

THESIS

BEYOND THE ZERO:  
THOMAS PYNCHON AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE

Submitted By

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER  
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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Pynchon criticism has always, perhaps necessarily, been a little paranoid. As George Levine and David Leverenz note in their introduction to *Mindful Pleasures*, “the essays published here contradict each other so often that they seem to be in rather than about Thomas Pynchon's novels.” Readings of Pynchon's texts are as numerous and varied as the readers that produce and attempt to justify them. Indeed, the state of Pynchon criticism in the years after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* and up to the first Pynchon renaissance, 1990's *Vineland*, reveals the limits within which his critics have operated. In much of this early criticism we find the same questions being asked time and time again: 1) Who is Thomas Pynchon? 2) What is he trying to tell us? and 3) Is it worth the effort of finding out? The first is a question of biography and the problematic nature of Pynchon's conspicuous absence from the public scene. The second is a quest for meaning, for the grand unifying agent and signifier of the texts. The third is a question of the text's legitimacy within the literary canon.

In their book *Writing Pynchon*, Alec McHoul and David Wills challenge these practices by asking the questions, “how can Pynchon be made to write? Or: how can Pynchon be read outside the logocentric tradition?” For them, it is a

surprising fact of Pynchon criticism that “such a theoretically 'advanced' figure as Pynchon should be treated, by and large, in such a theoretically retarded fashion.” The challenge for Pynchon's critics is to begin reading him not as a novelist but as a theorist, not as James Joyce but as (in the case of McHoul and Wills) Jacques Derrida.

By reading Pynchon in this way, what we discover is that his interest in the postmodern and the dispossessed populations which inhabit its scene is centered on the issue of waste, of what is displaced and held at the margins. Pynchon's investigation into a theoretical notion of waste allows us to examine three central issues: first, the highly specialized vocabulary he has developed in order to open his texts up to their theoretical possibilities; second, the way Pynchon's theoretical concerns anticipate and disrupt how we read him; and finally how the novels themselves, particularly *Gravity's Rainbow*, theorize waste in terms of the postmodern scene.

For the purpose of this paper, I will draw on a variety of theoretical sources, particularly the works of Jean Baudrillard whose ideas regarding postmodernity, hyperreality, simulation and the remainder are closely aligned with Pynchon's central concerns.

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## CHAPTER ONE SLOTH OR ENTROPY?

Thomas Pynchon is a writer of the dispossessed, of those who are left at the margins of history. In his novels, Pynchon presents us with a world which is strangely familiar, and yet there is a willful disjunction between what we know, or believe we know, and what it is possible to know. By portraying history, the experience of the twentieth century, as a struggle against unseen and enigmatic forces, we are reminded of how we are determined by discourses and technologies which we no longer understand. The world we inhabit in daily life is not the world of global capitalism, international politics, theoretical physics, or the inner workings of the computer microprocessor. Their complexity renders them invisible to us and their power over us arises out of this transparency. We are more than willing to carry on in our common sense notions of what truth is, what meaning is blissfully ignorant of how that common sense is produced. Einstein and Heisenburg might have discovered a universe which is inherently chaotic and perhaps incomprehensible, but we remain in a strictly Newtonian universe of causes and effects where everything is mathematically predictable and comprehensible. We eagerly consume a wide variety of advertised products with a sense of urgency which is surely not our own. We surf the net on our personal computers, heat our lunches in microwave ovens, and send faxes via our

cellular phones without paying the slightest attention to the scientific, political, or economic structures that have made them possible and necessary. For Pynchon the central issue of postmodernity is this disruption in history, the moment when the reality of the twentieth century split into what is apparently lived and what is transparently experienced. His novels are therefore an investigation into the question of what it is that shapes our experiences. How are we created to believe that we are autonomous subjects? How is our sense of meaning invented and determined? Moreover, how does this serve to justify and perpetuate the actions of those who have power over us? For these reasons it is nearly impossible to discuss Pynchon's novels in terms of their plots and characters. Pynchon's goal is not to represent or dramatize history but to problematize the very notion of representation. The problem of the postmodern experience is in discovering the rules by which that experience is and can be expressed. By writing his novels, Pynchon is simultaneously exploring how it is that he is able to write and how it is that he is able to be an author. What we discover is that he cannot be a novelist, cannot be *Thomas Pynchon*, unless he is first a theorist of the novel, of history, of the subject, and so on. When we read his texts it is therefore necessary to shift our attention away from the who, what, where, when and why of the fictional elements, the storyline and its heroes and heroines, and address the problem of how such literary practices are possible and legitimized. By reading Pynchon in this way, as a theorist rather than a traditional novelist, what we discover is that his interest in the postmodern and the dispossessed populations which inhabit its scene is centered on the issue of waste, of what is displaced and held at the

margins. Pynchon's investigation into a theoretical notion of waste allows us to examine three central issues: first, the highly specialized vocabulary he has developed in order to open his texts up to their theoretical possibilities; second, the way Pynchon's theoretical concerns anticipate and disrupt how we read him; and finally how the novels themselves, particularly *Gravity's Rainbow*, theorize waste in terms of the postmodern scene.

As we shall see, Pynchon's theories are closely aligned with those of the French theorist Jean Baudrillard. In their texts, Pynchon and Baudrillard share the desire to push the radicality of their theories to the very limit, to transgress even theoretical discourse if necessary in order to see what remains to be questioned. If Pynchon seems like a novelist who wishes to be a theorist, then Baudrillard in his writings on simulation, hyperreality, and seduction often have more in common with the short stories of Borges<sup>1</sup> than the theory he recommends we forget. In his article, "Hystericizing the Millennium," for example, Baudrillard imagines "an alternative to the linearity of history" which he calls "anagrammatic history" ("Hystericizing the Millenium"). In this language-based alternative to history he argues that "meaning is dismembered and dispersed to the four winds of the earth, like the name of god in the anagram." While history has traditionally been defined as an origin and an apocalypse with a straight line of causes and effects in between, he finds that we must instead come to terms

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1. The importance of Borges to the development of postmodern thought cannot be overstated. His stories are frequently cited in Baudrillard's post-Marxist essays, and, I would argue, are as integral to the development of the theory of simulation as McLuhan. Moreover, Pynchon often refers to Borges and his labyrinths as a metaphor for postmodernity. It is also interesting to note that Foucault cites a Borges story as having inspired *The Order of Things*.

with “the idea that *there is no longer any end, there will no longer be any end* and that history itself has become interminable.” Instead, history, like language, “moves in loops and curls, in tropes, in inversion of meaning.” History is not finite and determined but open to revision, revisitation and reinterpretation. By emphasizing the free play of language Baudrillard argues for the “utterly improbable, and certainly unverifiable, hypothesis of *a poetic reversibility of events.*” This he finds in the ability of language to disassemble and reverse itself by way of the anagram. He writes that the anagram:

makes one wonder whether there is a chance that history would lend itself to this poetic convulsion, to such a subtle form of return and anaphor and which, should the anagram yield beyond meaning, allow for the pure materiality of language to shine through and also show beyond historical meaning the pure materiality of time ... (“Hystericizing the Millennium”).

“Anagrammatic history”, therefore, combines the Foucauldian notion of history as “effective”<sup>2</sup> with Borges’s fondness for language games in an attempt to come to terms with the “*radical illusion of the world*”, a world of “pure fiction”. It is a “poetic alternative” to our dreams of apocalypse.

This is the world we discover in Pynchon’s novels. For Pynchon, history is read like a text, pieced together scrap by scrap. The landscape of the twentieth century is that of the trash heap, of the waste land, and everything and everyone

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2. Foucault writes, “History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being -- as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. ‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.” Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 88.

in it is part of the residue of western technology gone horribly wrong. In Pynchon's texts, history is represented as a series of discontinuous episodes, fragmented experiences punctuated by silence. Time is broken down into infinite delta-t's, the twenty-four frames per second of a film, rearranged, reversed, and endlessly repeated. Cause follows effect in the flight of the supersonic V-2.

Late in *Gravity's Rainbow* the story of Tyrone Slothrop is transformed into a secret history, a Zone urban legend:

There is also the story of Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly -- perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, *his time's assembly* and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered (GR 738).

This passage is interesting for several reasons. As in Baudrillard's essay, Pynchon finds that time cannot be assembled, cannot reach its apocalyptic end. History is interminable and there is no "punch line." Meaning, or the possibility of meaning, is dismembered and scattered about the zone of post war Europe and all that remains is the residue of Tyrone Slothrop, his story being one of countless fragments.

Midway through the novel, Slothrop is transformed into the superhero Rocketman. "Names by themselves may be empty," the text seems to warn, "but the *act of naming ...*" (GR 366, Pynchon's ellipsis). The name "Tyrone Slothrop," as Salman Rushdie notes, is far from empty. It is, in fact, an anagram for: "Sloth or Entropy" (Rushdie, 356). Pynchon, caught in the act of naming, gives us an important clue to his literary project. The themes of sloth and entropy resonate throughout his work from the early short story "Entropy" (originally published in

1960) to the more recent essay on sloth “Nearer My Couch to Thee” (part of a series of essays on the seven deadly sins that appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1993). These texts serve as an excellent doorway to Pynchon’s larger concerns.

According to Mathew Winston, “Entropy” was originally intended to be part of a “picaresque novel about a down-and-outer named Meatball Mulligan” rather than a stand alone story (Winston, 258). It is important to note that this story, along with the majority of those collected in *Slow Learner*, was written during Pynchon’s time at Cornell and though the short stories are generally treated by critics as the work of a clever but immature undergraduate talent, “Entropy” distinguishes itself as being particularly “Pynchonian” in its style, structure, themes, and vocabulary. More importantly, it introduces the much discussed and rarely understood concept of entropy. The confusion surrounding entropy arises out of the coincidental similarity between the mathematical formulas found in the second law of thermodynamics and in communication theory. In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon admits that “people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do” (SL 12). Indeed, he goes on to describe his continuing struggle with the subject:

Since I wrote this story I have kept trying to understand entropy, but my grasp becomes less sure the more I read. I’ve been able to follow the *OED* definitions, and the way Isaac Asimov explains it, and even some of the math. But the qualities and quantities will not come together to form a unified notion in my head (SL 14).

This would seem to be a surprising admission from a man who by all accounts is one of our most scholarly and knowledgeable contemporary writers. Speaking of

Willard Gibbs, one of the major theorists on the subject of entropy, Pynchon writes, "It is cold comfort to find out that Gibbs himself anticipated the problem, when he described entropy in its written form as 'far-fetched ... obscure and difficult of comprehension'" (SL 14, Pynchon's ellipsis). As Alec McHoul and David Wills suggest, it is even more difficult to believe that Pynchon considers himself to be "a story-writer who managed to fake his way to fame with such spurious knowledge as a cobbled-together theory of entropy" and that "whatever Pynchon is, he, she, or it is a phoney by his, her or its own standards" (McHoul & Wills, 134). If, as McHoul and Wills write, we must abandon the notion of autobiography and instead consider the possibility that "the 'Introduction' may be a fiction" then how are we to understand this passage? (McHoul & Wills, 134) Could it be that when Pynchon writes of entropy he really is referring to "Entropy", to his own fiction from "Entropy" through *Gravity's Rainbow* and his recognition, indeed, his anticipation, of their difficulty and obscurity in written form? If we look more closely at Pynchon's "confession" we find that he is being slightly disingenuous. The first reference he cites is the *OED*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is one of his favorite historical sources, undoubtedly due to the fact that it is an anagrammatic text where the history of the West is bound up with the history of a language. Moreover, it is a pun on Mucho Maas's nickname for the reader as detective, Mrs. Oedipa Maas, in *The Crying of Lot 49*. To a certain extent, Pynchon's "Introduction" does not help to explain the texts so much as frustrate and defer our quest for meaning. His second source on entropy is Isaac Asimov, whom Pynchon seems to treat as an ironic parallel to himself. Asimov is the

quintessential author as scientist. A Professor of Biochemistry at Boston University, he was the author of 468 books on subjects as diverse as Physics, Robotics, Shakespeare and the Bible. However, he is best known for his groundbreaking science fiction stories and novels, which in spite of their success place him squarely in the literary gutter. By citing Asimov, Pynchon draws attention to the problematics of authority, including his own. In the essay, "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" he writes that writers of so-called genre fiction,

by insisting on what is contrary to fact, fail to be Serious enough, and so they get redlined under the label "escapist fare." This is especially unfortunate in the case of science fiction, in which the decade after Hiroshima saw one of the most remarkable flowerings of literary talent and, quite often, in our history ("Luddite").

In the phrase "science fiction", science persists as the serious quantity, fiction as the frivolous. Pynchon understands too well that if he is made a man of science, his texts become over-determined. On the other hand, by embracing science *fiction*, science *as* fiction, as discourse, he is not being "Serious enough."<sup>3</sup> Caught between High and Low fiction, he would prefer the freedom to insist "what is contrary to fact", what is "far-fetched", than be bound by his own use of "facts" to an historical realism (cause and effect) that he believes deconstructs itself. To do otherwise would be to deny the textuality of scientific discourse and plunge into logocentrism.<sup>4</sup> Instead the concept of entropy is something which defies the

3. Foucault investigates the problem of scientific discourse in *The Order of Things*. He writes, "I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them. In short, I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) xiv.

formation of “a unified notion.” It is anagrammatic, has no punchline, and is scattered. Just as his autobiography must be treated as a fiction, so must his treatment of science and technology.

What then would be the anagrammatic definition of entropy? In the popular imagination entropy would seem to be defined by Eliot’s line in “The Hollow Men”, of the apocalypse as anticlimax: “*This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper*” (*Selected Poems*, 80). Pynchon describes it as an adolescent attitude which took “somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline” (*SL* 13). In this sense, entropy comes to represent the slowing down, the diminishing and disintegration of the world as a whole. But this is an ending which is not an ending. Pynchon, again referring to the *OED*, writes that entropy was coined in 1865 by Rudolf Clausius, on the model of the word “energy,” which he took to be Greek for “work-contents.” Entropy, or “transformation-contents” was introduced as a way of examining the changes a heat engine went through in a typical cycle, the transformation being heat into work (*SL* 12).

The key here is Clausius’s use of the Greek “tropos”, meaning turn or transformation. It is not only the root word in entropy but also in trope (Baudrillard’s “*poetic reversibility*”) and tropic (a reference to “Entropy” ’s epigraph, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*). Again we see how Pynchon’s use of scientific discourse, when examined closely, darts away from “objective”

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4. My argument is derived from Derrida. In *Of Grammatology* he writes, “the system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced. This logocentrism, this *epoch* of the full speech, has always placed in parenthesis, *suspended*, and suppressed for essential reasons, all free reflection on the origin and status of writing.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 43.

reporting toward the free play of language games. Moreover, Pynchon's self-characterization of youthful nihilism disguises again the complexity of his use of entropy as it is related to science as writing, to language as writing.

These two approaches to entropy, the linear and the anagrammatic, play themselves out within the story itself. "Entropy" is very neatly divided into eight sections and is structured like a fugue in music. Upstairs we have Callisto's "hothouse jungle" (SL 83), a closed system designed for perfect inner-harmony. This Xanadu is contrasted by the Alph-like chaos of the apartment below where, as the story opens, "Meatball Mulligan's lease-breaking party was moving into its 40th hour" (SL 81). Because there is no interaction between the two, save the noise (both literal and theoretical) which leaks up from Mulligan's party to Callisto's hothouse, we are meant to read the story symbolically. This, according to Pynchon's "Introduction", was a mistake: "It is simply wrong to begin with a theme, symbol or other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it" (SL 12). But within the story it is the character of Callisto who commits the sin of the "abstract unifying agent" and it is through his thoughts that we shape "Entropy" into a coherent whole, however problematic. Callisto, like Herbert Stencil in *V.*, considers himself a modern-day Henry Adams who, arriving at middle-age, discovers a technological and social reality which his youth had failed to prepare him for.

Henry Adams, three generations before his own, had stared aghast at Power; Callisto found himself now in much the same state over Thermodynamics, the inner life of that power, realizing like his predecessor that the Virgin and the dynamo stand as much for love as for power; that the two are indeed identical; and that love

therefore not only makes the world go round but also makes the boccie ball spin, the nebula precess (SL 84).

For Callisto, these realizations are “omens of apocalypse” and can lead only to “an eventual heat-death for the universe” (SL 85). In Pynchon’s texts, however, the distinction between Adams’ Virgin and dynamo is far more complex. Like Adams, he sees the Virgin as occult power, anagrammatic power, while the dynamo represents linear, technological power. For Pynchon the relationship between occult power and technological power is linked historically. In his “Luddite” essay he writes:

To insist on the miraculous is to deny the machine at least some of its claims on us, to assert the limited wish that living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings (“Luddite”).

This denial of the machine plays itself out in *V.* as the history of the twentieth century becomes the slow decline of the Virgin toward the dynamo, the animate toward the inanimate. For Callisto all animate life is moving toward heat-death and the ineluctable “Condition of the Most Probable” (SL 87). Dictating his memoirs in the third-person style of Henry Adams, Callisto states:

“he found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world. He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American ‘consumerism’ discovered a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He found himself in short, restating Gibbs’ prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly cease” (SL 88).

Here, entropy is portrayed as the absence of difference and the tyranny of the same. The violence of Capitalism (Wall Street) has given way to the passive consumption of Advertising and images (Madison Avenue) and Callisto discovers an America devoid of miracle, incapable of the Luddite's denial of the machine.<sup>5</sup> The miraculous, in Pynchon's use of the word, is not necessarily spiritual but instead is linked to probability. The secular miracle is an accident of outrageous improbability. It celebrates the unlikely and opens us to infinite possibility. In this system, probability favors the individual, the particular. At the level of the general, or the social, probability is calculated as the sum of millions upon millions of rolls of the cosmic dice. What Callisto seems to fear in entropy is that those most improbable of moments are somehow now excluded from the realm of the possible, that society in its drive for efficiency and technological progress has become incapable of difference, of imagination.

The weaving together of his hothouse is an attempt to keep entropy at bay, to create absolute static order so that nothing more can be lost. Within its walls, everything is in perfect balance, perfect harmony. It is described as "a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder" (SL 83). At the same time, however, as a closed system it tends precisely towards the undifferentiated state that Callisto

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5. This shift in emphasis from production to consumption is paralleled by Baudrillard's own movement away from Marxism and a theory of political economy toward more media-centered notions like hyperreality and simulation. As Douglas Kellner writes, "*The Mirror of Production* marked Baudrillard's break with Marxism, and in his next book, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (1976), he moves beyond his early critique of political economy and his first sketch of an alternative social theory into a more systematic development of his new theory of simulations." Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) 61.

had feared. His nightmare of apocalypse, in reality, is a death wish. It is Aubade, Callisto's companion, who recognizes this at the end of the story. Seeing that he has succumbed at last to the "reductive fallacy" (SL 87) of entropy and that he is indeed "helpless in the past" (SL 97) she breaks the window glass and destroys the hothouse's seal. As the story reaches its conclusion we read:

[Aubade] turned to face the man on the bed and waited with him until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion (SL 98).

Callisto's fear of entropy and his desire for absolute control over it has led at last to personal apocalypse and the tyranny of the same. In Callisto's world death reigns supreme over everything. It is the only truth he knows or is capable of knowing.

Earlier in "Entropy" Callisto recalls that while in France he "had purchased a Henry Miller novel and left for Paris, and read the book on the train so that when he arrived he had been given at least a little forewarning" (SL 93). This "forewarning" is given to us in the opening quote from *Tropic of Cancer*:

"Boris has just given me a summary of his views. He is a weather prophet. The weather will continue bad, he says. There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere .... We must get into step, a lockstep toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change" (SL 81, Pynchon's ellipses).

By the end of the story Callisto has indeed locked himself in the "prison of death." For him there is not even the slightest thought of escape. It has become too improbable. Moreover, the title of the novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, comes to represent

Callisto's struggle between the trope, the ability to transform anagrammatically, and death, Cancer being the constellation associated with death and apocalypse in ancient times. Cancer, the crab, appears in the tarot on the "Moon" card.

According to one authority on the subject:

thousands of years ago, early Chaldean astrologers announced that the world-destroying Deluge last occurred when all the planets came together in the constellation Cancer. When, in the course of time, the planets would again enter the sign of the Crab, the present world cycle would end. Everything would be swept back into primal chaos ... (Walker, 124).

Callisto, who seems to believe in weather prophets and Chaldean astrologers, omens in novels, has brought about his own version of the apocalypse. But does it ever come? The use of the word "should" twice in the last sentence of the story leaves the ending ambiguous. In fact, the ending is not an ending at all but a moment of pure anticipation. "Entropy" and entropy become interminable and still hold forth the possibility of poetic reversibility.

During the course of the story, Meatball Mulligan comes to realize just this possibility. In contrast to the hothouse, his world is that of the street, of chaos and riot. In *V.*, the elder Stencil, Sidney, describes this distinction in political terms:

Right, and Left; the hothouse and the street. The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs in the streets by manipulated mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future (*V.* 468).

As we have seen, Callisto lives in the "hothouse of the past" but what of Meatball? Does he live, as Stencil suggests, in the "dreamscape of the future"? In contrast to Callisto, Meatball is very much in touch with the "vagaries" of the world and the chaos of his own life and the lives of his friends. They live outside

the hothouse in self-imposed exile. Early in the story they are described as “American expatriates” (SL 82) who, for the most part, live and work in the hothouse of Washington, D.C. “Everyone saw a fine irony in this,” we are told (SL 82). Because they plan to go to Europe “someday,” the landscape of Washington is made to simulate European Street-life: “Their Dome was a collegiate Rathskeller out on Wisconsin Avenue called the Old Heidelberg and they had to settle for cherry blossoms instead of lime trees when spring came, but in its lethargic way their life provided, as they said, kicks” (SL 82). If their lives are “lethargic” it is not because the world is moving toward cosmic heat-death but instead we see them overwhelmed with possibilities and choices to the point that their movements and negotiations seem completely random and directionless:

haphazard weather, aimless loves, unpredicted commitments:  
months one can easily pass *in fugue*, because oddly enough, later  
on, winds, rains, passions of February and March are never  
remembered in that city, it is as if they have never been (SL 83).

Chaos is entropy outside of the closed system. The world is experienced as an undifferentiated mass which cannot be remembered, cannot be revisited or ordered in memory. Their activities, as we see in Meatball’s lease-breaking party, are inconsequential, if not forgettable. Most of all, their lives hold no meaning for them. There is not even the negative promise of Callisto’s apocalypse. The party may never end and the lease may never be broken. This results in what is described as a “forlornness in the streets” (SL 82). They are all too aware that history is interminable but they lack the will to transform it anagrammatically. The Duke di Angelis quartet plays music without instruments, Saul breaks up with his wife in an argument over Communication Theory, a girl complains that

she is drowning in the bath tub, but none of these things carry any sense urgency. As Meatball says at the news of Saul's wife's departure: "It was something earth-shattering, no doubt. Like who is better, Sal Mineo, or Ricky Nelson" (SL 89). For Meatball and Company everything is trivial and nothing "earth-shattering."

And then, something very strange happens, something as near to earth-shattering as Meatball and company can come. As the chaos and noise in the apartment reaches "a sustained, ungodly crescendo" (SL 96), Meatball realizes that he has a choice to make:

The way he figured, there were only about two ways he could cope: (a) lock himself in the closet and maybe eventually they would all go away, or (b) try to calm everybody down, one by one. (a) was certainly the more attractive alternative. But then he started thinking about that closet. It was dark and stuffy and he would be alone (SL 96).

Choice (a), the closet, is the choice that Callisto has made. It is the hothouse, a dark and stuffy place of loneliness. But Meatball is not waiting for the end of the world. He does not really want everybody to "go away." Instead he chooses the second alternative. This requires a great deal of effort on his part because he cannot control the party as a whole. To do this would be the same as dragging everyone into the closet (hothouse) with him. Instead he must deal with each problem "one by one" in order to overcome the condition of the most probable. This requires an acceptance of difference, imagination, the miraculous (the least probable). In short, all the things that Callisto despairs are lost. And so:

he gave wine to the sailors and separated the *morra* players; he introduced the fat government girl to Sandor Rojas, who would keep her out of trouble; he helped the girl in the shower to dry off and get into bed; he had another talk with Saul; he called a repairman for the refrigerator, which someone had discovered was

on the blink. This is what he did until nightfall, when most of the revelers had passed out and the party trembled on the threshold of its third day (*SL* 97).

Meatball's actions give the illusion of totality, of a master plan to save the world, of an attempt to create a new kind of community. However each is an isolated moment, discontinuous and disconnected. No two situations are pacified in the same way nor can they be. Instead, each in their own way remains a part of the chaos of the street. They are still lethargic and forlorn and the party struggles, "trembles", toward a new day with the same arbitrariness as before. But it is a miracle all the same. The true lesson of the street, then, is, as McClintic Sphere says in *V.*, to "Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care" (*V.* 365). This last notion is often repeated and just as often criticized for being a trite bumper sticker catchphrase. Indeed, just pages later in *V.*, SHROUD tells Benny Profane to "Keep cool. Keep cool but care. It's a watchword, Profane, for your side of the morning" (*V.* 369). Profane's side of the morning is that of Meatball and his friends, life in exile, life on the outside of society. Sphere's motto is the "watchword," the rallying cry, the secret password for those who live outside of the hothouse. But they are not trying to save the world. They are basically just out for "kicks." Their lives are accidental and, in the grand scheme, not very important. While Meatball cannot hope to exert absolute control, the hothouse approach, he can create the possibility, the improbable possibility, that isolated pockets within the world of the street may reverse themselves, might go against the linearity of history. That the whole of

the party does in fact respond to this is what Oedipa Maas describes as a “mysterious consensus” (L49 131) or “an anarchist miracle” (L49 132).

Between the two poles of The Street (chaos) and The Hothouse (apocalypse) Meatball finds in entropy the excluded middle of the trope, the turning away from literal meaning. If excluded middles are, as Oedipa says, “bad shit” (L49 181) then they are bad in the Luddite sense. As Pynchon writes:

When times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful, don't we, in seeking some equalizer, turn, if only in imagination, in wish to the Badass -- the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero -- who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us? (“Luddite”)

The Luddite, by his or her very nature, stands opposed to social norms, the hothouse, the machine. Moreover, he or she is also *ludic*, for the Badass's badness comes from his or her ability to “work mischief on a large scale” (“Luddite”). She is therefore playful, imaginative, at ease with the absurd. This is what Oedipa discovers in her quest for the Tristero, an invisible America filled with “a hundred alienations” (L49 179) that act as subversives against the machine that America has become. She wonders, “how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?” (L49 181). Like Meatball, she too has a choice, one that really is not a choice at all:

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia (L49 182).

Whether the Tristero is real or not is irrelevant to its role as a Luddite Badass.

Either way, it gives Oedipa the power to imagine something different from what

she has known to be true. By making herself alien, by embracing the transgressive reasoning of the Luddite and the paranoid, she becomes the Tristero, becomes the thing for which she has searched and in so doing destroys linear history, the chain of cause and effect, and embraces the anagram. As a novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* refuses us a proper ending. There is no apocalypse. The paraclete never comes. Instead, we are given the title of the book we have been reading. The sale of the stamps, the crying of lot 49, may represent the scattering of Mrs. Oedipa Maas, like Tyrone Slothrop, over the landscape of the Zone we call America.

What Pynchon gives us is a binarity that operates by way of the anagram. The pairs are not necessarily oppositional but are instead seductive as Baudrillard writes:

a pun is always a challenge, and in the triumphant era of production the mere allusion to seduction also assumes the role of theoretical challenge. Challenge, and not desire, lies at the heart of seduction (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 57).

He continues:

seduction is not *opposed to* production. It is what *seduces* production -- just as absence is not that which is opposed to presence, but that which seduces presence, as evil is not that which is opposed to good, but seduces good, as the feminine is not opposed to the masculine but seduces the masculine. One could conceive of a theory dealing with signs, terms, values on the basis of their seductive attraction, and not in terms of their contrast or calculated opposition. This theory would definitively shatter the specularity of the sign; a theory where everything would be played out not in terms of distinction or equivalence but in terms of a duel and reversibility (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 58).

In this way, the binaries we discover in "Entropy", the Hothouse & the Street, Control & Anarchy, Inside & Outside, The Virgin & The Dynamo and so on are

not opposed to one another but are instead seductive. Seduction acts as a challenge to and a reversal of the linear and apocalyptic world that we are told is real and normal. In the trope, in the glibness of a phrase like “Keep Cool, But Care”, Pynchon does not wish to oppose the world of the machine, but instead seduce it through his fiction.

Like his character, Meatball Mulligan, Pynchon is sensitive to the forlornness and lethargy of those who live in the world of the street. They are the Preterite masses who live outside the hothouses of the Elect, always excluded, passed over. He responds to this postmodern malaise in his essay on the spiritual and secular sin of Sloth. As Pynchon notes, the sin of Sloth, or laziness, was originally coined by Aquinas as “Acedia”, or sorrow. Sloth was a mortal or deadly sin because it represented “defiant sorrow in the face of God’s good intentions” (“Nearer, My Couch, To Thee”). What Pynchon finds interesting about Sloth is its development in the popular imagination from a sin against God into a sin against Capitalism, coextensive with the rise of capitalism and the development of technology. With the advent of the so-called Industrial Revolution, he writes:

Spiritual matters were not quite as immediate as material ones, like productivity! Sloth was no longer so much a Sin against God or spiritual good as against a particular sort of time, uniform, one-way, in general not reversible -- that is, against clock time, which got everybody early to bed and early to rise (“Nearer, My Couch, To Thee”).

In the age of technology, Sloth becomes the sin of imagination, of reversibility rather than linearity. Those who commit the sin of Sloth are “Persisting in Luddite sorrow, despite technology’s good intentions.” Sloth resides in the world

of the Street, it is "our background radiation, our easy-listening station -- it is everywhere, and no longer noticed" ("Nearer, My Couch, To Thee"). For Pynchon, the radical position of sloth is rarely taken and instead it has been coopted by postmodern consumer society as a way of getting "despair bought at a discount price, a deliberate turning against faith because of the inconvenience faith presents to the pursuit of quotidian lusts, angers and the rest" ("Nearer, My Couch, To Thee"). Postmodern despair goes so far as to reject Sloth itself because concepts like "imagination" and "reversibility" inconvenience our more superficial desire for total apathy. Sloth as Luddite sorrow is bad shit, an excluded middle.

In the history of Sloth, Pynchon finds that Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener", written in 1853, "is the first great epic of modern Sloth." For most readers, the character of Bartleby is an alternately annoying and fascinating enigma. Pynchon, moreover, reads him as a Luddite Badass:

Right in the heart of robberbaron capitalism, the title character develops what proves to be terminal acedia. It is like one of those western tales where the desperado keeps making choices that only herd him closer to the one disagreeable finale. Bartleby just sits there in an office on Wall Street repeating "I would prefer not to." While his options go rapidly narrowing, his employer, a man of affairs and substance, is actually brought to question the assumptions of his own life by this miserable scrivener -- this writer! -- who, though among the lowest of the low in the bilges of capitalism, nevertheless refuses to go on interacting anymore with the daily order, thus bringing up the interesting question: who is more guilty of Sloth, a person who collaborates with the root of all evil, accepting things-as-they-are in return for a paycheck and a hassle-free life, or one who does nothing, finally, but persist in sorrow? ("Nearer, My Couch, To Thee")

Bartleby's doomed end comes about because of his inability to find an alternative to the world he is in. He is not a "writer", after all, but a copyist, who labors in the useless repetition, the redundancy of dead language. There is no possibility for imagination or miracle because he works on Wall Street, a Street that is really a Hothouse, enclosed and controlled. Bartleby's world is that of a prison, where he lives under constant surveillance, persistent coercion. If, as Foucault writes, "Discipline 'makes' individuals" then Bartleby refuses individuality, rejects his own humanity (Foucault, 170). His constant refrain of "I would prefer not to" is an attempt to escape the "normalizing gaze" of surveillance technologies and disciplinary practices that "make it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish" (Foucault, 185). He shares the paranoia of Oedipa Maas and similarly wills himself into an alien role. This is what makes him relevant to the life of Melville's narrator. But more than the tyrannical sameness of his job as a scrivener, more than the paranoia of having everyone tell him what he ought to prefer to do, what most affects Bartleby, and in the end, horrifies Bartleby's employer, is waste, the culture of death which is truly postmodernity's background radiation. At the conclusion of the story the narrator reveals:

Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in administration. When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring -- the finger it was meant for, perhaps moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity -- he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers anymore; pardon for those who died

despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death (Melville, 849).

The dead letter office is like a waste dump or morgue. For Bartleby, each letter, each object -- the ring, the banknote -- is a corpse, the residue, the final remains of those who sent them. What Bartleby discovers in the dead letter office is the impossibility of communication, the truth that no meaning can be transmitted from sender to intended receiver. As Derrida writes:

all the precautions in the world are taken in vain, you can register your *envois* with a return receipt, crypt them, seal them, multiply coverings and envelopes, at the limit not even send your letter, still, in advance it is intercepted (Derrida, 490).

The truth of textuality is its absolute arbitrariness. Meaning is always scattered to the four winds "in advance." The truth of anagrammatic history is that we have always lived in it and failed to recognize it precisely because it is already outside, alien to the hothouse of society, disassembled, dismembered and disconnected. Just as Oedipa learns of the other America through the W.A.S.T.E. mail system, so Bartleby comes to understand his own history in the history of Preterite (mis)communications. Living as he does "in the bilges of capitalism" (as Pynchon puts it), Bartleby himself is the residue, the waste material, of those like his employer who exercise power and control. Like those letters, he is already intercepted, already destined for the fire when they no longer have need of him. Life is arbitrary and easily lost in the system.

There is a similar passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* which expresses the culmination of Pynchon's theoretical understanding of Sloth and (or) Entropy.

The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment, left on the outside of Earth, at the mercy of a Gravity we have only begun to learn how to detect and measure, must go on blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences, hoping that for each psi-synthetic taken from Earth's soul there is a molecule, secular, more or less ordinary and named, over here -- kicking endlessly among the plastic trivia, finding in each Deeper Significance and trying to string them all together like terms of a power series hoping to zero in on the tremendous and secret Function whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken ... plastic saxophone reed *sounds of unnatural timbre*, shampoo bottle *ego-image*, Cracker Jack prize *one-shot amusement*, home appliance casing *fairing for winds of cognition*, baby bottles *tranquilization*, meat packages *disguise of slaughter*, dry-cleaning bags *infant strangulation*, garden hoses *feeding endlessly the desert* ... but to bring them together, in their slick persistence and our preterition ... to make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste ... (GR 590, Pynchon's ellipses).

The world, for those who understand sloth and entropy, who abandon the linearity of history in favor of the anagram, is transformed into a trash heap, unreal, unwanted. In "our preterition", for those of us "left on the outside of Earth", these discarded objects are so many dead letters to be read. This is the true meaning of paranoia. When faced with replication and waste can we still find "the meanest sharp sliver of truth"? Or is the message always already intercepted? What Pynchon tells us is that this is precisely what They have been doing all along. Our consensus reality is based upon the recuperation and recycling of waste material. It is not we who have abandoned society but they who have denied the anagram, the entropic, the slothful. The Elect are the waste material of the Preterite, the Hothouse, the residue of the Street. We are endlessly reversible in a world we know is fiction. In the end, we awaken to a dream that is not our own.

## CHAPTER TWO THE WHOLE SICK CREW

For any reader of Pynchon's texts there lies the not so hidden danger of remaining in the dream too long. It is far too easy to become sidetracked, seduced, and duped, caught up in the mad paranoia and mindless pleasure of our own ability to unearth and reassemble meaning from the ash heap. To believe in anything too strongly (or not at all) is to fall into the trap of the dream. We allow ourselves to be caught up in Pynchon's "endless mindgaming" and, doing so, become targets for the derisive laughter of those who *know*: "Boy, did we put *him* on the Dream," as They like to say (GR 697). As when Tchitcherine experiments with Laszlo Jamf's hallucinatory drug, Oneirine (derived from the Greek *oneiros*, dream), we become susceptible to "mantic archetypes" which haunt our readings (GR 702). These hauntings, the text tells us, "show a definite narrative continuity, as clearly as, say, the average *Reader's Digest* article," which are so ordinary, so mundane, that they are only recognized as hallucinations by way of the "radical though plausible violation of reality" (GR 703). But what are we to do when there is no reality to violate? When faced by his own Oneirine haunting, Tchitcherine tests his sense of reality only to find that "*There is no violation*" (GR 704). The drug which produced the hallucination, the unreal, has in turn seduced reality (whatever that is or was), reversed the entire dichotomy rendering the distinction

meaningless. The assumed boundary between the radical and the conservative, the plausible and the implausible, the violated and inviolate, the real and the dreamt disappears while at the same time each term echoes and amplifies the other in simulated form. The wary reader, fearful of being lulled or suckered into believing in one side over the other finds herself suffering from the vertigo of acceleration and reversibility embodied in Pynchon's hyperkinetic shifts. What remains is neither incoherent nor a celebration of uncertainty but instead a virtual space within which meaning is inseparable from the desire to make meaning, truth from the will to truth. As Nietzsche writes, "Our will requires an aim; it would sooner have the void for its purpose than be void of purpose" (*Genealogy of Morals*, 231). Similarly, Slothrop, as he wanders the Zone, thinks to himself, "Either they have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that *reason*" (GR 434).

It is because of this fear of the absence of a purpose, of a *reason*, that Pynchon criticism has always, perhaps necessarily, been a little paranoid. As George Levine and David Leverenz write in their introduction to *Mindful Pleasures*, "the essays published here contradict each other so often that they seem to be in rather than about Thomas Pynchon's novels" (Levine & Leverenz, 3). Readings of Pynchon's texts are as numerous and varied as the readers that produce and attempt to justify them. Indeed, the state of Pynchon criticism in the years after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* and up to the first Pynchon renaissance, 1990's *Vineland*, seems to mirror the paranoia induced by Oneirine: "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is*

*connected, everything in the Creation*" (GR 703). Like Herbert Stencil or Oedipa Maas, Pynchon critics have sought to discover order in the enigmatic chaos of the novels. In the nineties, however, critics have become more self-consciously aware of their own role (and complicity) in the formation of a so-called IG Pynchon, a self-interested genius-industry which has more to do with academic culture than Pynchon's texts. Moreover, several critics have begun to identify a distinct lack of serious postmodern and poststructural criticism within the industry. As McHoul and Wills put it: "what surprises us is that such a theoretically 'advanced' figure as Pynchon should be treated, by and large, in such a theoretically retarded fashion" (McHoul & Wills, 13). For these critics the quest for meaning, for the will to truth, that we find both inside and outside Pynchon's texts is not the goal but the new subject of our investigations. As Lyotard writes:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for (Lyotard, 81).

What is necessary, then, is to stop reading Pynchon as though he were a Realist or Modernist author and instead begin to read him as a philosopher, as a theorist of the postmodern.

When faced with the body of criticism written about Pynchon and his work, one often goes away with the same impression that Eigenvalue has of the Whole Sick Crew in *V*:

The Crew had developed a kind of shorthand whereby they could set forth any visions that might come their way. Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary

allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how others reacted they were In or Out. The number of blocks however was finite (V. 297-8).

The Whole Sick Crew are proponents of an artistic movement they call “catatonic expressionism” which embodies a slothful and entropic stance toward the world. Eigenvalue interprets this in terms of the hothouse and envisions an eventual “exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations” which will inevitably lead to “death” (V. 298). What is more interesting, however, is the satire of modernist literary and critical practices. Artistic or critical judgement (smart or stupid) and canonization (In or Out) are based not on lasting values but on the cleverness with which an artist or a reader is able to assemble out of the waste and residue of western culture (proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms) a coherent whole.<sup>1</sup>

The decadence of the Whole Sick Crew is contrasted with the poet Fausto Majstral who lived through the bombing of Malta during World War II. During the seige, Fausto is forced to leave the hothouse of modernist poetics and enter into “The street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning -- we hope -- is some sense of home or safety. But no guarantees. A street we are put at the wrong end of, for reasons best known to the agents who put us there. If there are agents. But a street we must walk” (V. 323-4). In the Street, Fausto discovers a

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1. For a more detailed discussion of the problematic nature of Pynchon’s reception and canonicity see Bérubé’s *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers*. He writes, “in Pynchon’s case, I am more concerned to explain the *effects* of academic reception, especially insofar as reception is theorized by Pynchon critics as institutionalization and recuperation” (Bérubé 5).

group of children whose play he describes as serving a “poetic function” (V. 331). The children, “being poets in a vacuum, adept at metaphor,” use their play to undermine and counteract the apocalyptic world their parents have given them (V. 339). Embracing neither the extremes of salvation or destruction, the children keep a skeptical eye on the goings-on of the adult world, particularly the Bad Priest, an avatar of V.:

The Bad Priest was ubiquitous as night and the children, to sustain their observations, had to be at least as mobile. It wasn't an organized affair. These recording angels never wrote anything down. It was more, if you will, a “group awareness.” They merely watched, passive: you'd see them like sentinels at the top of a rubble pile any sunset; or peering round the corner of the street, squatting on the steps, loping in pairs, arms flung round each other's shoulders, across a vacant lot, going apparently nowhere. But always somewhere in their line-of-sight would be the flicker of a soutane or a shadow darker than the rest (V. 339).

The children inhabit the world of the street, the “rubble pile,” with passive watchfulness. Their metaphors, their games represent for them not an escape from their wasted world, the death and ruin that lies all around them, but instead an engagement with that very world. Fausto observes:

These children knew what was happening: knew that bombs killed. But what's a human, after all? No different from a church, obelisk, statue. Only one thing matters: it's the bomb that wins. Their view of death was non-human. One wonders if our grown-up attitudes, hopelessly tangled as they were with love, social forms and metaphysics, worked any better. Certainly there was more common sense about the children's way (V. 332).

The children of Malta are Pynchon's most dramatic representation of McClintic Sphere's, “keep cool, but care” (disinterested engagement) and Oedipa Maas's “anarchist miracle” (the secular divine). They are not inhuman but non-human, seeing the world without the filters of western consciousness. They do not

possess the will to truth which is the will to the lie. Life in the Street means being comfortable with paradox, with chaos and reversibility. It means letting go of the human when the human means embracing the inanimate, the deathwish. Their most astounding act, and for Fausto the most disturbing, is their participation in the disassembly of the Bad Priest. This dismemberment serves as the novel's poetic reversal aimed at V., who as the Bad Priest preaches infertility and inertia: "The girls he advised to become nuns, avoid the sensual extremes -- pleasure of intercourse, pain of childbirth. The boys he told to find strength in -- and be like -- the rock of their island" (V. 340). If the history of V. (and V.) is the history of the Twentieth Century, her disassembly transforms her anagrammatically. Her parts are dispersed among the children and around the world, like Tyrone Slothrop, inverted rather than extinguished. Stencil's quest becomes a futile attempt to put the pieces back together again. After meeting Fausto, Stencil investigates "the inventories of curio merchants, pawnbrokers, ragmen," collectors of the curious and unwanted, hunting for pieces of V. that may have survived. In the end he pursues a rumor concerning the fate of her clockwork eye rather than abandon his quest (V. 446). Benny Profane, on the other hand, finds contentment in Brenda Wigglesworth's "phony college-girl poem" (V. 454). This poem unconsciously invokes V. through the artistic representation of the twentieth century as a random collection of cultural waste material:

"I am the twentieth century," she read. Profane rolled away and stared at the pattern in the rug.

"I am the ragtime and the tango; sans-serif, clean geometry. I am the virgin's-hair whip and the cunningly detailed shackles of decadent passion. I am every lonely railway station in every capital of

Europe. I am the Street, the fanciless buildings of government; the cafe-dansant, the clockwork figure, the jazz saxophone; the tourist-lady's hairpiece, the fairy's rubber breasts, the traveling clock which always tells the wrong time and chimes in the wrong keys. I am the dead palm tree, the Negro's dancing pumps, the dried fountain after tourist season. I am all the appurtenances of night."

"That sounds about right," said Profane (V. 454).

Profane and Brenda end up racing together into the darkness of the Street. They have discovered V. in the "appurtenances of night", in the waste which is the parts and tools that make reality. As Valetta goes dark, every "housetlight and streetlight" is extinguished (V. 455). The hothouse and the street disappear and their aimless movement is all that works to counteract and transform the "absolute night" (V. 455), the century's apocalyptic end.

In *V.*, the reader is caught between stenciled and profaned texts, the hothouse and the street. It would seem that we are forced to choose between the decadence of catatonic expressionism and the passive vigilance of the poetry of the vacuum. By reading the text we, like Stencil, gather clues about V., invent for her a history only to see her disassembled and scattered. She is Victoria Wren (in Egypt and Florence in 1898 and 1899), the Lady V. (in the Paris theatre, 1913), Veronica Manganese (Malta, 1919), Vera Meroving (Southwest Africa, 1922), Veronica the Rat (in Father Fairing's sewer parish, 1934), The Bad Priest (Malta, ca. 1943), and perhaps even after her death, Mme. Viola, the "oneiromancer and hypnotist" (V. 451), who takes the clockwork eye to Stockholm in 1944. But this history of V. is built from scraps, gathered piecemeal and out of sequence. There is nothing with which to verify the data except our own belief in the possibility of a linear history and its promise of closure. The center does not hold. V. and V. are

both fragmented and anagrammatic. They only seem whole because we expect unity in things like novels, history, subjectivity and so on. But it is only an hallucination, an Oneirine trip, a dream and perhaps only Mme. Viola can tell us what it means.

As Levine and Leverenz have suggested, reading Pynchon's critics is similar to reading a novel like *V*. If Stencil was searching for V., who she was, what she signified, and what discovering her truth might mean, then we find that many critics are, as Mathew Winston's essay suggests, on a quest for Thomas Pynchon. In much of the early criticism we see that they are asking very similar questions: 1) Who is Thomas Pynchon? 2) What is he trying to tell us? and 3) Is it worth the effort of finding out? The first is a question of biography and the problematic nature of Pynchon's conspicuous absence from the public scene. The second is a quest for meaning, for the grand unifying agent and signifier of the texts. The third is a question of the text's legitimacy within the literary canon. As Winston discovered in his search, much of what we think we know about Pynchon is unverifiable:

I started by consulting official documents, and I immediately encountered difficulties. Some records, such as his Cornell transcript, are confidential by nature. Others Pynchon has made so; for instance, he has asked the principal of his high school not to disclose anything by or about him. Some documents have disappeared. Information about Pynchon's service in the Navy may have gone forever when a records office in St. Louis burned after an explosion. And his dossier at the Cornell College of Arts and Sciences has vanished, to the bewilderment of the staff there. I suspect that Pynchon, who has taken care to cover his tracks, may know what happened to it (Winston, 252).

While this passage seems to present a portrait of the artist as a paranoid recluse -- a common effect of Pynchon biographies -- it more importantly describes Pynchon's distrust of "official" histories. The history of the man called Thomas Pynchon is a secret history, like the secret histories he portrays in his novels. Moreover, any attempt to discover who Pynchon is only serves to highlight the absence of authorizing agency. There is nothing "official" about Pynchon or the signature he signs to his texts. His name, the name "Thomas Pynchon," is always a forgery, always a pseudonym. For Edward Mendelson, this uncertainty "calls into question the familiar modes of modern writing and the styles of modern authorship" ("Introduction," 1). More than calling them into question, however, it would seem that Pynchon has totally abandoned these familiar modes. For Richard Poirier, Pynchon is "a genius lost and anonymous" ("Importance of Thomas Pynchon," 58) and in his review of *Gravity's Rainbow*, he goes on to say:

this is a terribly haunted book. It is written by a man who has totally isolated himself from the literary world of New York or anywhere else. This remoteness is what has freed him from the provincial self-importance about literary modes and manners that is the besetting limitation of [contemporary] writers ("Rocket Power," 177).

Similarly, Rushdie calls Pynchon the "Invisible Man" but chides him for his seclusion, writing:

so he wants a private life and no photographs and nobody to know his home address. I can dig it, I can relate to that (but, like, he should try it when its compulsory instead of a free-choice option) (Rushdie, 352).

Pynchon's absence does suggest Joyce's slogan of silence, exile, and yes, even cunning, but more than that it represents what Tony Tanner calls the "persistent

strain in the writing of American authors which reveals a suspicion of all kinds of 'biography' and a growing hostility to 'publicity'" (Tanner, 12). This, Tanner relates to Roland Barthes's notion of the "Death of the Author." As Tanner writes:

If Thomas Pynchon, author, has "died" to the public, he has "bequeathed" us his incomparable texts -- and I hope he will give us more. His "disappearance" is not only to be respected, but to be honoured, even applauded. Of course, the speculations continue. I conclude with one that had quite wide currency at one time: namely, that since, as it happens, the emergence of this new writer Thomas Pynchon coincided with the disappearance and (effectively) the silence of J. D. Salinger -- well, Pynchon *was* Salinger simply using another name. This idea -- or wild hypothesis -- was published in an American journal called the *Soho Weekly News*. Pynchon responded with what one takes to be a wry, amused comment: "Not bad, keep trying." No doubt they will (Tanner, 18).

If we are to respect Pynchon's disappearance, as Tanner suggests, we must also come to terms with the challenge, the seductive power, this "death" presents us.

Like Bartleby in the dead letter office, Pynchon's texts and news of him come to us accidentally, as though misdirected. Everything about Pynchon and his texts is a "wild hypothesis", a rumor, passed on third hand, from a friend of a friend who knew a guy. Rumors about Pynchon represent a mini-industry within Pynchon studies and fandom. Again, Rushdie summarizes many of these:

We heard he was doing something about Lewis and Clark? Mason and Dixon? A Japanese science fiction novel? And one spring in London a magazine announced the publication of a 900-page Pynchon megabook about the American Civil War, published in true Pynchonian style by a small press nobody ever heard of, and I was halfway to the door before I remembered what date it was, April the first, ho ho ho (Rushdie, 352).

This was in 1990. These rumors resurfaced in the fall of 1996 with the announcement by Henry Holt of the publication of *Mason & Dixon*, which, according to *The Washington Post* was said "to have been in the works since 1973"

(Streitfield). Was it another April Fool's joke or were we to at last have *the* new "Pynchon megabook"? All one could do was speculate which was exactly what happened with the title alone. On the world wide web, Pynchon's disciples were already dutifully researching the lives of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the English astronomers who surveyed the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland between 1763-1767. By the time the time the book appeared on April 30, 1997 (the anniversary of the death of Pynchon's close friend Richard Fariña) it was already redundant. We already had Pynchonian paranoid readings (Was Mason a Mason?) and historical analyses (Linking the 1760s to the 1860s to the 1960s in neat cause and effect order). Like the V2 preceding the sound of its arrival, Pynchon criticism comes before the text itself. But it doesn't end there. Recently, we have learned that Pynchon has been hanging out with the indie-rock band Lotion and even interviewed the band for *Esquire*, writing admiringly of their "dangerous poetry and good tunes" ("Lunch with Lotion," 86). We have also learned that during the writing of *Vineland*, Pynchon took up a correspondence with the *Anderson Valley Advertiser* (a newspaper in Booneville, California) under the pseudonym Wanda Tinasky, bag lady. These letters have been collected and published and according to Steven Moore, "if it ain't Pynchon, it's someone who has him down cold" (qtd. in Streitfield). On the web we can also learn about Pynchon's happy marriage, about his young son Jackson, that he has moved from Northern California to Greenwich Village, and that he is living a very good life. Whether or not any of this is true (or relevant) seems to be beside the point. In the world of Pynchon criticism/fandom we find V.'s "country of

coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth," (V. 450) where rumor and truth are interchangeable, speculation and knowledge one and the same.

Like the Schroedinger's cat conundrum in physics, Pynchon mystifies us by being both alive and dead at the same time. This uncertainty makes him, as Stencil says of V., "a remarkably scattered concept" (V. 389). But it is this indeterminacy which seduces us into the game, flames our desire to "keep trying." By pursuing the name Thomas Pynchon, we have created a simulation of the author we think could write his texts. Pynchon himself, whomever he is, is the waste material, the scattered remains, of our need for an origin. In this way our very notion of what an author is is itself dismantled and reversed. It becomes impossible, therefore, to draw the boundary between the inside and outside of the texts themselves as they both circumscribe as well as inscribe Pynchon and his critics. Pynchon's remoteness highlights the limits (or lack thereof) of textuality as narrative plots and paranoid plots inhabit both the world of the novels as well as that of the novelist. Writing about Pynchon does not provide us insight into the man or the texts ascribed to him, but instead we are complicit in the invention of a metafiction about the artist's relationship to his critics. We become the Dr. Kinbote's to Pynchon's *Pale Fire*.

The question, "Who is Thomas Pynchon?", therefore, becomes exceedingly difficult to answer precisely because his name, his signature, represents both an absence and a multitude.<sup>2</sup> In the "Introduction" to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon expresses his own ambivalence toward the author of the short stories. He writes:

My first reaction, rereading these stories, was *oh my God*, accompanied by physical symptoms we shouldn't dwell upon. My

second thought was about some kind of a wall-to-wall rewrite. These two impulses have given way to one of those episodes of middle-aged tranquility, in which I now pretend to have reached a level of clarity about the young writer I was back then. I mean I can't very well 86 this guy from my life. On the other hand, if through some as yet undeveloped technology I were to run into him today, how comfortable would I feel about lending him money, or for that matter even stepping down the street to have a beer and talk over old times? (SL 3)

The writer who has signed his name to the collection *Slow Learner*, is not the same as the writer who did so to the individual stories when they were first published between 1958 and 1964. Like Fausto in his confessions, there is a Pynchon I and a Pynchon II (perhaps more). But his response to a writer and to writings to which he feels a mixture of suspicion and pity echoes that of Enzian in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Reminiscing about Blicero, Enzian tells Katje, "a former self is a fool, an insufferable ass, but he's still human, you'd no more turn out any other kind of cripple, would you?" (GR 660). Pynchon II, as a critic of Pynchon I, is a reader of the Street. Resisting the two Hothouse impulses of death ("oh my God") and control ("a wall-to-wall rewrite"), he instead remains disinterested but compassionate. He keeps cool but cares. The entire "Introduction" represents a

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2. This notion of the signature originated in Derrida's essay, "Signature Event Context," which sparked off a now famous speech-act theory debate with John Searle. Derrida's response to Searle's criticism was the essay "Limited Inc. a b c." McHoul and Wills offer a detailed analysis of Pynchon's Derridean signature in their chapter "Almost but not quite me ...". They write: "Derrida, however, adds a third type of signature which allows for readings that, for want of a better term, we would call 'anagrammatical.' This evokes the way Latin poets placed their names within their poems in a way which both fascinated and threatened Saussure. Here the signature stands for the play of writing within the text -- whether deliberately or unintentionally matters little -- for the data never reads out in the same way or order as it was punched (or *pinched*) in" (McHoul & Wills, 139).

deflation of the Pynchon mystique as it dismantles the stories one by one. He portrays himself, perhaps now as Pynchon III, as just a regular guy who a long time ago wrote some regular stories with little to no success. Even for Pynchon III there is no stable self to attach anything to. Writing again of Pynchon I, he says:

What is most appealing about young folks, after all, is the changes, not the still photograph of finished character but the movie, the soul in flux. Maybe this small attachment to my past is only another case of what Frank Zappa calls a bunch of old guys sitting around playing rock 'n' roll. But as we all know, rock 'n' roll will never die, and education too, as Henry Adams always sez, keeps going on forever (*SL* 23).

For Pynchon III, or Pynchon  $x$ , as the case may be, there is no end point, no static moment. Learning never stops, and rock and roll will never die. Pynchon is forever a "soul in flux" and we will never have our still photograph. Instead, we have a movie, twenty four frames a second, that in defiance of linear time and hothouse entropy we can run backwards as well as forwards. Perhaps we have had the undeveloped technology for time travel all along: the poetic reversal.

And so we turn to the texts themselves. But when we try to answer the second question "What do the texts mean?", things become no less problematic. The titles of Josephine Hendin's "What is Pynchon Telling Us?" and Speer Morgan's "*Gravity's Rainbow: What's The Big Idea?*" probably best express this desire. For her part, Hendin makes the insightful observation that:

meaning and meaninglessness are opposite sides of the same delusion, diversions into the traps of control or chance and away from the fact that life is uncontrollable. For Pynchon, only physicists give clear unequivocal statements that death has his undisputed hegemony in the universe, that life moves from order to disintegration, from differentiated structures to dispersed, undifferentiated matter, according to the second law of thermodynamics. Pynchon's law of human entropy orchestrates the

life of the nation, the couple, the family, the individual into a symphony of death centuries in the unrolling, its pattern inaudible to any one listener because a lifetime unfolds only the most minuscule movement tricked out by the devil as the song of life (Hendin, 41).

Speer Morgan, on the other hand, rejects Pynchon's ambivalence writing:

the reader may also grow vexed to the point of giving up on the some four hundred characters, the total volatility of mood (from utter slapstick to the darkest meditation in a single line), and the repeated explosion of verisimilitude and tone with the most outrageous anachronisms and crass, seemingly childish indecorums. The point of view offers no anchoring frame since it is free to the point of switching from scenes rendered as drama to others done through an omniscient voice so urgent that it drops all pretense of artifice, grabs the reader by the collar, and speaks head on. Most of all, we might grow weary of trying to wade through a plot that employs so few transitions or explanations, which drops us into this or that scene as into strange parties to figure out by our own wits where and among whom we are. In short, we may simply give up in confusion, preferring anything -- the crumbling cathedral of formal aesthetics -- to this chaos (Morgan, 83).

For Hendin, life is a delusion, the dichotomy of meaning/meaninglessness a trap, and, "Death Rules" (Hendin, 37). Morgan, as vexed as any of Pynchon's readers, instead becomes nostalgic for "the crumbling cathedral" of the traditional novel when faced by such overwhelming chaos. One essay revels in the Hothouse, while the other panics in the Street. These are typical reactions. James Nohnberg writes, "Pynchon's books display a manic and almost mindless invention, while an ultimately entropic and depressive quality gradually engulfs the development" (Nohnberg, 158). Time and time again we are told that the novels present us with chaos and resolve themselves through apocalypse. This either frustrates our search for meaning by being willfully difficult or forces us to accept meaninglessness as a sign that the end is near. Most of these critics use their

experience of reading difficult Modernist texts like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* as a model for understanding the complexities of Pynchon's texts. But unlike Joyce, it is not certain that Pynchon is interested in a method of, as Eliot wrote, "controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*," 483). If Pynchon is, to quote Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz, "an author in search of a metaphor" then, we are told, that metaphor must be found in science and can only be entropy (Friedman & Puetz, 23). For Morgan, this reveals Pynchon's central weakness: "One can only wonder if in some odd way Pynchon has not taken the concept of entropy too seriously, allowing an idea of physics, which has validity as a psychological delusion, to dominate his own view of human life" (Morgan, 97).

This moves us very quickly to question three: "Is it worth the effort of finding out?" For the Hothouse critic, that answer depends on how seriously he or she is willing to take entropy, how valid they believe it is as a metaphor for human life. David Leverenz writes that when he discovered "that [*Gravity's Rainbow*] did make sense" he was then able to "dismiss the book as a sermon that was, quite simply wrong" (Leverenz, 242). Edward Mendelson, on the other hand, argues that the choice between meaning and chaos found in *Gravity's Rainbow* is indicative of its status as an encyclopedic narrative and thus places it within a literary tradition which includes *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, *Moby Dick*, and *Ulysses* ("*Gravity's Encyclopedia*," 161). Similarly, Tanner writes that "Pynchon's work takes its place in that line of dazzlingly daring, even

idiosyncratic American writing which leads back through Faulkner to Mark Twain and Hawthorne, and above all to Melville and *Moby Dick*" (Tanner, 91). Depending on how one arranges the canon, Pynchon is either smart or stupid, In or Out. In this way, much of Pynchon criticism begins to look like the work of the Whole Sick Crew. An endlessly redundant game of *proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways.*

For Poirier, there is a great deal of danger in

looking at the writing as something to be figured out by a process of translation, a process which omits the weirdness and pleasure of the reading experience as it goes along, the kind of experience which, say, we expect from Dickens without being worried about it. The damage consists of treating each of the formal or stylistic or allusive elements in a work as a clue to meaning, a point of possible stabilization. This is an especially inappropriate way to treat Pynchon because each of these elements is in itself highly mobile and dramatic. Each is a clue not to meaning so much as to chaos of meaning, an evidence of the impossibility of stabilization. We are confronted with what, in another context, I call a literature of waste ("Importance of Thomas Pynchon," 50).

The reader of Pynchon is caught between the naiveté of the 19th century realist tradition, wherein everything is explained, and the sophistication of the 20th century modernist tradition, wherein everything requires an explanation. We are either too passive or too active in our reading habits and Pynchon seems to problematize both tendencies. For Poirier, this requires a great deal of care on the reader's part lest they "do to [Pynchon] the damage already done to Joyce and Eliot" ("Importance of Thomas Pynchon," 50).

If Pynchon resists a stable reading, be it in his life or in his texts, it is because he understands too well the normalizing processes of meaning making and canon making. By remaining fragmented he refuses to be interpellated,

“hailed” in the Althusserian sense, by the literary and social mechanisms he was born into. The literature of waste, to use Poirier’s phrase, does not represent the end of literature, the gleeful apocalypse of the Hothouse, but instead the recognition that criticism, particularly modernist criticism, has become so dominant that it no longer responds to literary texts but in fact produces them. Whereas criticism was traditionally a way of commenting on existing texts, it now anticipates them, interprets them in advance. It is not Pynchon who is apocalyptic but literary criticism itself. What we admire or find terrifying in Pynchon’s texts are the very things we enjoy or fear in the world around us. The texts are the waste material of our lives lived in preterite streets and elect hothouses.

Along with McHoul and Wills, Judith Chambers, Michael Bérubé and others have begun to problematize the modernist procedures which have characterized Pynchon criticism up to and even after the publication of *Vineland*. In the nineties, criticism has made a definite shift toward postmodern and poststructural readings of Pynchon’s texts. David Cowart argues that the Joycean parallel popular among many Pynchon critics is no longer applicable:

the literary apotheosis toward which modernism moves (in a number of texts) is not available to postmodernism, and thus *Vineland* corresponds not to *Finnegans Wake* but to the new literary start Joyce did not live to undertake (Cowart, 6).

Moreover, in *Vineland*, Pynchon searches for a “literary start” which Joyce would never have undertaken. Pynchon’s texts are not a step beyond in the evolution of literature but an abandonment of its destiny as a destiny. If he cannot be read satisfactorily by his contemporary readers it is because he is, like Nietzsche,

untimely. As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "I am one thing, my writings another matter":

--- Before I discuss them, one by one, let me touch on the question of their being understood or *not* understood. I'll do it as casually as decency permits; for the time for this question certainly hasn't come yet. The time for me hasn't come yet: some are born posthumously (*Ecce Homo*, 715).

Pynchon's texts give us the similar impression of being written for an audience that has not yet been born and indeed may never be. That instead of writing for those longing for the redundancy of another *Finnegans Wake*, Pynchon is instead creating his own audience.<sup>3</sup> They are *Vineland's* Prairie Wheeler's, born into a postmodern world defined by the Nietzschean "*fin-de-millennium* mood" where we live "on the violent edge between ecstasy and decay" (Kroker & Cook, 9). Judith Chambers writes, "It is this twilight decay that Prairie Wheeler, the young and jaded Venus of the reconfigured world, must negotiate if there is to be hope for her future and America's" (Chambers, 142).

If Pynchon has a bias, it is toward the youth of the Street. Prairie, the children of Malta, Meatball Mulligan and Company, Lotion -- all represent for him the eye on the future which is both innocent and jaded, disinterested and hopeful. They are able to immerse themselves in the rubble of civilization without willing

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3. By invoking Nietzsche's untimely I do not mean to confuse him with modernist or avant-gardist notions of melioristic progress or innovation for its own sake. I read the contrast between the untimely and the timely as a distinction between nonlinear and linear movements in time, in history. The untimely is that which is tropic, reversible, and anagrammatical. To be born posthumously is to arrive after one's own death, to become the residue of one's own scattering.

it into something they can control. They take pleasure in its strangeness, in its absurdity, without losing sight of its seriousness. Pynchon writes of Lotion:

what I appreciate this band for is its contradictions, which indeed happen to be those of rock 'n' roll at large -- sarcasm and feeling, precision and dishevelment, transgression of and respect for pop in all its ubiquity and power. I'm intrigued by the mystery of how this band -- any band -- can carry these with such apparent grace, and the mystery is deepened for me by their generational remoteness ("Lunch with Lotion," 86).

These contradictions are those of the postmodern and what he reads as "generational remoteness" is the reality of a generation born posthumously, born into the anagrammatic moment when everything is dismantled and opened to reversibility. In the conclusion of his interview, Pynchon discovers echoes of The Whole Sick Crew. The band discusses how pop music has become little more than references to the music of the past, endless recycling, when Bass Player, Bill Ferguson, realizes, "But there's gonna have to be an omega point, where -- What are you gonna reference, after ...." He pauses and Pynchon writes: "*For a moment, each face is visited by unaccustomed shadows*" ("Lunch with Lotion," 90). Resisting the apocalypse, overcoming the omega point, means moving beyond our sense of destiny, of historical indebtedness. It requires the dangerous poetry of the trope which can transform waste without hope of finality.

To accept the seductive challenge brought to us by Pynchon is to enter the Zone. As we find in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Zone represents "endless simulation" (GR 489). The author is simulated through rumor, produced by the authority of the signature. The text is simulated and produced by the process of its reception, the critical structure that claims it as its own. The "Real Text," if we treat it as a

destiny, becomes “our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it’s all squeezed limp of its last drop ...” (GR 520). But the Real Text is a dream, an hallucination that does not violate the real but makes it possible. We are lost in an ecstasy of paranoia. But paranoid self-awareness opens us up to the reversal. The goal, as Bérubé writes, is “to make Pynchon’s canonicity do cultural work” (Bérubé, 315). We must embrace the simulation, knowing it for the waste and replication that it is, and make it different, transform it to our advantage. By surrendering ourselves to Pynchon’s strangeness, we become untimely, reversible. The novels of our simulation become the theory of a text which is the residue of Pynchon’s scattering throughout the streets of our Zone.

### CHAPTER THREE THE W.A.S.T.E. LAND

Early in *The Crying of Lot 49* we read the story of Mucho Maas's experience with a different kind of lot: not the mysterious Lot 49 but instead a used car lot. Though the job is described as having been "exquisite torture for him" (L49 13), we learn that it was the last thing he was able to truly care about. Oedipa, we learn, worries that his present job as a radio disk jockey for KCUF serves merely as a "buffer between him and that lot" because "He had believed too much in the lot, he believed not at all in the station" (L49 15). The withdrawal and passivity which Oedipa witnesses in her husband are symptoms of the postmodern malaise which hangs over the entire book. Mucho has learned the lesson which it will take Oedipa the rest of her journey to understand. It is the lesson of the postmodern waste land. Mucho is haunted by the memory of a "creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky" (L49 144) which visits him each night in his dreams. The terror of the lot is later replaced (and pharmaceutically enhanced) with pity for the preterite masses who are united only by way of an anarchist miracle. He explains to a panic-stricken Oedipa:

"When those kids sing about 'She loves you,' yeah well, you know, she does, she's any number of people, all over the world, back through time, different colors, sizes, ages, shapes, distances from death, but she loves. And the 'you' is everybody. And herself. Oedipa, the human voice, you know, it's a flipping miracle" (L49 143).

The terror of “nada” (nothingness, the void, silence) and the pity of “love” are the twin lessons of the preterite. It is not until the end that Oedipa realizes their full weight when she awaits the miracle of the human voice, a sound we, and perhaps she, never hears. We are left to wonder whether “behind the hieroglyphic streets” she will discover “transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (L49 181).

Transcendent meaning, of course, belongs to the hothouse, and this is Mucho’s true failing. By locking himself in the hothouse of LSD-induced transcendence he forgets the earth (the street) to which the preterite truly belong and the sound of their anonymous voices joined in unison.

But before we condemn Mucho it is important to remember the lot. The description of the used car lot is a remarkable catalog of waste and one worth examining more closely:

Yet at least he had believed in the cars. Maybe to excess: how could he not, seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted in a shade just off enough to depress the value, if not Mucho himself, inside smelling hopelessly of children, supermarket booze, two, sometimes three generations of cigarette smokers, or of dust -- and when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives, and there was no way telling what things had been truly refused (when so little he supposed came by that out of fear most of it had to be taken and kept) and what had simply (perhaps tragically) been lost: clipped coupons promising savings of 5 or 10¢, trading stamps, pink flyers advertising specials at the markets, butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads, Yellow Pages torn from the phone book, rags of old underwear or dresses that already were period costumes, for wiping your own breath off the inside of a windshield with so you could see whatever it was, a movie, a woman or car you coveted, a cop who might pull you over just for drill, all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash,

condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes --- it made him sick to look, but he had to look (L49 13).

This passage reads like a litany of the dispossessed and the hopeless. The trash and residue, ash and waste which characterize the trade-ins extend themselves to include the people to whom they once belonged. The used cars represent the "actual residue of these lives" and are "metal extensions of themselves." What makes Mucho sick and what fascinates him nevertheless is the notion that it is not the cars which are the waste but the people -- the preterite themselves, who are the residue of their own trash.

In his essay "The Remainder," Baudrillard describes the relationship between the body and its shadow as an example of the "remainder par excellence." The shadow is:

something that can fall from the body, just like hair, excrement, or nail clippings to which it "is" compared in all archaic magic. But they are also, one knows, "metaphors" of the soul, of breath, of Being, of essence, of what profoundly gives meaning to the subject. Without an image or without a shadow, the body becomes a transparent nothing, *it is itself nothing but a remainder*. It is the diaphanous substance that remains once the shadow is gone. There is no more reality: it is the shadow that has carried all reality away with it. ... Thus the body can be nothing but the waste product of its own residue, the fallout of its own fallout ("The Remainder," 148).

The remainder challenges not only our privileging of the subject, of the body, at the expense of waste but also the very nature of the real. For Baudrillard, "the impossibility of determining what is the remainder of the other characterizes the phase of simulation and the death throes of distinctive systems, a phase when everything becomes a remainder and a residual" ("The Remainder," 144).

Moreover, he writes, "all of the real is residual" and that which we privilege as the

real is, in fact, the fall out of everything which is already residual ("The Remainder," 146). Thus the Elect are not only the remainder of the Preterite, but the reality which grants them their hegemony is only the remainder of the wasted Zone which they dominate. But this reversal does not simply invert our common sense; instead, it destabilizes our ability to distinguish between the elect and the preterite, the hothouse and the street, and so on. The reality of the Zone, the reality of reality, is always at the level of hyperreality, or simulation, because it is always reproduced by its own remainder. Without the preterite, the elect loses its reality, just as the body requires its shadow. Thus it is through discourse that the Real continues to dominate as reality. Baudrillard writes: "Birth is residual if it is not symbolically revisited through initiation. Death is residual if it is not resolved in mourning, in the collective celebration of mourning. Value is residual if it is not reabsorbed and volitalized in the cycle of exchanges" ("The Remainder," 146). But what becomes of Reality, of Birth, Death and Value, when we can no longer revisit them symbolically, resolve them, or reabsorb them? This is the problem of postmodernity and the Zone.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty of defining the postmodern results from its problematic relationship to modernity. In many ways the "post-" designates the postmodern as a remainder of the modern, the residue of a cultural dominant in decline.

Lyotard, in his text *The Postmodern Condition*, argues that the term "modern"

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1. Baudrillard's notion of the remainder is drawn from Bataille's concepts of excretion and appropriation. As an alternative to science, Bataille suggests, "The Heterological Theory of Knowledge." Heterology, he argues, "leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion; it introduces the demand for the violent gratifications implied by social life" (Bataille, 97).

designates “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (Lyotard, xxiii). The discourses and rituals of initiation, mourning, and so on that produce and reproduce the real are therefore modern in nature. The reversibility of the remainder is postmodern as is the remainder itself. Lyotard writes, “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, xxiv). The postmodern is that which will not easily and blindly allow reality to go on reproducing itself as if it were the only necessary experience. It is that which problematizes modernity’s grand narratives, “its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (Lyotard, xxiv). What was radical about modernity was its quest “to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” and this questioning of forms is inherited and intensified by the postmodern which is contained within the modern itself (Lyotard, 78). Lyotard argues paradoxically that “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern” (Lyotard, 79). In other words, the postmodern work of art produces its own origin and the rules of its fabrication after the fact. The nature of art and the role of the artist are both residual until we nostalgically recall them. Therefore, the postmodern abandons the real in order to explore those alternatives which were never taken because they came too soon. “Finally,” Lyotard writes, “it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (Lyotard, 81). Reality in postmodernism is never stable enough to allow for anything other than allusion, indirect reference, to the remainder and the remainder of the remainder.

As we enter the *Zone of Gravity's Rainbow*, we leave this nostalgia for modernity behind. We are instead plunged into the chaos of an illegitimate, unredeemed space. Here, we witness "a great frontierless streaming" of refugee populations who are "limping, marching, shuffling, carried, hauling along the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don't yet know is destroyed forever" (GR 549, 551). The objects which the refugees carry with them, "deathless piano performances punched on Vorsetzer rolls, ribboned black lingerie, flowered and grape-crested silverware, faceted lead-glass decanters, tulip-shaped Jugendstil cups, strings of amber beads" (GR 550), are now devoid of reality, the remainder of that lost order. Moreover, that order is effectively "destroyed forever" precisely because its supporting discourse has collapsed.

The text of *Gravity's Rainbow* warns us that "here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly," in order to prepare us for its postmodern "images of the Uncertainty" (GR 303). The real has been completely destabilized and any attempt to distinguish between the remainder and its lost origin has become futile. Uncertainty reigns in the Zone. The postmodern experience of uncertainty and instability is characterized by, as Kroker and Cook write, "a *fin-de-millennium* consciousness which, existing at the end of history in the twilight time of ultramodernism (of technology) and hyperprimitivism (of public moods), uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout" (Kroker & Cook, 8). Humanity is no longer the inventor of culture and technology but the residue of a system, of a mechanism, it can no longer understand. Moreover, the system can never be understood

precisely because it can no longer be made, no longer be normalized through a discourse of legitimation. The “background radiation” of parody and kitsch does not produce meaning, it instead seduces it. We gaze into the abyss, albeit a superficial one.

In “On Nihilism,” Baudrillard argues that we have reached, “a destiny of inertia for a saturated world,” and that, “the masses themselves are caught up in a gigantic process of inertia through acceleration” (“On Nihilism,” 161). And so we read in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

separations are proceeding. Each alternative Zone speeds away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center. Each day the mythical return Enzian dreamed of seems less possible. Once it was necessary to know uniforms, insignia, airplane markings, to observe boundaries. But by now too many choices have been made. The single root is lost, way back there in the May desolation. Each bird has his branch now, and each one is the Zone (GR 519).

The “single root” of a totalizing discourse “is lost” as the Zone replicates itself, speeding out of control toward an entropic finality which is always postponed.

The Zone itself is not simply a waste land but the residue of a territory which has disappeared. To think of it as a place on a map is to share in the nostalgia for the lost center, for redemption and renewal. But there is no way out of this purgatory, forward or back. It is too late; the modern has disappeared.

As Baudrillard writes, modernity represents “the radical destruction of appearances, the disenchantment of the world and its abandonment to the violence of interpretation” (“On Nihilism,” 160). Postmodernity, in turn, “is the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning” (“On

Nihilism," 161). For Baudrillard it is this "implosion of meaning" which has brought about the inertial scene of the Zone. But our fin-de-millennium mood is not merely the nihilism of the hothouse as we move toward entropy, but instead "melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of disappearance of meaning" ("On Nihilism," 162). Among the wastes of the Zone it is Sloth, defiant sorrow, which acts as a terrorist weapon against our accelerated and inertial systems.

Baudrillard writes:

Against this hegemony of the system, one can exalt the ruses of desire, practice revolutionary micrology of the quotidian, exalt the molecular drift or even defend cooking. This does not resolve the imperious necessity of checking the system in broad daylight.

This only terrorism can do.

It is the trait of the reversal that effaces the remainder, just as a single ironic smile effaces a whole discourse, just as a single flash of denial in a slave effaces all the power and pleasure of the master.

The more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals. The challenge, even infinitesimal, is the image of a chain failure. Only this reversibility without a counterpart is an event today, on the nihilistic and disaffected stage of the political. Only it mobilizes the imaginary ("On Nihilism," 163).

The terroristic power of the reversal belongs to the Zone. The text of *Gravity's Rainbow* effaces, erases, recent history by way of innumerable reversals in order to mobilize and awaken our imaginations. The hegemony of Their system, Their legitimizing discourse, can only be challenged creatively, by way of divergent thinking. If the Preterite are to confront the Elect in the light of day they must measure their own terroristic powers against the terror of the Rocket. As Pirate Prentice tells Roger Mexico, "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 --" (GR 638). For Pynchon the "single ironic smile" that Baudrillard describes is the expression of a paranoid mind. We do not always know who They, the masters, are, but we know They are out there and that They are watching. But how are We to efface, to erase, what has already disappeared, hidden itself in the wastes?

*Gravity's Rainbow* begins where *The Crying of Lot 49* leaves off. But it is not the miracle of the human voice we hear. Instead it is the inhuman sound of the rocket: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now" (GR 3). The sound of the rocket destroys our everyday sense of reality. Traveling faster than the speed of sound, the rocket always precedes its own noise. The cry that might warn us of our own imminent destruction only serves to show us our own powerlessness: "It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre" (GR 3). The evacuation is not an evacuation at all. Those who are able to escape have already received a reprieve from the rocket, even if it is only until the next time. And so the citizens of London during the blitz are awakened to their Preterite status, to an indifferent and omnipotent power they can never overcome.

Each has been hearing a voice, one he thought was talking only to him, say, "You didn't really believe you'd be saved. Come, we all know who we are now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save *you*, old fellow . . ."

There is no way out. Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after? (GR 4).

The London evacuees presage the Zone refugees in their sense of hopelessness, in the notion that the world into which they were born and in which they believed is now destroyed. There is no salvation, only the coldness of a system which allows them little recourse but to passively await death.

But this description of the evacuation exists within a nightmare and the nightmare belongs to Pirate Prentice. Even within his dream there is still some part of the Preterite imagination that is aware of the invisible system at work. When the passengers of the evacuating train ask, "Is this the way out?", the response is one of creative paranoia: "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into --*" (GR 3). The path of the Preterite is always inward, governed by paranoia, looking toward the hidden center that might restore meaning to the Zone. The search for knowledge about the system involves a "*knotting into*" rather than an escape from the very system which enslaves them. The paranoids dig beneath the surface of the obvious in order to restore meaning to the chaos of the street but only find themselves more deeply entrenched in the Elect's system.

Paranoia is closely aligned with guilt in this context, the guilt of failure, of not being worthy of salvation. For the Preterite, the Elect are not the enemy, not the evil ministers of an evil system, but those who have the power to save themselves, to escape the certainty of death. What the Preterite wish for most of all is that their paranoia will grant them access to the Elect's secrets so that they too might be saved, might transcend. During Tchitcherine's Oneirine episode we read:

Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination -- not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In for those like Tchitcherine who are held at the edge (GR 703).

The "edge" is the earth, the street, a place which the Preterite wish to abandon but cannot. If there is a "route In," it is obscure and difficult to find but there is nothing else to give them any sense of hope, any chance of finding "the meanest sharp sliver of truth" (GR 590). To be in the "We-system" is to understand the limits of what We will be allowed to know:

The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment, left on the outside of Earth, at the mercy of a Gravity we have only begun to learn how to detect and measure, must go on blundering ... (GR 590).

This quest, of course, is in vain. We can do nothing but blunder, move blindly, accidentally, and perhaps disastrously about the surface of the Zone.

The Preterite, still carrying along with them the residual baggage of the Modern, are at the mercy of their own powers of interpretation. And in their blundering, each has his own version of the true path, just as every bird has his branch, and each is the Zone. The text tells us that, "those like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity" (GR 582). Rather than be void of purpose, the Preterite cling to any and all forms of mystical truths in order to have a purpose. Creative paranoia inaugurates a period when, "Holy-Center-Approaching is soon to be the number one Zonal pastime" (GR 508). Enzian imagines that, "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back,

restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (GR 525). The Zone itself seems to offer the Utopian promise of discovering the hidden center that will restore the waste land, for "in each of these streets, some vestige of humanity, of Earth, has to remain. No matter what has been done to it, no matter what it's been used for . . ." (GR 693). The Preterite are always "held at the edge", "left on the outside of Earth" as the remainder of the Elect's system. No longer human, they search their Preterite streets for "some vestige of humanity." Exiled in the Zone, they hunt for what remains of the Earth.<sup>2</sup>

What they discover instead is that "in the Zone, hidden inside the summer Zone, the Rocket is waiting" (GR 359). Nothing in the Zone inspires more paranoia than the Rocket and the secret of its creation. What develops in this search for the hidden center is a wide-spread belief in one form of "Rocket state-cosmology" (GR 726) or other. The Rocket itself comes to embody the Elect's hegemony over the Zone. As we are told:

Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul (GR 566).

The dominance of the Elect is predicated on the power of the Rocket. With it at Their command, the hothouse grows and the system pushes the Zone ever closer toward the inertial state of absolute zero, total entropy. The promise of a reversal

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2. Here again we find echoes of Bataille. He writes, "when human beings become autonomous they discover around themselves a false and empty world. The awareness of being a dupe before administrative impudence (and also before terrifying displays of individual satisfaction and stupidity) succeeds the strong and painful feeling of communal unity. The vast result of centuries of struggle, of prodigious military or material conquest, have always led conquering peoples -- whether in the West or among the Egyptians or the Romans -- to a failed and disappointing world, flattened by interminable crises. Through an extreme malaise and through a confusion in which everything appears vain and nearly disastrous, there grows the obsession with *The Recovery of the Lost World*" (Bataille, 203).

grows ever more remote as the Elect's system moves closer toward its inevitable catharsis:

Abreaction of the Lord of the Night unless the Blitz stops, rockets dismantle, the entire film runs backward: faired skin back to sheet steel back to pigs to white incandescence to ore, to Earth. But the reality is not reversible. Each firebloom, followed by blast then by sound of arrival, is a mockery (how can it not be deliberate?) of the reversible process: with each one the Lord further legitimizes his State ... (GR 139).

For the preterite the "mockery" of the rocket represents the death of the imaginary. The hegemonic system in which they live accelerates toward the inertial in a panicked and ecstatic frenzy. What were once the dreams of the preterite are transformed and reappropriated by the elect in order to enslave them further, to draw them in closer, and tighten the knots that ensnare them. Laszlo Jamf's mysterious compound Imipolex J, the secret of the rocket and the true soul of the new Rocket State, would not have been possible without Friedrich August Kekule von Stradonitz's cyclical dream of the benzene ring which led to the discovery of aromatic compounds in organic chemistry:

Kekule dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which the dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. 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 may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of 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 by a maniac bent on suicide . . . (GR 412).

The rocket and the system represent the victory of postmodern capitalism over modern politics. The Zone is the new playing field for multinational corporations like IG Farben and DuPont, both of whom profited from Kekule's dream and the advancement of chemical science during the war. But the System must eventually burn itself out. The Earth's energy reserves inevitably will be exhausted and the waste of the Zone will reach a point when it can no longer be recycled. In the hands of the Elect, the system is a hothouse that is not diminishing but racing, "bent on suicide," toward entropy.

What sustains the preterite as they endure the violence of this system is the possibility that the elect's progress may indeed be reversible, that the old cycle will remain inviolate. As Father Rapier says during his "Critical Mass":

"To believe that each of Them *will* personally die is also to believe that Their system will die -- that some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History. To affirm Their mortality is to affirm Return" (GR 540).

Such an affirmation acts as a denial of the system's hegemony, to reject entropy in favor of the cycle and renewal. But again, the rocket appropriates Kekule's dream as we discover that its parabolic flight and the rainbow of its fall are in fact circular. The rocket's path, the text tells us, is:

not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it "rises from" and the Earth it "strikes" No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth (GR 726).

The rocket's path is only a parabola if we observe it from the surface of the earth, from the street. But it originates within the hidden center that lies infinitely below the earth and it is to the hidden center which it, like the preterite, must return. In this way the rocket becomes a paranoid symbol of hope and its very existence dominates the whole of the zone.

In one of the more inspired rocket mythologies that develops in the zone we read of:

Manicheans who see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle (GR 727).

The pairing of Enzian and Blicero as good and evil Rocket forces in a Manichean cosmos represents the struggle between the elect and the preterite within the zone. The choice is between suicide and escape, but which is good and which is evil? The dream of escape belongs to the Elect, as Blicero tells Gottfried: "And sometimes I dream of discovering the edge of the World. Finding that there *is* an end" (GR 722). The starting position of the elect is from the hidden center, from point of origin that the preterite believe contains meaning. From the hothouse point of view, the cycles of the edge, the street, cannot last forever. There must be an end, a final apocalypse. Blicero's dream is one of transcendence and escape.

He says:

"I want to break out -- to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become . . . ." (GR 724).

Similarly, the rocket scientist Pokler shares Blicero's dream as he tries to explain to his wife Leni what the rocket is meant to be used for:

"They're using you to kill people," Leni told him, as clearly as she could. "That's their only job, and you're helping them."

"We'll all use *it*, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend."

She laughed. "Transcend," from Pokler?

"Someday," honestly trying, "they won't have to kill. Borders won't mean anything. We'll have all outerspace. . . ." (GR 400).

For the Elect, and those like Pokler who are caught between the Preterite and the Elect, the rocket is not a weapon of war but a vehicle which holds forth, "The Promise of Space Travel" (GR 297). Pokler's utopian vision of mass space travel blinds him to the fact that people are instead being killed in the street. Pokler believes that he and his family are members of the Elect, that they too will escape and transcend, but Leni's laugh reminds us that they are preterite, they too are expendable. The dream of transcendence is in fact another nightmare. As Blicero says:

"Is the cycle over now, and a new one ready to begin? Will our new Edge, our new Deathkingdom, be the moon? I dream of a great glass sphere, hollow and very high and far away . . . the colonists have learned to do without air, it's vacuum inside and out . . . it's understood the men won't ever return . . . they are all men" (GR 723).

The place of transcendence, the moon, is not a new utopia but a sterile vacuum, a "new Deathkingdom." Whether the edge be the street, the earth, or the moon, the Elect's dreams of overcoming their own entropic system leads them only closer to its only and final conclusion: death.

This is something which Enzian understands very clearly of Blicero and his rocket when he thinks:

The history of the old Hereros is one of lost messages. It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the Moon's true message. The true message has never come. Perhaps the Rocket is meant to take us there someday, and then Moon will tell us its truth at last (GR 322).

Like the hidden center, the moon represents an opportunity for meaning and truth where none exists. Just as the preterite search for the center only heightens their entanglement into the system, the elect dream of reaching the moon is a doomed vision. The rocket must always submit itself to gravity. It cannot escape its own cycles. As Nora Dodson-Truck says, assuming the identity of the "The Force of Gravity":

*I am Gravity, I am That against which the Rocket must struggle, to which the pre-historic wastes submit and are transmuted to the very substance of History . . . (GR 639).*

What Nora has discovered is that the true force which governs the system and the Zone is neither the paranoia of the Preterite nor the Rocket of the Elect but the force of Gravity. What we arrive at is the realization that the "Earth is a living critter" and that "that Gravity, taken so for granted, is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth's body . . ." (GR 590). Gravity is the force within the Earth which governs the reversal and the cycles of the remainder. The power and control which the elect have over the Rocket only holds as long as there is fuel to burn, but at the peak of its parabolic flight, the Brennschluss point, the rocket surrenders to gravity and begins to fall.

The Brennschluss point is a moment of complete stillness, a zero point. At that moment the rocket is no longer traveling forward or back, up or down, it is frozen and inertial. But it is also the moment of transformation of the reversal when the movement toward fulfillment and reality inverts itself and is dismantled. The inward movement toward the center does not lead us toward the truth of the rocket, but instead:

The Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement toward stillness is the same (GR 319).

Similarly, the Elect's quest for space does not reveal the Moon's real truth but instead flirts with a vacuum that the rocket cannot conquer. As Ronald Cherrycoke meditates on Nora Dodson-Truck, he thinks:

She *has* turned her face, more than once, to the Outer Radiance and simply seen nothing there. And so each time has taken a little more of the Zero into herself. It comes down to courage, at worst an amount of self-deluding that's vanishingly small: he has to admire it, even if he can't accept her glassy wastes, her appeals to a day not of wrath but of indifference. (GR 150)

The truth of the Zero is that the system is indifferent to both the inward quest of the Preterite and the outward one of the Elect. Both move across the Zone in the hope of restoring meaning, but instead they are merely accelerating toward inertia. Paranoia and control, return and transcendence, are all the self-deluding beliefs of a post-war people who cannot accept indifference, that there is simply "nothing there." The fascination that a character like Tyrone Slothrop holds for both the preterite and elect characters who hunt him is his ability to transform, to reverse himself. As Pointsman discovers while reading Pavlov:

“Not only must we speak of partial or of complete extinction of a conditioned reflex, but we must also realize that extinction can proceed *beyond* the point of reducing a reflex to zero. We cannot therefore judge the degree of extinction *only* by the magnitude of the reflex or its absence, since there can still be a *silent extinction beyond the zero*” (GR 85).

Slothrop and his odd ability to predict where the rockets will strike has the ability to survive that “silent extinction”, to take us “beyond the zero.” For Pointsman this makes Slothrop very dangerous indeed because there is no greater act of terrorism than to attack the system by way of a reversal. Speaking of Slothrop, Pointsman declares:

“Whatever we may find, there can be no doubt that he is, physiologically, historically, a monster. *We must never lose control.* The thought of him lost in the world of men, after the war, fills me with a deep dread I cannot extinguish . . .” (GR 144).

The hegemony of the system is based on this fear of losing control, just as the rocket is defeated in its conquest of space by the loss of control which is gravity. Moreover, the fear of extinction, of taking the Zero fully into oneself, is driven by the fear of losing one’s own identity. We read of Pokler:

The fear of extinction named Pokler knew it was the Rocket, beckoning him in. If he also knew that in something like this extinction he could be free of his loneliness and failure, still he wasn’t quite convinced . . . So he hunted, as a servo valve with a noisy input will, across the Zero, between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation (GR 406).

The desire for “personal identity” belongs to the Elect, to those who insist on an irreversible reality that allows nothing to remain a remainder. “Impersonal salvation” is the desire of those preterite who are content to remain at the edge without looking toward the hidden center. It is in this desire that something like

humanity, though the Elect would never recognize it as such, remains. As the text reminds us:

perhaps, Pointsman, there is such a thing as the kindness-reflex ... that now and then, also beyond the Zero, survives extinction (GR 714).

The “kindness-reflex” is to be found among the preterite wastes; it is that which is the remainder of a cruel inhuman system which desires only death, and considers the void its salvation. It belongs not to a system of control but to those like Slothrop whose identities are transformed, dismantled and scattered about the Zone:

Slothrop, as noted, at least as early as the *Anubis* era, has begun to thin, to scatter. “Personal density,” Kurt Mondaugen in his Peenemunde office not too many steps away from here, enunciating the Law which will one day bear his name, “is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth.”

“Temporal bandwidth” is the width of your present, your *now*. It is the familiar “ $\Delta t$ ” considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are (GR 509).

The Elect in their hothouses dwell too much in the past, the preterite in their streets, too much in the future. But Slothrop increasingly has learned to dwell in the Zone, to privilege incidental acts of kindness over the completion of his quest. Before his scattering is complete and he disappears from the novel altogether we read:

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

In this moment, recognizing the intersection between Gravity and the Earth, Slothrop reaches the Brennschluss point in his temporal bandwidth and he disappears completely into the now. It is a moment where all sense of self is abandoned and he looks out across the Zone -- not with a sense of terror but of pity. It is a sense of kindness, of love, toward the preterite that survives his extinction, and so he cries, without thinking, just feeling at ease.

In the system of the Elect, dreams force themselves into reality and the whole of the Zone becomes a simulated space. It is for this reason that cinema takes on such an important role in the novel. We read:

“It is my mission,” he announces to Squalidozzi, with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, “to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation. What I can do for the Schwarzkommando I can do for your dream of pampas and sky . . . I can take down your fences and your labyrinth walls, I can lead you back to the Garden you hardly remember . . .” (GR 388).

Here von Goll recognizes that there is no going back, no retreat toward the hidden center because nothing can exist unless it is first simulated. The reality of the Zone, the system, the preterite and the elect are only real after they are simulated. The cinema is not the reflection of reality but instead reality is the remainder of the cinema, of the simulation. In spite of this, Slothrop attempts to erase Their system by imagining “the fork in the road that America never took”:

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 (GR 556).

Unfortunately, there will always be ways to do just that. Slothrop, however, is not searching for a lost center that he can hardly remember, but is instead searching for something within the waste itself that retains the power of the reversal. To find that set of coordinates, however, the Zone must disappear, it must lose its identity, just as the Preterite and the Elect must lose theirs, so that it can reappear as something different. When It reaches that moment of inertia and is scattered, only then will we know what survives beyond the Zero.

It is nearly impossible to read *Gravity's Rainbow* in any way other than in gross generalities. If we read for plot, we, like the preterite, only become entangled in the system. Reading for character only denies the instability of the names which float through the text. What we find instead is a critique of our own complicity in the formation of a system which we have passively allowed to enslave us. The argument of the novel rests on the reversible movements of those residual categories we have named the preterite and the elect. The preterite, driven by Paranoia, seek out the source of their terror in order to restore a utopian past that they have never experienced. Simultaneous to the Preterite's movement toward the Hidden Center is the Elect's outward quest for the vacuum of space. The Elect, having seen the center and found nothing there but the inertia of the Zero, understand all too well the Earth's central meaninglessness and seek to abandon it. Rather than endure the cycles of the Earth they choose the transcendent promise of the moon. For the Elect, as well as the Preterite, the Zone is not merely the surface landscape of the Earth but is itself a globe, a great hollow sphere. Inside this sphere lies the hidden center, the hothouse, where the Elect are

and the Preterite wish to be. The surface of the globe is the street and beyond it, in the emptiness of outerspace, lies the Moon. If the Moon represents the new terrain of the Elect, the place of transcendence, it is also the new Kingdom of Death.

But the Moon is unobtainable. The Rockets which the Elect have designed to take them there are doomed by the force of Gravity, and instead they fall down upon the Earth and the Preterite masses who reside in its wastes. The Zone is generated by and is the source of this strange cycle of paranoia in the street and dreams of transcendence in the hothouse. The Preterite and Elect are not polar opposites but instead one is always the remainder of the other. They are the residue of a constantly reversing system in which every Slothrop is dismantled only to reappear as a Laszlo Jamf or Weismann/Blicero and vice versa. What interests Pynchon is the point of transformation, the moment of inertia, of extinction, before we travel beyond the zero and gravity takes over. The dark tone of *Gravity's Rainbow* arises from the increasing probability that the cycle may at last be resolving itself and that everything within and without will join the absolute stillness of the void. Absolute entropy will reign and there will be nothing left to survive the zero point.

The link between the Elect and the Preterite is perhaps best illustrated by the story of Byron the Bulb, a sentient lightbulb who discovers that he is immortal:

One by one, over the months, the other bulbs burn out, and are gone. The first few of these hit Byron hard. He's still a new arrival, still hasn't accepted his immortality. But on through the burning hours he starts to learn about the transience of others: learns that

loving them while they're here becomes easier, and also more intense -- to love as if each design-hour will be the last (GR 649).

As the text explains, the guilt and pain he feels as he watches the other lightbulbs die out is the first of two lessons: "After Love, then, Byron's next lesson is silence" (GR 650). The lesson of "Love" is the lesson of the preterite seeking the lost center. Silence, however, is the lesson of the elect, of the void. In his immortality, Byron is transformed by the Elect into the Elect. He has found the hidden center but:

He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it (GR 655).

Byron's story ends in the perverse pleasure of the Zero. He speeds toward inertia without hope of discovering what might survive beyond the Zero because immortality cannot allow for a narrow sense of the now. Byron can only live in an infinite past or future, but he will never be able to just feel natural, never be anything other than glass and filament.

Contrasted with Byron and nearly every major character in the novel is Geli Tripping. For Geli, there is nothing but the now:

You either come to the Brocken-complex with a bureaucratic career in mind, or you leave it, and choose the world. There are the two distinct sorts of witches, and Geli is the World-choosing sort (GR 718).

Content to go on living in the World, in the now of the edge, the street, Geli's witchcraft is a very potent sort of kindness-reflex. Obsessed with love for Tchitcherine, Geli gathers up the preterite wastes in order not to recreate the world and make it Real but instead seduce it with magic.

In her pack, Geli Tripping brings along a few of Tchitcherine's toenail clippings, a graying hair, a piece of bedsheet with a trace of his sperm, all tied in a white silk kerchief, next to a bit of Adam and Eve root and a loaf of bread baked from wheat she has rolled naked in and ground against the sun (GR 717).

Geli's magic operates on the principle that we are only the fallout of our own fallout, the waste of our own waste. Her seduction plot begins with the seduction of Tchitcherine's shadow. Thus, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, Pynchon, strangely enough, gives us a happy ending as Geli consummates her conquest of Tchitcherine:

Toward nightfall, the lovers lying naked on a cold grass bank, the sound of a convoy approaches on the little road. Tchitcherine pulls on his trousers and climbs up to see if he can beg some food, or cigarettes. The black faces pass by, mba-kayere, some glancing at him curiously, others too involved with their own exhaustion, or with keeping a tight guard on a covered wagon containing the warhead section of the 00001. Enzian on his motorcycle stops for a moment, mba-kayere, to talk to the scarred, unshaven white. They're in the middle of the bridge. They talk broken German. Tchitcherine manages to hustle half a pack of American cigarettes and three raw potatoes. The two men nod, not quite formally, not quite smiling. Enzian puts his bike in gear and returns to his journey. Tchitcherine lights a cigarette, watching them down the road shivering in the dusk. Then he goes back to his young girl beside the stream. They will have to locate some firewood before all the light is gone.

This is magic. Sure -- but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it (GR 734).

Through Geli's magic, an anarchist miracle and a victory of the improbable through coincidence, Tchitcherine abandons his vengeful quest to destroy Enzian, and the two brothers pass each other in peace and anonymity. The Herero's phrase, "mba-kayere", I am passed over, is no longer a lamentation of having been abandoned by an indifferent universe to the preterite world; it is now a song

of triumph. To be passed over is to be freed of identity, to live in the now, so that we too might be seduced by the magic of reversibility. The lessons of Love and Silence lead us round a vicious cycle of paranoia and control, but the lesson of seduction leads us toward transformation rather than the emptiness of transcendence.

In *Vineland*, Pynchon expresses his theory in a fable. Sister Rochelle, the Head Ninjette, recounts the story of the preterite and the elect, the hidden center and the lunar void, in terms of Heaven and Hell. She says:

“When the Earth was still a paradise, long long ago, two great empires, Hell and Heaven, battled for its possession. Hell won and Heaven withdrew to an appropriate distance. Soon citizens of the Lower Realm were flocking up to visit Occupied Earth on group excursions fares, swarming in their asbestos touring cars and RV’s all over the landscape, looking for cheap-labor bargains in the shops, taking pictures of each other in a blue and green ambience that didn’t register on any film you could buy down in Hell -- till the novelty wore off, and visitors began to realize that Earth was just like home, same traffic conditions, unpleasant food, deteriorating environment, and so forth. Why leave home only to find a second-rate version of what they were trying to escape? So the tourist business began to dwindle, and then the Empire was calling back first its administrators and soon even its troops, as if drawing inward, closer to its own cthonian fires. After a while, the tunnel entrances began to grow, blur, and disappear behind poison oak and berry bushes, get covered by landslides, silted up in floods, till only a few lone individuals -- children, neighborhood idiots -- now and then would stumble on one, out in a deserted place, but dare inside only as far as the first turnings and loss of outdoor light. And then all the gateways to Hell were finally lost to sight, surviving only in local tales handed down the generations, sad recitals that asked why the visitors never came anymore, and if they would again, stories congested and dark as UFO stories are ethereal and luminous. And always shamefaced, with an air not of UFO elation but guilt, at having somehow not been good enough for them, the folks who lived in Hell. So, over time, Hell became a storied place of sin and penitence, and we forgot that its original promise was never punishment but reunion, with the true, long-forgotten metropolis of Earth Unredeemed” (VL 382).

In Sister Rochelle's scheme of things, to be world-choosing, to be a non-paranoid preterite, is to understand that the Earth, the street, cannot be made Real. It must instead remain residual, "Unredeemed." The power of the preterite is in their anonymity, in their ability to be "lone individuals -- children, neighborhood idiots" without identity, nationality, gender, or anything else to, as Slothrop might say, fuck things up. Like the children of Malta they are dispassionately vigilant. It is only then that we are opened up to seduction, to the possibility of becoming different, rather than hoping to return to something that never existed in the first place save in the simulation of the Real. The reversal of the remainder is not a return but a turn, a trope, which scatters what is always already dismantled. The postmodern scene, which Pynchon envisions, does not only represent an incredulity toward metanarratives (Lyotard) and a wholesale destruction of meaning (Baudrillard), but an immense exploration of inertia, of the zero. What survives beyond the zero is kindness. For Pynchon, kindness is the ability to keep cool but care, to live indifferently, facelessly, in hopes of being seduced by the wastes, and magically transformed by the scattered remains of an order which can no longer legitimate itself. Pynchon is a terrorist, a Baudrillardian nihilist, without being utopian. In this way, kindness becomes an act of terrorism, it is the "single ironic smile" that reminds us that the Elect are indeed mortal just as Their system, the system of meaning, is mortal. If the Preterite embrace paranoia they are complicit in their own destruction. But, for Pynchon, to be preterite -- to be passed over for salvation -- to be residual, is to remain unredeemed and thus restored to an unreal Earth we never knew. Pynchon's writing is an invitation to

explore those unreal wastes which modernity would otherwise appropriate and make linear, homogenous, and undifferentiated. In his texts, Pynchon provides us with a literary language and a theoretical discourse that enables us to, as he writes, “insist on the miraculous” and “deny the machine at least some of its claims on us” (“Luddite”). The reversal, the anagram, are expressed by Pynchon in the terms sloth and entropy. In them, we are offered at least some possibility, however improbable, that we can remain free of the machine, unredeemed and preterite. Writing, for Pynchon, encapsulates both the formation of his thought as well as the action of that thought through his dangerous poetry. What Pynchon tells us is simply that theory can only express its truths through fiction, through the anagram. In *Mason & Dixon* he argues that Truth and History must be “tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev’ry Radius, Masters of Disguise” who possess “Speech nimble enough to keep her [history] beyond the Desires, or even the curiosity of Government,” the machine, the system (*M&D* 350). It is within the wastes of writing itself that we encounter the anagrammatical. Pynchon’s writing lies at the edge of the Zone, at the limits of postmodernity, and defines for us where the tropic/al magic of seduction and reversibility begins.

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