes; that is to say, one cannot love in the fullest spiritual sense without the help of God.

What’s more, Hooker adds later,

I presse this instruction . . . to shew the disorderly proceedings of many poore Saints, that labour extremely to work their own soules, and to bring their hearts to love Christ; that they even fall out with themselves, and curse their base hearts, that can love the world, and cannot love Jesus Christ: they labour much, and would bring their hearts to love him, but they cannot doe it, because they goe to worke the contrary way . . . . (211)

That is to say, a Saint may think he is loving God the right way, but he isn’t. Throw in a passionate, assured Saint’s slight but necessary *doubt* of his own assurance, and even the most pious fear damnation to an eternity of hell—indeed John Winthrop, who helped found Boston and led the ascension of Puritan New England, went to his own grave terrified that that he would suffer the eternal afterlife separated from God and in anguish of hellfire and brimstone.

The paradoxes of Hooker’s theory of love and joy proliferate. When he writes that genuine love serves the end of consolation, he reminds the Saint that “there is a great deale of false love and false joy in the world,” and that every man “must put his love on triall” (217). Yet the test requires that one identify genuinely inspired love for God—and again total assurance that this “love come[s] from the Spirit of the Father” (218), and not “leane, earthly, and naturall love, that growes onely out of [one’s] parts” and abilities” (218). If confusing fear follows from instruction and consolation, one can easily imagine the terrors that follow from “Reprehension” and “Exhortation.” The
simple fact is that, in Hooker’s system, where there is absolute fervency in faith, a deep and terrible depression is never far behind. Or think of it this way: behind every good, joyful Saint, there is an even more powerfully debilitating despair. Hooker’s treatise on Love and Joy is full of the deepest sorrows; this is a good thing, it leads us to believe.

3: Salvific Sloth

As the narrator of Gravity’s Rainbow posits, Slothrop’s Garden of Love grows, but the context of his very secular, sexual exploits makes clear that it does not abound with Spiritual Love of the kind Hooker advocates. Instead, it “[t]eems with virgin’s-bower, with forget-me-nots, with rue and all over the place, purple and yellow as hickeys, a prevalence of love-in-idleness” (22, emphasis added). Ever the trickster, Pynchon uses the botany of this garden to clarify a very important point to come in his second explicit reference to Hooker’s sermon. Referring to the prevalence of that final flower as “love-in-idleness” (rather than the more common “pansy”) suggests a favorite Pynchon theme: Sloth.

Hooker talks of three ranks of men that work against the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth: open enemies; hypocrites; and the Slothrop variety, “the glozing neuters.” The first two types are self-evident: the final category, however, are more complex. Of this sort, Hooker says,

these also love their sins more than Christ, nay, they love him not at all in truth; these are they that halt between two opinions, your faire fools, they would harme no man; so no man would harme them: the highest pitch these come to, is this, that they may get respect and credit among the best, and they say, He that meddles least is happiest: these are good and civil neighbours, and will sometimes do a man a good turn, provided they may not hurt themselves; if a wretched man come, they will bee like him, and now and then show forth faith and troth:[6] they will not reprove others, because they shall not censure them. (243)

For Hooker, these people lack the courage of their convictions, and waffle in a state of ambivalence. They adapt to contexts, rather than projecting a rigid dogmatism into every situation.

To the Puritan minister, this type of man is every bit as threatening to the establishment of God’s earthly kingdom as an open and avowed enemy to the congregation. But Pynchon’s narrator casts suspicion on just how bad this stance is, and expostulates on the difficulties of living such a state:

Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as “the glozing neuters of the world” have no easy road to haul down, Wear-the-Pantsers, just cause you can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When’s the last time you felt intensely
Neither hero nor villain, saint nor stranger, Gravity's Rainbow's glozing neuter is neither Elect nor Preterite. Though Hooker sees these people as enemies of Christ, William Slothrop's heresy identifies the ambivalent as a possible antidote to the intolerance of the fiercely dogmatic.

As is often the case in Pynchon's fictions, a single term’s range of signification weighs heavily in understanding the numerous possibilities that his language makes available. Hooker leaves little doubt as to which definition of glozing he prefers, indicting those that tend “to talk smoothly and speciously; to use fair words or flattering language; to fawn” (“Gloze,” def. 2a). Gravity's Rainbow is not so explicit: commenting on an “energy inside” allows for a reading that glozing means as much “to interpret” as it does “to extenuate.” Slothrop and his ilk are as guilty of thinking through a situation as they are of failing to come to a decision. But the novel is not done playing with the dictionary here. In fact, the very name “Tyrone Slothrop” helps to inform the potential positive quality of glozing neutrality.

For one, Sloth is a capital sin of particular interest to Pynchon, and makes up, phonetically, the first half of the surname. In his essay on this seemingly mild mortal sin, “Nearer, my couch, to Thee,” Pynchon examines the secularization of sloth throughout the development of capitalist America. He points out that

“Acedia” in Latin means sorrow, deliberately self-directed, turned away from God, a lack of spiritual determination that then feeds back on in to the process, soon enough producing what are currently known as guilt and depression, eventually pushing us to where we will do anything, in the way of venial sin and bad judgment, to avoid the discomfort. (“Nearer” 3)

Crucially, Pynchon emphasizes that sloth is not a sin of laziness or slowness per se, as popular accounts hold. Instead, it is a failure of a particular kind of activity—initially an active love for and faith in God, but that is, in Gravity’s Rainbow, a failure to actively love and have faith in Man—that results in the kinds of sins one commits in order to fill that void. Thus, sloth is a gateway sin, so to speak: a font of more and diverse, but lesser sinning.

However, the kinds of sin that perturb Pynchon in this essay are not those handed down at Sinai or enumerated in Leviticus: those biblically based sins are violations against a rigid, set order of carefully defined mandates and thou-shalt-nots. This kind of sinning represented in Exodus and Leviticus has become a bureaucratic morality; but in Gravity’s Rainbow the modern sin of sloth that rankles the narrator is the moral malaise of inactivity in the face of injustice and iniquity.
For an example of this kind of sinner, we should consider Franz Pökler. His sin is exactly his unwillingness to stand up for his ethical beliefs: that his wife Leni should be freed from the SS camps; that he should be allowed to keep a life with his daughter, Ilse; that the Rocket be used to prevent and not execute war; and so forth. But he believes too deeply that the system will work itself out. Six times, he is given papers for indefinite leave, the company of a girl that he believes could be his daughter, and no apparent surveillance. He does not flee. Franz instead always waits for Them to once again abduct his daughter, and then to return to the rocket plant at Peenemünde. In his hope for the humanist element of the corporate state to hold sway over its clearly exploitive elements, he glozes (as in “staring intently”) too much upon the stars, to gloze (as in “think through, interpret”) upon his true feelings about Leni, his daughter, Wiessmann, the Wehrmacht, or the War. Pökler exemplifies the danger inherent in Hooker’s kind of Puritanism: believing too strongly without questioning or deviating from the predominant moral order, he sinks into despondency because of the fatal mixture of belief and doubt. And so against the evils in Camp Dora next to his rocket-firing site, he does nothing. Pökler demonstrates a sloth of the kind that Pynchon’s novel condemns.

For America, however, Pynchon says, the sin of sloth is different in kind: it is a sin against economy, a sin against productivity. Citing Bartleby and that exemplar fide of acedia, the Couch Potato, today’s lazy bones commits sins against linear time: what, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* might be called “secular history.” In squandering the finite number of hours and seconds that could be marshaled in the service of profit, the modern sloth enthusiast is the anti-Poor Richard, the opposite of the young Jay Gatz, dreamily eyeing the splendor of a yacht from shore whilst relegating the day’s every moment as a paragon of productivity:

In the idea of time that had begun to rule city life in Poor Richard’s day, where every second was of equal length and irrevocable, not much in the course of its flow could have been called nonlinear, unless you counted the ungovernable warp of dreams, for which Poor Richard had scant use, . . . there would seem to have been no other room for speculations, dreams, fantasies, fiction. Life in that orthogonal machine was supposed to be nonfiction. (“Nearer” 3)

In this type of acedia, Pynchon sees hope. For, after all, this is the sin of dreaming, of fantasizing—it is, Pynchon asserts, the “sin” of writing. This kind of dreaming, aided by alternative notions of temporality, may posit a solution to the triumph of linear time, and the death of imagination. Pynchon goes on to argue,

Yet, chiefly owing to the timely—not a minute too soon!—invention of the
remote control and the VCR, maybe there is hope after all. Television time is no longer the linear and uniform commodity it once was. Not when you have instant channel selection, fast-forward, rewind and so forth. Video time can be reshaped at will. What may have seemed under the old dispensation like time wasted and unrecoverable is now perhaps not quite as simply structured. If Sloth can be defined as the pretense, in the tradition of American settlement and spoliation, that time is one more nonfinite resource, there to be exploited forever, then we may for now at least have found the illusion, the effect, of controlling, reversing, slowing, speeding and repeating time—even imagining that we can escape it. Sins against video time will have to be radically redefined. ("Nearer" 3)

Videotape and channel surfing add to the possibilities given by oneiric time as alternatives to predominating notions of temporality. As Steven Weizenburger recognized even before the publication of the Sloth essay, *Gravity's Rainbow* neither endorses the linear time of Puritan teleology or the predictably cyclic time of Enzian's Zone Herero faction. As he concludes, “History, we find, does not march inexorably forward by goosesteps, nor does it gyrate in circles” (70). If history and time are not limited to a linear/cyclical binary, as both Pynchon and his best-informed critics seem to assert, it is reasonable to question other predominant binaries that the novel treats. Certainly, the binary of Elect/Preterite fits this description.

The positive function of Sloth resolves into greater clarity in the name Slothrop's second syllable. “Rop” is yet another typically arcane Pynchonian joke: “ROP,” or just plain old “rop,” is printers’ slang for “run of paper,” “an American term (run of paper) applying when color half-tones are printed at the same time as the type matter” (“ROP”). That is to say, one part of polychromatic images is printed along with the text, images that will be completed later in the printing process.

*Gravity's Rainbow* makes much of paper throughout, and thus makes this slang particularly relevant, as paper was responsible for so much of the Slothrop family's existence—and for the existence of America as it is. Yet the Slothropes are not powerful, nor are they poor, for despite all their production, “they did not prosper . . . about all they did was persist . . . “ (28). In short, they neither are Elect, nor are they Preterite, despite Tyrone’s early musings. But they are some other term, some middling term that upsets the PuritanicalAmerican binary image of success or failure, of good or evil, of saint or stranger. Tyrone is a run of Sloth's paper, ambivalence and equivocation printed on his being at birth.

In a further wrinkle, Tyrone is a variant of “tyro” or “tyron”—“A beginner or learner in anything; one who is learning or who has mastered the rudiments only of any branch of knowledge; a novice” ("Tyro"). Tyrone is a novice of his own legacy of sloth. His search for his history—more, I argue, than the search
for the rocket—gives him fuller insight into the nature of a salvific Sloth, one that makes up a key term that breaks apart the Elect/Preterite binary and affords him a way of moving beyond his heritage’s reductive divisiveness.

4: William Pynchon and William Slothrop

If Thomas Hooker illustrates the despair inherent in Puritanism, William Pynchon’s writings reflect a more hopeful strain possible within approaches to orthodoxy excised by the conservative branch from the colonial American politico-religious landscape. He found a danger in valuing only the opinions and ideas of those who have undergone a recognizable conversion experience as a testament to their Election. Daly rephrases this process for a more modern reader:

If we are redeemed from sin at the moment of our justification, and if that redemption is not and cannot be distinct from our justification, then it is possible that many among us who have not yet had the conversion experience are not only justified but also already redeemed from sin, and we may wish to consider their opinions something other than sinful delusions. (209)

In short, even though those around us may not be marked by the same experiences, and therefore share a common identity (be it national, religious, racial, or the more dangerous combination of all three), these people might still be loved by God, forgiven from sin, and worth very much the same as ourselves.

William’s descendent Thomas takes some license with his ancestor's theology, but Gravity’s Rainbow is clearly not uninformed by history. It describes a William Slothrop who, as a pig farmer, “took off from Boston, heading west in true Imperial style, in 1634 or -35, sick and tired of the Winthrop machine, convinced he could preach as well as anybody in the hierarchy even if he hadn’t been officially ordained” (554-55). Though pigs were scorned throughout folklore and the Bible, William Slothrop, in good Puritanical fashion and like his descendant Tyron(e) three centuries later, saw his work with the animals “as a parable,” and wrote a long tract about it presently, called On Preterition. It had to be published in England, and is among the first books to’ve been not only banned but also ceremonially burned in Boston. Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for these “second Sheep,” without whom there’d be no elect. You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. (555)

William Slothrop’s theology is really only one small step to the “left” from
William Pynchon's progressive Puritanism, from theorizing the potential value of the presumed unregenerate to asserting their outright necessity.

The presence of the fictionalized Puritan treatise leads to the novel's greatest reconsideration of American history:

Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back [ . . . ] maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without Elect, without Preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up . . . (556)

Reflecting on his personal past also allows Slothrop to reflect on his national past, and in so doing Tyrone is able to recover a narrative that, while present in the register of historical events that shaped American history, was suppressed by agents of intolerance and exclusion.

Identifying the suppression of William Slothrop's *On Preterition* as the diverging point where America went astray from a more positive trajectory allows the novel to re-imagine the legacy of Puritanism not simply as an orthodoxy of exclusion, intolerance, and despair, (*à la* Thomas Hooker), but instead as a system of beliefs that values alterity and difference as necessary components of attaining to true selfhood.

This essay does not purport to exhaust the full potential of readings presented by the sensitivity to Puritan history within *Gravity's Rainbow*; rather I hope to show that Pynchon's mastery of America's religious history opens avenues to interpretation that require a knowledge of the full breadth and complexity of an aspect of the past that is too often treated as an orthodox monolith. Like all things Pynchon, it would seem, Puritanism too is multiple, and needs to be approached with the sensitivity due to all the carefully researched elements within Pynchon's big book.

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Notes

1 William Hathorne’s notoriously violent treatment of Quakers, as well as his unapologetic adjudication of the Salem Witch Trials, was so offensive to one of his descendents that he changed the spelling of his name. That was, of course, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

2 Massachusetts’s governing magistrates “perceiv[ed] by the Title Page that the Contents of Book were unsound, and Derogatory” (qtd. in Gura, 475).
The articulation of conversion generally took the form of presenting a prepared narrative account of one's knowledge of God's grace to the congregation of Church members, who would generally approve the account. Women, however, were asked to write out their account, to be read by a male interlocutor. While the practice seems a formality today, it appears to function as a kind of coding device—as noted above, “Puritan” was a polymorphous and often contentious term: by creating a somewhat standardized practice of initiation, there was sufficient flexibility to avoid being indicted as a mere going-through-the-motions that characterized the Puritans' critique of the Catholic and Anglican “covenant of works” (as opposed to the Calvinist “covenant of grace”); simultaneously, the form gave a kind of identity to a group that was so internally heterogeneous. In effect, it created a set of people and things visibly Puritan: hence, I refer to the conversion experience as “Puritan,” whereas elsewhere in this essay, I refer to the various “Puritanisms” that mark internal conflicts and consistencies. To be clear, for the Puritans, Church structure in the earlier years was less in dispute than the particulars of theology: by and large, local churches were given as much autonomy as possible. Even volatile issues like the acceptance of or separation from the Anglican Church were largely set aside in favor of a belief in congregationalism. It was not until the early 1660s, at the beginning stages of a crisis of membership admission policies that would result in the “Halfway Covenant,” that more global structural concerns manifested themselves in inter-parish discourse. Hence, the conversion narrative has a more organic history than the Halfway Covenant. Two useful sources on the topic of the conversion narrative, among many, include Edmund S. Morgan's Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea (see especially 37-73) and Patricia Caldwell's The Puritan Conversion Narrative. Morgan's book is seminal and indispensable for American Puritan studies, while Caldwell's presentation exhaustively updates the debates surrounding the history of the conversion narrative, while providing key insights and a wealth of footnotes for further reading.

Strict Calvinists, like Hooker, believed that God had preordained the fates of each individual's soul, and that no manner of behavior, belief, or piety could save the Preterite, the “passed over.” Either one was saved, or one was doomed to burn for all eternity. The Elect, however, could “backslide” and resume sinning once their behavior was sanctified by God's saving grace: it was against this threat that many Puritan sermons labored.

Common usage at the time would suggest a definition of “parts” here as “intellect” or “intelligence.”

“Troth” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, Second Online Edition, as both faithfulness and truth. All subsequent definitions are also from this reference.

Works Cited


The generic debate surrounding *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are critics such as Palmeri, Weisenburger (*Fables*), Seidel, Morgan, and Kharpertian, who have argued that Pynchon's novel fits in with the tradition of the Menippean satire. Drawing attention to the subtle and intricate ways in which Pynchon's third novel parodies and aggrandizes the discourse of the power elites, these critics see *Gravity's Rainbow* as the latest exponent of a long and particularly illuminating tradition of the literary gadfly, which runs from Petronius, over François Rabelais and Jonathan Swift, to Pynchon. The defining characteristic of *Gravity’s Rainbow* for these critics, is, as Kharpertian puts it, “the critical exposure of official cultural institutions and demystification of power [as well as] the focus on the ugly, the painful and the ridiculous” (108-9). A second group of scholars, while hardly oblivious to *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* satirical dimension, defines Pynchon's generic affiliation instead in terms of the encyclopedic narrative. In the wake of Edward Mendelson's influential essay “*Gravity’s Encyclopedia,*” these critics, including LeClair and Hite, have pointed out that what is central to Pynchon's novel is the broadly conceived vision of the world that it offers. Like the original eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert, Pynchon's novel bespeaks a summative gesture that tries to envelop all the variety and richness of the world between the covers of one book, complete with mathematical formulas, foreign alphabets, and explanatory illustrations. As Mendelson himself put it, “[e]ncyclopedic narratives attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (30). Whether or not this encyclopedic vision mirrors the summations fostered by the works of Dante and Shakespeare, as Mendelson originally argued, or whether *Gravity’s Rainbow* should instead be read as a postmodern deconstruction of the very idea of summation and order, remains a topic of critical debate. Yet, what is clear to both groups, as well as to those who locate *Gravity’s Rainbow* in the satirical tradition of Gargantua and Pantagruel, is that, when trying to define Pynchon's novel generically, size matters.
Yet megalomania is not the only aspect that satire and the encyclopedic narrative have in common. In fact, many of the abovementioned scholars employ some sort of hybrid categorization when trying to account for the generic loyalty of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Thus, Weisenburger reads *Gravity’s Rainbow* as an “encyclopedic satire” (*Fables* 204) whereas other critics have acknowledged the permeability of genre in a novel which after all reminds us that “here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly” (303). What is less often made explicit in these analyses, however, is that both the encyclopedic narrative and the Menippean satire are also strikingly similar in the method of their categorization proper. Proponents for either genre rely on an extradiegetic parameter in order to determine *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s generic status, respectively that of organization and that of ironic distance. The decisive criterion for both genres is not what actually happens in the novel’s plot, but rather how it is told. To be sure, *Gravity’s Rainbow* abounds in taxonomophilic and list-keeping characters not to mention its self-asserted fascination with Ulrich Zwingli, “the man at the end of the encyclopedia” (267), but what really determines the novel’s status as an encyclopedic narrative is how it orders and reorders information. Similarly, Kharpertian notes that one of the main characteristics of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a Menippean satire is that it has “extratextual targets” (109).

In this essay, I wish to complement these existing genre studies with a categorization that relies instead on an intradiegetic element, namely the presence of artists and of the arts in Pynchon’s third novel. I propose to read *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a *Künstlerroman* for the manner in which it thematizes the creative process as a central element of its plot, much in the same way as the great artist-novels of European modernism such as James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (hereafter cited as *Portrait*) and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. At first sight, this may seem a rather counterintuitive or, to borrow a Roger Mexico-ism, “Odd, odd, odd” (85) claim to make since, contrary to these modernist novels, references to artists and art are rather scarce in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as they are in Pynchon’s fiction in general. This absence is all the more striking when we compare Pynchon’s novels to those of some of his contemporaries such as Don DeLillo, Gilbert Sorrentino, and William Gaddis, for whom the question of the artist appears as a central and ongoing concern. In Pynchon’s fiction, on the other hand, references to the arts appear to be tangential rather than thematic, with, among others, brief interludes devoted to Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* in *V.*, the paintings of Remedios Varo in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and a returning musical debate in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that pits the compositions of Beethoven against those of Rossini.2

While these scattered references obviously bespeak some interest in the arts on the part of their creator, it is also clear that they do not, as in the fiction of Gaddis, DeLillo, and Sorrentino, offer a fully developed insight into the creative process proper. *Artists*, for that matter, seldom appear as central
characters in Pynchon’s fiction, and when they do, they usually take on an equally whimsical form as ridiculous figures such as the Whole Sick Crew in *V.*, whose exercises in “catatonic expressionism” are, as one arts patron puts it, “nothing but talk and at that not very good talk” (297). For other characters such as “the quick-change artist” Herbert Stencil in *V.*, or “the old blithering gab-artist” Brigadier Pudding (GR 79), the epithet “artist” seems to have been chosen mostly for parodic purposes, or to illustrate the semantic conflation of the very term “art” in a capitalist society that uses it now only to denote the market categories of skill and competence. Even *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* most primary artist-character, the filmmaker Gerhardt von Göll, “once an intimate and still the equal of Lang, Pabst, Lubitsch” (112), now unapologetically courts Mammon rather than the Muse. As von Göll tells the Argentine cast of one of his current projects, his primary concern is to get the best “mileage” (387) out of his movies. And while the narrator assures us that “commerce has not taken away von Göll’s touch” (112), his transformation from filmmaker into marketeer is far removed from the authenticity quest that otherwise typifies the *Bildungsprozess* in the traditional *Künstlerroman*.

Nevertheless, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the *Künstlerroman* does serve as a relevant generic model for how Pynchon bestows on the construction of a *technological* artifact—the rocket—all the characteristics traditionally reserved for artistic creativity. Throughout the novel, Pynchon foregrounds the aesthetic qualities of this particular technology, starting with Slothrop’s teacher at the Casino Hermann Goering, Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, who says about the rocket’s radio transmission system, the so-called “Hawaii I,” that “[t]here’s a poetry to it, engineer’s poetry . . . it suggests Haverie—average, you know—certainly you have the two lobes, don’t you, symmetrical about the rocket’s intended azimuth” (207). Dodson-Truck’s folk etymology does more than facilitate Slothrop’s learning progress through mnemonic aid. His evocation of the expression “engineer’s poetry” suggests a bridging of two realms which Pynchon had earlier tackled in “Entropy” and *Lot 49*, and to which he would return more extensively in his 1984 essay “Is It OK To Be a Luddite?”, namely art and science. In that essay, written as a response to C.P. Snow’s famous 1959 Rede lecture, Pynchon argues that, far from having bifurcated into two different cultures, art and science have actually grown closer to each other, just as the very persona of Dodson-Truck, a technical instructor competent in thirty-three languages, would suggest such an interdisciplinary rapprochement. While the Luddite essay is, however, mostly written as a critique *ex negativo*, arguing *against* the widespread demonization of science and technology in Western culture, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to an extent not yet present in either “Entropy” or *Lot 49*, takes on the more challenging task of putting into positive terms these artistic qualities of technology. Its aim is not just to show us that “Technology only responds,” as the Herero leader Enzian argues in a well-known anti-Luddite soliloquy from the novel (521), but rather to portray the rocket and the process
of its creation as matters of actual aesthetic value.

Comparing the rocket’s assembly directly to one artistic discipline in particular, as Dodson-Truck does, is one way to achieve this goal, yet far more frequently than Pynchon scholars have been willing to acknowledge, the author is actually very critical of precisely this urge for analogization. Indeed, the celebrated Pynchonian “metaphor of God knows how many parts” (Lot 49 87) is one which, more often than not, subverts the very unity and harmony it is meant to suggest. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, this subversion is apparent in the disturbing ease with which the idea of the rocket as artwork is taken up by some of the more troublesome characters in the novel such as Major Weissman or the Nazi architect Etzel Ölsch. The latter sees in the double integral formula, used to track the rocket’s position while in flight, an affirmation of its belonging to *his* artistic discipline: “‘Meters per second’ will integrate to ‘meters.’ The moving vehicle is frozen, in space, to become architecture, and timeless. It was never launched. It will never fall” (301). The aestheticization of the rocket here perversely draws our attention away from the fact that this technological artefact of course will fall, causing death and massive destruction, as is indeed shown on the opening and closing pages of the text. Yet even there, Pynchon persists in using artistic references to frame the reader’s perception of this technological artifact such as “the film that we have not learned to see” (760), whose eagerly awaited premiere on the novel’s final page turns out to be the imminent blast of a V-2 hanging above the movie theatre. Similarly, the proceeding Evacuation that follows the explosion of a rocket on the novel’s opening page is described as “all theatre” (3). We might even argue that the rocket’s infamous screaming coming across the sky serves as a reference to Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* (1893), with the Kierkegaardian anguish of modernity now substituted for the postmodern paranoia of the bomb.

What is the purpose then of this ambiguous game which Pynchon plays with the reader, alternately showing us the aesthetic qualities of the rocket’s machinery parts—“Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully” (750)—while never failing to keep us attuned to the destructive nature of this artifact? In *Postmodern Sublime*, Joseph Tabbi offers one possible answer to this question by identifying in rocket engineers such as Franz Pökler, Kurt Mondaugen, Horst Achtfadhen and Klaus Närisch the intimations of a technological sublime which attributes to machinery the same mixed response of awe and terror which the Romantics formerly perceived in nature and in art. In spite of their far-reaching expertise in ballistics and differential calculus, these characters come to regard the rocket as “a figure representing forces and systems that the human mind and imagination cannot hope to master or comprehend but for which we are nonetheless responsible” (20). This is the essence of what Tabbi, in another essay, terms “Pynchon’s psychology of engineers;” namely *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* detailed
dramatization of the technologists’ mental bafflement when, like the artist or the nature mystic before him, he sees himself confronted with an object that resists any form of representation or control.

Nevertheless, there is something distinctly ironic about interpreting *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* descriptions of the rocket through reference to a scientific discipline that the novel itself notoriously satirizes and ridicules. From the obviously defective psychological practices of Ned Pointsman and Kevin Spectro at the St. Veronica hospital to the novel’s blatant dismissal of human consciousness as “that poor cripple, that deformed and doomed thing” (720), *Gravity’s Rainbow* abounds in disparaging remarks about a discipline which writers such as James Joyce and William Gaddis had earlier ridiculed through the neologism “psychoanalosing.” In Pynchon’s novel, such dismissive remarks can in part be read as Pynchon’s attempt to distinguish *Gravity’s Rainbow* from the stream of consciousness acrobatics favored by modernist precursors such as Joyce, an attempt which, as Brian McHale has shown, is already present in a lesser form in *Lot 49*. On the other hand, these passages are also clearly intended as a criticism, reminiscent in some ways of the falsifiability hypothesis of Karl Popper, of the reductive approach that characterizes psychology, both in the behaviorist sense favored by Pointsman and Spectro and in its aesthetic-philosophical counterpart of the sublime. Both approaches reduce the human experience to a question of mental control (or the lack thereof), whereas Pynchon, perhaps more than any novelist before him, focuses precisely on the aspects of human existence that lie outside of the psychological atmosphere, not in order to capitalize on this incongruity, as Tabbi does in *Postmodern Sublime*, but rather to offer a much broader perspective on human experience that includes the sensory as well as the extrasensory.

It is doubtful, therefore, whether Pychon intends the earlier cited aestheticizations of the rocket to be read as psychological effects only. Such an approach, it would seem, still “puts us in with the neutered” (521), that is, with the likes of *Lot 49*’s Randolph Driblette who has domesticated reality to such an extent that he now regards his own consciousness as “the projector at the planetarium” (62). Neither does such a psychologistic perspective allow us to fully exhaust the moments of personal crisis that frequently befall the Peenemünde engineers, including Pökler’s fear that, as his wife Leni never tires of telling him, “[t]hey’re using you to kill people . . . That’s their only job and you’re helping them” (400). Pynchonian paranoia, after all, does not refer to a *psychic* condition but rather to the much more general “discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation” (703), a moment of ontological crisis, in other words, which far exceeds the realization of epistemological failure on which hinges our intuitions of the sublime.

But perhaps it is useful to look to another group of artist-engineers in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in order to get a better idea of these extra-psychological
similarities which for Pynchon connect art and technology with death and destruction. First introduced in *V.*, the Hereros are a tribe of South-West Africans enslaved in Germany’s rocket industry who have drawn attention from critics mostly for the racial and postcolonial issues which they introduce into the novel. Yet they are also a group of engineers who, after their Nazi superiors have fled before the advancing Allied forces, set out to construct a rocket of their own. The assembly of this artifact, the so-called 00001 rocket, is not only introduced to the reader in artistic terms as “the most immachinate of techniques” (728) but it also evokes a link between art, technology, and destruction. As so often in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this new element emerges as the result of an initial misunderstanding, a Freudian lapsus in reverse that takes place during a conversation between the two Herero leaders Enzian and Josef Ombindi:

“You know,” Ombindi’s eyes rolled the other way [. . .] “there’s . . . well, something you ordinarily wouldn’t think of as erotic—but it’s really the most erotic thing there is.”

“Really,” grins Enzian, flirting. “I can’t think of what that would be. Give me a clue.”

“It’s a non-repeatable act.”

“Firing a rocket?”

“No, because there’s always another rocket. But there’s nothing—well, never mind.” (319)

The topic that Ombindi is hinting at here is racial suicide, the “program” (317) which he and the so-called “Empty Ones” have come to embrace as the only solution to half a century of continued colonial oppression by the West. Enzian’s misunderstanding, however, is most suggestive in that it makes us initially think of the launch of the rocket, rather than death, as a non-repeatable act. In juxtaposing the two, Pynchon draws the reader’s attention to a thus far unexamined parallel, namely between the absolute singularity that characterizes the (technological) work of art—by definition a unique feat of expression—and the moment of death which is not only non-repeatable but which is also, as Martin Heidegger famously argues, the only thing that nobody can assume for me (221-24). Immune to both the forces of mechanical reproduction and exchangeability, the creative gesture and death thus share what Pynchon calls a “movement toward stillness” (319), a countercultural attempt to regain a locus of sedentary permanence in a world that, as the Herero leaders both acknowledge, tends more and more towards all-encompassing mechanicity and acceleration. This is what underlies the “strange rapprochement” (319) that exists between Enzian and Ombindi, with the latter trying to recover this locus of singularity through racial death while the former tries to do so through artistic creation. Enzian’s strategy ultimately
emerges as the victorious one, reuniting both Herero factions in the assembly of the 00001, but not without Pynchon reminding us yet one more time, both in the passages described above as well as in others, that the artwork’s quality of singularity is essentially the same as the inalienable authenticity that characterizes the moment of death.

It is this aesthetic paradox—neither a celebratory nor a bleak one—which explains why death and artistic beauty appear so often paired in Gravity’s Rainbow, and which Pynchon brings to an unprecedented, some might say perverse, extreme by making the very epitome of destruction—the Bomb—into a work of art. If dying is, as Sylvia Plath wryly acknowledges, “an art”—one which she self-professes to “do extremely well” (“Lady Lazarus” 245)—then Pynchon provides us in his third novel with the mirror-image of that Plathian oxymoron by showing us how also art itself, like those buried carbon molecules discussed by Walter Ratheneau, is one of the “structures favoring death” (167). It is perhaps only fitting, therefore, that the novel’s most often-cited verdict regarding the rocket’s absolute singularity, namely that “it really did possess a Max Weber charisma . . . some joyful—and deeply irrational—force the State Bureaucracy could never routinize, against which it could not prevail” (464), should come from an artist-character named Miklos Thanatz, a subtle yet powerful reminder of the paradoxical ways in which singularity lies entwined with death.

Of all the creative characters in Gravity’s Rainbow, no group can be more aware of that entwinement than the Hereros, a people nearly exterminated by a German colonial campaign in 1904, who now embrace the assembly of the 00001 rocket as a way of recuperating a sense of identity: “One reason we grew so close to the rocket,” Enzian explains to Slothrop, “was an awareness of how contingent, how much like ourselves, the A4 could be—how at the mercy of small things” (362). This quotation marks the first in a series of statements that establish a direct link between the 00001 rocket and the process of identity formation. In themselves, such identifications are nothing peculiar; they are echoed by other characters such as Slothrop, who goes on to become “rocketman,” or the amalgam of rocket-cosmologists mentioned at the end of the novel which leads the narrator to conclude that “Each will have his personal rocket” (727). What sets the Herero identification apart, however, is that in their case it is the creative process rather than the artifact itself that establishes this sense of unity. As Enzian sees it, the assembly of the 00001 is “the only Event that could have brought them together,” adding in humility, “I couldn’t” (673).

These references to the tribe’s ongoing reintegration constitute not only the dialectical counterpart to the gradual effacement of the soon scattered Tyrone Slothrop,7 but in their insistence on the close relationship between the creative endeavor and identity, they also mimic one of the primary characteristics of the Künstlerroman genre. As Herbert Marcuse explains in Der
Deutsche Künstlerroman, this narrative structure is “a novel in which an artist appears as the representative of a life form of his own in society” (10). Distinctive for the Künstlerroman genre is, according to Marcuse, the development of the artist-character’s separate self-consciousness which marks a break with the epic tradition where the artist still appears subsumed by the society surrounding him. It is this “epic” context of impersonal submersion that still characterizes the Hereros when assembling rocket parts in the Nazi factory at Nordhausen and “wheeling them out by hand, a dozen of you [. . .] all your faces drowning in the same selfless look” (725). The construction of the 00001, on the other hand, marks an emancipation at once of the creative act from this kind of commodified industrial labor and of the Hereros themselves who, as one former Nazi engineer puts it, “now constitute a nation of their own” (451). Their former rote labor on the rocket is now transformed into a self-conscious gesture of identity politics which closely mirrors the emancipation process gone through by other Künstlerroman protagonists such as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Woolf’s Lily Briscoe, or the various Thomas Mann characters which Marcuse himself discusses. “Perhaps,” so Pynchon’s narrator muses regarding the Hereros’ rocket, “just before the firing, it will be painted black” (724). As with Stephen Dedalus and Lily Briscoe, the final outcome of this Bildungsprozess towards self-realization is the powerful assertion of an artist’s individual vision forged in the smithy of the soul, namely to get “the first African rocket fully assembled and ready for firing” (326). Through the assembly of the rocket, the Hereros manage to wrest themselves from the epithets formerly attributed to them by the West. The term Schwarzkommando, for instance, a neologism originally coined by a London agency to refer to a group of fictionalized Hereros, is at present “no longer a title, they are a people now, Zone-Hereros in exile for two generations from South-West Africa” (315).

Nevertheless, Gravity’s Rainbow is also markedly distinct from the modernist Künstlerroman in that the subject of this process of art-mediated identification concerns a group of people—the Herero tribe—and not an individual as in the novels of Joyce, Woolf, and Mann. This is a significant divergence since each of the latter novelists advocates the incompatibility of artist and community, a dictum that is perhaps best expressed by Lily Briscoe’s definition of the painter as a figure “drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people” (236). Neither do Pynchon’s artist-engineers partake of the cult of originality that is at the heart of each of these modernist Künstlerromane. For, notwithstanding its earlier cited qualities of singularity, the Hereros’ 00001 is itself already a copy of another rocket, the so-called quintuple zero that was fired under the direction of Weissman from the Lüneburg Heath during the spring equinox of 1945. Referred to as “the second in its series” (724), the 00001 is not only modeled after this original rocket but it also uses the same infrastructures, “sliding like an oiled bolt into the receivership of the railway system prepared for it.
last spring” (728). As such, both the reproductive character of the 00001 and the tribal integration that it effects, serve as reminders of the communal context within which every artwork and technological artifact operates. They indicate that for Pynchon, as for Jacques Derrida, “invention is invented only if repetition, generality, common availability and thus publicity are introduced or promised in the structure of the first time” (Derrida 28). This is the postmodern aesthetic that underlies the creative endeavor of the Hereros in Gravity’s Rainbow and which distinguishes it from the solitary experience of their precursors in the modernist Künstlerroman.

It is this same communal approach to art that also appears at the end of Gravity’s Rainbow where Pynchon has the lyrics from a centuries-old William Slothrop hymn sung to a contemporary movie audience in Los Angeles, followed by the priestly envoy “Now everybody—” (760). Like the falling V-2 rocket that is at the same time nearing its “last delta-t” above this movie theater, the completion of the Slothrop song is left “hanging,” that is, waiting to be affirmed by the sing-along recognition of a live audience. At the same time, Pynchon ends his own artistic feat of engineering, Gravity’s Rainbow, on the self-effacing presence of the Dickinsonian dash, thus similarly urging his reading audience to recognize themselves in the tale which they just finished reading and to reproduce it in writing, in speech, or any other form of human expression.

Like other postmodern American novelists before and after him, Pynchon thus undoes the solipsistic cul-de-sac into which the modernists had landed the Künstlerroman genre. Like the re-cognitive forgeries of Wyatt Gwyon in William Gaddis’s The Recognitions, like the snapshots of the people’s photographer August Sander in Richard Powers’s Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, and like the “quoting Bill” passages in DeLillo’s Mao II, Pynchon’s endorsement of art as copy is less a pessimistic verdict on the impossibility of creating original art, however, than that it serves as a reminder of the distinctly communal horizon within which every artwork operates. The idea of creation ex nihilo is rejected by these novelists, in other words, not to bemoan “the waning of affect” which Fredric Jameson sees at work in the reproductions of Andy Warhol (10), but to emphasize the traditions—cultural, historical, and philosophical—within which each artwork operates. And of these authors, Pynchon is certainly the one who goes furthest in exploring this communal horizon, not because he extends the scope of tradition to include the engineer as well as the fine arts practitioner, but because in Gravity’s Rainbow he returns the artwork to nothing less than its very historical ne plus ultra, namely the context of ritual which, according to Walter Benjamin, forms the origin of all art. This is at least how the Hereros’ rocket assembly is perceived in a daydream of Slothrop’s where the tribe’s unearthing of an unexploded warhead from its “grave” (361) displays all the characteristics of a festival-like ritual. While some Hereros are busy getting the warhead out, others
sit on a hillside eating bread and sausages [. . .] Someone has set up an army tent, someone has brought in beer kegs. A scratch band, a dozen brasses in tasseled, frayed gold and red uniforms play selections from Der Meistersinger. Fat-smoke drifts in the air. Choruses of drinkers in the distance break from time to time into laughter or song. It’s a Rocket-raising: a festival new to this country. (361)

Like the cave paintings in Lascaux, or the fertility sculptures of the Neolithic era, the artistic endeavor appears couched here in what is obviously a ritualistic context, in a “rocket-festival” that serves to embolden the community spirit of the tribe. Like these prehistoric artifacts, there is a quasi-religious impetus to the Hereros’ assembly of the rocket, which in their case does not serve the purpose of guaranteeing a fruitful hunt or abundant progeny, but rather the cultural reanimation of a people already twice passed over by death. As other critics have noted, the rocket becomes for the Hereros a totem, a “True Text” (525) onto which they transfer all the powers of magic formerly associated with the so-called “Erdschweinhöhle,” the pig’s hole in the earth which “back in Südwest . . . was a powerful symbol of fertility and life” (316). The assembly of the rocket thus assumes a clearly ritualistic function as “the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom” (525), an artwork, in other words, that connects with the original social function that art fulfilled before its post-Renaissance conception as self-expression and autonomy.

Yet the Hereros’ rocket ritual is also more than a genealogical inquiry into the origins of art. In presenting a group of South-West Africans as the torchbearers of art’s original legacy, Pynchon is at the same time deflating a powerful Western myth—one particularly popular in the modernist Künstlerroman—namely the frequent identification of art with Europe. It is the Berlin composer and Beethoven devotee Gustav Schlabone who first draws attention to this particular ideology. After having been informed about the untimely war death of one of his colleagues, the German composer Anton Webern, Schlabone tells Slothrop,

Shot in May, by the Americans. Senseless, accidental if you believe in accidents—some mess cook from North Carolina, some late draftee with a .45 he hardly knew how to use, too late for WW II, but not for Webern [. . .] Do you know what kind of myth that’s going to make in a thousand years? The barbarians coming in to murder the Last European, standing at the far end of what’d been going on since Bach, an expansion of music’s polymorphous perversity till all notes were truly equal at last . . . (440)

Although extrapolated to a far future, the “myth” to which Schlabone alludes is an all too familiar one, and by no means confined to the novels of Henry James. I am referring, of course, to the stereotypical dichotomy of the barbarian American versus the civilized European, the former’s artistic
aspirations forever denied to him or paternalized as, in the words of one character, “a fascinating combination of crude poet and psychic cripple” (738). Yet Pynchon does not content himself with simply exposing the persistent specter of European cultural supremacy. Rather, in presenting a group of high-tech engineers of African descent as artists _par excellence_, he also deflates the common depreciation, shared by both Europeans and Americans, of _that_ continent’s artistic production as primitive. Much to the contrary, the Hereros’ rocket, created during those uncertain and hectic post-war summer months of 1945, offers us an early example of the soon omnipresent postcolonial tactics of the Empire firing back. If the original German colonization of the Hereros marked, as Pynchon wrote in a 1969 letter to David Hirsch, “the imposition of a culture valuing analysis and differentiation on a culture that valued unity and integration” (241), then the Hereros have now successfully inverted that process by returning the individualist aesthetic of the modern artist-protagonist to the integrated context of art as ritual.

Yet one question still remains: why does Pynchon choose to reallocate this originary ritualistic quality in a technological artifact rather than in say sculpture or song? Given the disempowered and ridiculed artist-figures that populate Pynchon’s other novels, one cannot but conclude that this choice follows from a profound skepticism regarding the social power of the traditional arts in the contemporary world. Unlike an author such as Gaddis, for instance, who in his 1955 novel _The Recognitions_ could still believe in some lingering empathetic appeal of the fine arts, Pynchon locates such communalizing potential now only in the realm of technology. When the narrator of _Gravity’s Rainbow_ tells us that “now [. . .] the real and only fucking is done on paper” (616), then he is no longer referring to the painter’s etching sheet or the composer’s music score, artifacts whose political efficacies have long turned sterile, but to the engineer’s quadrille paper on which Pynchon hand-wrote his own draft of _Gravity’s Rainbow_. Like Don DeLillo’s artist-character Klara Sax, Pynchon recognizes the contemporary world, in other words, as a “postpainterly age” (_Underworld_ 393), and, like Klara, who repaints defunct airplanes in the American desert, Pynchon implies that the aesthetic qualities, formerly attributed to the fine arts, appear now only in the realms of technology and science.

In assigning this aesthetic quality to machinery, Pynchon’s Hereros, finally, offer not only an alternate way for thinking about technology but they also wrest _their_ rocket from the war context in which the original quintuple zero rocket originated. If the success of the latter was from the very beginning contingent upon military conflict, was “something that needed the energyburst of war” (521), then the Hereros manage to channel this creative energy through a different route by letting it pour forth through the aesthetic experience of the artist-engineer. This, it should be noted, is also how Benjamin perceived the relationship between technology and the arts.
Unless we allow technology into the arts, so Benjamin famously argues, then “the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war” (244). Or, as one of Pynchon’s own literary successors, Richard Powers, puts it in his rephrasing of Benjamin’s argument, one that equally befits Gravity’s Rainbow, “The choice is clear: shoot snapshots, or shoot rifles” (256).

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Notes

1 Mendelson was not the first critic to note the relevance of the encyclopedia for analyzing Gravity’s Rainbow. Already in an essay published in 1975, Morgan Swigger drew attention to the “fictional encyclopedism” that structures Pynchon’s third novel.

2 For a discussion of the Beethoven-Rossini polemic as well as of Pynchon’s use of music in general, see David Cowart’s Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion.

3 In the last quotation, this injurious feature concerns the boy Gottfried who, as the narrator lavishes superlatives on the beauty of steel, is being inserted into the rocket to be launched into space and into a certain though never precisely known death.

4 For Joyce and Gaddis’s usage of this neologism, which they seem to have arrived at independently from each other, see Finnegans Wake (522) and The Recognitions (183, 453).

5 In Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale defines the shift from modernism to postmodernism in terms of a change of dominant from epistemological to ontological uncertainty. According to McHale, Lot 49 still falls for the most part within the modernist category although it already contains some moments of ontological crisis.

6 In The Open Society and its Enemies (1945), Popper argued that psychoanalysis—like Marxism—cannot be considered a scientific doctrine because in reducing everything to one single impetus—desire in the former; class struggle in the latter—it cannot be proven wrong.

7 This contrast that is reinforced when Slothrop tells Enzian that “I don’t have any people” (363).

8 Another example of this felt incompatibility is, of course, Stephen Dedalus’s view of the artist as a deus absconditus who “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce, Portrait 217).

9 Joseph Tabbi was the first critic to note that Pynchon’s writing style mirrors the trial-and-error method of the engineer (Postmodern Sublime 103).

10 In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin argues that “the earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind” (Illuminations 223).

11 This detail about the textual genesis of Pynchon’s novel is noted in Steven Weisenburger’s A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion (1).
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Silences and Worlds: Wittgenstein and Pynchon
Sascha Pöhlmann

1. Pynchon’s philosophy, Wittgenstein’s literature

Writing about Wittgenstein, that most eminent philosopher of language, means writing about problems of translation. In his *Miscellaneous Remarks*, one can find this: “Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten” (*Vermischte Bemerkungen* 483). One good attempt to translate that statement was made by Martin Puchner, who gives it as “Philosophy should only be done as poetry” (295), with an additional explanation that the word *dichten* means *to write poetry* but also *to condense*. David Schalkwyk amends Peter Winch’s translation “philosophy ought really to be written as a form of poetic composition” (56) by the term to *poetize*. Yet *dichten* not only refers to the writing of poetry, but to fictional production in general, even if it is not in written form, and it also evokes the semantic field of being sealed off, tight, consolidated, and also that of proximity. Wittgenstein’s comment on the literary nature of philosophy is already subject to the play of meaning which places it itself closer to literature than philosophy.

Wittgenstein himself furthers this understanding of his work in a literary context by stating that what he invents are new similes, “neue *Gleichnisse*” (*Culture and Value* 16), and Wolfgang Huemer, in a recent book called *The Literary Wittgenstein*, states that “the fascination of Wittgenstein’s works lies to a considerable degree in their literary quality” (2). However, Puchner cautions readers against looking too much at the literary form of philosophy since this often keeps the two apart because “it envisions their conjunctions as that of a philosophical content that is then poured into some literary form” (296). The same holds true of the philosophical form of literature. In an attempt to do justice to the instability of this distinction, I would like to connect two works from each field, one that became famous as philosophy, and one as literature: *Gravity’s Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein. I want to argue that they are related in their interest in the problematic relation between language and the world, in the uses of silence, in the construction of possible worlds, and in causality. Furthermore, certain passages in the *Tractatus* allow for a new angle on Slothrop’s scattering towards the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

A new reading of the connection between the early Wittgenstein and
Pynchon is necessary because the text which deals with this relationship most thoroughly also deals with it only superficially. William M. Plater in *The Grim Phoenix* traces Pynchon's influences and states that the *Tractatus* is important because it also describes “the world as a closed system” and thus served as a model for Pynchon's textual systems. Plater is right in saying that Pynchon “does not have to use the *Tractatus* consistently” because fiction is not philosophy (5), but that does not mean that his fiction and Wittgenstein's philosophy do not consistently share similar traits. It is not enough to equate Wittgenstein's world of language with Pynchon's closed systems suffering entropy.

In Plater's opinion, readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* have no choice but to impose their own meaning on the noise of the text, just as Weissmann in *V.* got DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST from the sferics by “finagling” (278). This scene may serve as an appropriate parable for Pynchon's technique, but the large part of the content of the *Tractatus* remains remarkably uninterpreted. Similarly, Petra Bianchi in her essay on Wittgenstein and *V.* addresses only a small part of the *Tractatus*, ignoring its ethical (non)content altogether. However, it is this ethical dimension of his early thought which “must be taken with complete seriousness and placed at the center of his philosophy” (Hodges 90). With this in mind, I aim to address that gap in Pynchon criticism, and to relate Wittgenstein's and Pynchon's intellectual projects more thoroughly to each other. For this reason, let me first summarize some of the main concerns of the *Tractatus*.

The basic aim of the *Tractatus* is “to draw a limit to thought—or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts” (TLP p. 3). Wittgenstein uses a critique of language to define clearly what can be said and what cannot be said meaningfully. One can think more than one can say. It is possible to think the unsayable, but not to think the unthinkable, let alone say it, especially say meaningfully. In Wittgenstein's opinion, the only meaningful statements are those that can be either true or false. Anything else must be shown, and “What can be shown, cannot be said” (TLP 4.1212). Realizing that the world is limited in such a way—“Feeling the world as a limited whole” (TLP 6.45), as Wittgenstein puts it, *this* is the mystical, that which Cyril Barrett paraphrases as “the marvellous, remarkable, inexplicable” (72).

As it is, the “limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (TLP 5.6). Neither have anything to do with eloquence or education; my world is not smaller if I do not know what *différence* is. Instead, they are defined by the line between what can be said and what can only be thought or felt: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (TLP 6.522).

It is the task of philosophy to use logic as a tool to draw that line, and nothing else—especially not to pretend to say the unsayable by making ethical statements. However, the *Tractatus* is an ethical book, despite its
status as written philosophy, as Wittgenstein told his friend Ludwig von Ficker in a famous letter:

*The book's point is an ethical one.* I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now. . . . What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And *it is precisely this second part that is the important one.* (Janik & Toulmin 192)

In other words, he “meant what he did not say” (Gabriel 11, my translation). In a strict understanding of the last statement of the *Tractatus,* “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (TLP 7), it is true that the *Tractatus* “cannot be written” (Hodges 87). This is why Wittgenstein claimed that “perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts” (TLP p. 3). Its words point towards something they cannot express directly. However, Wittgenstein also constantly does what he calls “running against the walls of our cage” (Kenny 296), that is, speak about that which is unsayable, revolting against his own “doctrine of silence” (McDonough 236), even though he knows it is “perfectly, absolutely hopeless” (Kenny 296). Derrida used quite a similar technique when trying to speak about *différance* and explain at the same time why it cannot really be spoken about (you may call it “approach and avoid”)

Here, both their projects must acquire literary qualities, both must enter the realm of *Dichtung* to probe the limits of language beyond description. Literary forms can express a certain conception of philosophy and its method, and where literary form and philosophical method are closely connected, it would be a mistake to ignore the former and focus on the latter (Gabriel 3). It is sentences without truth value that point towards the unsayable, towards “non-propositional insight” (Gabriel 25, my translation). While the natural sciences can describe, the imagination can attempt to show—trying, failing, no matter, trying again, failing again, failing better.

2. Parallels

Pynchon imitated the structure of the *Tractatus* in a short passage of *Gravity's Rainbow*, but the link goes further than that. His novels, and especially *Gravity's Rainbow*, are the kind of texts which point to something outside themselves while refusing to comment on it directly. They convey the idea that words cannot represent things fully, but at best are “only $\Delta t$ from the things they stand for” (510). The early Wittgenstein’s picture theory is built on the descriptive powers of meaningful statements, but the ethical point of the *Tractatus* is that language is incapable as a system to represent the full range of human experience. Both Pynchon and Wittgenstein use words nevertheless, and they may even come close to delta $T$, but in the end fail
like characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* at that “number one Zonal pastime” of Holy-Center-Approaching (508). The desire to express is there nevertheless, and with it the realization that what cannot be represented must be shown, hinted at, outlined from the other side. Showing the limits of language and representation, both Wittgenstein and Pynchon force their readers to deduce that something lies beyond that limit.

2.1 Inadequacy of World-Description

The inadequacy of natural science to go beyond the sayable is painfully felt by the characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* living under the threat of random V2 strikes. Natural science is the “totality of true propositions” (TLP 4.11), so what it does is describe the world, draw a map—yet it cannot offer interpretations of this map that go beyond the sayable. No description of the world in sentences with truth value allows for the deduction of anything metaphysical, which is Hume’s “is-ought problem” (*Treatise of Human Nature*, 231-2), but also Moore’s naturalistic fallacy (*Principia Ethica*, §10, 61-2). Or, in Wittgenstein’s words:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. (TLP)

One of the chroniclers of what is the case is Roger Mexico, a statistician “devoted to number and to method” to whom “belongs the domain between zero and one” (55). Yet he constantly has to deal with people who feel the desire to look beyond zero and one while he is marking rocket strikes in squares on a map of London: “The Poisson equation will tell, for a number of total hits arbitrarily chosen, how many squares will get none, how many one, two, three, and so on” (55). The Poisson distribution is misinterpreted by others as a technique for prediction. His descriptive capabilities and statistical interpretations are correct, yet in the extreme situation of random death from above, they show their inadequacy to even address that which troubles people most—strategies for survival and metaphysical explanations:

“Why is your equation only for angels, Roger? Why can’t we do something, down here? Couldn’t there be an equation for us too, something to help us find a safer place?”

“Why am I surrounded [. . .] by statistical illiterates? There’s no way, love, not as long as the mean density of strikes is constant.[. . .]”

The rockets are distributing about London just as Poisson’s equation in the
textbooks predicts. As the data keep coming in, Roger looks more and more like a prophet. (54)

Jessica and Pointsman keep bothering Mexico about what lies beyond his map, and realize that, in the words of the Tractatus: “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer” (TLP 6.52). All questions that cannot be answered by statements with truth value are—strictly speaking—nonsense. “When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words” (TLP 6.5). Yet it is these unsayable questions which are the most urgent:

“Can’t you . . . tell […] from your map here, which places would be safest to go into, safest from attack?”
“No.”
“But surely—”
“Every square is just as likely to get hit again. The hits aren’t clustering. Mean density is constant.”

Nothing on the map to the contrary. Only a classical Poisson distribution, quietly neatly sifting among the squares exactly as it should . . . growing to its predicted shape . . .

“But squares that have already had several hits, I mean—”
“I’m sorry. That’s the Monte Carlo Fallacy. No matter how many have fallen inside a particular square, the odds remain the same as they always were. Each hit is independent of all the others. Bombs are not dogs. No link. No memory. No conditioning.” (55-56)

Roger’s attitude can either be called “Scientist-neutrality” (58) or “cheap nihilism” (57). If, as David Seed states, the “general tendency of the systems Pynchon examines is to obliterate humanity, to reduce bomb-blasts to a statistical event’ or to reduce people to things, to passive functions” (181), Roger Mexico exemplifies that tendency. He has no problem at all with the limits of his scientific discourse, and does not appear to experience the will to resist death like others do. One night, however, he is confronted with the metaphysical in the form of the drunk Reverend Dr. Paul de la Nuit, who tells him:

“[T]he ancient Roman priests laid a sieve in the road, and then waited to see which stalks of grass would come up through the holes.”

Roger saw the connection immediately. “I wonder [. . . ] if it would follow a Poisson . . . let’s see . . .”

“Mexico.” Leaning forward, definitely hostile. “They used the stalks that grew through the holes to cure the sick. The sieve was a very sacred item to them. What
will you do with the sieve you’ve laid over London? How will you use the things that grow in your network of death?”

“I don’t follow you.” It’s just an equation. . . . (56)

Scientific discourse is unable to address those problems really bothering people, and Mexico does not even understand why this is a problem—as Wittgenstein puts it, “The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution” (TLP 6.4321). The world is perceived as limited when language shows its limits and non-propositional insight demands to be voiced. The feeling of war, of living under constant threat of sudden death, where “you never hear the one that gets you” (23), must show the failure of descriptive language, and the best books about war have a tendency to highlight this failure in their own ways.

2.2 Forms of Silences in Gravity’s Rainbow: Em Dashes, Three Dots, and the Unspeakable

The limits of descriptive language not only show themselves in those passages where questions of non-propositional insight are posed rather explicitly. Gravity’s Rainbow is full of other forms of silences, where people wonder “not quite in words” (483), or where they get a glimpse at what is beyond language. While the scenes of Mexico’s statistical discussions serve to describe the need to go beyond truth value, other parts of the text show that which cannot be said. If, as Wittgenstein asserts, “All propositions are of equal value” (TLP 6.4) and “Propositions can express nothing that is higher” (TLP 6.42), another mode of expression is necessary to indicate what lies beyond our world of language. The final statement of the Tractatus, leaving open the rest of the page and the “end” of the text for a heavy silence, is a normative sentence addressing philosophy as a critique of language. However, it allows for multiple readings, and one of them hints at the innate terror of this radical incapability to gain a full understanding of the world inside language. Yet it contains both resignation and hope, since it can be read as an acceptance of non-propositional insight as another means of achieving what maybe cannot be quite called knowledge.

What is left is the urge to indicate that which cannot be spoken of, and of course this indication must take place in language itself, and as such must remain incomplete and eventually unsuccessful. However, a literary form allows play in language, and two ubiquitous formal aspects of Gravity’s Rainbow point towards the unsayable more than any others: the em dash and, especially, the three dots. These are so characteristic of Pynchon that Adrian Wisnicki could use them as identifying marks when he tried to attribute to him the articles in various magazines connected to Boeing (15). I read Pynchon’s ellipses as invitations for extrapolation. Some of his sentences function like launch pads
which set the reader on a course, and after the Brenn schluss of meaningful language she has to find the target herself (or miss it).

Most of Pynchon’s dashes are used for insertion, pause, or disruption, and they generally just do what dashes do, but some of them carry traces of much more meaning. The most memorable instance of such a special dash is the one Gravity’s Rainbow ends with: “Now evybody—” (760). It is an end which is not one, of course. That dash opens up the possibility to speculate endlessly about what happens at the end of the text. It allows us to wonder whether the approaching rocket bridges that “last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t” (760) and destroys it and us, or whether this “moving vehicle is frozen, in space, to become architecture, and timeless. It was never launched. It will never fall” (301). Maybe William Slothrop’s old hymn ends there in a mushroom cloud, maybe the whole audience joins in and sings as Their rocket fails to destroy them (and maybe it’s the singing that stops it). The final silence of the last page prefers possibility over certainty, and it points towards something outside the text, an interpretation, reasons, explanations that cannot be quite put into words. Beyond textual proof that something is the case, this dash indicates silently what could be the case.

The second technique of outlining the unspeakable is Pynchon’s use of the three dots, which even more than the dashes indicate a gap, a deliberate silence, a necessary exclusion. These absences of words are present on about every page of Gravity’s Rainbow; I will pick two of those I consider most important.

The first example is also the most condensed one, compressed into a single word and three dots which point towards both this compression and also its insufficiency. It occurs during Slothrop’s browsing through the London Times:

Leafing through, dum, dum, de-doo, yeah, the War’s still on, Allies closing in east and west on Berlin, powdered eggs still going one and three a dozen, “Fallen Officers,” MacGregor, Mucker-Maffick, Whitestreet, Personal Tributes . . . Meet Me in St. Louis showing at the Empire Cinema (recalls doing the penis-in-the-popcorn-box routine there with one Madelyn, who was less than—)—

Tantivy . . . Oh shit no, no wait— (252)

Slothrop reads that his friend “Tantivy” Mucker-Maffick has died. Even though he will suspect later on that this “death” may in fact have been but a linguistic event in a manipulated text—“maybe the whole story was a lie. They could’ve planted it easy enough in that London Times, couldn’t they? Left the paper for Slothrop to find?” (252)—his immediate reaction to the report shows that he initially accepts it at face value, and he is therefore genuinely devastated by it. The passage includes what John Powers calls “the most poignant ellipsis
in all of fiction” (qtd. in Howard 31): the word “Tantivy” is not spoken, and it is not thought as a word—rather, the word and the three dots that follow it mark a whole set of insights, emotions and thoughts which are beyond the descriptive powers of language. The word is framed by two dashes, three dots and eventually another dash, it is surrounded by absences and silences, by that which cannot be spoken. Words fail Slothrop, and he is permeated by silence:

Staring out the window, staring at nothing, gripping a table knife so hard maybe some bones of his hand will break. It happens sometimes to lepers. Failure of feedback to the brain no way to know how fiercely they may be making a fist. You know these lepers. Well—

Ten minutes later, back up in his room, he’s lying face-down on the bed, feeling empty. Can’t cry. Can’t do anything. (252)

We miss what happened in these ten minutes, Slothrop going to his room to lie down on the bed. More significantly, after a section that began with an interior monologue, we miss Slothrop’s thoughts too. He ends up silent, and the words “Can’t cry. Can’t do anything” are not a coarse attempt to describe his state of mind, but precise pointers towards the unspeakable. He may be thinking many thoughts, but they are not represented by words in the text. The confrontation with death is also the confrontation with the limits of language. After these silences and markers of the unspeakable, everything that could be said seems trivial, and the first utterance made by a character is just that: “At noon Hilary Bounce comes in rubbing his eyes wearing a shit-eating grin. ‘How was your evening? Mine was remarkable’” (253). The insufficiency of language becomes most apparent in situations where words fail and somebody speaks.

My second example addresses a silence that has struck readers who “have felt that an encyclopedic narrative that includes so much of the history of World War II must be shaped by a peculiar vision when it so steadfastly avoids Hitler and the Holocaust” (Tölölyan 56). It is evident that the Holocaust is not completely absent from the text, but some readers seem to observe an imbalance. Most recently, Luc Herman and Bruno Arich-Gerz have discussed this perceived lack of representation in their essay “Darstellungen von Dora.” They take the criticism very seriously, but argue that Pynchon does not at all suppress the suffering of the inmates of the Dora camp (399), but puts it into the larger context of the system which not only produced rockets but also included the production of death (409). I want to add to this argument by considering the philosophy of the Tractatus, which can help understand a little better why absence not necessarily equals marginalization.

The passage which most directly deals with the Holocaust is located at the end of Franz Pökler’s story, an episode which, as Weisenburger remarks,
is “the longest in the novel and is placed very much at its center” (234). This is not to argue that this makes the Holocaust central to *Gravity’s Rainbow*; what is important is rather that the Holocaust is not central to Pökler’s story, and so *Gravity’s Rainbow* rather thematizes the conditions of speaking about the Holocaust than the Holocaust itself directly:

The Obersturmbannführer was not at his post when Pökler went into Dora. He was not looking for Ilse, or not exactly. He may have felt that he ought to look, finally. He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart. . . .

[...] While he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside . . . all this time. . . . Pökler vomited. He cried some. The walls did not dissolve—no prison wall ever did, not from tears, not at this finding, on every pallet, in every cell, that the faces are ones he knows after all, and holds dear as himself, and cannot, then, let them return to that silence. . . . (432-33)

Pökler must be asked the question that would haunt following generations: How much did people know about the Holocaust? Pökler definitely knew something, otherwise he would not have felt that “he ought to look, finally” (my emphasis). It is as if he had believed that as long as he refused to look, it would not be there. The data, the evidence presented in descriptive language to him, did not suffice to understand “with senses or heart” what was going on right where he was (and with his—indirect?—involvement). Three dots end this statement, an ellipsis refusing to describe just what it is he did not know: the complex terror to which has been assigned that simplifying signifier of the Holocaust, forever doomed to be inadequate.

The passage ends focusing on a single detail of that large concept, a single woman, still through the eyes of Pökler, still lacking any more general comments. In this instant, the text refuses to relegate death to statistics, as it is so often done—as Stalin said, and he was someone who knew—when millions die. The crisis of representation becomes evident. In this scene, what cannot be spoken about is passed over in silence—but in a silence of indication, not one of description. Pökler is struck by the terror which went on while he was working on the V2, and this terror is opposed to the rational descriptive work he did of drawing “marks on paper” while something went on “in the darkness outside,” not only literally outside his workplace, but also radically outside the sphere of his descriptive endeavour, something which could not be grasped by mere data, but after all could only be fully understood as non-propositional insight. While Slothrop is confronted with the tragedy of one person’s death and is left empty of signification, Pökler must face what at this stage only hints at mass death on an unknown scale, and his story acknowledges two kinds of silence: the silence which allowed him to keep the darkness outside and the data from turning into knowledge, and the silence which marks
the impossibility of describing the world in which the Holocaust is the case. Richard Crownshaw identifies Pynchon’s use of allegory to describe “how a chronology of bureaucratic and scientific events, which up till now Pökler has found an acceptable version of reality, cannot explain and rationalize the fate of Jews” (209). A literary device of symbolical displacement is necessary to point towards that which cannot be stated more directly. When Pökler, at the end of a chapter so preoccupied with what he thought and said, sits for half an hour holding the “bone hand” of a “random woman” (433), we do not get any description of his thoughts, there is no reference to anything he might think in words, just like the text refused to represent Slothrop’s thoughts in the missing ten minutes. This absence marks the text’s acknowledgement of the limits of language and of itself.

Similarly, in the passage on Pökler in the Dora camp, the many ellipses remind the reader of the inadequacy of descriptive language as well as the desperate need to speak. Pökler realizes the danger of letting the “faces [. . .] he holds dear as himself [. . .] return to that silence” (433) in which they had been kept in the time when he had refused to look, but the text itself shows that such a silence of description is, strictly speaking, ultimately inevitable, even though it must be resisted in the strongest possible way. Pökler's final acts of compassion are not accompanied by any words he speaks, and they are described in words which do not find closure in a period followed by a silence of description, but remain the mere ephemeral beginning of what comes after words, and what is indicated by three dots which end the passage without completing it.

The unspeakable is not only addressed by the critique of descriptive language in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but also as capital-S Silence, almost an entity in itself, something to be experienced personally in epiphanic moments. This happens to Greta Erdmann and Byron the Bulb, but it is Tchitcherine’s colleague Galina I want to focus on here.

While bringing the New Turkic Alphabet (NTA) to “the tribesmen” of “Seven Rivers country” (338), Galina learns about Silence:

> Here she has become a connoisseuse of silences. The great silences of Seven Rivers have not yet been alphabetized, and perhaps never will be. They are apt at any time to come into a room, into a heart, returning to chalk and paper the sensible Soviet alternatives brought out here by the Likbez agents. They are silences NTA cannot fill, cannot liquidate, immense and frightening as the elements in this bear’s corner—scaled to a larger Earth, a planet wilder and more distant from the sun. . . . (340-41)

The NTA, a rational linguistic system covered by what Wittgenstein deals with in the *Tractatus*, is opposed to “great silences” which are forever outside language and cannot be contained. These silences point towards an order
of being that is different from what language allows to be said, and they are connected to non-propositional insight. Such an epiphany happens to Galina, who imagines herself both as a giant threatening a city as well as an inhabitant of that city—and thus in the encounter of Silence learns that “it is herself, her Central Asian giantess self, that is the Nameless thing she fears . . .” (341). Galina has learned about the limits of language and world only in the conditions away from the cities of a culture which has fully settled for what the NTA could express. We encounter Galina again only once more in the text, at the interrogation of Tchitcherine, who does not recognize her. She has “come back to the cities, out of the silences after all, in again to the chain-link fields of the Word, shining, running secure and always close enough, always tangible . . .” (705). The cities, symbols of rational modernity, are refuge from those silences, and they allow for security in the Word, the secure conditions of representation. The Silence far away from that domain of rational language taught Galina the inadequacy of that language by showing her its irreducible Other, which yet must be present in all attempts at representation. She has returned to the cities but does not speak in this passage, and we do not learn what effects these experiences had on her. Her explicitly marginal role in the text, in the end a passive bystander, possibly includes a lesson about Silence—her epiphany may have been of great importance, but maybe its very nature forbids description, since if it could be described, it would be worthless. Wittgenstein commented similarly on ethics, saying that he “would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance” (Lecture on Ethics 295-96).

2.3 Critiques of Causality, Interpretation and Paranoia

Implied in both Wittgenstein’s and Pynchon’s critique of language is also a distrust in the concept of causality. The Tractatus employs a discussion of the law of causality to explain how only certain states of affairs can be described meaningfully. Just as we cannot infer from the world what we should do, what is good or evil, what is metaphysical, we cannot infer from it the knowledge about what is going to happen. It is an illusion that “the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena” (TLP 6.371). For Wittgenstein, only the laws of logic deserve the word law, while the “laws” of nature are “assumed as hypotheses” (TLP 5.154). Logic is seen as the form which is “the possibility of structure” (TLP 2.033) and as such “transcendental” (TLP 6.13). However, logic should not be regarded as a positive foundation of the world, a transcendental signified, since “the propositions of logic are tautologies” (TLP 6.1) and therefore “say nothing” (TLP 6.11). Wittgenstein’s logic here is close to Derrida’s différence as that which “makes signification possible” (395) but is only present as a trace. As Jorn K. Bramann writes in Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus” and the Modern Arts,
That logic is transcendental means that one necessarily perceives the world as something which is subject to the laws of logic, that the basic structure of reality is identical with the order of logic. The order of facts as represented by the language of the propositional calculus, therefore, is not just one order among others that are possible, but it is the order of the world. The basic disconnectedness of all facts is, therefore, the true state of the world. Ordinary perception, and whatever is conveyed by ordinary language, can only give a distorted image of reality. The connections which they suggest are not real. A philosophical view of the world recognizes them as illusions. (84)

Logic does not care what $p$ and $q$ stand for. Its laws only produce empty propositions without truth value, and so “outside logic everything is accidental” (TLP 6.3).

Enter anti-paranoia, the insight that “nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (434). Pynchon’s characters are finagling their way through a world which does not make sense, but requires them to make sense quite literally, to connect facts and make inferences with ambivalent truth-value. Order becomes an obsession, and it is always an order which has the paranoiac at its center. Of course, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean you’re wrong. However, this paranoia is based on the assumption that things happen for a reason, that one event necessitates another—that there is cause and effect. Wittgenstein would disagree: “There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is logical necessity” (TLP 6.37). The insight into this logical necessity does not lead to any gain of knowledge about the world, since logic is only the space in which that which is the case exists—the “facts in logical space are the world” (TLP 1.13). This is why logicians cannot and “do not draw any ontological conclusions from their calculi” (Bramann 83), which leaves their results as empty as Roger Mexico’s statistics. Since mathematics “is a logical method” (TLP 6.2) and a “proposition of mathematics does not express a thought” (TLP 6.21), mathematics cannot be used to make statements about the world itself, especially not about issues which its inhabitants perceive as vital.

Wittgenstein attacks causality on a large scale, his “attitude toward the world is anti-ideological to an extreme. But Wittgenstein’s conception of facts does not only undermine ‘holistic’ theories like that of Marx, Hegel, Toynbee, or Jaspers, but common sense perceptions of reality as well” (Bramann 87). It is important to note that Wittgenstein does not question causality on an ontological but on an epistemological level. What follows from his assumptions about logic is this:

5.135 There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation.
5.136 There is no causal nexus to justify such an inference.
5.1361 We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present. Superstition is nothing but belief in the causal nexus. (TLP)

One could call this the belief in “the aprioristic certainty of causal connections” (Stenius 60). Or, from a different angle: “Paranoids are not paranoids [. . .] because they’re paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations” (292). The desire for an understanding of the world by connecting states of affairs (or believing that they are connected *a priori*) can never be fulfilled because such a connection must be provisional and limited, one could say *personal*, and Wittgenstein recognizes this desire on this level of meaningful statements as a human urge rather than an innate order of the world:

6.36 If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that cannot be said: it makes itself manifest. . . .
6.362 What can be described can happen too: and what the law of causality is meant to exclude cannot even be described.
6.363 The procedure of induction consists in accepting as true the *simplest* law that can be reconciled with our experiences.
6.3631 This procedure, however, has no logical justification but only a psychological one. It is clear that there are no grounds for believing that the simplest eventuality will in fact be realized.
6.36311 It is an hypothesis that the sun will rise tomorrow: and this means that we do not *know* whether it will rise. (TLP)

This psychological justification is what Pynchon is interested in, knowing that beyond that, no meaningful statements can be made. This is why he calls the meeting of two paranoids a “crossing of solipsisms” where “two patterns create a third: a moiré, a new world of flowing shadows, interferences . . .” (395). The solipsist shares with the paranoiac the assumption that she is the center of the world, and that all meaning converges towards that center. Both centers give order and stability to a chaotic world, and so it is “every paranoid’s wish [. . .] to perfect methods of immobility” (572).

Yet is there not a basic contradiction between Pynchon and the early Wittgenstein—does not the one view the world as chaotic while the other views it as ordered? Their world views can be reconciled. Wittgenstein may seem to assume that there is a logic operating in the world and thus order in the world, but this logic is a *condition* of the world, not its Manichaean driving force, and as such it is an order too remote to be of any use for making any kind of inference about the *content* of logical operations. Logic is an *absent*
order that is useless for satisfying our paranoid drives, and everything inside that absent order, paradoxically, is absolutely chaotic.

Wittgenstein even seems to address the paranoiac directly when he states that “The world is independent of my will” (TLP 6.373), and dismisses any relation between the two beyond mere coincidence: “Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favor granted by fate, so to speak: for there is no logical connexion between the will and the world, which would guarantee it, and the supposed physical connexion itself is surely not something that we could will” (TLP 6.374). A paranoid subject believes in solipsistically being at the center of a world which has to be interpreted, and where order can be created by establishing meaning. Wittgenstein claims instead that there “is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas” (TLP 5.631), and that the “subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (TLP 5.632). Since “the self is not a possible object of experience” (Glock 349), just like the eye is not part of the visual field (TLP 5.633), it cannot be part of the world, nor can it be outside the world either. This is why it is referred to as a limit of the world, and this is why meaning in the world must ultimately escape that subject. What remains is the insight that there “is no a priori order of things” (TLP 5.634), and thus that any order of things is provisional, just like any attempts at making sense of the world from within it.

2.4 The Political and Philosophical Possibility of (An)Other World(s)

If there is no a priori order of things, it is possible to imagine any order in the world. This makes paranoia possible but also poses a problem for paranoiacs, since their system of interpreting the world must necessarily remain open. Plater states that “Pynchon has created a fiction that shows as well as speaks about the closed system, and he has created a philosophically complete world, one that is all that is the case” (61). This judgment fails to consider two important aspects. First, speaking about what Plater assumes is the “closed system” of language—and one may reasonably doubt it is one—means thinking beyond its boundaries. Second, the first statement of the Tractatus—“The world is all that is the case” (TLP 1)—should not only be taken fatalistically in a deterministic way, since it is more than a “brutal truth” (Cowart 91). Another appropriate reading, closely connected to ideas of entropy, is that “Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist” states that the world is everything that is the fall, that everything constantly goes downhill. David Wills and Alec McHoul have collected a large number of meanings for the word Fall in their essay on V., and all these show how complex a reading of the Tractatus as literature can get: “Fall, accident, plunge, downfall, decline, ruin, decay, collapse, overthrow, drop, lapse, slump, depression, surrender, death, cadence, case, instance, example, matter, situation, event, circumstance, eventuality, occurrence,
outcome, occasion, case (jur.), case (med.), case (ling.)” (279). My reading of
the first statement, though, will consider what it does not say, but what is
explained shortly after: that the world is not only what is the case, but that
it is also what is not the case, and what could be the case. The Tractatus is
about the conditions of possibility, not about actual states of affairs: “Each
thing is, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs” (TLP 2.013), and the
“existence and non-existence of states of affairs is reality” (TLP 2.06). It is that
space that is important, not what is in it. Pynchon creates such a space but
does not present its content as pre-determined and unchangeable. The world
of Gravity’s Rainbow is more than what is the case, it is also what is not the
case, and most importantly what could be the case. Pynchon here is in line
with this idea of the Tractatus, but not with Plater’s interpretation of it.

Both Wittgenstein and Pynchon subscribe to possibilism, which Bradley
defines as “the belief in things which are merely possible, that is, nonactual
possibles” that can be “worlds, states of affairs, objects, or whatnot” (29).
Pynchon’s possibilism evidently differs from Wittgenstein’s, and I would
simplify and argue that one is political where the other is philosophical.

Wittgenstein argues that “[j]ust as the only necessity that exists is logical
necessity, so too the only impossibility that exists is logical impossibility” (TLP
6.375). He is concerned with the framework of logic that allows us to conceive
of states of affairs in the first place. “Logic deals with every possibility and all
possibilities are its facts” (TLP 2.0121). Since logic does not care for the content
of its statements, it is not concerned with things as they are, but always already
involves things as they could be. Logic provides not content but a form, and
“quite generally, Wittgenstein regards the notion of form as equivalent to a set
of possibilities” (Bradley 45). His critique of causality leads to the radical insight
that “Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all
could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things” (TLP 5.634). Plater
reads this as a comment on points of view and relativism (11), but it is based
on a misunderstanding of statement 1.1, “The world is the totality of facts, not
of things.” Plater takes this to mean that what matters is the observation of the
world, not the world as it is and is not, and sets it without further comment in
the context of Maxwell, Boltzmann and Henry Adams, as if the meaning of the
statement were self-evident (11-12). However, reading on from statement 1.1
just a bit, one recognizes that it is not about observing the world: “The world
is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts” (TLP 1.11), for “the
totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case”
(TLP 1.12). If we understand the world to be the totality of facts in terms of our
description of what is, and if we exclude what is not and the possibility implied
in that distinction, we limit the world more than necessary, and misunderstand
the Tractatus. It is not a tract on perception. Since the “totality of existing states
of affairs also determines which states of affairs do not exist” (TLP 2.05), with
every presence we must think an absence, and the play between the two is
the condition of possibility. With this in mind, the statements “Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things” (TLP 5.634) read differently, not with Plater’s emphasis on description, but on being. Since statements with truth-value are only embodiments of what is possible in that “space of possible states of affairs” (TLP 2.013), the acceptance of necessity must give way to a radical recognition of possibility. Without causality in the world, nothing is necessary, but all is possible.

Wittgenstein’s possibilism stems from these properties of language. It is possible to envisage “nonactual state[s] of affairs” or “different ways the world might be,” even though of “the various ways the world might be, only one of them was, is, or will be, actual. All the others were, are, or will be, nonactual” (Bradley 30). Nonactual does not mean impossible, and language is the space in which these possibilities can be played out. Wittgenstein wrote in his Notebooks 1914-1916 that in “the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally” (7e). The distinction between nonactual and impossible is a useful one to keep in mind when considering a fictional text. Strictly speaking, fictional texts can never deal with the impossible, since logical impossibility could not be expressed in language which has logic as its condition: “It is as impossible to represent in language anything that ‘contradicts logic’ as it is in geometry to represent by its co-ordinates a figure that contradicts the laws of space, or to give the coordinates of a point that does not exist” (TLP 3.032). Fictional texts instead can deal with what is nonactual in “our” world. If one follows Wittgenstein in recognizing “two domains of quantification: an unrestricted domain of objects that exist as possibilia and a restricted domain of actualia” (Bradley 61), one must recognize that this allows for an infinite number of “games of make-believe” (Pavel 54), and so for conceptions of possible worlds.

Lubomír Doležel in Heterocosmica comments on the postmodernist rewriting of canonical literary texts that “displacement constructs an essentially different version of the protoworld, redesigning its structure and reinventing its story. These most radical postmodernist rewrites create polemical antiworlds, which undermine or negate the legitimacy of the canonical protoworld” (207). This can be applied not only to the protoworld of a literary text, but also to the protoworld we believe to be reality. It is possible to create a polemical antiworld to “the real world” for political purposes, rewriting things as they are, are not, could be, should be, reinventing its narrative. Brian McHale reminds us that “fictional possible worlds and the real world inevitably overlap to some extent” (34), and it is the transworld exchange which can make the postmodern “fictional heterocosm” (28) political.

The belief in nonactual but not impossible worlds implies a politics of changeability as it questions the status quo by abstractly showing that things as they are are not the only way things can be. For example, “Newspeak” in Nineteen
Eighty-Four is an attempt “not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible” (312). Manipulating and limiting language is a political act, and the power of language to refer to nonactuals is political. There is power in speculations starting with “If someone killed the President….” Pynchon comments in a related manner on this power of language when he presents the consequences of the introduction of the New Turkic Alphabet: “On sidewalks and walls the very first printed slogans start to show up, the first Central Asian fuck you signs, the first kill-the-police-commissioner-signs (and somebody does! this alphabet is really something!)” (355-56). Immediately this system of language is appropriated for subversion. There is, in a way, only a small difference between describing a different state of affairs and demanding it. The creation of a fictional world like the Zone, which has “no locational as well as no epistemological stability” (Tanner 80), posits a challenge to all unified narratives in and about the so-called “real world.”

It also involves a critique of political necessity, an abstract one to be sure, but one that can found an anti-conservative politics of possibility which refuses to accept that which can be changed for the better. Slothrop learns that lesson from a pine tree:

Slothrop’s family actually made its money killing trees, amputating them from their roots, chopping them up, grinding them to pulp, bleaching that to paper and getting paid for this with more paper. “That’s really insane.” He shakes his head. “There’s insanity in my family.” He looks up. The trees are still. They know he's there. They probably also know what he's thinking. “I’m sorry,” he tells them. “I can’t do anything about those people, they’re all out of my reach. What can I do?” A medium-size pine nearby nods its top and suggests, “Next time you come across a logging operation out here, find one of their tractors that isn’t being guarded, and take its oil filter with you. That’s what you can do.” (552-53)

Slothrop is moved out of his fatalistic acceptance of necessity (“I can’t do anything”) by being shown an alternative to doing nothing. The tree does the thinking for Slothrop, thinking beyond what is to what could be.

Byron’s fellow bulbs react in a similar way to Slothrop’s trees when “word goes out along the Grid” (650) of Byron’s imminent getting unscrewed by a Phoebus agent:

They are silent with impotence, with surrender in the face of struggles they thought were all myth. We can’t help, this common thought humming through pastures of sleeping sheep, down Autobahns and to the bitter ends of coaling piers in the North, there’s never been anything we could do…. Anyone shows us the meanest hope of transcending and the Committee on Incandescent Anomalies comes in and takes him away. Some do protest, maybe, here and there, but it’s
only information, glow-modulated, harmless, nothing close to the explosions in
the faces of the powerful that Byron once envisioned, back there in his Baby ward,
in his innocence. (650-51)

The bulbs’ fatalism is not presented as rooted in true necessity—the hope of
transcending this incapacity to act and change is there, only it is destroyed
by the Committee on Incandescent Anomalies (CIA), whose job it is to
keep things as they are, to serve and protect the status quo. Power aims at
perpetuating itself and so constructs necessity. Orwell’s Party sought to
manipulate language in such a way that it would make it impossible to realize
that there is no necessity; Pynchon in his fiction of paranoia manipulates
language to show us that everything is possible.

3. Slothrop

Yet where do these politics of possibility lead Slothrop eventually? He does not
seem to be a good advocate of any cause, since he meets a highly ambiguous
fate towards the end of Gravity’s Rainbow. However, certain passages from the
Tractatus can shed new light on his scattering. They will not resolve the ambiguity,
and nothing should, but they add a positive note to this dissemination.

Mondaugen’s Law states: “Personal density is directly proportional to
temporal bandwidth. ‘Temporal bandwidth’ is the width of your present, your
now. It is the familiar ‘Δt’ considered as a dependent variable. The more you
dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more
solid your persona” (509). Slothrop’s bandwidth moves from a fuzzy line to a
singular dot as he is stripped of his identity in the course of the novel, until
he is reduced to only his self, and then beyond it. Mondaugen’s Law explains
that “the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to
where you’re having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes
ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you’re doing here” (509). He is gradually
dropping out of time, and consequences of this have shown even earlier:

But nowadays, some kind of space he cannot go against has opened behind
Slothrop, bridges that might have led back are down now for good. He is growing
less anxious about betraying those who trust him. He feels obligations less
immediately. There is, in fact, a general loss of emotion, a numbness he ought to
be alarmed at, but can’t quite . . .

Can’t . . . (490-91)

The silences expressed by those repeated three dots already point towards
Slothrop’s moving towards an experience beyond language. This journey will
terminate in his removal from the text altogether, even though his absence
is clearly marked. His final disappearance, when he loses even the singularity
that is his self without identity, can be seen as “the change from point to no-point” which “carries a luminosity and enigma at which something in us must leap and sing, or withdraw in fright” (396). The Tractatus gives reason to celebrate his vanishing: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present” (TLP 6.4311). Slothrop’s temporal bandwidth is so limited that he only knows the present; Plater rightly states that he achieves “timelessness outside of time” (51), but fails to link this to the Tractatus.

The same is true of his treatment of solipsism, which does not go beyond linking Wittgenstein’s concept of the self to the writer’s role in fiction (9). Much more can be gained from the following passage in the Tractatus:

5.62 . . . The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world.

5.621 The world and life are one.

5.63 I am my world. (The microcosm.)

5.631 There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. . . .

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world. . . .

5.64 Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it. (TLP)

The “solipsist’s ego is an entity without an identity” (Pears 19) in that passage of the Tractatus, which is what Slothrop experienced in the course of the text. Slothrop constitutes the limit of a world just like anyone else, but he manages to transcend his. Something grows from his loss of identity and self: he “becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon” (625). He vanishes from the world system by becoming a coordinate system of his own. The “reality co-ordinated” with “the self of solipsism” (TLP 5.64) originates from him as an absent center without extension. If everything metaphysical must lie outside of the world whose limit is language, Slothrop must leave language (the text) to have access to the metaphysical. If the “solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” (TLP 6.521), Slothrop’s scattering may indicate such a solution. Wittgenstein claims that this is “the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense” (TLP 6.521).
“Those Who Know, know” (665), indeed. Another example: the Polish undertaker, who is a “digital companion” whose response to everything is either yes or no (663), tries to transcend his life of zeros and ones by getting hit by lightning; by experiencing “a singular point” he wants to reach another “world laid down on the previous one and to all appearances no different. Ha-ha! But the lightning-struck know, all right! Even if they may not know they know” (664). His goal is to gain knowledge about “how people behave before and after lightning bolts, so he’ll know better how to handle bereaved families” (665). He is preparing for confrontations with death, and for speaking about death. In his “digital” state, his language seems insufficient, so he looks for transcendence. Thanatz witnesses “an enormous blast of light and sound [hit] the water back where the undertaker, peeved at what he takes to be no gratitude, is hauling away. ‘Oh,’ comes his faint voice. ‘Oh, ho. Oh-ho-ho-ho!’” (665). This is all the commentary there is, and either the undertaker has learned the hard way that his plan might not have been such a good idea after all, or he has indeed found what he was looking for—only that his language fails at representing it.

Slothrop’s experience of transcendence is not as painful as the undertaker’s, but he too is leaving language and world behind. Earlier, he mused about finding in the waste of the “cleared, depolarized” Zone “a single set of coordinates from which to proceed” (556), and this set could be Slothrop himself, indicating new conditions of existence. He may be that new “Center without time, the journey without hysteresis” (319), which at the same time is not. He has become like Derrida’s *différance*, “the structured and differing origin of differences” (393), producing a new way of structurality in his axes, making structures in his coordinates possible, but also disappearing from the system itself, leaving only traces. This gives a new angle to Weisenburger’s idea that Slothrop, as a cross, is “Christ-like” (321)—he may have a famous predecessor in creating a new system and then leaving it so that it might work. He leaves the plot with all its links, and “the difficulty of knowing from the inside whether or not a set of events constitutes a designed plot or is merely coincidental” (Schaub 105) does not affect him any longer. He is only present “in spirit” (712) and has left traces all over the text, but “Slothrop qua Slothrop” (738) is gone.

Slothrop is in good company. He is not the only literary character leaving the text behind, and his fellow escapees into the silence beyond words are numerous and well known. Wyatt Gywon in Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* simply walks off out of our view, having lost his name hundreds of pages earlier, going somewhere the text refuses to follow (900). Leopold Bloom, resting after having traveled, falls asleep, and the final question of Ithaca, “Where?”, is answered either by a large dot or by a blank space, depending on what edition you prefer (689/871). The voice in Beckett’s *Unnameable* realizes that perhaps words “have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me,
if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (418). All those words have only carried the voice (and the reader) to the threshold of the story, and what is behind the door that opens on it remains in the realm of silence. Hamlet’s last words draw our attention to the fact that there is always a rest, a surplus of meaning in the play that is beyond words, and that also there is rest, peace to be found in silence. Pynchon himself writes about Daniel Pearse, the protagonist of Jim Dodge’s Stone Junction, that “it is for him to slip along the last borderline, into what Wittgenstein once supposed cannot be spoken of, and upon which, as Eliphaz Levi advised us—after “To know, to will, to dare” as the last and greatest of the rules of Magic—we must keep silent” (“Introduction” xiv). The protagonist of the Tractatus, who it could turn out possibly was us all along, finds a ladder waiting at the end, and Wittgenstein’s words: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” (TLP 6.54). What unites all these texts, and what shall serve as a final short summary of a long connected reading of Wittgenstein and Pynchon, is that they share a deep awe at silence, and at the same time an equally deep desire to express, and with it the realization that these are not separate. Their shared impossible project is an inquiry into the nature of Silence, and even if there may be no propositional knowledge to be gained from it, at least it contains a lesson similar to the one Byron the Bulb learned, a lesson of love, and of respect for Silence.

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Notes

1 “1. It is a combination. 1.1 It is a scalar quantity. 1.2. Its negative aspects are distributed isotropically. 2. It is not a conspiracy. 2.1 It is not a vector. 2.11 It is not aimed at anybody. 2.12 It is not aimed at me . . . u.s.w.” (415)

Works Cited


Wills, David, and Alec McHoul. “‘Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist’ (Wittgenstein, Weissmann, Pynchon)/ ‘Le Signe est toujours le signe de la chute’ (Derrida).” *Southern Review*, 1983:16, 274-91.
Since Lawrence Wolfley’s 1977 article “Repression’s Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon’s Big Novel,” commentators on Pynchon’s writing have often found themselves in uncomfortable and sometimes ridiculous positions where they are forced to argue about the importance of something although or because it is not explicitly in Pynchon’s text. Using various forms of logic, they find themselves “seeking other orders behind the visible” (GR 188), often concluding that something’s present because it’s absent. This paper, which proudly follows in that tradition, is divided into four short parts: the first part is a brief biography of Charles Richet; the second surveys his interests in the paranormal and psychic phenomena, emphasizing what we think are echoes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; the third discusses his work on anaphylaxis, particularly as it relates to *Gravity’s Rainbow*; and in the fourth, we will try to connect the pieces and explain why Richet is, to our minds, perhaps one of the most important historical figures not mentioned in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

1. Richet’s Biography

Charles Richet was born in 1850 and died in 1935. A Parisian physiologist and student of the occult and paranormal, Richet is best known as the winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery of anaphylaxis and anaphylactic shock. Richet, originally trained in the emerging new field of psychology, revived the study of hypnotism (which was falling into disrepute by 1875) and convinced Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet and later, Sigmund Freud, of its value in psychotherapy (Boadella, 46, Wolf 26-28). Among his research, he conducted one of the first studies of anorexia nervosa in 1896, wrote a treatise on the etiology of shivering and goose bumps (Wolf 50), and predicted the existence of neurotransmitters (Wolf 151-52). To say that Richet was a prolific medical researcher and writer is
an overwhelming understatement: Stewart Wolf’s partial bibliography of Richet’s oeuvre lists seven hundred and thirty-nine publications on topics relating to physiology and medicine (171-204).

Richet was also an inventor who designed and built several machines that advanced medical technology, as well as an airplane that flew only a few weeks after the Wright Brothers’ first flight at Kittyhawk. He also developed one of the first working helicopters and eventually owned a portion of the largest airplane firm in France (Wolf 85-88). He was a leading international peace activist before, during and after World War I. In 1907, he wrote a book titled *Le passé de la guerre et l’avenir de la paix* (*The End of War and the Dawn of Peace*) in which he attempted to thwart pro-war rhetoric by itemizing (and significantly underestimating) the horrific costs of a European war in terms of civilian and military casualties, munitions, and destruction of public and private property (Wolf 117-18). In 1916, in the midst of World War I, he wrote *Les Coupables* (*Those Responsible*) in which he sought to explain the causes of the war and to estimate the costs incurred at that point. Shortly after the war, Richet began to espouse a political position diametrically opposed to the economic theories of Walter Rathenau, in which he argued strongly for the elimination of multi-national weapons industries and cartels—“without arms merchants there is no war” (qtd. in Wolf 126)—and predicted that if the arms build-up continued, “we will have another great war more terrible than this” (qtd. in Wolf 126). These views are evident in Richet’s last piece of anti-war writing, *Pour le paix* (*For Peace*), which he published in 1930. We will discuss the importance of this apparent connection to Rathenau in section 3.

### 2. The Paranormal

Among Richet’s personal friends were William James, Alfred Russell Wallace, Oliver Lodge, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who covers some of Richet’s research into the paranormal in his 1926 book, *The History of Spiritualism*—areas such as hypnotism, clairvoyance, telekinesis, automatic writing, and communication with the dead. However, Richet’s interests in existing relationships between medicine and the occult were much broader. One of the founding members (along with Janet) of the French branch of the Society for Psychic Research (SPR) in 1882, he headed the Paris branch for several years and served as President of the London-based group in 1905.

Richet also helped to found the *Institut Métapsychique International* (*IMI*) in 1919, a public foundation, funded by the government of France, whose explicit objective was to conduct in-depth investigations of claims of the paranormal in spiritualist, mesmeric, or other contexts. Among its first Board members were some folks with wonderful Pynchonesque names—the Italian Minister of Health Rocco Santoliquido (president), Richet (honorary president), Albert Baron von Schrenk-Notzing, astronomer Camille Flammarion, and the
physician Gustave Geley (director). The IMI can be seen as an actual historical version of the fictionalized “White Visitation” that appears in Gravity’s Rainbow. During its early history, as a publicly-funded interdisciplinary institute whose goal was to explore and to explain the paranormal, it sought to integrate such phenomena into the larger scientific community, and eventually to develop practical uses for such phenomena. By 1931, the IMI had tried to dominate the international psychic community, in effect, to corner the market on the paranormal.5

When constructing the allusive infrastructure of The White Visitation in Parts I and II of Gravity’s Rainbow, Pynchon provides an extensive study of the history of the paranormal in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. The text is peppered with references to individuals such as Pierre Janet (49, 87-88, 142), Madame Blavatsky (269), M. K. Petrova (49), Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin (675), and to various groups: “Coueists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, Dale Carnegie zealots” (89), ARF (Abreaction Research Facility) (75), the SPR (Society for Psychical Research) (153, 633), and so on.6 In short, Pynchon provides a thorough and seemingly encyclopedic survey of people and organizations involved in psychic research (often thinly disguised as scientific and/or medical research) in the period before and during World War II. Given the encyclopedic nature of the text, the names of significant people and/or organizations in the field that Pynchon does not mention may be regarded as significant. In this case, while the names Charles Richet and Institut Métapsychique International are both missing, the interests and work they represent certainly are not.

Richet founded several journals related to spiritism, including the Annals of Psychical Science and the Revue Métaphysique, and he wrote two books and dozens of articles on psychic research (Wolf 58-59). His two most significant works on these topics are Thirty Years of Psychic Research (1923) and The Natural History of a Savant (1927). In Thirty Years of Psychic Research, Richet argued that the grand hope of humanity lies in psychical research, with the ultimate goal of contacting and learning from the dead (210-13). This rather radical statement from a lifelong pragmatist and physician may seem out of character, but it reflects the growing confidence Richet had about some sort of existence on “the other side.” For Richet, the question was not whether spirits existed after death, but to what extent the human personality survived intact after death. Richet noted, “although in the immense majority of [my] spiritist experiences, it is impossible to admit [the] survival of the personality, there are undoubtedly some very puzzling cases that make one admit the survival of human personality” (210). In Gravity’s Rainbow, Pynchon explores similar interests, not only in the sections that relate directly to the White Visitation, but also to larger questions about what happens after death to people in general and to Tyrone Slothrop in particular.

Richet also wrote novels, plays, a musical and some children’s fairy tales,
many under the pseudonym Charles Epheyre. Two of these, *Soeur Marthe* (Sister Martha) and *Possession*, are novelized versions of his experiences with various psychic mediums, some of whom exhibited split-personality syndrome. *Soeur Marthe*, emanating from a female consciousness, is what we might call a feminized version of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, one that critic Ian Hacking describes as “a split-personality novel whose characters are far truer to the clinical practice of the day than any Jekyll and Hyde” (437).

Richet participated in some séances with a number of mediums, most of whom were women. The by-invitation-only séances were great social occasions much like that described in *Gravity's Rainbow* (29-30)—dazzlingly dressed members of the social elite attended and were fed expensive wine and elaborate food while special magnesium lights and photographic equipment were set up to record the events. In one such picture, for example, Richet and Baron von Schrenk-Notzing hold hands with a medium known as Eva C. (the woman known as Sœur Marthe in his novel) while an ectoplasmic form of an emerging spirit begins to take shape on her shoulder and lap. In another plate, ectoplasm begins to solidify into the form of an entity known as Katie King (aka Katje Koenig) over the slumped form of medium Florence Cook.

Richet coined the word “ectoplasm” to refer to the white gaseous or plasma-like substance that occasionally emanated from the bodies of mediums during séances and signalled both the presence of spirits and their willingness to communicate (Crowley 1-3). Such “white visitations”—the formation of ectoplasm on the bodies of the mediums—can be seen in many of the photographs of the séances at <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/photographs.htm>. Pynchon’s familiarity with both the term “ectoplasm” and its etymology can be seen in the two uses of the word in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In the first, while considering the fate of Slothrop, Pointsman muses, “There’s something there, too transparent and swift to get a hold on—Psi Section might speak of ectoplasms—but he knows that the time has never been better, and that the exact experimental subject is in his hands” (144). Here, the direct comparison is between ectoplasm and Slothrop. Rather than seeing Slothrop as a type of ectoplasm or metaphoric apparition of something from another realm, Pointsman regards him as the literal manifestation of “the exact experimental subject,” who can give him insight into the unknown. The second reference occurs when Greta Erdmann tells Slothrop about her first experience with Imipolex-G:

> Through the windows of the board room, I saw them at a round conference table, with something in the center. “What is it?” I asked, vamping Drohne. He took me out of earshot of the others. “I think it’s for the F-Gerät,” he whispered.
> “F?” sez Slothrop, “F-Gerät, you sure of that?”
> “Some letter.”
> “S?”
“All right, S. They are like children at the threshold of language with these words they make up. It looked to me like an ectoplasm—something they had forced, by their joint will, to materialize on the table. No one’s lips were moving. It was a séance.” (487)

Here, the comparison is made between ectoplasm and Imipolex-G, and the industrial process of producing the polymer is compared to a séance. By some sort of narrative transitive property, the conclusion from the two analogies—Slothrop is to ectoplasm, and ectoplasm is to Imipolex-G—is that Slothrop is analogous to Imipolex-G. In both cases, the word “ectoplasm” retains some of its original meaning, but it also becomes a metaphor for a mysterious and inexplicable entity or substance that acts as an interface between the worlds occupied by Slothrop and Imipolex-G.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, of course, Carroll Eventyr is the medium at the White Visitation, and his control is Peter Sachsa. If we regard the name Carroll Eventyr as a veiled echo of Charles Epheyre, the pen name of Charles Richet, a number of connections begin to take shape. The name Eventyr, as several critics have noted, means fairytale in Danish. As mentioned above, Richet wrote children’s fairytales, but the name could also be a verbal pun (and a very bad one at that) on his role as a medium. Another way to phrase Richet’s question—to what extent does human personality survive after death?—is to ask where does the spirit go after the body dies? The response, one could say (with your best Billy Crystal Miracle Max accent), “‘e vent here. No, no, ‘e vent over here.” On a bit more serious level, Pynchon takes the connection several steps further. While Peter Sachsa is the control and Carroll Eventyr the medium at the White Visitation, during an earlier séance in Germany in 1930 (the same year Richet wrote *For Peace* (his anti-Rathenau treatise against multi-national weapons firms), Peter Sachsa was the medium and Walter Rathenau was the control. During the séance, Rathenau, through Sachsa, comments,

Tyrian purple, alizarin and indigo, other coal tar dyes are here, but the important one is mauve. William Perkin discovered it in England, but he was trained by Hofmann, who was trained by Liebig. There is a succession involved. If it is karmic, it’s only in a very limited sense . . . another Englishman, Herbert Ganister, and the generation of chemists he trained. . . . Then the discovery of Oneirine. Ask your man Wimpe. He is the expert on cyclized benzylisoquinilines. Look into the chemical effects of the drug. I don’t know. It seems that you might look in that direction. (166).

A bit further, “Rathenau” says “Consider coal and steel. There is a place where they meet. The interface between coal and steel is coal tar” (166). Here, coal tar acts as a type of black semi-liquid, plasma-like interface between coal and steel similar to the way ectoplasm represents a white plasma-like interface
between life and death. Interestingly, Rathenau’s comments here reproduce and recall not only features of Richet’s conception of ectoplasm and his arguments against Rathenau and international cartels in his 1930 antiwar writings, but as we shall see, they also allude to several important elements in Richet’s work on anaphylaxis.

3. Anaphylaxis

Richet’s work on anaphylaxis and anaphylactic shock followed the work of Pavlov and involved testing the reactions of dogs to toxins derived from the tentacles of a particularly nasty jellyfish known as Portuguese-Men-of-War (*physalia physalis*). He also worked with squid, octopi, and sea anemone toxins while sailing around the Mediterranean on board the research vessels *Princesse Alice* and *Hirondelle II*, sponsored by the Prince of Monaco Albert I, out of their home port of Monte Carlo (Rojido 364-67). The aim of Richet and his colleagues on board the *Princesse Alice* and the *Hirondelle II* was to study Portuguese-men-of-war in order to develop a protective serum for bathers and divers (Rojido 364). His procedure was rather simple: he gave measured, non-lethal doses of Physalia toxin to a group of dogs. Several days after the first dose, he gave a second (supposedly non-lethal) dose to each of the dogs. One of the dogs died within twenty-five minutes of receiving the second dose, another died two hours later, and several of the others exhibited symptoms much more severe than the first dose. In subsequent trials, Richet reduced the amount of toxin in the injections, and rather than building up an immunity to it (which is called prophylaxis or tolerance), the dogs continued to respond more quickly and more severely to the toxin (Rojido 367). The results were exactly the opposite of Richet’s working hypothesis.

In subsequent trials, Richet defined anaphylaxis as “the ability of a venom to diminish immunity instead of reinforcing it” (Rojido 366) and he found that “once anaphylaxis had been induced, it persisted for several weeks or longer” (Rojido 366). In other words, the time (or delta t) between stimulus and response, between cause and effect diminishes with each subsequent dose, but the reaction is more severe, even when the dosage is significantly reduced. The theoretical end of this continuum is, of course, beyond the zero, one in which no dose—or simply the idea of a dose—will produce instant death. We need to keep in mind that while the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the greatest period in history for the development of preventative inoculations and vaccinations (smallpox, diphtheria, tetanus, etc.) Richet’s work—conducted in 1901 and perhaps signaling a sea-change between nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific approaches—went counter to all these other studies (Rojido 365).

Researchers since Richet have combined Pavlovian operant conditioning and allergic reactions to certain substances to produce what is known as
“conditioned anaphylaxis.” In one study conducted in the early 1990s, rats were injected with egg albumin combined with exposure to audiovisual cues. Once the rats were “sensitized,” they were conditioned to exhibit anaphylactic responses to the extent that the audiovisual cues were enough to cause the rats to exhibit anaphylaxis from the egg albumin (Crowe et al. 617-18). Moreover, conditioned anaphylaxis raises a number of questions about behavioral manipulation of the rats. In this case, the audiovisual cues cause the rats to crave egg albumin, even though they realize that it will make them ill or kill them. The conditioning reaches the point that the rats can synthesize the anaphylactic effects of the egg albumin simply through the audiovisual cues (Crowe et al. 622-23). It is not difficult to see, from this instance, that Richet’s dogs, like Tyrone Slothrop, would soon approach the theoretical Zero and then perhaps go beyond, either to anticipate a sting or to react to an imagined sting—or even to react to the smell, sight, sound, or mention of a toxic or allergenic substance—one such as Imipolex G. It appears possible, using conditioned anaphylaxis, to produce at type of ultraparadoxical phase in anaphylaxis—to change a toxic allergy into an obsessive fetish.

One way to make this case is to trace the etiology, development and effects of the substance that is the most common and widespread cause of anaphylaxis and anaphylactic shock—latex. References to latex-based or synthetic latex-based products are ubiquitous in Gravity's Rainbow, from everyday items such as bananas to condoms to automobile tires to movie film to Oneirine to Imipolex-G. One look at the contents of Slothrop's desk bears this out—among the layers of bureaucratic magma are rubber pencil erasers, library paste, envelope adhesive, rubber bands, boxes of gummed paper stars, shoe polish, and so on (18). Latex is an aromatic heterocyclic butadiene polymer (like Oneirine and Imipolex G, and just a bit different from the cyclized benzylisoquinilines that Walter Rathenau mentions at the séance) that was developed from the sap of rubber trees in the nineteenth century. Synthetic latex, developed at DuPont jointly by Wallace Carrothers (as Pynchon notes in GR: 249, 348) and scientists from IG Farben in the 1930s, was derived from nitrated cloth, or guncotton, another butadiene polymer and the basic explosive of the nineteenth century. Gun cotton (a useful by-product of the gunpowder made at the Dupont plant in Delaware) is derived from hemp, which contains a number of butadiene polymers. In Gravity's Rainbow, if we work forward in his meta-fictionalized history, hemp leads to gunpowder, then to latex, then to synthetic latex, then to rayon, nylon, Oneirine then ultimately to Impolex G. Interestingly, the companies that developed these synthetics after 1930—Dupont, IG Farben, and so on—are the same companies that developed the synthetic dyes that Walter Rathenau mentions during the séance in 1930. Oneirine is one of Pynchon's most interesting psychopharmaceutical products, one whose hallucinogenic effects, as Tchicherine tells us, include “radical-though-plausible-violations-of-reality” that reliably indicate unreality (703).
While several of Slothrop’s many fantasies and dreams fall under this category (251, 255-56, 266, 293) we should also keep in mind, as the narrator tells us in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, that early research on Imipolex G was done at DuPont labs (249).

4. Conclusion

While critics have often focused on Pavlov’s Book and the three Pavlovian stages in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it may be more appropriate to discuss Slothrop’s “condition” within a context formed by a combination of Pavlov’s research on conditional responses and Richet’s findings from his study of anaphylaxis. While Pavlov’s nineteenth-century approach stresses cause and effect, Richet’s twentieth-century experiments are more relativistic in that they unsettle and in some cases reverse traditional ideas of cause and effect. Richet was a contemporary and colleague of Pierre Janet, who makes a referential cameo appearance in *Gravity’s Rainbow* during Roger Mexico’s debate with Pointsman about cause and effect and the efficacy of Pavlovian experimentation. Pointsman says,

> Pierre Janet—sometimes the man talked like an Oriental mystic. He had no real grasp of the opposites. “The act of injuring and the act of being injured are joined in the behavior of the whole injury.” Speaker and spoken-of, master and slave, virgin and seducer, each pair most conveniently coupled and inseparable—the last refuge of the incorrigibly lazy, Mexico, is just this sort of yang-yin rubbish. One avoids all sorts of unpleasant work that way, but what has one said? (88)

Although Pointsman’s remarks are made about Janet, they could just as well have been made with reference to Richet—scientist, mystic, and one who *always* challenged relations between cause and effect.

To conclude, then, as these many points suggest, the various parallels between the life and work of Richet and the narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow* cannot simply be regarded as mere coincidence. Instead, they help to connect a number of seemingly unrelated aspects and events in Pynchon’s text that can roughly be collectivized under the rubric of Medicine and the Paranormal.

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Notes

1 All citations from *Gravity’s Rainbow* are from the 1995 Penguin edition.
2 Because of his diverse interests and abilities, bits and pieces of biographical information about Richet can be found in a number of texts. Stewart Wolf has written
the most informative, book-length study of Richet's life to date.

3 A close personal and professional friend, Oliver Lodge wrote an obituary for Richet in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychic Research* journal in 1936. Pynchon’s familiarity with Lodge’s work on aether theory and the paranormal can be seen in references to Lodge in *Against the Day* (58).

4 For more about the Society for Psychical Research and about the activities of Richet in the organization, see the London SPR website at <http://www.spr.ac.uk/>.

5 For the early history of the IMI, see Lachapelle. The IMI still exists, and for a more comprehensive account of the history and activities of the IMI, including a list of past officers, see the Institute’s website at <http://www.metapsychique.org/>

6 We have intentionally left Ivan Pavlov off this list because of his position as one of Richet’s immediate precursors and because of his approach to psychic studies and rational empiricism in his work on medicine generally, and on conditional response specifically. We will discuss both of these in section 3.

7 Some of Richet’s writings are rather difficult to find in the United States. The only copy of *Soeur Marthe* we have located in the US is in the New York Public Library, a place that Pynchon has reportedly used rather extensively for research.

8 The photographing of such séances was quite common. Many of the photographs have been preserved and are widely available, particularly on the website <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/photographs.htm>

9 Simon Garfield (35-60) notes that mauve dye was discovered by accident, when Perkins was trying to synthesize quinine from a mixture of water and naphthylamine, a substance derived from coal tar (as Pynchon indicates). It was the first dye to be synthesized from a non-vegetable or animal origin, and marked a turning point in the history of the commercialization of chemistry.

10 Rojido goes into some detail explaining the work of Richet, Portier, and Prince Albert I, but perhaps a more interesting detail with regard to *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be found in L. F. Haas’s brief article on neurological stamps in the *Journal of Neurological Psychiatry*. Albert I was a renowned stamp collector and in 1950, his grandson, Rainier III, created what is now one of the world’s great stamp museums in Monaco. Haas has reproduced an image of a stamp printed in Monaco in 1951 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Richet’s work in the Mediterranean on anaphylaxis with Portier and Albert I. The right side of the stamp includes profiles of Richet, Portier, and Albert I, as well as one of the research vessels, and, in the background, a landscape of Monte Carlo, and a building that may be the International Hydrographic Organization, the Monte Carlo Congress Centre, or the Casino. The left side of the stamp, of course, is dominated by an oversized, large purple rendering of a Portuguese Man-of-War, one that at first glance may even appear to some as a giant octopus.

11 Ohad Parnes notes that Richet actually arrived at anaphylaxis while attempting to establish a new notion of a “reflex,” which he had conceived as a bodily defense mechanism with a neurological underpinning (218).

12 For more on latex-based anaphylaxis, see the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety & Health Administration website <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/
latexallergy/> or the British Health Service website <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~aair/latex.htm>. The problem with connections between latex allergy and *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one of historical sequence, since most sources report that a formal diagnosis of anaphylaxis as a result of latex allergy did not enter the medical lexicon until the mid-to-late 1970’s, although reactions had been noted since latex first began to be used in the nineteenth century (<http://www.aafp.org/afp/980101ap/reddy.html>). Thus, any official diagnosis of latex allergy or anaphylaxis resulting from latex products would not have appeared in the medical literature until at least a few years after *Gravity’s Rainbow* was published. The many and varied allusions to connections between anaphylaxis and allergic responses as they relate to natural and synthetic latex-based products such as rubber and Imipolex-G in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, suggest that Pynchon may have had some knowledge of their interrelationships, perhaps from his days working with insulation materials at Boeing.

13 For more on the history of latex, see <http://www.immune.com/rubber/nr1.html>. The historical product line that I outline—from hemp to gunpowder to synthetic latex polymers—can be traced on the Dupont Company website <http://heritage.dupont.com/>.

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In 1967, in an article entitled, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” the novelist and critic John Barth suggested that the novel as traditionally conceived was facing a serious crisis. In his analysis of the state of contemporary fiction he noted an increased tendency and need on the part of many “serious” writers to engage in a kind of fiction that took writing as its subject. Barth saw this increasingly self-reflexive fiction as a tacit admission that traditional forms of narration were becoming outmoded and were perhaps on the verge of becoming obsolete. Citing Borges and Beckett as writers who had successfully responded to the literary legacies left by Eliot and Joyce, Barth’s essay effectively laid down a challenge to contemporary writers to find new ways of renewing the novelistic genre. Six years after Barth’s influential article, Thomas Pynchon published *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which, in its hugely complex encyclopedic nature, suggested not only that the novel as a form was alive and well, but equally that, in Pynchon, a highly original writer capable of creating new spaces and modes of narration had emerged. In the nearly four decades since its publication, *Gravity’s Rainbow* has consistently frustrated attempts by critics to provide totalized interpretations. The novel has fallen under the rubric of the postmodern and has come to be considered as an open text *par excellence*, a work whose magnitude and scope resists both traditional hermeneutic and poststructuralist modes of interpretation.

Here I argue that certain sections of the novel represent closed systems, with implicit rules and codes that are intended by the author to limit the number of possible interpretations of his work. In addition, I will suggest that one of the key practices underlying Pynchon’s poetics is the kind of literary symbiosis that modernists such as Joyce and Eliot advocated, that key building blocks of Pynchon’s text can best be described as modernist. Such sections do not limit, but extend and adapt, to invest his work with the kind of originality for which Barth had called.

Although the underlying theoretical approach is comparative and semiotic in nature, it is the act of reading and the role of the reader in producing the text that are my focus here. In particular I will be emphasizing the importance in recognizing the self-reflexive nature of Pynchon’s text, how
in a similar vein to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* may be a text as much concerned with its own form and structure as its content. Here I am referring in particular to the various instances in which an unidentified narrator, who displays a level of omniscience concomitant with that of the author, seems to directly address the reader and offer instructions to his audience. The consistency and frequency of these authorial intrusions suggest that the narrative is intended to operate and communicate on more than one level and that Pynchon had two different types of implied reader in mind when writing and constructing his narrative.

Umberto Eco’s notion of first- and second-level readers provides a useful framework, which will help contextualize the following reading. In his essay “Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading,” Eco notes that one of the common stylistic features of postmodernist writers is *doublecoding*, which he identifies, quoting the architect Charles Jencks, as a text which “speaks on at least two levels at once,” addressing “simultaneously a minority, elite public, using ‘high’ codes, and a mass public using popular codes” (214). He then explores the kinds of reactions that readers tend to have when confronted with *doublecoding* and, with the exception of someone who objects outright to mixing cultured and popular styles, he identifies two kinds of reader who seem to fit the profile of the typical reader and critic. The first kind of reader, who is oblivious to the significance of intertextual references and quotations, perceives “the entire text as a pleasant invitation and does not in the end realise the extent to which it draws on elite styles (so he enjoys the work but misses its references).” In the second example, the reader “feels at home precisely because he enjoys this process of alternating between difficulty and approachability, challenge and encouragement” (218). The latter reader is able to pick up on the nuances of intertextual irony and is thus able to establish a privileged relationship with the multilayered text.

For the purpose of my own argument, I consider as first-level readers, those who follow and read the story or primary narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow* without noticing or choosing to address and respond to possible self-reflexive or inward turns in the text. For these readers, the primary narrative is in effect an historical fiction, a surreal and atmospheric story of some three hundred mostly fictional characters set in the final months of World War II and its immediate aftermath. The overriding metaphor which dominates this complex surface narrative is the V-2 Rocket, an extremely powerful symbol, thanks to the Cold War and the nuclear age. When one considers the sheer magnitude and scope of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and especially Pynchon’s anatomical treatment of the V-2 rocket, it is easy to imagine why first-level readers might miss or choose to ignore, various signposts in the text indicating an inward self-reflexive turn in the narrative.

My nominal second-level readers are those whose first-level enjoyment of the story is interrupted when they are made aware that a subtle linguistic
event may have occurred, one that does not seem to have a bearing on the primary narrative. More often than not, this realization is occasioned by the sensation that the tone or register of the narrator seems to have shifted, and that another layer of discourse interrupts momentarily the primary narrative. While continuing to read the text, their awareness of the possibility of doublecoding, authorial intrusion and other self-reflexive practices is heightened.

One of the most important self-reflexive turns in the novel occurs in episode 10 of “Beyond the Zero,” in which Tyrone Slothrop, the novel’s principal character undertakes a bizarre metaphysical journey into a toilet world. Slothrop has agreed to report for duty as a test subject at a fictional London hospital called St Veronica’s, so that a shady scientific outfit called PISCES can investigate his peculiar relationship to V-2 rockets—the locations of Slothrop’s purported sexual conquests appear to coincide with the sites of subsequent V-2 rocket strikes. This episode represents one of the few cyclical narratives in the novel, which, at least structurally, has the appearance of being a unified self-sufficient whole and foregrounds three of the key binary oppositions in Gravity’s Rainbow, black and white, North and South, and the word and shit (Weisenburger 43). The possible symbolic relationship between the word (information) and shit is an important element in my reading, which will be highlighted later.

1. Slothrop’s Descent into the Toilet World

The episode begins with an exchange of letters between Slothrop and one of the most mysterious and enigmatic of Pynchon’s fictional creations, the Kenosha Kid, who appears at the beginning and close of the episode. Weisenburger has called the Kenosha Kid “one of the outstanding enigmas of Gravity’s Rainbow” (43) and as yet there is no critical consensus regarding the identity or genesis of this character. Recently huge interest was generated by the discovery of a Western novelette by Forbes Parkhill entitled “The Kenosha Kid” (1931). While Parkhill’s novelette may well have inspired the name for Pynchon’s Kenosha Kid; there do not seem to be any further significant parallels that can be drawn between the two texts. Later, I will consider whether the fact that Orson Welles’s birthplace was Kenosha, Wisconsin is purely coincidental, and I will also argue that the Kenosha Kid may in fact represent Pynchon himself. For now, the importance of the Kenosha kid lies in that he both opens and closes the episode, indicating a circular pattern to the narrative. Read with this in mind, the main body of the episode can effectively be broken into three identifiable parts, two distinct and substantial sections which are connected by a bridge.

The first section takes the form of an imagined drug-induced historical analepsis set in Boston in 1939 in the men’s room of the Roseland Ballroom,
where “Red,” a young Malcolm X, is working as a shoe-shine boy. After a booze-filled night of excess, Slothrop finds himself perched on the rim of a toilet bowl, while downstairs white Ivy League students dance to the sounds of “Cherokee.” Music is extremely important throughout the episode and this section is dominated by the figure of Charlie Parker and his rendition of the classic jazz standard “Cherokee,” entitled “Koko.” Interestingly, Pynchon quotes almost verbatim a large section of an interview Parker gave in *Down Beat* magazine, describing how he developed his original style (Westerath 112). The key moment is, however, when Slothrop’s harmonica, “which he packs everywhere he goes” (63) falls into the toilet: “With no warning, as tears stream out his eyes, PLOP goes the harp into the, aagghh, the loathsome toilet!” (63).

The notion of personal loss as a catalyst for engaging in harpy metaphysical journeys is a familiar trope. Obvious literary precursors in this regard are Dante Alighieri and Virgil who provide their own reworked versions of Orpheus’s visit to the Greek underworld. In consistently referring to Slothrop’s harmonica in terms of a harp, Pynchon seems to cast Slothrop’s descent in Orphic terms. It is also worth noting the harp’s symbolic importance, both in poetry and music, as a symbol of artistic creativity. In particular, the Aeolian harp is a recurring trope in much Classical and Romantic poetry and, as will be argued later, this may signal that the author intends the ensuing events to be read not just in a literal sense, but figuratively. Indeed a literal interpretation of the events subsequent to Slothrop’s plunge into the toilet world, is undoubtedly limiting as Pynchon’s highly amusing and dynamic prose insists that we enter realms of further possibility.

Having escaped the clutching hands of Malcolm X and his accomplices, whom Slothrop imagined clutching at his ankles, a transitional bridge section begins. The fictional cosmos which Slothrop now moves through is full of signs and symbols, suggestive clues introducing epistemological concerns, central to the developing narrative.

A-and there’s *still* no sign of his lost harp. The light down here is dark gray and rather faint. For some time he has been aware of shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this ceramic (or by now, iron) tunnel he’s in; shit nothing can flush away, mixed with hardwater minerals into a deliberate brown barnacling of his route, patterns thick with meaning, Burma-Shave signs of the toiletworld, icky and sticky, cryptic and glyptic, these shapes loom and pass smoothly as he continues on down the long cloudy waste line, the sounds of “Cherokee” still pulsing very dimly above, playing him to the sea. (65)

As Slothrop descends further he begins to adapt to his environment, and once “shit-sensitized” (65) he is even able to read. Throughout this transitional section, the reader is informed that much of what Slothrop sees in this world is familiar, but Slothrop is unable, or to be more precise, is not allowed by the
author to recognize, the “patterns” which are “thick with meaning” and the “icky and sticky, cryptic and glyptic” clues (65). Indeed, the only signs that he seems to recognize are those of Harvard acquaintances, amongst whom is a young JFK. Before his reminiscences can be completed, however, he hears a “godawful surge” approaching and is engulfed by a “jam-packed wavefront” of all sorts of detritus, a “mind-boggling mosaic . . . seems he's been tumbling ass over teakettle—though there's no way to tell in this murky shitstorm, no visual references . . . from time to time he will brush against shrubbery, or perhaps small feathery trees. It occurs to him he hasn't felt the touch of a hard wall since he started to tumble, if that indeed is what he is doing” (66). Slothrop is disoriented and as he gathers himself together, a new world with its own distinct topography gradually begins to materialize and take shape. Since his unceremonious exit from the Roseland Ballroom, Slothrop had been in free fall, in a literal sense, progressing down a network of iron sewage pipes. Now he has hit rock-bottom and as he finds his bearings in these waste regions, he is surprised to find “contacts” living here, within shells of “fine-packed masonry ruins” (66). The underworld which he now finds himself in is exceptionally well ordered, and he sees people he knows but can't quite identify sitting “about the worn flagstones” transacting, “something vaguely religious” (66). The following reading will suggest that the image of familiar figures sitting around “flagstones” may represent the first discrete sign in the text that the reader should examine the text closely during the act of reading so as to identify these figures. While this can only be noted retrospectively, the idea that the toilet world Slothrop experiences may be more familiar than seems at first sight, is subtly planted in the reader's mind.

After defining and delineating the contours of this new world, the final and most crucial section of this episode begins. The crux of this article will focus on a close reading of the initial paragraph: (1) when Crutchfield is first introduced (67-68); (2) the parody of the western standard “Red River Valley” which immediately follows; and (3) the next short paragraph which begins, “Oh, it's the Red River all right, if you don't believe it just ask that 'Red,' wherever he may be,” etc. In effect, I will argue that Crutchfield may have a distinct second-order identity, linked to the actor Henry Fonda. This suggests a significant artistic and creative debt on the part of Pynchon to Sergio Leone's Once Upon A Time in the West, and to a lesser extent to John Ford’s 1940 adaptation of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. Rather than simply imposing a Leonian or Fordian model on the text, this reading of Pynchon's narrative takes its cue from the text itself and comes from my identification of the following passage as a possible authorial intrusion in which the reader is addressed directly:

Now don’t you remember Red Malcolm up there,
That kid with the Red Devil Lye in his hair . . . (67)
Here now is Crutchfield or Crouchfield, the westwardman. “Not archetypical” westwardman, but the only. Understand, there was only one. There was only one Indian who ever fought him. Only one fight, one victory, one loss. And only one president, and one assassin, and one election. True. One of each of everything. You had thought of solipsism, and imagined the structure to be populated—on your level—by only, terribly, one. No count on any other levels. But it proves to be not quite that lonely. Sparse, yes, but a good deal better than solitary. One of each of everything’s not so bad. Half an Ark’s better than none. (67-68)

The first couplet of the above passage signals a break in the narrative and contains a momentary reminder of Slothrop’s earlier experiences in the Roseland Ballroom and his lucky escape from the grasping clutches of the young Malcolm X. The previous paragraph saw the end of Slothrop’s descent, the bridge that links the Boston and Crutchfield sections. Now as Slothrop’s new environment takes on a concrete form for the first time and before Crutchfield is introduced, there seems to be a subtle shift in tone and register. A direction is given not to “remember Red Malcolm” which can be interpreted as signaling a break with the preceding narrative. Just who exactly is issuing this direction and to whom is it addressed? It is certainly not Slothrop talking to himself and it is extremely unlikely, although possible, that the advice comes from the scientists organizing the experiment in St. Veronica’s. The didactic tone which predominates in the first part of the next paragraph, suggests that here, the reader is being addressed.

This is the critical moment when the paths of first-level and second-level readers may diverge. The first-level reader who is either too engrossed in the plot or doesn’t consider the possible shift in tone and register worthy of consideration, will continue reading without interruption. Second-level readers will, however, be stopped in their tracks. If this is a direct command who is it directed at? Who does the word, “Understand,” attempt to contact? Furthermore, if the reader is being addressed by the author, what is he or she to make of the declaration quoted above: “You had thought of solipsism, and imagined the structure to be populated—on your level—by only, terribly, one. No count on any other levels. But it proves to be not quite that lonely. Sparse yes but one of each of everything’s not so bad. Half an Ark’s better than none”? If the reader is indeed being addressed, the direct commands and advice given in the second person can be perceived as advocating a possible code, which could prove useful in interpreting the Crutchfield episode. This would suggest not just an attempt on the part of Pynchon to control the possible number of interpretations of his text, but a self-conscious, self-reflexive impulse to draw attention to his own craft. The second-level reader thus proceeds with the primary narrative, but now with one eye open to possibilities that might tell him something about the story of the making of the story.
In his *Companion to Gravity’s Rainbow* Weisenburger provides explanations of Spanish terms, cowboy slang and geographical landmarks referred to in the text, which indicate that the world at the bottom of the toilet that Slothrop experiences is some kind of direct albeit bizarre transposition of the American South West. Other critics, such as Moore and Cowart, have concentrated on the cinematic nature of the passage, but while they note the potential influence of western movies in the text, crucially they do not investigate the section where Crutchfield is first introduced. Luc Herman provides the most comprehensive and detailed study of the Crutchfield section in an important article that considers the novel in terms of parody. For Herman, the target of parody is the western itself, and therefore he concentrates on the scene’s generic western qualities, although he also recognizes the interactive and metafictional dimension of the text. While he stops short of identifying the section discussed above, “Here now is Crutchfield” to “Understand, there was only one,” as a specific code, he does note the readers’ role in using their generic knowledge in making sense of the scene and how “at the very moment the reader is summoned to activate his generic knowledge, the author is playing around with it” (215). Pynchon may not be simply playing with his implied audience’s interpretive skills, but as I will argue, he may well be consciously testing those abilities.

While Herman’s detailed parodic reading of the comic and surreal latter stages of the episode seems appropriate (69-71), in the initial stages when Crutchfield is first introduced, Pynchon may be resorting to pastiche rather than parody. The refunctioning of a scene from Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* in Pynchon’s narrative as an extensive allusion may at first seem parodic, yet there is no explicit attempt to produce the kind of comic effect or reaction in the reader which is the usual intention of parody. Indeed, the didactic, measured tone of the narrator before and during Crutchfield’s introduction, as well as his neutral initial presentation, which is devoid of comic elements, points to pastiche rather than parody. When contrasting pastiche and parody, Margaret Rose observes that the principal difference is that the former is usually a “neutral practice,” whereas the latter usually contains some comic or critical charge (72). The author’s engagement in “neutral” pastiche rather than parody, does not, however, signify that the covert grafting of a complex allusion from Leone’s film on to his own text is not loaded with intent. Indeed, my reading suggests that Pynchon’s recourse to Leonian myth is part of a larger metafictional project being undertaken in the episode, in which the author seems to be prompting and testing his reader’s interpretive abilities. The notion that Pynchon might inscribe codes in his text, so that readers can then identify source texts that he uses to construct his own narrative has far-reaching implications. Not only does this suggest the importance of recognizing and responding to potential metafictional digressions in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but it also suggests a self-conscious writer drawing attention to his own craft and artistry.
One of the key reasons that the metafictional dimension of Pynchon’s text is possibly overlooked or, most often one suspects, only referred to in passing, is that such readings often depend on having a clear idea of who is narrating and to whom the narration is addressed. This is a key interpretive problem facing readers attempting to gain a foothold in Gravity’s Rainbow’s treacherous fictional cosmos, and the few critics who tackle this issue rarely reach consensus. Smetak considers the root of the problem as emanating from Pynchon’s use of indirect free style or speech, what Henry James called “third-person narrative limited,” “a style marked by the use of words denoting mental processes, by use of the features of direct speech, by idiosyncratic idioms and exclamation marks, and by a sense of heightened subjectivity” (94). This third-person narrative limited style tends to omit quotation marks and exclamation marks and is thus very difficult to recognize, as phrases such as “he said” and “he thought” as well as qualifiers such as that and you are often absent. These important omissions make the reader’s task similar to that faced by Slothrop, as he fumbles about for visual references and information in the Toilet world.

My hypothesis is that some of the confusion regarding just who is talking in specific instances in Gravity’s Rainbow may not be simply a result of the author’s use of indirect free style, but may be also due to Pynchon’s willingness to engage in authorial intrusions. By entering his own text and addressing his readers directly, Pynchon temporarily eliminates the traditional boundaries between the author and his text, and consequently shifts the focus of the text from the characters and plot, to the relationship between the implied author and his readers. Instances of possible authorial intrusion, such as that considered here are never clearly signposted and may, to some degree, be masked by Pynchon’s use of indirect free style.

What these difficulties make clear is that regardless of external contexts or theoretical methodologies, the basis of any real attempt to come to terms with Gravity’s Rainbow must begin with the text itself. The only way to gain a foothold in this most complex of postmodern textscapes is through the act of reading and paying attention at all times to the tone and context of the narrative voice. The idea that Pynchon may be engaging in an authorial intrusion provides the catalyst for the following second-level reading of the Crutchfield section, which traces Western myth and film in the episode. I shall then address how Pynchon’s mythmaking strategy underpins his writing.

2. Pynchon’s Spaghetti Western
and Sergio Leone’s Once Upon A Time in the West

Since there are many studies detailing allusions to films in Gravity’s Rainbow, it seems strange that no critics have looked at this section in terms of the films of Sergio Leone, especially as Pynchon’s western scenario brims with violence, double dealing, sexual ambivalence, and betrayal. One of the standard tropes...
of Leone's Spaghetti Westerns is that the entire plot tends to move inexorably towards an inevitable ritualized Mexican standoff. The reader will not witness Crutchfield’s shootout with Toro Rojo, as the effects of the sodium amytal will have worn off Slothrop before their duel can take place. But the text signals this stereotypical denouement is inevitable:

> What the white man does not have to utter, however casually, is anything like “Toro Rojo's gonna be riding in tonight.” Both pardners know about that. The wind bringing them down that raw Injun smell, ought to be enough for anybody. Oh God it's gonna be a shootout and bloody as hell. (69)

As already mentioned, the Western that may have the most important bearing on the Crutchfield section is Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, released in 1968 and starring Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson. The most obvious sign in Pynchon's text which suggests that he may be drawing for inspiration from Leone's film stems from the following sentence: “There is somebody playing a mouthharp behind an outbuilding—some musical glutton, mouth sucking giant five-note chords behind the tune of Red River Valley” (68).

Among the most distinctive features of Leone's Westerns are the musical scores provided by Ennio Morricone, which in many ways are integral to the conception of the movies themselves. *Once Upon a Time in the West* stands out in this regard as Leone played Morricone's soundtrack on the set of the film during the shoot. Afterwards the actors' dialogue was recorded and Morricone's music was then superimposed, with varying degrees of volume, over the dialogue. For Bronson's character, this overdubbing is exaggerated so that when he is portrayed playing the harmonica, the accompanying soundtrack is always unrealistic and hyperbolic. In many respects, Leone's use of the harmonica is not unlike Pynchon's description of a “musical glutton” (68). Although the theme that dominates the movie contains only three chords, it arrives always in bursts of five notes, which suggests that it conforms very closely to Pynchon's description of “mouth-sucking giant five-note chords” (68).

Although Bronson took lessons in how to hold and play a harmonica from the actual musician heard on the soundtrack, Leone purposely overdubbed the movie so as to imbue the film, which is fastidious in its attention to historical detail, with a sense of unreality and the mythic. This juxtaposition of historical accuracy and over-the-top Romantic mythologizing of the American West contributes to the underlying poetics of the entire enterprise. Unusually, and in a radical departure from typical Hollywood westerns, the title of the movie was the conceptual beginning of the creative enterprise. Leone's clear intention was to use and adapt some of the conventions, devices and settings of the traditional American Hollywood Western in such a way as to provoke a strong reaction from his audiences. From the first, before a line of
the script was written, the objective was to juxtapose the contrasting worlds of fable and history (Frayling, 251). The many references to classic Westerns, particularly those of John Ford, were explicit and meant to be recognized by fans of the genre. In the spirit of Joyce and Eliot, Leone’s art, as he describes it, was unashamedly indebted to his precursors:

We wanted that feeling throughout of a kaleidoscopic view of all American Westerns put together. But you must be careful of making it sound like citations for citations’ sake. It wasn’t done in that spirit at all. The references aren’t calculated in a programmed kind of way, they are there to give the feeling of all that background of the American Western to help tell this particular fairy tale. They are part of my attempt to take historical reality—the new, unpitying era of the economic boom—and blend it together with the fable. (qtd. in Frayling, 256)

Leone had hired Bernardo Bertolucci and film critic Dario Argento to help write the treatment for the film, and the three spent several months in Leone’s home in Rome, studying classic westerns and selecting themes, places and images and dialogue which is conflated in Leone’s epic depiction of the West. As a result, Once Upon a Time in the West is not merely an elegy of the American West but of the Western genre itself.

The specific clip from Leone’s film that seems to have the most important bearing on the Crutchfield episode is the scene where Henry Fonda, playing a hired gunslinger called Frank, is first presented to the audience. Provocation was one of the key elements of the poetics underlying Once Upon a Time in the West. Leone’s use of Fonda, completely against type, results in one of the most memorable moments in the American Western canon. Previously Fonda had played heroic noble characters including Wyatt Earp and the young Abraham Lincoln. In an exceptionally clever and somewhat cynical ploy on the part of Leone, Fonda’s character is revealed as the mastermind behind the massacre of the McBain family at their Sweet Water ranch. Even more shocking is his callous execution of a defenseless red-haired boy. Looking closely at Once Upon a Time in the West, we see considerable evidence to suggest that Pynchon’s characterization of Crutchfield may be closely based on Fonda’s character in the movie. The way Crutchfield is portrayed in the extended first paragraph closely resembles Fonda’s legendary first scene in the film.

“Sweet Water” is the name McBain, an Irishman with flaming red hair, has given to his ranch situated in what is depicted as a desolate desert valley, surrounded by low-set limestone mountains. Having discovered that, far from being barren, the valley conceals an underground stream or water source, McBain has bought and settled the land, biding his time until the railway arrives on his doorstep, when his family will become rich overnight. Just as the laying of the railway line approaches McBain’s valley, he and his family are massacred by Frank (Fonda) and his accomplices. Throughout the
scene, the color red predominates—from the McBain family’s hair, to the reddish brown wood of their home, to the gorse which is the only shrubbery visible.

A close reading of Pynchon’s text reveals definite parallels between the Crutchfield episode and Leone’s film. Crutchfield and Fonda are both browned by sun, wind and dirt. Both are first visually portrayed against a wooden background and a barn or stable. Playing against type, Fonda is very much “wood of a different grain and finish.” And both are grotesque loathsome solid-set characters of a nonetheless good-humored disposition. The gradual introduction of the harmonica theme in both Leone’s film and Pynchon’s text is equally well synchronized. The two loci are also similar settings, desert valleys surrounded by mountain ranges, with rivers running through them. In light of the McBain family’s flaming red hair, “Red River Valley” can be interpreted as a simple codified reworking of McBain’s Sweet Water.

When the character of Crutchfield is first described, it is against the background of a barn and stable wall. He is “wood of a different grain and finish,” “good-humored,” “solid-set against the purple mountainslope, and looking half into the sun” (68). This description is strikingly similar to how the viewer first sees Fonda enter movie. After killing McBain and two of his family, with the sun to the back of the killers, Fonda and his accomplices approach the McBain family homestead. The last remaining child lingers petrified, his eyes fixed on Fonda’s character. The men dressed in brown dusters get closer. They stop, and gradually the camera swings around to slowly reveal Fonda’s identity, first against the wooden background of the homestead, then against an outbuilding, and finally in full profile against the backdrop of sky and a far off purplish mountain slope. Fonda smiles at the little boy, until an accomplice accidentally reveals his identity, after which he momentarily grimaces, smiles once more and finally executes the defenseless child. The scene is played out to the tune of the harmonica constantly repeating the same five-note, three chord motif.

If Once Upon a Time in the West is being reworked by Pynchon, and Crutchfield is indeed loosely based on Henry Fonda’s character, is Leone’s film then the key frame of reference that Pynchon prompts the reader to recognize when Crutchfield is first introduced?: “Here now is Crutchfield or Crouchfield, the westwardman. Not ‘archetypical’ westwardman, but the only. Understand, there was only one. There was only one Indian who ever fought him. Only one fight, one victory, one loss. And only one president, and one assassin, and one election” (67).

Once again, comparing Leone’s film and Pynchon’s text presents some curious and suggestive parallels. Not only could Fonda’s casting be described as “not archetypical” but the level of cruelty and brutality of Frank’s character was in itself a departure from the norm. The reference to the westwardman could also represent a pun on the name of Clint Eastwood, the star of Leone’s
previous westerns. Carrying the analogy between Fonda and Crutchfield further, it is possible to identify Bronson as the Indian who fights him. Bronson’s previous credits in Westerns had seen him typecast as an Indian, which made him a natural choice to play Harmonica, an anonymous Indian. The fact that Fonda’s character is finally killed in a shootout by Harmonica, an Indian in a red shirt, suggests clear parallels between sets of antagonists: Crutchfield and his nemesis Toro Rojo (Red Bull), Frank and Harmonica. Both Pynchon’s text and Leone’s film move toward the same climax. There is only one showdown or “fight” between Harmonica and Frank, in which Harmonica prevails. Although Leone declines to specify an exact year when his film is set, the background story of the ongoing construction of the first transcontinental railroad across America points to the 1860s. Abraham Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, some four years before the ceremonial completion of the railroad on May 10, 1869, provides a clear context for Pynchon’s reference to “one president,” “one assassin” and “one election.” The earlier reference in the episode (65) to the future President JFK who was assassinated on November 22nd 1963 in Dallas Texas, further demonstrates the multiple signifying possibilities presented by Pynchon’s text.

While there are several other potential signifiers, scattered across the text in an apparently haphazard fashion, which suggest a link between Leone’s film and Pynchon’s text, the most notable connective occurs in the earlier reference to “contacts” Slothrop recognizes, “People he knows,” sitting around “worn flagstones,” transacting “something vaguely religious” (66). “Flagstone” is the name of the town that features prominently in Leone’s film, reinforcing the notion that Pynchon may be drawing heavily not only on American Western myths and tropes in constructing Slothrop’s dream vision, but also on specific texts. Today, Leone’s film may seem a somewhat obscure source, but it is worth remembering that for Gravity’s Rainbow’s first readers in 1973, Leone’s film was only five years old and would have been fresh in the minds of many cinema goers and most certainly aficionados of the Western. One suspects that just as Leone expected cinema goers to recognize his own debt to John Ford and others, Pynchon would have expected his readers and critics to consider his postmodern Western setting in the context of well-known Westerns.

The importance of identifying Leone’s film as a potential source and framework for the extended initial paragraph of the Crutchfield section, however, may be not so much the connection itself, but the fact that Pynchon draws attention to his text’s structure and content. While the act of reading provides the means of establishing a possible external frame of reference, one also has to take into account the reader’s store of knowledge. A reader who has never seen Leone’s Once Upon A Time in the West, or heard its music, would be unable to recognize any possible allusions to the film. Hence, if Pynchon is trying to draw attention to the mythmaking strategies underpinning his own
work, it stands to reason that the myths or texts he draws on should not be too obscure or too difficult to recognize.

3. The Grapes of Wrath

On presenting his close reading at the recent Pynchon conference in Granada in June 2006, Steven Weisenburger noted that the paragraph immediately following the parody of “Red River Valley,” which mentions “okies,” “Red” and “FDR’s little asshole buddies” might allude to another movie in which Fonda starred, Ford’s 1949 adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*:

Oh, it’s the Red River all right, if you don’t believe it just ask that “Red,” wherever he may be (tell you what Red means, FDR’s little asshole buddies, they want to take it all away, women all have hair on their legs, give it all to them or they’ll blow it up round black iron in the middle of the night bleeding over Polacks in ay caps okies niggers yeh niggers especially . . . ) (68)

This intuitive insight proved judicious as Pynchon’s text does indeed seem to echo and allude to Ford’s film. Here Fonda is cast in the lead role as Tom Joad, a convicted killer with a good heart, who sets out from Oklahoma with his extended family for California, upon his release from jail. After numerous setbacks and being victimized and exploited owing to their poverty and situation on the margins of society during the Great Depression, the Joad family eventually arrive at a “Farmworkers Wheat Patch Camp” in California, run by the Department of Agriculture. This camp provides a place of refuge and a degree of autonomy for the displaced Okies, and is run by a central committee of workers, which is free from the outside interferences of the corrupt police. The scene from the film which seems to have a direct bearing on the text quoted above occurs when a group of Okies including Tom Joad are working for a local farmer called Thomas. Sympathetic to their plight, Thomas warns them that locals in collusion with the police force intend to try to close down their camp by causing a fight at a forthcoming barn dance. The farmer reads an excerpt from a local newspaper which states: “Citizens angered at Red agitators burn another squatter’s camp and order agitators to leave the County.” At this point, Fonda’s character interjects: “Listen, what is these Reds anyway? Every time you turn around somebody calls somebody else a Red. What is these Reds anyways?”

Pynchon’s play on the word “Red,” in conjunction with the reference to Okies and FDR, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the American President during the Depression, is in itself extremely suggestive. There is, however, an even stronger link between these two texts, as the music that constantly plays in the background, right through Ford’s film, is the tune “Red River Valley.” Crucially, at one stage, just prior to the showdown between local
troublemakers and the Okies, Tom Joad, asks Ma Joad (Jane Darwell) to
dance, whereupon he sings to her:

    Come and sit by my side, if you love me,
    Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
    But remember the Red River Valley,
    And the boy who will love you so true.

Thus, two of Henry Fonda's most famous films seem to provide the
building blocks for the first two paragraphs of the Crutchfield section. Rather
than engaging in a generic parody of the Western, Pynchon seems to be
engaging in a symbiotic activity, reminiscent of cinematic montage, where
two distinct images or visual representations are brought together to form
a new image and effect. The bridge that links these two allusions to Fonda's
movies is the song's title, followed by a comic parody of its traditional lyrics.
I have already suggested two different contexts in which to consider the
phrase “Red River Valley,” the first a cryptic allusion to McBain’s Sweetwater
in Leone’s film and the second an explicit reference to the musical melody
that haunts Ford’s adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. When one considers
Pynchon’s complex narrative structures, the question also arises as to
whether the reader should take Pynchon’s parody of the song “Red River
Valley” at face value. Could the narrator’s suggestion to “light up and set
for a spell” also be directed to the reader? Should the reader then stop a
moment and take note of the “shit (which) hereabouts shore is swell”?

*Red River Valley*

    Down this toilet they say you are flushin’–
    Won’t’chew light up and set for a spell?
    Cause the toilet it ain’t going nowhar,
    And the shit hereabouts shore is swell. (68)

The notion that the “shit” contained in the toilet world may have some
intrinsic informational value or cryptic significance is, as we have seen,
the first thing that Slothrop observes following his dive into the toilet
world (65). Noting that the relationship between the word and shit
constitutes one of the “most significant semantic contraries” of *Gravity’s
Rainbow* (Weisenburger, 43), “shit” can then be seen as a scatological
metaphor signifying the word or information. The use of the word shit
in 1960s contemporary slang to signify unwelcome or unexpected news
or information (i.e., “that’s bad shit”) is equally suggestive. The notion
that the “shit,” around the shore of the toilet world is “swell” implies that
there is plenty of information in the immediate textual environs for the
reader to absorb or assimilate. This “shit” or information seems to point to
two allusions to Henry Fonda films, linked literally and cryptically by the phrase and song title “Red River Valley.”

When seen in hindsight, the allusion to Ford’s film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* is relatively straightforward. One might even ask whether this relatively explicit allusion was inserted in the text to help the reader establish the more opaque link with Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West*? In the rest of the Crutchfield episode, there may indeed be allusions to other actual movies, involving famous Western actors or directors, such as Howard Hawkes’ *Red River*, as Moore has suggested (66-67). Or it may be the case, as Herman argues, that there are no specific textual targets in these surreal, perverse and comic closing sections. The clear and careful presentation of allusions to both Leone’s and Ford’s films stands in stark opposition to the rest of the Crutchfield section, which is confusing and disorienting. This in turn implies that the recognition of these allusions may form part of a larger metafictional project at work in the episode, and that there is no single key to the mysteries of the text.

4. An Allegorical Reading of the Episode

Pynchon’s practice of consciously drawing on textual sources extends beyond simple intertextuality into the domain of literary symbiosis, and the kind of manipulation of myth advocated by modernists such as Eliot and Joyce. The author’s recourse to pastiche in the above instance to provide the scaffolding for an extended section of his text might be considered as a modernist strategy or technique, in the spirit of Eliot’s mythical method. This particular use of myth is, however, intricately bound to the author’s attempt to actively engage his readers in metafictional discourse. This suggests that while Pynchon has taken on board the central tenets of modernist poetics, he moves beyond them to formulate a postmodern poetics in which metafiction plays an extremely important role.

That Pynchon should seek to lay bare the tools of his craft for alert second-level readers and draw attention to the way in which he uses myth to structure his fictional world is particularly intriguing and worth exploring. As noted earlier, the key symbol that dominates the episode is the harp. In a literal context this is Slothrop’s harmonica, the musical instrument that he carries everywhere with him. Reading Slothrop’s dream vision purely in a literal sense, though possible, is somewhat limiting, not least because it discounts the possibility of seeing Slothrop’s journey from an allegorical perspective. As I mentioned earlier, Slothrop’s downward descent to the toilet underworld, although extremely bizarre, does fit within a recognizable tradition of metaphysical poems, such as Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia*, in which allegory is central to interpretation.

Here I am considering the prominence given to both Charlie Parker
and Sergio Leone in the episode and most specifically the manner in which Pynchon homes in on the key moments when both artists broke with tradition and redefined and reinvigorated their respective artistic mediums. Pynchon’s exposure of the tools of his own craft, by directing the reader to uncover his engagement in symbiotic mythmaking in the Crutchfield episode, seems highly significant and far from coincidental. Indeed, the episode can also be read as a complex allegory of the creative process and how artists strive to reinvent their own craft while paying tribute to their predecessors—the kind of agonistic process whereby the artist removes the burden of tradition from his shoulders and places it firmly under his belt.

There are important parallels between the specific instances from Jazz and cinema that Pynchon chooses to include in his own work, and it is worth considering these within a historical and artistic context. Pynchon’s extended discussion of Charlie Parker’s track “Koko” in the Roseland Ballroom section focuses not only on the musician whose 1945 recording of “Cherokee” revolutionized modern jazz, but specifically, on how Parker took a standard tune, and through extreme improvisation, made the familiar strange and the old new. As mentioned earlier, Pynchon paraphrases Parker’s own description of this key moment in his artistic development, remaining remarkably true to his original source, implying that this incorporation is more neutral pastiche than loaded parody.

This theme of reinventing what has gone before is also the defining feature of the poetics underpinning Leone’s Once Upon a Time in the West, which can be considered as a massive enterprise in cinematic symbiosis. Thus the specific re-enactment of Fonda’s entrance in Pynchon’s text alludes to the cinematic moment when Leone turned the Western genre on its head. Pynchon’s own recourse to Leone’s and Ford’s films when structuring consecutive paragraphs of his narrative seems to support the idea that Pynchon himself advocates the kind of symbiotic act that defined Parker’s and Leone’s artistic achievements. The fact that he draws attention to this symbiosis may indicate a desire for his art’s inherent complexity be appreciated in full. Equally, however, it can be seen as a response to those who had forecast the demise of the novel, an affirmation that literature, music, and art will always find ways to perpetuate themselves.

This reading would suggest that the Kenosha connection with Orson Welles may not be purely coincidental and could be intended to have a similar allegorical significance. Welles’s stature as a revolutionary film maker who pushed back the boundaries of his own craft is generally acknowledged. That the figure of Welles should undergird a narrative that seems to celebrate the works and craft of similar groundbreaking artists as Parker and Leone seems highly suggestive. The idea that Pynchon may be consciously and publicly engaging with tradition, by identifying with certain cultural predecessors and internalizing them so as to evolve his own
individualized voice, evokes comparison with Harold Bloom’s theory of the “Anxiety of Influence.”

5. Thomas Pynchon and the Act of Authorial Kenosis

When one considers Pynchon’s penchant for punning and word games, it is tempting to make a link between the third stage of Bloom’s theory of influence, Kenosis, and Kenosha. Originally a Greek word denoting “emptiness,” the term Kenosis was first used in a theological sense in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:5-8. Christian theologians use the word to explain the process whereby a god, who exists outside of time and space, could become human, incarnate: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.” In effect, Kenosis attempts to explain what the Son of God chose to give up in terms of his divine attributes in order to assume human nature—described by Bloom as, “the humbling or emptying out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status” (14). The changes that Jesus undergoes when he becomes incarnate are temporary, and God assumes the divine attributes that Jesus “empties himself of” till he ascends back into Heaven following his resurrection. Within the context of Bloom’s theory of poetry, Kenosis is a type of “breaking device” which represents “a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor” (14). Somewhat paradoxically, the later poet or writer comes to terms with an artistic precursor by internalizing his work within his own. According to Bloom, this is done in such a way that the precursor’s work is “emptied out,” without the later poet’s work being deflated (15). The relevance of Bloom’s conception of Kenosis is clear when one considers how Pynchon internalizes and incorporates fragments of Leone’s, Ford’s and Parker’s artistic legacies into his own writing. These three artistic precursors are in effect “emptied out” into Gravity’s Rainbow, yet in such a way that their presence adds to, rather than subtracts from, Pynchon’s text. The Anxiety of Influence was published one year after Pynchon’s novel in 1974, so it is unlikely that Pynchon was aware of how Bloom intended to use the concept of Kenosis in his impending publication. While Bloom’s theory of the “Anxiety of Influence” provides an intriguing context in which to view the mythmaking strategies underpinning Pynchon’s writing, if Pynchon is engaging the reader in complex word play through punning, it is most likely that he is playing around with the Christian concept of Kenosis.

The instance of authorial intrusion discussed earlier details how Pynchon engages in metafictive discourse to address his readers directly. This authorial technique and strategy succeed in temporarily reducing the traditional distance between the author and reader, and this technique and strategy introduce an important analogy with Christian doctrine. By addressing the reader directly from inside his own text, Pynchon effectively makes himself incarnate in the text. The author temporarily abandons his Joycean god-like
role, standing above and at a remove from the fictional world he is responsible for creating and abandoning aspects of his divine status. This act of *authorial kenosis* parallels Christ’s descent from Heaven, whereby Christ temporarily took on human form, while retaining divine status. It is also interesting to note how in the episode in which this authorial intrusion takes place, Pynchon effectively “empties himself,” exposing the tools of his trade and demystifying his divine craft. Whether or not Pynchon intended his readers to consider his employment of the name “Kenosha” as a possible pun on the Christian notion of Kenosis, the theological term does seem highly appropriate in describing this kind of authorial intrusion.

The above reading suggests that Pynchon's text is constructed to be read on several levels and needs to be read not just literally or from a historical perspective, but also figuratively. There have been many suggestions as to the identity and function of the Kenosha Kid in Pynchon’s text. In light of the act of authorial intrusion identified earlier, the possibility that the Kenosha Kid may actually represent Thomas Pynchon himself, taking on a role analogous to that of Christ, needs to be considered. The representation of the Kenosha Kid is by no means a straightforward authorial self-depiction, however. In this case, he is perhaps best described as a fictional demiurge or avatar of the author.

Such a reading effectively attributes god-like (authorial) qualities to the Kenosha Kid and provides an interesting context for considering the curious epistolary dialogue that takes place at the beginning of the episode, when Slothrop writes to the Kenosha Kid and asks: “Did I ever bother you, ever, for anything, in your life?” (60) The Kenosha Kid’s response is brief and unsympathetic, and it suggests that Slothrop’s request will not be granted: “You never did” (60). The tone of Slothrop’s request is that of a defensive plea and implies that Slothrop is asking for a special favor, wish or request to be granted. The italicization of the word “ever,” where one might also reasonably expect the addressee’s name to appear can be interpreted as merely reiterating that this is the first time Slothrop has ever requested anything from the Kenosha Kid. It might also be interpreted, however, as signifying that the Kenosha Kid harbors eternal or immortal qualities, through his identification as “ever.” The Kenosha Kid section (60-61) presents the reader with numerous interpretive difficulties, in part due to its fragmented nature, but equally due to the confusion surrounding the identity of the Kenosha Kid. One thing that is made clear, however, is that the Kenosha Kid exists in a superior position to Slothrop, as the following passage, which is decidedly biblical in tone, suggests:

At the end of the mighty day in which he gave us in fiery letters across the sky all the words we’d ever need, words we today enjoy, and fill our dictionaries with, the meek voice of little Tyrone Slothrop celebrated ever after in tradition and song, ventured to filter upward to the Kid’s attention: “You never did ‘the,’ Kenosha Kid!” (61)
Slothrop’s attempt to make his voice “filter upward” intimates that the Kenosha Kid exists above him and at a distant remove. The description of Slothrop’s voice as “meek,” an adjective used throughout the New Testament to refer to the faithful, is equally suggestive. Reinforcing the religious subtext inherent in the text, the Kenosha Kid section seems to close with an explicit allusion to the Christian feast of Easter Sunday, which marks the resurrection of Christ following his crucifixion, an end to Lenten fasting, and the return of meat after forty days of abstention: “The day of the Ascent and sacrifice. A nation-wide observance. Fats searing, blood dripping and burning to a salty brown” (61). This possible allusion to Christ’s crucifixion and his Ascension into Heaven is particularly noteworthy, as Christ’s Ascension effectively marks the moment when he resumes his divine status and reverses the process of kenosis that he underwent to become human.

This analysis of the Kenosha Kid section suggests that this most slippery and enigmatic character is portrayed as having god-like qualities. That is not to say that he represents Christ, but rather that his characterization is analogous to that of a God. Pynchon’s subsequent engagement in authorial intrusion, effectively coming down and making himself incarnate in the fictional world that he has created, therefore gives rise to the possibility that the Kenosha Kid may also represent Pynchon himself. As the creator of both Slothrop and the world of Gravity’s Rainbow, Pynchon plays a role that is not unlike that of a god. This might explain why Slothrop is constantly taunted throughout the opening section that “he never did the Kenosha Kid.” As a fictional character, the act of kenosis is quite simply beyond Slothrop, as he will never be able to transcend his fictionality and exist outside of the text. This privilege is reserved for gods and authors alone, and though Pynchon is indeed creator of both Slothrop and the world in which he exists, this is one request that no author could ever grant.

The kind of close comparative and semiotic reading that I have carried out here identifies and asserts the metafictional possibilities presented in Pynchon’s text. The various connectives identified suggest that the technique of intertextuality is a key element in Pynchon’s writing and that he values and makes use of diverse cultural texts in codifying sections of his narrative. Pynchon’s engagement in metafictional discourse through the technique of authorial kenosis adds an extra dimension to his symbiotic mythmaking, as the reader gets two stories for the price of one, an historical narrative and the story of the making of that narrative.

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Notes

1 Steven Weisenburger points out how “Red River Valley” is a parody of a traditional Western lyric, and, amongst other details he translates various Hispanic names, providing contexts for terms such as little pard, Rancho Peligroso and Toro Rojo. He also identifies
geographical points plotted in the narrative, such as Eagle pass, a border town on the Rio Grande and how “Los Madres” refers to the Sierra Madres range of Northern Mexico (47).

For Thomas Moore, Crutchfield’s world represents “a country under the toilet” and sees in the characters of Crutchfield and Whappo, ghost overlays of John Wayne as Dunson and Montgomery Clift as the boy Matthew Garth in the classic John Hawkes Western Red River (67). David Cowart sees Slothrop’s fantasy as only becoming cinematic in the later part, calling Crutchfield a decadent cowboy, whose relationship with his “pathetic sidekick” Whappo symbolizes that of colonizer and native (50-51).

Thomas Schaub identifies an over voice that “retains the advantages of the intrusive, visible guide, but undermines the stability commonly associated with it, for his knowledge of the world is fragmentary” (131). Molly Hite contends that Pynchon’s narrator “is a Proteus who can change tone and attitude so completely that his utterances appear to emanate from separate personae” (142). Hite’s notion of the narrator as a slippery Proteus, constantly shifting form and changing perspective provides a flexible context in which to view Gravity’s Rainbow’s narrator or narrators. Neither Hite nor Schaub, however, considers the possibility of authorial intrusion in the course of their analyses of Pynchon’s narrative.

I am extremely grateful to Steven Weisenburger for this helpful suggestion as I had not seen Ford’s film and might otherwise have overlooked this further significant allusion to a character played by Henry Fonda.

Works Cited

Why have critics of *Vineland* failed to agree on the nature and scope of the fascist menace looming over the novel? Brad Leithauser’s review typified the book’s negative early reception in claiming that *Vineland* lacked something “overarchingly malignant” for its characters to combat. Federal agent Brock Vond, while clearly intended as a scaling-down from the operatic portrayal of evil in *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s Blicero, looked to Leithauser, “even by cartoon standards, . . . insubstantial,” unable (as his budget line is miraculously cut at the end) to disturb the book’s cloying recurrence to themes of family and home (9, 8). Subsequent, subtler readings noted Pynchon’s reinventions of Orwell, from the 1984 setting to warnings against television’s mind-control and new and improved Thought Police—“Tube Police, Music Police, Good Healthy Shit Police” (313). In more concrete terms, David Thoreen undercut critiques like Leithauser’s by showing *Vineland’s* true backdrop of fascist apocalypse to lie in foreboding references to Reagan’s potential invocation of emergency powers and a police state (“Fourth Amendment”). But the surprising trend of recent readings, more rooted in American political philosophy, has been to put Vond’s vision of former radicals as infantilized members of an “extended national Family” on a rational and manageable footing, regarding Vond as extreme but placing him in the broad context of US liberalism’s difficult relationship to community (VL 269). Thus Jerry Varsava and Cyrus R. K. Patell independently argue for seeing Vond as representative of a communitarianism that is, in Patell’s words, “coercive, majoritarian, and bad”—the wrong path for community to take, they show Pynchon arguing, but far from the accusations of a totalitarian America which *Vineland* still, however reduced its scale, seems intent to make (Varsava 65, Patell 171).
Here I explain this confusion over the darkest reaches of *Vineland* and Pynchon’s prophecies as a product of his insistence on a punning narrative maneuver I call, as he does at times, “flipping” or “turning.” These moves function in small but endemic features of temporality, image, and historical and literary reference richly connected to his theme of betrayal. For, true to the 1960s milieu it dissects, *Vineland* adopts as its central political fear not so much totalitarian take-over as the acts of betraying comrades that might or might not lead to it—the fear of an evil within, unsuspected, making a sharp and sudden expression, best militated against (or so is Pynchon’s ambition) by the pliable structure of language. N. Katherine Hayles documented in one of the earliest critical essays the victory of “the snitch system” over kinship and other traditions in *Vineland* (15). But betrayal, I argue, creates an entire poetics for Pynchon, insinuating itself into levels of the novel deeper than Hayles’ analysis of plot and character allows. In trying to render Frenesi’s “turn,” Pynchon invests in images and single words that can be seen, in a metaphorical sense, turning themselves—holographic language that maintains elements of bright, almost utopian promise in moments that seem on the surface to portend the worst in American political culture, and vice versa. Such flickering images are rarely read in all their elusiveness by *Vineland* critics seeking, as Varsava calls it, Pynchon’s “determinate political stance” (63).

These images’ disjunction is what I register with my two epigraphs, which are Pynchon’s sources for the boot-sole image on which my analysis (and, I claim, an entire arc in Pynchon’s corpus) culminates. On the one hand is Whitman’s great statement of Romantic, democratic promise and the individual’s endurance; on the other, the Vondian impulse of Orwell’s dystopianism. Both remain equally present in that climactic passage, and the purpose of my essay is to vivify the self-conscious remove from Pynchon’s long-time procedure of political prophecy that their dualism allows him to instigate.³ Surprisingly, *Vineland*’s allusions to some of the most sacred texts of democratic individualism, while making for awkward characterizations and plotting, also render the novel’s critique of American fascism much more thoroughgoing than its lighter atmosphere would suggest. This book’s malignance is found not arching through the sky but incubating underfoot.

Centering *Vineland* on the question of flipping gives its smaller scale an illuminating continuity with the larger, wilder Pynchon visions from which the novel’s difference has been more sensed than understood. Varsava and Patell, for instance, both pair *Vineland* with *The Crying of Lot 49* as Pynchon’s two smaller novels of “domestic” politics; but *Vineland* has deep connections to those big novels, *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which Pynchon diagnosed American politics through analogy to international fascism (Varsava 64). Those works ask: If the US did go fascist, how would it happen? The question appears often in coded terms of “werewolf” transformations that merge language about insanity’s spasms—“flipping” in its colloquial sense—with a
deep reading of fascistic potential. McClintic Sphere in V. muses that human brains, like computer circuits, “could go flip and flop.” In World War II, “the world flipped”; then “come ’45, [. . .] they flopped,” and the Cold War ensued: “Everything got cool” (293). Charismatic love might result for those who now “flip back,” Sphere suggests, “But you take a whole bunch of people flip at the same time and you’ve got a war” again—a warning of, in the words’ evocation of the switch detonating a nuclear device, a new wave of totalitarian warfare led by American bombs (293). On its second page, V. sounds an overture to a career full of such “abruptness,” of “normal night’s dream turning to nightmare. Dog into wolf, light into twilight” (10). The book will later connect the wolf image to both the Germans’ dress rehearsal for the Holocaust in Südwestafrika (where Mondaugen hears the incessant call of the strand wolf) and the betrayals of the 1956 New York cast (who are, in the August heat, on the verge of “Werewolf season”) (300). In its central conceit Gravity’s Rainbow expands on Sphere’s speculations about the innocent American lover gone mad: conditioning by Nazi Laszlo Jamf may have flipped the one and zero of stimulus and response in Slothrop’s brain, and—“a monster,” says Pointsman—he unwittingly brings Nazi rockets in the wake of his sexual love (147). And Gravity’s Rainbow follows in V.’s werewolf vein too by reserving the image for two enforcers of totalitarian regimes: Tchitcherine and Blicero. The latter, we hear, grows on the Lüneburg Heath, “in his final madness,” “into another animal . . . a werewolf . . . but with no humanity left in his eyes” (494).4

By Vineland, however, the chief fascist has been downgraded from werewolf to badger (the Old English meaning of Brock, as David Cowart points out), and Pynchon is working on a more complex, more realistic version of the fascist flip, centered on Frenesi (Cowart, “Continuity” 178). Here we have no singular moments of gothic transformation, nor the willed opacity of Pynchon’s previous female double agents like V. or Katje Borgesius. It is true that during the bad-weather sequence in Oklahoma City where her betrayal of Weed becomes complete, Pynchon does associate Frenesi, “electrically excited” by sex, with “gray mother storms giving birth,” the scene in effect casting her as the Whore of Babylon to Vond’s Satanic “Beast” (VL 212). But Pynchon parodically defuses Frenesi’s likeness to V. and other such White Goddess figures in his previous texts: in his wink at readers right before her reunion with her mother, Prairie plays a game of crazy eights in which “the whereabouts of the Mother of Doom,” the queen of spades, is in question; Prairie wins that hand, and her mother proves no such thing (367). It indeed seems that Pynchon, for much of the book, wishes to render Frenesi as “just another mom in the nation of moms,” not a werewolf but “[o]nly an animal with”—when it comes to her parenting particularly—“a full set of pain receptors after all” (292, 287).

But even as one of Pynchon’s most realistically human-scaled creations, Frenesi has—rightly, I think—aroused critical skepticism, particularly in relation
to her key acts of betrayal. As Joseph Tabbi notes, her reasons for submitting to Vond’s power come down to unconvincing lines like, in her plea to DL, “‘I’m not some pure creature [. . .] [Y]ou know what happens when my pussy’s runnin’ the show’” (Tabbi 96; VL 260). The word “turn,” while inherently milder and more understandable than “flip,” operates in such contexts as Pynchon’s awkward call back to the reserve of fascistic madness he evoked through werewolves and the sado-masochistic seductions of Blicero. For example, Frenesi, like her mother, feels “a helpless turn toward images of authority, especially uniformed men” in a scene that projects her decision-making onto (as Sasha explains) “some Cosmic Fascist” splicing in “a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction” and initiating an “ancestral curse” (83). At these crucial moments of explanation, there seems to be little distance between Frenesi’s vague search for her motives and Pynchon’s, as in the ellipses of both character’s and author’s thinking here: “Of all [Frenesi’s] turnings, this turn against Sasha her once-connected self would remain a puzzle she would never quite solve, a mystery beyond any analysis she could bring to it” (292). For an author who has before scoffed at analysis (literally a “loosening up, as of a knot” with lines such as “No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into” (GR 4), the language for Frenesi’s mindset signals a definite slackening.

But Frenesi is being built according to other, almost heuristic principles. Tony Tanner has remarked at length on a line from *Mason & Dixon* that encapsulates Pynchon’s belief in the capacity of American culture to pass quickly from ideal states to violent ones concealed within it; there, “the latent Blades of Warriors press more closely upon the Membrane that divides [the] Subjunctive World” of America’s utopian promise “from our number’d and dreamless Indicative” (Tanner 224-5; MD 677). Frenesi, seven years earlier, was Pynchon’s attempt to embody in one character’s variability the thinness of that metaphorical “Membrane” and the grand, grammatical categories of ideal and history it barely divides. She gains such allegorical scope from the family history Pynchon assembles around her, lineage that ripples always with the arbitrary nature—the unpredictable turns—of genetic transmission. Cowart was first to point out the anagram for “sin-free” in the “Eve-like” Frenesi’s first name, underscoring the blue-eyed innocence which, in Pynchon’s image system, makes her all the more susceptible to arrogant assumptions of her Election (“Continuity” 185). But there is also a pun in her grandparents’ combined family name, Becker-Traverse. Is it a stretch to see Be-Tray or Be-Trayers in the merger of the two names, given Pynchon’s tendency for punning? Is the innate oppositionalism implied by Traverse (one meaning of which is to contradict or deny) thwarted by the whim of a new signifier? It was “blind fate,” the text says, that Eula Becker and Jess Traverse ever met in a Wobbly hall in Vineland, and Pynchon here is nuancing (if still also leaving distressingly gendered) the biological determinism implied by Sasha’s vision of the “Cosmic Fascist” gene (76). Of the three generations of daughters
Vineland traces from the Becker-Traverse union, each takes a notably different path: from Sasha's allegiance to radical causes (despite her love of men in uniform), to Frenesi’s betrayal of 24fps, to Prairie’s undetermined choice—she vacillates in the dual ending between rejection of Vond and her chilling last whisper: “You can come back [. . .] Take me anyplace you want” (384).6

As volumes of critical work attest, history has always been a structure of uncertainty for Pynchon; but Vineland adds to his work a new ambition to match the historical with the genealogical, in relations more proximate and less magisterially determinative than Stencil’s obsession with his father’s journal, Slothrop’s connection to his Puritan ancestor William, or Oedipa’s inheritance from Pierce. The family in Vineland is as a consequence hardly the emblem of safety and renewal it seems to be. Rather, family is the intimate seat of the assumption that history is on a Whiggish upward arc from generation to generation, that the young redeem the old. In a rare glimpse into Pynchon’s private thoughts, Molly Hite reports on uncovering a copy of Vineland he sent to his undergraduate mentor at Cornell, Walter Slatoff. It is inscribed: “Dear Walt, this is what you get for asking, a third of a century ago in class, ‘How about a story where the parents are progressive and the kids are fascists?’ See? You never know when somebody might be listening” (qtd. in Hite 140).

Pynchon clearly regards Vineland as an ambitious feat of ironic narrative construction, rare in American literature and, indeed, his own corpus, a story in which the sins of the fathers are not visited on the children—because that would imply the children were, as Frenesi wrongly assumes, “sin-free.” Familial inheritance in Vineland is thus doing what, for example, Enzian—in his transformation from Germany’s colonial victim to inheritor of Blicero’s rocket obsession—did in Gravity’s Rainbow: providing the ironic “Membrane” structure by which those who seem least susceptible to fascism end up its agent. Pynchon’s inscription also reveals a fundamentally pessimistic valence for the youngest character’s surname: Prairie is named Wheeler not as an image of cyclical renewal, but as an intimation that American family inheritances are on a wheel of fortune, with no predictability to how each generation will turn. As Raymond Williams points out, in its original usage “revolution”—a word used freely in Vineland by both radical filmmakers and drug enforcement agents, each claiming to be leading the “real” one—meant only a major turn on the political wheel, without direction specified (Williams 270-74; VL 27, 101).

Since family recapitulates nation on many levels in Vineland, these poetics of betraying genes seep into Pynchon’s choice of multivalent adjectives for American historical change and, by extension, the pacing evoked by his narrative. Consider “creeping” in the novel’s first sentence, a line in which much of the narrative is crystallized: “Later than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the
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roof” (3). Thoreen, characteristically among Vineland’s critics, reads “creeping” here as the simple companion to the 1984 reference, an ominous suggestion of “the many-tentacled military and government bureaucracies that shape so much” in the book (“Political Parable” 46). But as with so many of Pynchon’s words—and especially his key opening and closing gerunds, like “screaming” and “crying”—“creeping” cuts in multiple directions, exemplifying not just Vondian inroads into American culture but the preterite’s movements as well. If “Wheeler” has a negative aspect beneath its obvious meaning, “creeping” has a positive one. In Pynchon’s vocabulary, creeping is most often that low-to-the-ground, insect-like persistence through which Vineland identifies and celebrates its Counterforce.

DL best embodies the creeping spirit. “Skidding” and “slid[ing]” are verbs often associated with her and her motorcycle. She is rat-like, with the “rodent-brown rinse” she gives her hair and the “rodent hour” at which she invades Brock’s prison camp (116, 255, 134). DL’s name, pun for disabled list, links her creeping to its etymological kin of cripple, reminding us that, as Gravity’s Rainbow says, humans are the creation’s “crippled keepers” rather than its controllers (734). There is also continual connection between living creepers like DL and the Thanatoids—creeps in the undead sense who try to restore the balance of justice by bringing Underworld retribution closer to the Earth’s surface, as when two of them usher the fallen Vond to his dismemberment by woge spirits in the book’s ending. The patriarch of Frenesi’s radical family, Jess, is crippled by a sabotaged tree and driven halfway into the ground, an image that recalls the dead sitting up in their tombs on Judgment Day (played on in Dante’s Inferno) and anticipates the Thanatoids’ later resurrection. All these deep connections with the earth lie in implicit contrast with the fascist imagery of flight. Vond resembles “the sleek raptors that decorate fascist architecture,” a 1990s American rocket captain in his own way, flying in a black helicopter and offering his lower-level operatives the seeming protection of the “federal wing” (287, 87). Like Blicero, and like the image of Hobbes’s Leviathan on which the aspirations of both are modeled, Vond wishes to loom over landscapes. These are all examples of politics as an embodied state—felt in crippling, reinforced by posture.

But we need to do one more turn (at least) on “creeping.” For if making states of fascism and anti-fascism behavioral and embodied helps Pynchon combat presumptuous essentializations of political identities, it also means anyone can be either fascist or anti-fascist at any time, depending on how he or she behaves. Suddenly Thoreen’s intuitive reading of “creeping” seems right again. Vond too is called a “creep,” in a derogatory sense, and the Thanatoids who serve as his twin Charons are named Blood and Vato—the same initials as his, in an echo of “Be-Trayers” and of Benny Profane and the Bad Priest in V. (VL 141, 200). At the center of such flips and turns is, of course, Frenesi. She exists for years in an inverted “underground of the State” in which turning has
been routinized and the signifiers of the outlaw applied to those inside the system (31).

All this undermining of the metaphors of both resistance and power recalls Pynchon’s 1993 essay, “Nearer, My Couch, To Thee,” about a state of resistant passivity similar to creeping. An analysis of sloth in history, the essay is, thirty years later, Pynchon’s return to Sphere’s invocation of “flop.” And while “flop” seems in Sphere’s formula like a viable state of cool passivity into which to withdraw after war, Pynchon insists that it is not safe from turns to violence. Sloth can flip back as well: Pynchon details its deep religious history as a sin of despair against God, then tracks its newer meanings, in the industrializing world of nineteenth-century America, as a sin against clock time, an imaginative rebellion connecting Melville, Kafka, and much of modernism. But then, one paragraph later, sloth cuts in an opposite direction—flop becoming fascist flip in the way Sphere implied. “In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political,” Pynchon writes, “a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920s and 1930s being perhaps Sloth’s finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind” (57)—a good summary, in fact, of Vineland’s historical arc. Before the essay ends Pynchon has gone back to thinking of sloth as a concept with, again, an oppositional future, if it can teach us to “[p]ersist in Luddite sorrow” in an era ruled by technology (57).

In the parallel case of the fate of creeping in history, Pynchon’s ambivalent usage grows naturally out of the strangely resilient and reversible history of the word in the American political lexicon. An internet search run on “creeping” today would find thousands of opinions about democracy’s descent into fascist and other totalitarian orders, indicting everything from, on the right, political correctness and constraints on free enterprise to, on the left, government spying programs and military-industrial alliances. The word has a hold on the Cold War and post-Cold War American imagination, despite the changing nouns that come after it. “Creeping” began its American career in far less menacing form than its latter-day usages would suggest, in—from the socialist point of view that was its primary target—an almost positive form. In 1944 the godfather of conservative economists, Friedrich Hayek, warned of “creeping socialism” in The Road to Serfdom, published first in England and, a few months later, in the US, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in the US each year through the end of the 1940s and reaching many more in a condensed Reader’s Digest version (68). Hayek used the trauma of the war to assert the perfection of free-market capitalism and damn all systems of planning that contradicted it. Thus, underscoring Weimar policy and the Socialism in National Socialism, he aligned Hitler with all those interested in centralized planning of any sort, under the catch-all of imminent totalitarians. Omitting the terror, militarism, and genocide crucial to most definitions of the
totalitarian, Hayek characterized activist labor in England and America as a mere pawn in monopoly capitalism's scheme, the accomplishments of worker protection—the eight-hour day, union bargaining powers—as slow, creeping inroads toward a socialist, and thus to him totalitarian, order.

As he tries to find common ground among 1930s socialists, 1960s counterculturalists, and their 1980s remnants, Pynchon surely has this earliest meaning of creeping in mind, and *Vineland* reads in part as a reclaiming of socialist creeping for the Traverses, Beckers, and Gates, the New Deal believers Hayek (and, the novel points out, Reagan [265]) attacked. But Pynchon desires embodied political dynamics more than polemics, and so his recalling of a positive creeping digs into the temporality of the image as well. He makes us see the totalitarian questions raised by creeping and turning against a huge backdrop of history, and not just humans'. For the creeping fig hanging over *Vineland* is a clock of sorts, differentiating slow time as much as the rocket’s “delta-t” does fast time in *Gravity's Rainbow*. There, Pynchon wrote of a “mineral consciousness,” explained by the Argentine Felipe:

> Rock’s time scale is a lot more stretched out [. . .] “We’re talking frames per century [. . .] per millennium!” [says Felipe] [. . .] Sentient Rocksters [. . .] [see] that history as it’s been laid on the world is only a fraction, an outward-and-visible fraction [. . .] [W]e must look to the untold, to the silence around us, to the passage of the next rock we notice—to its aeons of history under the long and female persistence of water and air (who’ll be there, once or twice per century, to trip the shutter?). (623)

*Gravity’s Rainbow* says elsewhere, “[W]e have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world” (521), and this rock camera and the creeping fig are two such meters that Pynchon—the slow learner, the teacher of slowness—helps us imagine. Via similar play on “creeping,” the vast domains of ecological time hinted at in *Vineland*—the stories of the *woge*, the looming of ancient redwoods, the untrammeled land echoed in the title—serve as models of patience for readers’ and revolutionaries’ sense of political time. Pynchon finds, far beneath conventional understandings of historical progress, attunements to slow time that truly counteract the fascist impulse.

In spite of *Vineland*’s relative smallness, then, wide temporal bandwidths abound. Undetectable inner movements disconnect humans from the imperial instinct for spatial exploration and draw them to the kind of animacy a creeping fig experiences. As Hite points out, Frenesi’s name suggests “frenzy” (150). We could see the whole text, in fact, as the juxtaposition of states of frenzy, with the “rapture” and technological rush of Vond-types on one side, and creeping, “rock and roll” in its literal meaning, and more palatable frenzies on the other (*VL* 212). Takeshi’s experience with the Puncutron Machine is one such invisible inner motion; antidote to a slow, slow moment of dying, it attunes him to others rather than isolating him and inspiring dreams of
vengeance beyond his body’s reach. Pynchon also parallels Takeshi “purring into transcendence” with the minor story of Van Meter (180). His name connects him back to Gravity’s Rainbow’s calls for meters whose scales are unknown in this world, and when he removes the frets from his bass, he discovers what Pynchon is evoking through these odd images of vibration and movement: “the abolition of given scales, the restoration of a premodal innocence in which all the notes of the universe would be available to him” (224). Tellingly, Van has to “keep forcing himself to slow down” when he plays creeping hits for the Thanatoids, including the super-slow “As Time Goes By” (225).

At all points, the key error, to Pynchon, is to assume that time or history is going by at the speed one expects, which is often dictated by a machine. Frenesi’s camera lens enacts the epistemic problem. One of her favored words, “action,” inspired by her camera, is a key opposite of creeping. We can imagine a director of the Sentient Rockster film shouting “Action!” and then having to wait centuries for his take. In fact, Slothrop discovers in Gravity’s Rainbow that the “Fascist ideal” is “Action, Action, Action” (270). But Frenesi struggles much more with this lesson, becoming a symbol of the narrow view of the revolutionary moment that doomed 1960s activists in Pynchon’s account. She sees 24fps as her own “Action News Team” and takes on, along with the Romantic arrogance of her Election, a very narrow temporal bandwidth: she understands her service of Vond “as the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them” (195, 71-72).

What new meter whose scale is unknown in the world can record and sort all these highly ambiguous, easily inverted, and easily betrayed movements within history? To find a resolution point between creeping and flying, vibration and action, I want to finally examine images of the daily state of walking on two feet, present here in the key image of the footprint, which Vineland has in several sizes. The underside of the shoe is an almost ultimate point of obscurity and darkness, a spot where the forgotten and the wasted accumulate, an ideal, toilet-like place for Pynchon to perform one of his secret histories. To be underfoot is the ultimate reminder of preterite humility; the Buddha’s footprint, as Pynchon probably knows from the Zen research that went into the novel, is a sacred sign in parts of Asia. To forget what’s underfoot, on the other hand, is the ecological alienation from which nearly every fascist crime and perversion in Pynchon could be said to flow. For to the Sentient Rockster, of course, there is menace in just walking around, stepping on all those conscious beings on the earth. Pynchon undoubtedly also wants to call up the whole tradition of colonial contact evoked by that most famous footprint in literary history—the one of Friday that Crusoe discovers on the beach—as well as more contemporary
resonances of metaphors for human impact such as ecological footprints and urban footprints. (Oedipa sees a version of the latter in the “printed circuit” of the city visible from the hills above San Narciso [14].)

Footprints are important in two other key respects. First, they appear only as a having-been-there, indexical signs, which Pynchon may have learned about from C. S. Peirce, taken by John Johnston, among others, to be the namesake of Lot 49’s present absence, Pierce Inverarity (Johnston 56). Pynchon explores the maddening bottomlessness that can follow from such signs when Pointsman muses in Gravity’s Rainbow about the pins piercing Mexico’s map of rocket hits: “A pin? not even that, a pinhole in paper that someday will be taken down, when the rockets have stopped falling” (141). Second, in another undoing of our notions of final responsibility for an action, the footprint’s signification cannot be easily separated from the act of its making—which, as the victim of that Orwellian boot and the colonized subject both know, often entails a violent imposition of the self or state. These foundational acts of sovereignty’s violence are distanced from the core of the state, as a colony is separated from its metropolis and the foot, seemingly, from the self—an extremity, as we call it.

Most importantly, though, a footprint is a basic unit of measurement, the basis for one foot, a measure handed down by history whose scale may need re-imagining. In its evocation of scale the footprint promises a way into the question that has so bedeviled critics: how to compare the evil in Vineland to that of previous Pynchon work. One of the least discussed and incongruous parts of Vineland, Takeshi’s insurance investigation of a Godzilla-sized footprint on the Japanese coast where a computer lab used to be, calls to mind Slothrop’s investigations of rocket hits at the start of Gravity’s Rainbow. This Godzilla subplot, dangling in the middle of Vineland like a remnant of an earlier draft, seems like Pynchon’s intentional reminder of his old, far more apocalyptic methodology, with Godzilla’s act figuring as Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the most extreme of America’s violent footprints, presaged by Gravity’s Rainbow’s many portrayals of the rocket as King Kong. When Takeshi notes that he cannot grasp the footprint as a footprint while standing in the middle of it, he echoes Gravity’s Rainbow’s image of people living “inside the Fist of the Ape” (281). To leave Godzilla in the text in this underformed way, as Pynchon does, only underscores the contrast between the large-scale crime of nuclear war and the smaller-scale sins Vineland is mainly about, what Sasha calls “not [. . .] world history or anything too theoretical, but [. . .] humans, usually male, living here on the planet, often well within reach, committing these crimes, major and petty, one by one against other living humans” (80). Destructive behaviors have happened before and on large scales, Vineland seems to say, yet here there is something to compare them to.

Still, there is a definite awkward extremity to this everyday violence, this turn away from the earlier works’ evocation of American fascism by corporate
connections and Nazis making it to America—an awkwardness related to the straining means by which Pynchon’s flips attempt to get utopia and dystopia, Whitman and Orwell, side by side. *Vineland*’s version of Blicero is Vond, certainly, but also Millard Hobbs, a former actor who, after appearing in late-night commercials, slowly buys into, and now owns, a lawn-care company under the name “the Marquis de Sod.” Through him *Vineland* puts the Sentient Rockster thesis in play and gives a political edge to every footfall. In his commercials,

the Marquis [. . .] might carry on a dialogue with some substandard lawn while lashing away at it with his bullwhip, each grass blade in extreme close-up being seen to have a face and little mouth, out of which, in thousandfold-echoplexed chorus, would come piping, “More, more! We love eet!” The Marquis, leaning down playfully, “Ah cahn’t ‘ear you!” (46-47)

Thus the grass express those “unacknowledged desires for [order]” that Vond sees in flower children (269), here evoked as faces on the blades. Leviathan looms over his kingdom once more, now explicitly named after Thomas Hobbes. Hanjo Berressem was first to point out that the Marquis, in a rather cartoonish way, inherits the position of sado-masochist Pynchon so thoroughly explored through Blicero (215-16). But de Sod is too, above all else, a travestying of Whitman. Isn’t the commercial meant to ironically evoke Whitman musing on the child’s question “What is the grass?” in section 6 of “Song of Myself,” where he writes that, though those beneath the grass are dead and gone, he still “perceive[s] after all so many uttering tongues” coming from it (120)?

The legacy of *Leaves of Grass* is indeed at issue for Pynchon from *Vineland*’s title on, and his portrayal of Whitman as a sado-masochistic gardener speaks to just how thoroughly infused his work has become with attempts to hide the darkest America in the lightest, the lightest in the darkest. Whitman’s “The Sleepers” is surely an intertext for Takeshi and DL’s dawn sighting, out their office window, of the Thanatoids waking up—another of Pynchon’s flickering images, written over with the language of forking, turning, and flipping:

Although the streets were irregular and steeply pitched, the entryways and setbacks and forking corners, all angles ordinarily hidden, in fact, were somehow clearly visible from up here at this one window—naive, direct, no shadows, no hiding places, every waking outdoor sleeper, empty container, lost key, bottle, scrap of paper in the history of the dark shift just being relieved, was turned exactly to these windows. (173)

And then, like the Tristero’s signs for Oedipa in *Lot 49*, it all disappears as the *Vineland* sun rises: “the shadows come in to flip some of the angles inside out as ‘laws’ of perspective [are] reestablished” (173; emphasis added). The “naive,
direct” view of down-and-out Americans the passage implies must be that of Whitman, whose leveling eye Pynchon, the finder of Elect and Preterite in every American setting, will not allow himself (yet by which he clearly feels tantalized). Whitman never doubts the perspective from which he is able to democratically equate all the sleepers, whatever their waking status: “I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers each in turn / . . . Only from me can they hide nothing” (441). Pynchon, with his ghostly Thanatoid sleepers, turns us at every point to the elegiac pulse in Whitman, making him, quite oddly, almost a gothic writer, going well beyond the uglification of him familiar to us (and no doubt to Pynchon) in Allen Ginsberg. Pynchon takes the sweep and scope of Whitman’s democratic vistas and shows blood to be running through them, as in DL’s realization (contra Frenesi) of her “entanglement” in “the crimes behind the world, the thousand bloody arroyos in the hinterlands of time that stretched somberly inland from the honky-tonk coast of Now” (180).

Whitman’s catalogs undoubtedly had a major influence on the explosion of style Pynchon made in Gravity’s Rainbow, and passages like the one on Slothrop’s desire to “make it all fit” and see signs in every piece of trash juxtapose a Whitmanesque sensibility with, as that passage ends, its grim betrayal by the Bomb (638). (Elaine Safer is telling only part of this bifurcated story when she writes that Gravity’s Rainbow “turns Whitman’s transcendental vision of man’s natural goodness on its head” [47].) But only here in Vineland do we see Pynchon engaging so explicitly with Whitman as legacy. Whitman is to Vineland, in fact, what Rilke was to Gravity’s Rainbow: the presiding poetic presence who shapes the particular kind of Romanticism Pynchon dissects and discredits in the text. Thus while de Sod may seem like only a cartoon fascist, without the depth of Blicero and befitting the lighter atmosphere of Vineland, in a sense the latter novel hits closer to home by focusing its criticisms not only on an American setting but an American literary canon, trying to construct a tradition of American fascistic leanings without the deep investigation of European Romanticism and modernism that V. and Gravity’s Rainbow offer. If a fascist genetics is inherent in Americans, this lineage asks in a different way, what avoiding of the “ancestral curse” can there be? Likewise, as Millard Hobbs’s movement from actor in a commercial to owner of the company suggests, Pynchon sees these Sadean and Hobbesian ways as inevitable results of the homogenizing effects of cultural history. The charisma of Whitman cannot be sustained in hundreds of millions, over hundreds of years.

American Transcendentalism seems to be under attack elsewhere in Vineland, which clearly represents, especially after Mason & Dixon’s appearance, a turn in Pynchon’s reading toward American texts. True, Emerson’s “On Sovereignty” is lovingly quoted at the ending reunion, but, in another instance of ambivalence, Pynchon encodes contrary readings elsewhere. Ralph Wayvone is a mafioso who heads up Ralph Wayvone Enterprises—a sly reference, along
the lines of Blood and Vato’s link with Brock Vond, to Ralph Waldo Emerson? In a book with much suspect talk of joining the “wave of History,” Wayvone’s name—reversible to One-Way or One-Wave—may hold a judgment of the future-centered (and past-denying?) vision of a pond’s ripple in Emerson’s “Circles” (VL 27). Given Pynchon’s critiques of American homogenization elsewhere, the waves that continually create each individual’s new horizons—“every end is a beginning”—could indeed seem to him, in historical practice, to be one wave (Emerson 228). Certainly the line definitive of Frenesi’s fascist turn—her belief in a “freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them”—sounds a criticism of an Emersonian eternal present (71-72). Emerson’s famous “transparent eyeball” that “see[s] all” and is “part or parcel of God” might also be troped in the camera eye with which Frenesi often shields herself from experience, a camera called at one point—during the People’s Republic of Rock and Roll scenes that set her betrayal in motion—her “throbbing eye” (Emerson 11; VL 210).

Readers’ problems with truly believing in Frenesi’s turn have everything to do with these strained attempts not just to trace the fall-out of individualist credos but to find an intellectual lineage for fascism and other perversions in American Romanticism. As with creeping, Pynchon somehow needs to invest single images with the fullness of America’s Romantic and democratic potential (Whitman) and the dystopianism (Orwell) which pulls him in an opposite direction. Pynchon wants it, in essence, both ways, the way back always present even in the darkest images, and perhaps even through their very darkness. The point is well illustrated in a culminating passage about another footprint, a single homogeneous one formed by many successive generations of tramping, which we can read as Pynchon’s cynical image for what centuries of American individualists have done in their communions with nature and their supposed trailblazing. This footprint comes at the end of one of the most telling passages in Vineland, yet one difficult to understand for the way it mixes promise with despair and dystopianism, along with Pynchon’s own self-consciousness about his portraits of fascist America. The scene is the closing Becker-Traverse family reunion:

And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began, some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia—Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic
interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (371-72)

The language sounds anthemic, and, indeed, as with “the song They never taught anyone to sing” that ends Gravity’s Rainbow against the rocket’s red glare, here in this moment—a “twilight” that must not have its last gleaming, the suggestion of a new stars and stripes in the “constellated” “interweaving,” a chorus of voices joining together—Vineland also recasts the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Its dissenting singers focus “not [. . .] above [on] any nightwide remoteness of light, but below,” underfoot, on the preterite and Whitman’s dead. As in Gravity’s Rainbow’s ending too, Pynchon defers the key question, leaving the nation suspended in “prefascist twilight,” just as he left the rocket hanging above us. That uncertainty is recapitulated in the Whitman/Orwell conjunction visible in those “meanest of random soles,” the Kerouacean, off-beat America they evoke alongside the sovereign over-use and the well-beaten paths of a paved nation they do as well. If de Sod’s whipped flowers are remembered here, then in the boots’ stomping lies a kind of everyday fascism, warring on nature. The “blackly fermenting” leaf they create, in line with Pynchon’s images of an America that can flip at any time, is an emblem of both the nitrogen cycle he often celebrates and of something “virulent” just on the other side of the membrane—if anyone will “turn [it] over.” If we think of how disintegrated that leaf would be in its blackened, trampled state, we see that the flip is no longer really a flip at all; the leaf is simply all one mass, and fascistic empire is, right along with a fecund American garden, here in the US, on ground westward expansion has claimed and despoiled. Still, it takes the ever-turning images of Pynchon’s text to get us readers to turn up this soil, for in doing so we risk the “flip” Thomas Schaub sees in a similar hoeing image in Lot 49: by looking beneath “the cheered land,” Oedipa becomes “unfurrowed,” both living outside the grooves of American culture and, like the old sailor, contracting a kind of “delirium” (from the Latin delirare, literally “to leave the furrow”) (149, 105, 104; Schaub 150).

A leaf is to Pynchon what it was to Whitman: an image of nature but also of the book (though note here that Pynchon, critiquing Whitman, sees only one homogeneous leaf, not many). This is a passage about texts, full of elliptical, highly literary connections to other books and, as importantly, Pynchon’s own. Ambitiously synthetic in its language, the passage caps not only Vineland but the whole development of Pynchon’s ideas of a fascist turn I have documented here. In the passage we see a bookend to Sphere’s warning about a flip that America cannot let occur, as well as suggestion that reading for such flips is itself a kind of madness, a “delirium”—but a necessary one. Still,
“prefascist twilight” seems like a letdown from the visceral nature of “werewolf season”; Pynchon has dealt in the image of the flip so many times before that it has become almost completely abstracted from V.’s visions of Weimar “fever” (353). Indeed, Pynchon seems to wonder aloud here (especially to the ear that has heard his other, more bracing renditions of this connection) whether the “perennial question” of the US’s fascist turn has really been his own flowering perennial—“the old reliable names good for hours of contention” and three previous novels, one of which drew, on the arcs of rockets, a line from Hitler and Blicero to Nixon that is not unlike what the old radicals rehearse here.

If Vineland’s postmodernism is “attenuated,” as Cowart claims, then we ought to read it not only for the well-troddenness of popular culture, but for Pynchon’s re-use of his own signifiers as well (“Attenuated Postmodernism” 6-8). Here I have traced the totalitarian thesis of the 1960s and 1970s as it meets several impasses in Vineland, chief among which is the difficulty of embodying a totalitarian turn in ways that do not call on elaborate forms of metamorphosis. Seeing this both realistic and highly conceptualized betrayal at the heart of Vineland clarifies the absence of a more controlling evil and distinguishes Pynchon’s new achievement: a language for political resistance that maintains vigilance and undermines fascistic assumptions at their fundamental bases. Thus does the novel creep, turn, and flip through the attentive reader’s mind.

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Notes

1 Thanks to participants in the International Pynchon Week in Granada, Spain, June 2006, for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

2 Of the many moments of such analysis, see for example, Booker and Bumas (163-65). For Pynchon’s own muted suggestions of his connections to Orwell, see his Foreword to 1984’s centennial edition (Orwell vii-xxvi).

3 Certainly Pynchon has been widely interpreted as a writer who rejects narratives that end in the triumph or defeat of resistant cultures for the much messier prospect of suspended judgment, as in, for instance, John Johnston’s claim that “logically disjunctive” (76) possibilities about the politics of the Tristero confront Oedipa and the reader in Lot 49. But Oedipa, however many bodily metaphors Pynchon brings to her, is essentially only a mind grappling with that paradoxical state. My reading tries to understand the stakes of embodiment in Pynchon’s creation of these political paradoxes: the visceral swings into madness, the betraying character who must turn away from emotional attachments as well as abstract ideals. In other words, where Johnston’s is a typically end-centered view of Pynchon’s uncertainty, I read for the means by which “both-and” states develop sentence by sentence for Pynchon and the reader.

4 For prompting my collection of Pynchon’s werewolves, I owe a general debt to
Manfred Kopp’s reading of the “Wolf of Jesus” in *Mason & Dixon*. (See Kopp 163-64.) Kopp notes many mentions of werewolves in *Mason & Dixon* but does not pursue the image in earlier Pynchon.

5 Gates, Frenesi’s father’s name, extends the idea with its suggestion of (as in Sphere’s speculation) computer circuits and their flips between the one and zero of binary code, troped on elsewhere in *Vineland* (see 90-91).

6 On the fate of feminism and feminist theory more generally in *Vineland* and in the “Cosmic Fascist” passage, see Hite, especially 140-41.

7 The Biblical dimension of the creeping fig adds to its ambiguity. Pynchon invokes Jesus’s prediction of Jerusalem’s fall in Mark 13, known (appropriately for small-scale *Vineland*) as the “little apocalypse”: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer [for which read the end-time] is near.” Is Pynchon calling up the solace Mark’s apocalypticism represented to preterite early Christians? Or do we emphasize the autumnal time the novel ends on, with Reagan’s re-election on the horizon and Prairie’s possible turn to her mother’s ways? What time is it, in essence, on this little apocalyptic clock?

8 On Pynchon’s appreciation of the Beats, see his Introduction to *Slow Learner* (14, 22).

9 Patell, while not uncovering these direct allusions, sees Pynchon’s politics as a deep critique of the Emersonian individualism at the root of “liberal ideology.” See Patell, especially 1-33, 167-73. Tanner, writing on William Emerson, a magician figure in *Mason & Dixon* who teaches students to fly, aptly calls Pynchon “an Emersonian with shadows” (237).

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Childhood as a Metaphor: Motif and Narrative Device in Mason & Dixon

Zofia Kolbuszewska

"The only hope, I suppose, is if we haven't come home exactly,— I mean, if it's not the same, not really,— if we might count upon that failure to re-arrive perfectly, to be seen in all the rest of Creation. . . ." (Mason & Dixon 755)

The new nation, the nation of civil law, can suppress madness—the mad are locked up—but children are still around; and it is to them that the forbidden passions are assigned. At least until the romance is over and real life begins. (Alryyes 190)

Referring at the close of his article “Plot, Ideology and Compassion in Mason & Dixon” to the time of the novel, Tom Schaub designates it “the remembered futurity of a nation about to be born” (201). It is worth noting that since Romanticism the remembered futurity has been considered to be embodied in the image of the child. In what follows I will discuss the image of the child as a metaphor driving the narrative desire in Mason & Dixon. In my account I will rely on Peter Brooks' approach to narrative in Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narratives (1998).

Drawing inspiration from Sigmund Freud's essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Brooks proposes a dynamic model of narrative, whose operating logic can be described as anticipation of retrospection. In this model, the tension between repetition and change, binding the beginning and the end of the plot, propels the writer’s and the reader’s desire to make meaning—narrative desire—along a chain of signification transformations which seek to arrive at a meaning that would stop the narrative's movement. This movement thus begins with a blinded, that is, collapsed and inactive, metaphor of transmission. In the course of its advancement, the narrative unpacks the givens of the initial figure by acting them out as metonymy in order to arrive at the terminal figure, an enlightened and transactive metaphor of transmission. The metonymic process restores difference to the blinded metaphor, thereby turning it into an enlightened metaphor (Brooks 23-29, 90-112, 319-23).

It seems that in Mason & Dixon, the writer’s narrative desire, fuelled by his efforts to explore and question contemporary nostalgic representations
of the rise of America’s vision of itself, is carried through the narrative process by means of the child metaphor. Consequently, the reader sets out from the blinded metaphor of the nation as, simultaneously, a newborn infant, America as a prodigal son leaving its home Britain, and an image of future citizens whose education is supposed to turn them into dutiful children of the nation. The extradiegetic frame narrative that fades into and at times emerges from that of Rev. Cherrycoke’s narration, whimsically and metaleptically reworks these images by unpacking them metonymically. The reader is thus provided with examples of historicized Oedipal conflicts between sons and fathers, prodigal sons leaving their homes, masters serving as surrogate fathers who in the end betray their assumed sons, and children who, first deserted by their fathers, are forced later to act as those fathers’ fathers—in other words, literally appear as fathers of men. The plot of Pynchon’s novel finally veers into the conflated Wordsworthian and Emersonian image of childhood embodied by Mason’s sons remembering their dreams of America, thus figuring the terminal enlightened metaphor of the novel’s narrative.

Sensitive to the cultural significance of the power of cutting edge technology and scientific disciplines to captivate the mass imagination, Pynchon, when writing *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, seems to have been inspired by the Nobel laureate geneticist James Watson. Appearing before the congressional Human Genome Advisory Committee, Watson said, “we used to think that our fate was in the stars. Now we know that, in large measure, our fate is in our genes” (Jaroff 62). Indeed, in both *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon links the stars, that is the macroscopic, with the microscopic molecules that encode human heredity and are responsible for its transmission. The writer’s interest in genes can be construed as a parodically biologized quest for the origin. Appositely, both novels do return to an origin. *Vineland* begins and ends with the word home, while the narration in *Mason & Dixon* starts with the historicized child audience of Rev. Cherrycoke and ends with the Romantic vision of the mythic redeemer children, Charles Mason’s sons, arrested in the timelessness of the American pastoral vision.

The writer’s gestures of reaching back—to the site of the 1960s countercultural movements in *Vineland* and the inception of the United States in *Mason & Dixon*—emerge from the cultural exigency of an American society beset with questions about its self-definition in the last two decades of the twentieth-century. Pynchon’s retrospection can be seen as a critique of the neoconservative nostalgic project launched in the Reaganist 1980s and in the 1990s in order to redeem the tumultuous, multicultural, and anxiety-ridden present of global capitalism by “stabiliz[ing] what [neoconservatism] perceived as a harmful, dissolute erosion of cultural values” (Caputi par. 3). The writer seeks to defy the fusion of capitalism and nostalgia characteristic of the New Right strategy, which, by marketing merchandise self-consciously invoking bygone days, generates “imagined nostalgia” for an untrammeled
past never in fact “lived through but presented in fond and familiar ways” (Caputi par. 6). Pynchon’s quest for America’s self-definition takes him self-consciously to sites of the past that is as disunified and ambiguous as the present he sets out from.

He parodically thematizes his awareness of the vain generational longing for the healing of traumas experienced in the turbulent national past by having Rev. Cherrycoke expatiate in chapter 56 of *Mason & Dixon* on the great trauma suffered by his generation in the wake of 1752’s transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which involved skipping eleven days, an experience that left a “chronologic Wound,” compelling the generation to seek obsessively for the sequence of those allegedly missing days in a vain effort to “pretend Life undamaged again” (555) and in the hope of redeeming the lost time. In response to his young audience’s incredulity and ridicule, he points out that “one day, should you keep clear of Fate for that long, you may find yourself recalling some Injustice, shared with lads and lasses of your own Day, just as uncalmable, and even yet, unredeem’d” (555).

Yet, as Caputi observes, the American search for meaning is not constituted solely by traditionalism. “New Right ideology—and by now, much of American culture—joins this traditionalism to a technological savvy eager to remain competitive in the globalizing world market” (par. 5). As does Pynchon, by parodically engaging genetics when interrogating the troubled past.

James Berger proposes the term “revised nostalgia” when discussing *Vineland*’s return to the revolutionary 1960s not “as to a site of original wholeness and plenitude” but rather as a site of cultural and political trauma, where a traumatic past “persistently leaps forward into the present” (171). He stresses that the traumatic moment is simultaneous with a “utopian, or revelatory, moment” (171), which resembles Walter Benjamin’s concept of *jetztzeit*, the visionary, “critical moment of historical, redemptive possibility that continues to erupt into the present even after many previous failures” (171). Mediated by particular cultural and ideological forms, “*Vineland*’s utopian/traumatic vision,” the revised nostalgia, “possesses ethical and political urgency, an imperative to use its glimpse of utopian potential to try to change an unjust history” (171-72). The return to the traumatic 1960s is refracted in the novel through the popular, mass culture of the Reaganist 1980s, which subsidized and perpetuated the view of the 1960s as “a source of political and especially sexual violence and chaos” (172).

Berger observes that the novel ascribes the failure of social movements in the 1960s to political betrayals that are inseparable from sexual betrayals (174-75). Sasha, Frenesi’s mother, realizes that her own “oppositions [. . .] to forms of power” are really “acts of denying that dangerous swoon,” that is sexual desire for “uniformed men” (*VL* 83). She believes that this uniform fetish is hereditary “as if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence
requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control” (83). The reference to DNA thus bespeaks both the threat posed by the reproduction and transmission of control desire and desire control, and social control’s penetration to the microscopic level of biological structure beyond individual consciousness. Moreover, the reference to genetic manipulation thematizes the anxiety about the impossibility of returning to people’s original, prelapsarian untrammeled nature.²

In Mason & Dixon, the return to the site of origin coincides with Christmas of 1786, on the eve of 1787; that is, the year the American Constitution was ratified.³ The nation is thus represented as a child, while its DNA is figured by the compositional structure of the novel. In Triangulating Thomas Pynchon’s Eighteenth-Century World, Manfred Kopp argues extensively and cogently that the spatio-temporal configuration of motifs in the novel is that of a double helix; that is, a DNA sequence:

It is . . . the book’s unusual spelling of this term, “[h]elixxx,” [M&D 417] that suggests an implicit connection to the famous DNA double helix. Incorporating not only binarity, balance, and complementarity, but combining also linearity and circularity in its own spiraling shape, this double helix has to be seen as the perfect illustration of the novel’s internal configuration. In conjunction with various other references to genetics, this interpretation finally suggests that if Gravity’s Rainbow stands “on the landscape like a formless monster with little, if any, organizing skeleton,” [Weisenburger 3] then Mason & Dixon may also lack such a strong skeleton, but it shows an organizing DNA instead. (196)

However, the novel’s plot resolves itself into a non-deterministic vision of what this figurative child could become: a vision of the subjunctive, non-reduced possibilities inherent in the genetic makeup, even if not to be realized, or realized only in bursts of jetztzeit, a utopian possibility of social change concomitant with traumatic moments. Thus, although engaging genetics, Pynchon rejects the sense of destiny written into the text of a genotype that has been invested with “all the power and prestige of modern science” and therefore he seems to agree with the opinion of David Cox, a Stanford geneticist who asserts that

[f]rom the molecular genetics point of view, it’s absolutely clear that we’re demolishing the arguments of genetic determinism. But the facts have never got in the way of people who wanted to use genetics in a deterministic way in our society. (qtd. in Allen par. 27)

It is the employment of instruments and weapons whose workings are based on the Newtonian deterministic vision of natural laws that ensures the domination of Western civilization—especially its tradesmen, merchants,
and politicians—in Pynchon’s colonial America. The cosmic—the stars and planets the Astronomers observe—is harnessed in the service of political and economic power on earth by means of precise mechanisms. "The finer the Scale we work at, the more Power may we dispose. [. . . ] They who control Microscopick, control the World” (663). Although Mason’s observation is made when explaining the precision and the long range of the Lancaster County rifle, Manfred Kopp treats this statement as “[a] hidden reference to genetics” (195). If this is so, it is a vision of co-opted deterministic and reductive genetics, serving the commercial and political needs of the twentieth-century military-industrial complex, as well as commodified mass culture. This conjecture seems to be confirmed by the circumstances in which the word helix is mentioned in the novel. It appears during a parodic conversation at the “infamous Lepton Ridotto” (410) during which Lord Lepton, a villain-businessman and capitalist owner of a hellish metal works in the American wilderness—an uncannily secularized version of the Puritan Lord of the howling wilderness—questions the need for such a rigid ordering of the universe as envisioned by the Great Chain of Being, a metaphor visualizing an immutable, permanent and hierarchical order linking all higher and lower forms of life. We are thus encouraged to see the figurative genetic make-up of the nation, or its heritage, as both flawed and manipulable, and, in keeping with the non-deterministic vision of genetics, unpredictable in its richness and therefore full of future promise and possibilities.

In The DNA Mystique, Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee propose that the genome has become the modern metaphor for the soul (qtd. in Wolpe 217). In the same vein it can be averred that the double helix compositional skeleton of Pynchon’s novel, an externalization, so to speak, of DNA, can be interpreted as a modern, biologized variation on Rousseau’s reversal in Emile of the connection made by Plato in The Republic between justice inscribed in the soul and justice in the polis. Both inscriptions are written in the “same letters;” but what is inscribed in “small letters” in the individual soul is more legible when written in the large letters of the polis (Plato 615; Alryyes 20). By modeling the composition of his novel on DNA, and thereby externalizing the helix structure, the writer writes large the potential inherent in the “genome” of the infant nation, and gestures towards all the possible plots and narratives of the nation’s fate in bud. In this regard it is reminiscent of a novel containing all possible plots, familiar from Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which indisputably serves as an intertext for Mason & Dixon, in particular the counterfactual chapter 73. However, the geneticist and ethicist Alex Mauron wryly observes that “[t]o be a human person means more than having a human genome, it means having a narrative identity” (832).

Discussing the rise in the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century of the novel and of narratives bearing witness to the birth of the nation, Ala A. Alryyes designates them “national narratives” and defines them
as “the constellation of symbolic manifestations of the nation—its political prescriptions, myths of origin, rules of belonging and proper feelings, educational proclamations and policies”—that “underscore this made (and not found) nature of the nation” (12). Alryyes further notes—appositely invoking DNA—that “[l]ike the two strands of a double helix, the novel and national narratives intertwine” (205).

Although Pynchon’s return to the site of the nation’s birth is a rhizomic pastiche of different genres, it is by and large stylized as an eighteenth century novel. Pynchon’s book is thus underscored by the same concern as the rising novel and the contemporary national narratives—namely that of “resist[ing] fictional and political representations in which nature and God, duty and happiness, were firmly on the side of the father and of the Father” (Alryyes 16). Because children “represent both the promise of and resistance to continuity” (Alryyes 15), the childhood of man and society becomes the site on which the patriarchal royal authority can be contested. However, as Alryyes observes, both discourses ascribe to the child the paradoxical position of “an actor in an original discursive condition and also an excluded cipher; he/she is both out of place and a place of beginning” (15). The critic points to a paradox associated with the rise of the novel which

often narrates a neo-archetypal story of an often unhappy child who leaves her/ his father’s house for a place in the world. Staging his Lockean freedom, the child sets forth into the world, losing a home, acquiring narratable experience, and becoming the hero of the novel. But the child remembers his/her father’s tears, and often his curse. The child’s experience in the world narrated in the novel is also a dialogue with the lost home. (25)

Alryyes further invokes Rousseau’s views concerning the child and the philosopher’s “secularization of a religious nostalgia for a lost unity” which, she claims, resemble Romantic allegorical narratives where the history of humanity is represented as the life story of a single person. Thus “the life of one man comes to stand for the history of the nation, and the child comes to allegorize both privileged past periods of national history and the promise of a happier future” (20-21), while “the citizen . . . becomes a ‘child’ of the nation” (22). It can therefore be concluded, in Alryyes’ words, that “[i]f narrative is the literary form which allegorizes temporality, the child is the literary content which acts similarly” (181).

In discussing the American Revolution as a watershed in the history of the American family, Jay Fliegelman reflects in Prodigals and Pilgrims on the manner in which the transformations in familial relations that gave rise to more affectionate and egalitarian relationships between parents and children amplified political appreciation of individual identity and personal autonomy. These changes were themselves rooted on the one hand in the Protestant
championing of religious autonomy and on the other hand in Lockean ideas on child development and upbringing that stressed education as a means of acquiring individual autonomy, attaining moral independence, and developing rational self-sufficiency. Therefore it comes as no surprise that family-life and family-relations metaphors figure prominently in the cultural and political discourse in colonial and, later, Revolutionary America: “[A] call for filial autonomy and the unimpeded emergence from nonage echoes throughout the rhetoric of the American Revolution” (Fliegelman 3).

Studying a general revolution in the understanding of the nature of authority which swept eighteenth-century Europe and America, Fliegelman discusses metaphors capturing the moment of breaking away from the corrupting effects of dependence and indolence by, among other things, shedding filial obedience and dependence on the parents, especially a patriarchal father. Fliegelman further stresses that “[o]nce the cause of American independence had been identified with substituting God’s yoke for Britain’s, rather than with the suspect virtue of self-dependence, the Tory arguments for the necessity of a protective parent were turned back on themselves” (175). The elevation of Washington to the status of the nation’s new and benevolent father and subsequent identification of Washington with America has resulted in identifying ontogeny with phylogeny, as Fliegelman aptly puts it, conflating history and biography. Consequently, America saw itself as born at once, its infancy paradoxically interpreted as an attainment of manhood (Fliegelman 223). The view of the instantaneous rise of the nation was also conceptualized in spiritual terms, whereby rather than returning to the earthly father, the prodigal son discovers a father of grace:

The spiritual model for the new nation “born at once” was the miraculous gathering of the diaspora, the formation of the new Israel. And the model for both was the Christian become regenerate by a second birth, reborn by embracing a new father of grace. (Fliegelman 224)

Two metaphors seem to be particularly resonant in these circumstances: the metaphor of the prodigal son turned pilgrim, who substitutes the heavenly father for the earthly representative of patriarchal power, and the metaphor of an orphan mourning the demise of his parent in a death-bed scene figuratively representing the demise of the ancien régime, with the child finding a new and affectionate parenting in an America, which according to Paine’s statement in Common Sense has the power “to begin the world again” (45). These metaphors seem to correspond in Mason & Dixon to Brooks’s blinded metaphors of transmission.

The extradiegetic frame narrative that opens the novel presents the act of telling the adventures of Mason and Dixon to the Le Spark youth by their tutor Cherrycoke. Throughout these entangled narrative levels a “metonymic
unpacking” of the inactive metaphors of transmission takes place. Itself an inactive metaphor, Cherrycoke’s tutorial is instrumental in the metonymical transformation of blinded metaphors of transmission into the enlightened metaphor of transmission by parodying the Enlightenment emphasis on teaching through entertainment and subverting the idea of the unified historical curriculum designed to turn young citizens into children of the nation.

The parlor in which Cherrycoke is to tell his story is described in the frame narrative. A mirror placed on the parlor’s wall seems to play an ingenious intertextual role. The motif of the mirror and the cat reflected in it are reminiscent of the initial scenes of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass And What Alice Found There*, which not only begins, just like *Mason & Dixon*, with the invocation of children gathered around the fireplace on a winter evening listening to a story told by a lonely bachelor wistfully expounding on the flow of time, but also reverses the sequence of events in its mirror world (like when the queen cries out and only then pricks her finger), just as the plot of Pynchon’s novel does. *Mason & Dixon* ends at the moment of Mason’s death, chronologically preceding Cherrycoke’s act of relating Mason’s and Dixon’s adventures, which opens the novel. This mirror reversal metaphorically marks the promise—inculcated in the heads of the first young generation of independent America—of a new nation in the New World which it is hoped will be governed by the principles of freedom and equality, unlike the Old World, riven with injustice and corruption:

“‘Tis the Elder World, Turn’d Upside Down,” Ethelmer banging out a fragment of the tune of that Title, play’d at the surrender of Cornwallis, “‘Tis a lengthy step in human wisdom, Sir. [. . .]

“These late ten American Years were but Slaughter of this sort and that. Now begins the true Inversion of the World.” (*M&D* 263-64)

On the other hand, the mirror on the parlor wall and assorted mismatched pieces of furniture in the room appear to gesture toward the Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which, like Pynchon’s novel, purports to settle accounts—in the Gothic mode—with the nation’s traumatic ancestral past and its transmission. In *Mason & Dixon* the Gothic mode functions on two levels—as a parody of eighteenth-century Gothic motifs and conventions and in its twentieth-century transformed shape which underpins and permeates the pastiche rhizome of the novel. By referring to the eighteenth-century Gothic, the writer subtly invokes its concern with thwarted inheritance and a family history which express anxiety about the demise of the old patriarchal social and political system in the wake of the rise to power of the bourgeoisie. Thus, indirectly and uncannily, Pynchon introduces the problem of those disenfranchised inhabitants of eighteenth-century America who,
not allowed any consensual political rights, were considered dependent on the father’s or father figure’s authority and thus denied autonomy. These were slaves, servants, women, and children, of which only male children became independent on reaching maturity. The figure of Tenebrae, who as a girl would be destined to remain dependent on the family patriarch, while her name—“darkness” in Latin—involves the darkness of the most wretched dependents, that is, slaves, and serves as a link between eighteenth- and twentieth-century Gothic.4

In American Gothic, whose publication coincided with the appearance of Mason & Dixon, Teresa Goddu points out that the critical tradition within American literature is dominated by the generic term romance that displaces or subsumes the Gothic, which, in turn, is often replaced by the more general term “dark,” a term that is, paradoxically, stripped of its racial connotations. Following in the footsteps of Toni Morrison, Goddu shows that race has assumed the role of an uncanny counterpoint for the white identity in American literature since its inception. Thus “resurrecting the term gothic reasserts the racial roots of the romance’s blackness” (Goddu 7). Goddu points to the Gothic’s preoccupation with the materiality of flesh and its focus on the body, especially in the writings of African-American authors, who employ the Gothic “as a useful mode in which to resurrect and resist American racial history.” Goddu invokes the ending of Richard Wright’s introduction to Native Son,5 where Wright points out that the horrors that Poe or Hawthorne had to invent are already embodied in African-American history—especially the haunting legacy of slavery—and Ralph Ellison’s opening to Invisible Man, where he insists that “the gothic must be understood in realistic terms” (Goddu 131, 153).

Thus, by bringing out the trauma of slavery and its implication in the nascent capitalist economy, the second mode of the Gothic in Mason & Dixon follows Wright’s contention and Ellison’s injunction, and must be comprehended in realistic terms; that is, as a real, historical circumstance that disrupts the national narrative of innocence, purity and equality (Goddu 10). Rev. Cherrycoke’s observation in his Spiritual Day-Book testifies to Pynchon’s novel’s self-conscious use of the two modes of Gothic: “To anyone who has observ’d slave-keepers in Africa, it will seem all quite ancient,— Lords and Serfs,— a Gothick Pursuit,— what, in our corrupt Days, has become of Knights and Castles, when neither is any longer reasonable, or possible” (275). By his apocryphal act—apocryphal because handed down from generation to generation in Dixon’s family without any historical record to confirm it—of freeing slaves driven by a slave trader, Dixon, a prodigal Quaker son, expelled by his local gathering in Northern England, attempts in America to extend the benefits of the autonomy enjoyed by children of God to those who are denied it on the grounds of their alleged mental and physical inferiority which, in the vein of Lockean thinking, necessitates keeping them dependent. Dixon’s
intervention can thus be construed as a reworking of Brooks's blinded metaphor of transmission. A prodigal son's refusal of any authority, even one which seems as democratically exercised as that of the Quaker gathering, grows into defiance of the vestiges of patriarchal power in a society which in its filial struggle against Britain compared its own situation to that of a slave. Like a burst of Benjamin's jetztzeit, Dixon's courageous gesture reveals in a flash the possible, subjunctive America of social justice and equality. It is worth noting that its subjunctive nature is underlined by the allegedly apocryphal character of the event.

Mason is also a prodigal son turned pilgrim, albeit only shortly before his death when he substitutes the authority wielded by the vision of America he has in his dream for the authority inherent in the hierarchical structure of the contemporary British society. Having defied his father, a baker who accuses him of dreaming in vain of rising in society, Mason becomes an assistant to the Astronomer Royal, Mr. Bradley, and hopes eventually to occupy his position. He thus substitutes a surrogate father, Mr Bradley, for his biological father as a source of authority. Cheated of his dream of becoming the Astronomer Royal by Neville Maskelyne, Mason returns to his father’s household and his estranged sons after accomplishing his American mission. However, never reconciled with his father, he finally takes his new family and the two sons from his first marriage to America, where he dies. Dr Isaac, Mason’s second son by his beloved wife Rebekah, who dies giving birth to the boy, assumes the role of his father’s guide and emotional support-giver while he is still in England. This becomes clear in particular when they both visit Dixon’s grave. Thus, in a literal manner, Dr Isaac becomes his father’s father; the child becomes the father of the man.

Dr Isaac and William, his elder brother, keep vigil at their father’s death bed in America. Welcome in America, the orphans find support and can start a new life. Appositely, the metaphor of orphans mourning the demise of the old world in the death of their father, discussed by Fliegelman, is employed by Pynchon as an inactive metaphor of transmission, metonymically played out in Dr Isaac’s and William’s bereavement and mourning of their father.

It must be noted, however, that Mason & Dixon ends in a scene whose last sentences transpose the actual orphans, Dr Isaac and William, who at their father’s death bed should be over 26 years of age, into the figures of Romantic children. In the timelessness of their subjunctive mode of existence they address their father as if he were still alive, “‘We’ll go there. We’ll live there.’ ‘We’ll fish there. And you too’” (773). They embody the subjunctive promise of the pastoral America “not yet ‘reduc’d to certainty’” (177), and the America that “may yet be true” (345) coexistent in its timelessness with

[...]

the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities
to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,— winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. (345)

Mason's neglected and lonely sons thus become avatars of the Romantic promise of redemption through the figure of a lonely child in communion with nature. They seem to figure Emerson's “[i]nfancy” which is “the perpetual Messiah, who comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise” (37).

And although “[t]he fantasied child that veils the incompatibilities and the impasses, this child that restores to the social and sexual landscape a prelapsarian intoxication, is supplanted in the very moment of its accomplishment by the actual child who threatens to live on as the reminiscence of that which it formerly elided” (Blum 25), the hysteror proteron reversal, familiar to Pynchon's readers from Gravity's Rainbow, ensures that the enlightened metaphor towards which the plot of the novel veers invokes the prelapsarian child, thus foregrounding the intoxication with an America of the timeless promise and possibilities figured by this Romantic redeemer figure.

Consequently, it is this image of childhood as a space of freedom and future promise viewed in retrospect, a promise concomitant with and continually thwarted by historical circumstances such as slavery, that reverberates with echoes of Emerson, and Twain's Huckleberry Finn, and is even ironically continued in the boyhood dream of the Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby. However, the enlightened metaphor of the redeemer child towards which the narrative desire driving the plot of Mason & Dixon gravitates is not just a blank screen of adult desire; it also projects a promise of “purposeful[ly] Dither[ing]” (5) guidance provided by the figure of a poet or writer. Tom Schaub insightfully observes that in Mason's sons' final words readers are no doubt meant “to hear the pastoral accents of Frost's farmer going out to clean the spring in 'The Pasture' ('You come too'), and Whitman's invitation in 'Song of Myself': 'I stop some where waiting for you'” (201). Pynchon's elusive figure of a poet or writer is indeed waiting somewhere there, inscribed in the subjunctive space of possibility figured by the redeemer child, and beckons to readers while pointing to traumatic circumstances in the history of America.

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Notes

1 On the complexity of the narrative and the plot of Mason & Dixon, see Duyfhuizen.
2 This impossibility of returning home, to the initial, prelapsarian state is reminiscent of the blocking of all passages home in Mingeborough in Gravity's
Rainbow: “But there is the occupation. They may already have interdicted the kids’ short cuts along with the grown-up routes. It may be too late to get home” (744).

3 Tom Schaub calls the time of the novel “the remembered futurity of a nation to be born, the past already imperfect” (201).

4 Fliegelman notes that prior to the eighteenth century the word “family”—coming etymologically from the Latin root familia, itself derived from the word familus, or servant—usually denoted an entire household (10).

5 I would like to thank Tom Schaub for calling attention to the omission from this essay’s initial draft of Richard Wright’s discussion of the Gothic at the end of his Introduction to Native Son.

Works Cited


Historical Sources for Thomas Pynchon’s “Peter Pinguid Society”

Martin Paul Eve

Most close readings of the Peter Pinguid Society section in The Crying of Lot 49 have hailed it as an example par excellence of Pynchon’s aptitude for combining historical fact with fiction. However, many of these works have underestimated the precision of Pynchon’s sourcing (J. K. Grant 60-61) while others, in extreme cases, have been deceived into the all-too-familiar uncanniness whereby Pynchon’s extra-textual history appears too fantastical to be real (Pérez 40). In this note, I will present the cumulative textual evidence to support the view that Pynchon consulted a single work, F. A. Golder’s “The Russian Fleet and the Civil War” to construct the historicity of this episode. I will also present an interesting historical connection to the date of significance to Pinguid’s supposed followers, for 9 March 1864 was actually the date of Ulysses S. Grant’s ascent to the rank of Lieutenant-General—a significant factor in the Union Civil War victory.

To briefly recap: The fictional Peter Pinguid Society was, according to Pynchon’s text, founded to commemorate the eponymous captain of a Confederate man-of-war. En-route to launch an assault on San Francisco, Pinguid encountered a Russian vessel under the command of Rear Admiral Popov—sent to prevent Anglo-Franco assistance to the Confederacy—and, in what Brian McHale sees as a Faulknerian parody, the narrative remains unclear over whether they fired at one another (96). Much of the historical scenario could have been constructed from archival naval communications, particularly the Arkhiv Morskogo Ministerstva, Dielo Kantseliariii Morskogo Ministerstva, no. 91, pt. III. (102-03), which is the basis of Golder’s work. However, it is far more likely that Pynchon did not visit the Russian archive and, instead, relied on this secondary source.

Such a conclusion is warranted by four direct textual correlations to Golder’s article and the improbability of Pynchon arriving at an identical translation of the original Russian sources therein. First, Pynchon writes about a potential Confederate naval threat to San Francisco:

Rumors were abroad that winter that the Reb cruisers Alabama and Sumter were indeed on the point of attacking the city. (32)

which distinctly echoes Golder’s account,
It was reported that the Confederate cruisers *Sumter* and *Alabama* were planning to attack the city. (809)

This is of particular note as current scholarship on this section has emphasized the likelihood of the *Alabama* and *Sumter* rumor being of Pynchon’s own making. Indeed, Golder’s article contains all the named ships, and more, employed by Pynchon in this section: “Bogatir, Kalevala, Rinda, and Novik, the clippers Abrek and Gaidamak” (Golder 808). Secondly, Golder writes that

In view of this possibility Popov took measures to prevent it. He gave orders to his officers that should such a corsair come into port, the ranking officer of the fleet should at once give the signal “to put on steam and clear for action.” (809)

A direct portion of Golder’s version appears in Pynchon’s corresponding passage:

the Russian admiral had, on his own responsibility, issued his Pacific squadron standing orders to put on steam and clear for action should any such attempt develop. (32)

The direct repetition of the translated phrase “put on steam and clear for action” seems more than fortuitous.

Thirdly, Golder’s article posits a diplomatic link between Russia and America in the emancipation of their respective slave populations: “Alexander had freed the serfs; Lincoln was emancipating the slaves” (805), which Pynchon uses inaccurately (as C. Nicholson and R. W. Stevenson have pointed out [30]), crediting Nicholas, rather than Alexander when describing what Mike Fallopian finds troublesome about Pinguid’s response to the confrontation:

appalled at what had to be some military alliance between abolitionist Russia (Nicholas having freed the serfs in 1861) and a Union that paid lip service to abolition while it kept its own industrial labourers in a kind of wage-slavery, Peter Pinguid stayed in his cabin for weeks, brooding. (33)

Finally, Pynchon seriously plays up the significance of this initial military dalliance between the US and Russia, crediting the event with serious Cold War repercussions:

But that was the very first military confrontation between Russia and America. Attack, retaliation, both projectiles deep-sixed forever and the Pacific rolls on. But the ripples from those two splashes spread, and grew, and today engulf us all. (33)

Even without the fictitious firing incident, Golder comes to a similar conclusion
that this event was a truly remarkable point of international relations:

It was a most extraordinary situation: Russia had not in mind to help us but did render us distinct service; the United States was not conscious that it was contributing in any way to Russia's welfare and yet seems to have saved her from humiliation and perhaps war. There is probably nothing to compare with it in diplomatic history. (812)

As Golder describes it, however, the result is an accidental détente between two nations whose relations would evolve to the Cold War tensions of the 1960s when *Lot 49* is set.

Moving now to the second point of historical interest: the date chosen by Pynchon for the fictional hostilities between the Russians and Americans: “the 9th March, 1864, a day now held sacred by all Peter Pinguid Society members” (32). This date was actually marked in Civil War history as the day on which Ulysses S. Grant was appointed Lieutenant-General of the United States (U. S. Grant 116), a crucial legislative move in his progression towards becoming General-in-Chief; a position required in order to legally allow Grant to overrule his co-Generals (Catton 116-123). In reality, the date celebrated by the PPS turns out to be of significance for the Union, not the Confederacy. Such turbulence regarding the Society’s allegiance, which disregards the dialectic of “[g]ood guys and bad guys” (*Lot 49* 33) in order to critique the entire project of industrialization, also cannot wholly rest upon support for slavery; Pynchon cannot have been unaware of the canonized historical rhetoric which regards Eli Whitney’s cotton gin as the crucial industrial development that rendered slavery economically viable (Rhodes 25-27). I would suggest, although the troubling of political polarities was already evident, that this research should urge future scholarship to examine more rigorously the usually assumed label of “right-wing” that is applied to The Peter Pinguid Society.

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Although Thomas Pynchon has famously avoided the spotlight, he and his work—especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*—nevertheless cast a large shadow over contemporary American fiction. In a Bloomian anxiety of influence, a subsequent generation of fiction writers—I’m thinking of writers like the late David Foster Wallace, William T. Vollmann, Rick Moody, Bradford Morrow, Mary Caponegro, Michael Chabon, A. M. Homes, Colson Whitehead, and the subject of the collection of essays under review, Richard Powers—has been inspired to write by Pynchon’s great novels but has also sought to find a way out from under their shadow. This anxiety is made more acute by the concomitant sense that the postmodernism exemplified by Pynchon and his fellow experimental writers of the sixties and seventies (Barth, Coover, Sorrentino, Gaddis, Barthelme, Reed, and so on) has reached something of a dead end. That is, postmodernism’s consciousness of language, its iconoclasm, and its questioning of all master narratives, which in the 1960s played an important role in exposing and debunking many long-held social conceits and hypocrisies, by the late 1980s and 1990s had devolved into an all-purpose irony, the rolling of the eye and the nudging in the ribs that mocks any assertion that eschews irony’s game and aspires to sincerity. As Wallace explained in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, “Irony’s useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. . . . All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Postmodern irony and cynicism’s become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. . . . Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving” (147).

Wallace articulated most explicitly and consistently the challenge facing the generation of fiction writers that came of age at the twentieth century’s close: to make use of the bequest of the postmodernist generation—the awareness of language as language, narrative as narrative, representation as representation, the refusal to let the reader suspend her disbelief—but to use it in ways that will connect fiction more directly to the world we all more or less share. If postmodernism can be characterized as a double representation—fiction representing fiction representing the world—then the fin-de-siècle generation seeks, not so much a complete break with their
forebears, but a way to preserve though deemphasize the first representation while reemphasizing the second representation.

As a result, this generation’s relations with the postmodernists can be testy. Wallace had enormous admiration for *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but he also tired of reviewers’ comparisons of *Infinite Jest* to Pynchon’s novel. He once said to me, exasperatedly, “Why do they always compare me to Pynchon? Why don’t they compare me to DeLillo?” In his novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” (which would be a novel by anyone else’s standards) from the collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, he uses some creative writing students’ engagement with Barth’s classic story “Lost in the Funhouse” to critique the exhaustion and commercialization of postmodern fiction and the need to find new aesthetic directions so as to make fiction connect to the world and touch its readers. In “Octet” and “Adult World,” from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, he directly addressed the exhaustion of postmodernism. Another example is Matthew Remski’s brilliant and insufficiently known novel *Silver*, which begins with foreign correspondent Tyrone Pynchon’s peregrinations in pre-World War II Europe and works its way to contemporary America, where Jesus Christ, who is immortal but who did not, it turns out, ascend into heaven, becomes the first Ronald McDonald, and where the murdered Playmate Dorothy Stratten becomes a symbol of the dehumanization resulting from the twentieth century’s ideology of control. Both authors attempt to metaphorically kill the literary father and claim a new aesthetic.

Richard Powers is among the most intelligent, ambitious, and eclectic of the fin-de-siècle generation. Beginning in 1985, he has published ten novels, each interweaving a discipline or topic (genetics, medicine, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, race, memory), a narrative that acts on and is acted upon by the topic, and a set of formal strategies that develop the themes. Although there are no weak entries among his novels, my favorites are *Prisoner’s Dilemma* (1988), about the effects on a family of the trauma suffered by their father during World War II; *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), probably his most complex work, about the search to decode DNA, genetic communication, and interpersonal communication; *Galatea 2.2* (1995), about a novelist named Richard Powers who assists a scientist in creating a neural net that can pass the Master’s comps in English; *Plowing the Dark* (2000), which features parallel stories about code writers and artists trying to create a virtual reality program and a teacher held hostage by a fundamentalist group in Beirut; and *The Echo Maker* (2006, National Book Award), about a brain-damaged accident victim who cannot recognize his sister as his sister.

Stephen J. Burn in his introduction to *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, which he has edited with Peter Dempsey, notes the important influence Pynchon’s writing had on the young Powers: “Pynchon’s novels, with their blend of literature and science, and their dark portraits of the hidden networks of institutional power, exerted a lasting influence on Powers’s work
and, in fact, Powers has re-read portions of *Gravity’s Rainbow* every year since he discovered it as a sixteen-year-old” (xxi). Burn further tells us that one explanation Powers has offered for his decision in college to drop his Physics major and enter the Rhetoric program was his rereading of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Advent Evensong section. Powers has apparently maintained his interest in Pynchon: in 1990 he reviewed *Vineland* for the *Yale Review*; and in 2005 he wrote “Pynchon Appreciation” for *Bookforum*. Such influence as there may be is evidenced in Powers’s work not so much in character, narrative, surreal violations of the realist aesthetic, or the shotgun marriage of high-brow and low-brow as it is in the narratives’ casual mastery of esoteric disciplines, especially the sciences, and the application of those disciplines to explore ontological and epistemological questions.

It’s no wonder, then, that Pynchon enthusiasts have been drawn to Powers’s work as well. Indeed, *Intersections* includes essays by several critics—David Cowart, Charles B. Harris, Joseph Tabbi, Sven Birkerts, and Joseph Dewey—who have made important contributions to Pynchon studies. It is something of a surprise, however, given Powers’s output—ten novels so smart, complex, and rich that they practically beg for critical explication—that more scholarly work on his fiction has not already been generated. The useful annotated bibliography at the end of *Intersections* shows us that to date only one book-length study has been published, Dewey’s *Understanding Richard Powers*, along with a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, guest edited Jim Neilson in 1998, and a couple of dozen other book chapters and articles. It is this context that makes Burn and Dempsey’s collection so important. The essays here offer a variety of approaches to Powers’s work (*Generosity* [2009], Powers’s tenth novel appeared after *Intersections* was assembled), create an opportunity for critical exchange about his work, and blaze trails that other scholars can follow and then extend.

The editors have organized the collection into Burn’s introduction, providing background information on Powers’s life, career, and aesthetic, and three sections, the first covering his novels chronologically from his first, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) to *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993); the second beginning with *Galatea 2.2*, which, they argue, marks a turning point in his fiction, and ending with *The Echo Maker*; and the third consisting of essays that consider the novels in broader contexts and including a short but valuable essay by Powers. My own idiosyncratic way of thinking about the organization here is to divide the essays into three categories: essays that explicate some disciplinary knowledge to support a reading of the text; essays that explore formal strategies to show how they contribute to the ways the text makes meaning; and essays that consider Powers’s work in the context of the sea change I suggest above, the transition from postmodernism to whatever comes after.

I include four essays in the first category. Anca Cristofovici looks at
Powers’s first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, and its inspiration, a well-known photo by August Sander of three German farmers taken on the eve of World War I. She uses Sander’s biography and aesthetic as well as other photographic theory to show how the novel blurs the boundary between aesthetic and documentary truth and how it uses the photo as a means of traveling back and forth in time. Like others in this collection, she does not see Powers’s engagement with his sources as being a one-way flow of information. Rather, just as knowledge of Sander gives us an entrée into the novel, so does the novel gives us new ways of looking at Sander’s work. Burn, looking at *The Gold Bug Variations*, uses Paul MacLean’s concept of the Triune Brain as a way of understanding Stuart Ressler’s decision to drop out of the race to decode DNA, the novel’s treatment of evolution as an ongoing competition among the three parts of the brain, and the role of art as a means of stepping outside this evolutionary competition. Jon Adams examines in *Galatea 2.2* the themes that develop out of phenomenal similarity and functional simulation, or, as he puts it, “the differences between things that look the same and things that work the same” (138). The novel’s narrative, the creation of a neural net that can pass the Master’s comps, becomes a vehicle for exploring what makes one human. Charles B. Harris uses research in Capgras Syndrome (the brain perceiving a loved one as an imposter) and, more generally, in brain functions to connect *The Echo Maker’s* presentation of the brain as a networked ecology to our instinct to narrate ourselves into safe places. The moral impulse suggested by the novel is to break out of our self-protecting narrative and create a new story that can include someone else.

My second category includes essays that focus on formal issues and so gesture toward the question of the extent to which Powers’s novels participate in the postmodern tradition of self-referentiality. Sven Birkerts argues that the titular logic problem in *Prisoner’s Dilemma* provides both the formal structure for the novel and a mini-narrative out of which the novel’s themes develop. He sees Powers’s technique of wedding a series of realistic episodes with an alternate, more fantastic narrative as a way of addressing the crisis of the exhaustion of postmodernism: “how to create the terms of mattering in a culture that has divested itself of faith in all anchoring premises” (59). David Cowart, in looking at *Operation Wandering Soul*, a novel set at a hospital for seriously ill children, examines how the novel itself simultaneously participates in and refutes a tradition of literature in which narratives of some children’s suffering become entertainment for other children. The novel’s debate over the value of storytelling in the dwindling lives of these sick children—does it cure or kill?—leads to a synthesis in which *Operation Wandering Soul* becomes a narrative of children’s suffering that acknowledges and implicates the agents of that suffering. Trey Strecker argues that the paired narratives in *Plowing the Dark* present art as a space from which an observer can achieve a critical and reinvigorating distance from the overwhelming real world. Each narrative
serves as the art-space for the other, and at the novel’s climax characters from each narrative surrealistically meet in shared art-space. Paul Maliszewski examines the form of Gain, a novel with (again) paired narratives, one the history of a soap and chemical company, the other about a woman dying of cancer, who is convinced the company’s output caused her illness. When Gain was published in 1998, reviewers generally saw it as straightforward realism. Maliszewski complicates its realism by arguing that the company’s narrative gradually removes all humans until the company itself is the character, a strategy that mirrors the presence of corporations in contemporary life: given the rights of individuals by the courts, but also granted limited accountability, they are everywhere in our lives and yet nowhere. Similarly, Joseph Dewey argues that in The Time of Our Singing, a 2002 novel about race, focused in the story of a mixed-race marriage, which was also critically categorized as realism, an alternate, third-person narrative that violates the boundaries of time and space undercuts the main, first-person narrative, which is traditional, unimaginative, and leads, predictably, to an epiphanic climax in which Big Themes resonate.

My third category is really an extension of my second. These essays look more broadly at Powers’s fiction as it is situated on the cusp between postmodernism and whatever comes next, what Burn in his introduction calls his “synthesizing elements of realism and metafiction” (xxxi). Scott Hermanson argues that in Prisoner’s Dilemma Eddie Hobson, the patriarch whose mysterious illness so affects his family, suffers metaphorically from the breakdown of modernism’s faith in a perfect future based in the possibility of grand, totalizing schemes. Simultaneously, the plot of Walt Disney trying to make a post-World War II epic demonstrates the bankruptcy of the concept of the world as a textual construction. When the novel’s narrative levels collapse, we are left with what Hermanson calls an econovel, “an endless revising of reality, but one constantly aware of the inescapable constraints surrounding us—imprisoning us” (72). Bruno Latour posits that Powers’s fiction breaks down distinctions between matters of fact, which have traditionally been the domain of science, and matters of concern, which have been the subject of art. Suggesting something of a feedback loop, he argues that, while Powers has drawn on science for his fiction, the fiction provides means for scientists to think and write about their work. Carter Scholz puts Powers’s work in relation to traditional science fiction, arguing that the latter is about technology’s promise for the future whereas the former gives us not the future but a false present, where technology is omnipresent but stripped of its promise. He says, “everything we need to live or die is now bound to technology and to its narratives” (302). The novels become a place where technology can be narrated in alternate, less damaging narratives than the official ones.

In a book full of laudatory essays, Joseph Tabbi offers the one cranky entry, and its crankiness is based on his perception that Powers has not
succeeded in moving beyond the seeming usedupness of postmodernism. He criticizes Powers's tendency to move from topic to topic (genetics, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, etc.) but then to treat each topic in essentially the same form. He notes Powers's desire to reconcile head and heart in his fiction, but wonders if this ambition is possible in the limited form of the sentimental novel. Finally, he compares Powers to Pynchon, in whose work head and heart are not reconciled but thrown apart. He concludes, “Powers's mastery of information is no less deep or extensive than Pynchon's, but he is much better behaved, much more inclined to keep his imagination within the frame of what science allows and technology licenses. Powers is much more disciplined than his literary predecessors, when it comes to processing information from other fields. But it is a discipline that serves these scientific fields and these professional discourses better than it serves the semi-autonomous development of literature” (227). I’m not sure I entirely agree with Tabbi’s argument, but I like the potential dialogue that results from his breaking rank.

Intersections gives Powers himself the last word, in an essay in which he places his work in the context of Tom LeClair’s concept of the systems novel, which, rather than reducing reality, bracketing it off, represents it as infinitely interwoven with social, scientific, cultural, ideological, and narratological processes. He explains,

If mimetic fiction, on one hand, inviting an act of unbroken identification that willfully takes the symbol for the symbolized, trades in what John Gardner called the “vivid and continuous” fictional dream, and if postmodernism, on the other hand, calling attention to itself as an artifice through all sorts of anti-narrational devices, employs willful interruption of this unbroken dream, the novel I’m after functions as a kind of bastard hybrid, like consciousness itself, generating new terrain by passing “realism” and “metafiction” through relational processes, inviting identification at one gauge while complicating it at others, refracting the private through the public, story through form, forcing the reading self into constant reciprocal renegotiations by always insisting that no level of human existence means anything without all the others. (308)

This passage serves well as a grand summing up of what the essays in this volume, in their more focused explorations, have tried to demonstrate.

There are a few other essays in this collection that I found less successful, but other readers may find them useful. Another carp: the documentation is quite eccentric. It uses endnotes, preparing us for Chicago style citations, but when you turn to the end of the essay, the notes present the publication information in something approaching MLA bibliographic style. I imagine most readers will not be as irritated by this as I am.

Nevertheless, on the whole this volume is successful in offering thoughtful readings of Powers's fiction, in creating a scholarly dialogue about
his work that will, one hopes, generate future discussions, and in trying to situate Powers as heir to Pynchon’s generation and legator to a new one.

—Illinois State University

Work Cited

Measuring the World Anew

Tore Rye Andersen


“How much?”
“Twelve meters.”
“Sure?”
“Sure.”
“And add six meters, and we land on . . . three hundred and sixty meters.”

This sober exchange between the two title characters marks the beginning of Austrian Leopold Maurer’s new graphic novel, Miller & Pynchon. The two characters are measuring the world, like the characters in another recent Germanic work, Daniel Kehlmann’s wonderful novel Measuring the World (2005, English translation 2006), a story of the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and the explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Through a fictionalized account of their travails in the early nineteenth century, Kehlmann’s bestseller tells the story of how during the Enlightenment scientific rationality conquered the world and changed it forever.

In interviews upon the publication of Measuring the World, Daniel Kehlmann granted that his novel had been very inspired by Mason & Dixon, and it is certainly not difficult to spot the many thematic similarities between Kehlmann’s and Pynchon’s accounts of scientific expeditions and the “corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick” (M&D 487), which according to both authors took place during the Enlightenment. This historical process was first discussed by Pynchon in his essay “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” and of course treated much more extensively in Mason & Dixon, for instance in the story of Dixon’s fantastic journey to the inner surface of the earth. The inhabitants of this mythical realm greet Dixon cordially, even though his presence may threaten their very existence. As Dixon recounts, “Once the solar parallax is known,” they told me, “once the necessary Degrees are measur’d, and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish. We will have to seek another Space” (741). From a purely scientific standpoint, the measuring of the world is a more or less inevitable process which carries along many benefits, but Pynchon’s novels argue that it also contributes to the marginalization and eventual disappearance of those magical and fantastical realms that have always played an important part in
human imagination and culture. Indeed, when The Chums of Chance revisit the hollow Earth in *Against the Day*, the entrance seems to be shrinking:

Skyfarers here had been used to seeing flocks of the regional birds spilling away in long helical curves, as if to escape being drawn into some vortex inside the planet sensible only to themselves, as well as the withdrawal, before the advent of the more temperate climate within, of the eternal snows, to be replaced first by tundra, then grassland, trees, even at last a settlement or two, just at the Rim, like border towns [. . .].

On this trip, however, the polar ice persisted until quite close to the great portal, which itself seemed to have become *noticeably smaller*, with a strange sort of ice-mist, almost the color of the surface landscape, hovering over it and down inside [. . .]. (115)

While Kehlmann’s novel in its appropriation of such ideas is loosely inspired by *Mason & Dixon*, Maurer’s *Miller & Pynchon* is not so much inspired by, as a regular rewriting and remediation of Pynchon’s novel. On the whole, Pynchon’s novels lend themselves naturally to graphic adaptations. Like Chu Piang’s opium dreams, they are filled with “situations, journeys, comedy” (*GR* 347)—all traditional staples of the comic book genre—and the rich imagery and descriptive prose of the novels often seem to have been composed with a painter’s brush. A quick image search on Google reveals that a number of artists have created illustrations to Pynchon’s work, especially the endlessly inspiring *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The crowning achievement so far is of course Zak Smith’s impressive *Pictures Showing What Happens On Each Page of Thomas Pynchon’s Novel Gravity’s Rainbow* (2006), originally exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2004, and now in the permanent collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Leopold Maurer (born 1969) is an Austrian artist who studied Sociology at the University of Vienna and attended the Academy of Fine Arts, also in Vienna. In addition to his studies, he obviously found the time to read a lot of fiction, since *Miller & Pynchon* is unusually rich in intertextuality and literary references. Two minor characters in the book are named Thomas and Bernhard, after the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-89), whose work inspired William Gaddis’ *Agapē Agape*. Another character in the book—a crocodile, no less—is called Hoffmann, in honor of the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). Furthermore, we meet a Coraghessan (after T. Coraghessan Boyle), and the hedonistic womanizer Miller is clearly inspired by Henry Miller.

First and foremost, though, *Miller & Pynchon* is an extended and elaborate homage to *Mason & Dixon*. When we first meet Miller and Pynchon they are measuring a demarcation line between North and South in some nameless country. Like Mason and Dixon, they go about their work with traditional
surveyor’s instruments like rods and chains. Initially, this seems only natural, but later we learn that the two characters live in a modern day and age rife with high speed bullet trains, glass-fronted skyscrapers, and, one would suppose, modern surveying equipment. Maurer’s book thus has a different slant than *Mason & Dixon* and *Measuring the World*, which are both set in the past. *Miller & Pynchon* is set in our present, but the protagonists proceed as though it was set in the past. The two characters are indeed measuring the world, but they are measuring a world which has already been measured through and through. As opposed to Mason and Dixon, then, Miller and Pynchon are not really instrumental in the “corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick.” They are carrying out work which has already been done, and this meaningless repetition identifies them as anachronisms on a fool’s errand.

Early in the book, the anachronistic couple meet two young women and let them in on their important mission. The women curiously inquire whether they are surveyors, but the bumbling and sweating Pynchon quickly retorts, “Not quite, gracious madam. Your humble servant is an astronomer and a mathematician. My colleague Miller is a surveyor” (13). In other words, we are firmly in *Mason & Dixon* territory, with the melancholy astronomer Pynchon standing in for Mason, and the “draufgängerisch” Miller for the cheerful Dixon. Pynchon’s melancholy stems from having lost his wife Helene ten years previously. The astronomer can’t seem to put the loss behind him and move on with his life, and even a decade after her death, he stills finds her face in the comets he observes in the night sky. Once again, *Miller & Pynchon* more or less seems to conform to the pattern set by Thomas Pynchon’s novel, but Maurer has several surprises in store for his readers. Helene did not die in childbirth, as readers of *Mason & Dixon* would expect, but in a terrible tragedy where she was steam-rollered by a gigantic runaway cheese. Maurer may include many well-known elements from Pynchon’s novel, but the way in which he employs those elements is refreshingly irreverent. He playfully reshuffles them and forges something new in the process. Occasionally he even turns matters on their head, as in the title of his book, where the honorable astronomer Pynchon has to suffer the indignity of having his name mentioned after his lowly surveyor partner. Imagine the agony Mason would have gone through if subjected to a similar insult.²

Maurer’s mismatched protagonists proceed on several adventures together (“enough to fill several winter evenings”), during which they drink a lot of coffee and eat their fair share of bananas (and, inevitably, slip on the peels and fall on their asses). During their travels they employ sturdy axmen, encounter a mechanical duck, and upon entering a cave during a storm they discover a cut-off ear with magical properties (recalling Mason’s encounter with Jenkin’s Ear). Furthermore, they acquire a faithful sidekick, the speaking sewer crocodile Hoffmann, who has escaped from the sewers to go search
for his father. Apparently, Maurer read more than one Pynchon novel, which further becomes evident when the protagonists run across (and fall into) a giant footprint, reminiscent of the scene with Takeshi at Chipco Labs in *Vineland*.

Two thirds through the book, our intrepid explorers assiduously climb a mountain, only to be met at the top by Coraghessan, an emissary from the Consul General who hands them a new assignment. They are to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope to observe the Transit of Venus, in order to help obtain the solar parallax—as if the distance to the sun hadn’t already been measured down to within the last inch in the age of bullet trains! Once again, Miller and Pynchon are portrayed as anachronisms on a fool’s errand, and the atavistic nature of their endeavors is underscored when the two friends prepare to climb down the mountain again. From his perch atop Miller’s shoulder, Hoffmann curiously asks how Coraghessan managed the strenuous climb to the top, only to be told that he naturally took the cable car. Mason and Dixon may have been at the vanguard of modern science; Miller and Pynchon are clearly stranded in the wrong century. Nevertheless, as good, obedient soldiers in the service of Scientific Progress, the two embark on an ocean liner to South Africa, accompanied by their new trigger-happy bodyguards, Thomas and Bernhard. What they discover beneath the scorching sun of South Africa, however, is not so much scientific truth as deep personal truths, on a par with those Kurt Mondaugen found at Foppl’s villa in *V*.

In my introduction to Maurer’s book I have naturally focused on the many connections to Pynchon which, after all, are the sole reason *Miller & Pynchon* is reviewed in the present journal. This approach may give an impression of a derivative or even parasitic work, which is entirely dependent on its host and can’t stand on its own. And sometimes *Miller & Pynchon* does seem to be constructed of nothing but allusions, not only to Pynchon, but also to other figures from literature and art history. Some of Maurer’s landscapes are very reminiscent of Van Gogh’s swirling landscapes, and some of his persons seem to be taken right out of Picasso. Multi-allusive works like *Miller & Pynchon* usually carry their own pleasure for the well-read reader, who can amuse himself by catching and mapping the many references. It is often the case with such works, however, that this mapping of allusions is the primary, if not the sole, pleasure. Such works have a tendency to sink under the intertextual burden and never really succeed on their own terms, as works with a clear identity. The truth is, however, that Maurer’s book functions surprisingly well on its own terms. Even at its most similar to Pynchon’s novel, it never seems merely derivative, and the action frequently shoots off in unexpected directions, as when Miller turns out to be a werewolf.

In its constant oscillation between low-key storytelling and foregrounded allusions to various figures from pictorial art and literature, Maurer’s graphic novel constitutes an intriguing combination of the two principal
styles of remediation discussed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their influential book *Remediation*, namely transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. The strategy of transparent immediacy aims to ignore or deny the presence of the medium, whereas the strategy of hypermediacy evinces a clear fascination with the medium itself. As a result of the able deployment of this double strategy of remediation, the reader of Maurer’s work is constantly shuffled back and forth between absorption and estrangement, between a willing suspension of disbelief and a total annihilation of the illusion of reality.

The Austrian and German reviews of the book demonstrate how well *Miller & Pynchon* succeeds on its own terms. Most of the reviews were resoundingly positive, but interestingly they often failed to notice, or at least to mention, any sort of connection to *Mason & Dixon*. It undoubtedly provides an extra frisson to identify the many allusions in *Miller & Pynchon* and to discover the extent of Maurer’s subtle dialogue with Thomas Pynchon, but it is clearly not necessary to catch all the references in order to enjoy this original graphic novel.

“Graphic novel” may in fact not be the right name for what Maurer has created. The term has gradually come to be an accepted label for a medium which also includes such works as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000-04), and Posy Simmonds’ *Gemma Bovery* (1999), but the term is still a contested one. Critics of the genre feel that the “novel” part of the term is a blatant attempt to elevate a genre which should not be elevated at all, and even from within the medium there appears to be a widespread dissatisfaction with the term. The author of *Watchmen* (1987), Alan Moore, dismisses the term as “something that was thought up in the 80s by marketing people,” and says that “the term ‘comic’ does just as well for me.” Art Spiegelman likewise prefers the term “comics” (even though his gloomy masterpiece *Maus* must be one of the least comic comics in existence). In an interview with *The Economist*, Spiegelman quipped, “I’m called the father of the modern graphic novel. If that’s true, I want a blood test. ‘Graphic novel’ sounds more respectable, but I prefer ‘comics’ because it credits the medium. [‘Comics’] is a dumb word, but that’s what they are” (Moskowitz).

Leopold Maurer also refers to his own book as a comic, and his (and Moore’s and Spiegelman’s) preferred label is admittedly a fitting one for *Miller & Pynchon*. Despite its bleak sounding board, the entire work is shot through with a subtle, bitter-sweet humor, which binds the chapters together and sets Maurer’s book somewhat apart from its model. The black-and-white drawings are at once simple and very expressive, and support the low-key tone of the book very well. While not without its runaway cheeses and moments of hilarious slapstick, Maurer’s comedy is much less expansive than Pynchon’s zany humor. He has created a subdued, touching and subtle story of two men adrift (wonderfully captured in Maurer’s cover image of the two friends
caught naked in a lake, after having their clothes pilfered by those two Eager Fräuleins), who travel the world together and gradually learn to accept and respect each other. This may once again sound very much like Mason & Dixon, and the similarities are obviously many and intended, but Miller and Pynchon nevertheless gain a life of their own as they toil away on their hopelessly anachronistic missions, measuring the world anew.

One can only hope that Miller & Pynchon will be translated. As a self-contained, albeit intensely allusive, comic book (or graphic novel) it is very successful; as an addition to the ever growing canon of works inspired by Thomas Pynchon, it is supremely interesting, and it deserves to reach a much wider audience.

—Aarhus University

Notes

1. Miller & Pynchon, p. 9-10. All translations from the original German are mine.
2. Early in Mason & Dixon we learn that Dixon’s gaudy uniform “often caus[ed] future strangers to remember them as Dixon and Mason” (16), but posterity—and the very name of the line they measured—have put matters to right, whereas Lepold Maurer teasingly places surveyor before astronomer.

Works Cited


Contributors

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