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**OTHER SIDE OF THIS LIFE**

Death, Value, and Social Being in Thomas Pynchon's Fiction

Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki in auditorium XII, on the 1st of September, 2007 at 10 o'clock.

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## 1. Other Side of This Life: Introduction

Anyone who reads the fiction of Thomas Pynchon soon notices the writer's obsession with death. Polymorphous, ambiguous, endowed with structuring force—death in Pynchon has the characteristics usually attributed to life, which shows that it has a special role in the poetics and ethos of his writing. In his introduction to a collection of early short stories, *Slow Learner* (1984), Pynchon seems to say something about the importance of death in literature and in his writing when he remarks that “when we speak of ‘seriousness’ in fiction ultimately we are talking about an attitude toward death.” With this remark, Pynchon refers to his early short story, “The Small Rain” (1959), and the way its central characters, who are soldiers of an army detachment, evade the death they face in a rescue operation. But Pynchon's formulation is quite open-ended. What kind of attitude toward death is Pynchon talking about? What is seriousness in fiction? Does it involve something besides sheer human mortality?

These questions and the connection between seriousness, literature, and death in Pynchon turn out to be even more complicated when they are thought in relation to his present work. What the reader encounters in *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), and *Against the Day* (2006)<sup>1</sup> is death as a nexus for diverse narrative elements: apocalyptic visions, entropic dissipation of energy, unveiling of lethal mysteries, operational violence and destruction, inanimate objects that come alive, humans that turn into objects, the restless dead and their visitations, melancholy and mourning over lost loves, sacrificial deaths, the disruption of bodies and identities, and the recurrent narrated and narrative desire for transcendence and immobility, for silence beyond words. Therefore, any discussion on death in Pynchon has to take into account that in addition to death we are also dealing with a number of other questions—questions of temporality, teleology, ethics, subjectivity, ontological borders, and the borders of representation.

In Pynchon studies the writer's preoccupation with death has been noted many times. One persistent strain in criticism has been the discussion on Pynchon as an apocalyptic writer, and many critics have over the years emphasized the writer's cultural pessimism and his vision of the modern world as rushing to inevitable destruction. In *Grim Phoenix. Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (1978) William Plater argued that Pynchon describes the world as an isolated system moving in only one direction—toward death (3). In his study, Plater devotes much space to what he sees as

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<sup>1</sup> In parenthetical references hereafter V, L49, GR, VL, M&D, respectively. Pynchon's latest novel, *Against the Day*, came out at the end of November 2006, and because of the late publication date and the vastness of the novel (1085 pages), it is not incorporated in this study at its present stage.

the overarching theme in Pynchon—the irreversible and entropic transformation towards death. This theme ranges from big thematic patterns to the smallest textual details, meaning, for example, that in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's major work, the word death and its cognates appear hundreds of times (174). For Plater, Pynchon's view of Western civilization is merciless: the violent history of the 20th century, the prospects of mass destruction provided by science and technology, and the recurrent rhetoric of mortality all point to an inevitable end that can only be hindered but not changed. From *V.*, Pynchon's first novel, Plater quotes the sailor Mehemet's words in Malta as a crystallization of this idea: "I am old, the world is old; but the world changes always; we, only so far. It's no secret, what sort of change this is. Both the world and we [...] began to die from the moment of birth" (V, 459). Despite an overwhelming cultural pessimism Plater concludes, however, that this pervading artistic theme in Pynchon does not appear only as an irreversible fall or decay, but forms a certain duality: "life and death are aspects of the same form. Man needs death to live and lives only to die" (1978, 136). Theodore Kharpertian, in *A Hand to Turn the Time: The Menippean Satires of Thomas Pynchon* (1990), reads Pynchon as a satirist, but he considers Pynchon's satiric quality rather dark. Like Plater, Kharpertian argues in relation to *Gravity's Rainbow* that there exists "ample evidence to regard its apparent eschatological judgement on the past, present, and future of the West as unremittingly negative, unrelievedly pessimistic, and terminally apocalyptic" (1990, 112). In novels like *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, death seems to be inscribed in the history and present of Western culture. The Western world is governed by a gigantic complex of scientific, political, economic, and technological power structures that have made death a systematic enterprise generating wars, genocides, usurpation, and pollution. Sometimes, though, the decline and fall of a civilization does not emerge as altogether gloomy, but in a manner typical of black humour as a mixture of horror and comedy. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, living in the modern technopolitical order is compared to a suicidal sightseeing tour:

Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide...though he's amiable enough, keeps cracking jokes back through the loudspeaker, "Good morning folks, this is Heidelberg here we're coming into now, you know the old refrain, 'I lost my heart in Heidelberg,' well I have a friend who lost both his ears here!" [...]... as he nods you by, you catch a glimpse of his face, his insane, committed eyes, and you remember then, for a terrible few heartbeats, that of course it will end for you all in blood, in shock, without dignity—but there is meanwhile this trip to be on...(GR, 412–413)

In addition to these apocalyptic insights, many critics have emphasized certain death-in-life experience and a loss of humanity determining Pynchon's characters. Judith Chambers, for example, argues that in *V.* Pynchon "recounts private acts of depravity to indicate that the history of Western civilization is a history of decay" (1992, 69), and the

shift from animateness to inanimateness in the characters reflects on the individual plane the “world’s decline” (64). Chambers is not alone in this respect, for similar summaries were made in Pynchon studies throughout 1970’s and 1980’s.

Often this kind of discussion reveals, more than anything else, an inclination in the critical discourse to totalize Pynchon’s prose with a “Grand Unifying Theme” (3), as Alec McHoul and David Wills put it in their *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis* (1990). In *Writing Pynchon*, the first book-length poststructuralist reading of Pynchon’s work, McHoul and Wills take an ambiguous attitude towards thematic study. Although they admit that many themes “present themselves” in Pynchon—“death itself, sex, science, religion, art, music” (33)—they see that a majority of the thematic approaches to Pynchon belong to naïve forms of criticism. The critical search for a Grand Theme is for McHoul and Wills just another form of totalizing reading that very soon exhausts its explanatory force. For example, the theme of entropy, a favourite issue in Pynchon studies, is “worked to death” (ibid.). What would be a more suitable Grand Theme than death, the meaning of which seems to be self-evident from the beginning? As Jacques Derrida remarks in his *Aporias* (1993), the meaning of death is often taken as self-explanatory: “everybody knows what one is talking about when one names death” (25). The culturally self-evident conceptions of death define it as the opposite of life, as a biologically defined event, as a fate that everyone has to face alone, and as a principle of negativity and destruction that recurrently overshadows our daily life. The problem, always present in thematic readings, is that themes carry these pretextual, cultural connotations, that sometimes make us blind to whatever else emerges from the given text. What characterizes Pynchon as a writer, however, is that in his prose the self-evidence of many cultural conceptions is both affirmed and undone.

Along with the poststructuralist phase in Pynchon studies, thematic approaches have undergone critical reconsideration. The question of death in Pynchon, however, has not vanished but re-emerged in a different form. When Hanjo Berressem, in *Pynchon’s Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (1993) argues that if there is a teleology in Pynchon’s texts it would have to be a “teleology of death,” because “Pynchon’s work is always concerned with death” (22), he seems to echo some older statements. But this time the context for defining death has remarkably altered; in Berressem death has taken a “linguistic turn,” for it is seen as an integral part of Pynchon’s writing. In his reading, Berressem links death with representation and subjectivity. To him, the relation between language, silence and death plays a prominent role in Pynchon; recurrently Pynchon evokes moments where characters encounter something that is beyond language and conceptual understanding, something openly associated with death. Berressem calls these encounters “threshold experiences,” in which death denotes both the border of representation and the border of subjectivity. Death is something that cannot be apprehended directly, because such an encounter would also denote the end of the subject; therefore death is always already mediated (22–23). With reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Berressem links death to the



“negativity of language,” that is, the incapability of language to represent what lies beyond it (in Lacanian terms, the *real*). Berressem sees that in Pynchon this unnameable outside language affects also the textual plane: in recurrent threshold experiences the negativity of language also becomes silence and negativity *in* language (ibid.). In novels like *The Crying of Lot 49*, names and metaphors momentarily lose their signifying force. This happens either in endless repetition, or when the representative force of language is openly questioned. As when the protagonist Oedipa Maas realizes that a metaphor, however important, is also a mere word, functioning as a protective device against the unnameable: “whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost” (L49, 89).

The prominent role of repetition in Pynchon’s poetics is in Berressem’s study associated with the “death instinct,” determined as repetition compulsion, the return of the same, which in the Freudian context indicated the instinct to return to the inanimate state. This linking of repetition, death, and writing also characterizes another poststructurally oriented study, Stefan Mattessich’s *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (2002). In this book, Mattessich analyzes how Pynchon’s writing constantly evokes the materiality of language. As a result, the text is characterized by a strange “flattening effect” when the textual existence, the “bare objecthood” of language momentarily comes to the fore (81). Mattessich names this structure operating within Pynchon’s texts a “gravitational movement”—a recurrent return to text, to past, to death, to the inorganic, to the origin—that paradoxically animates or organizes his prose (81–83). By comparing gravity as a physical force with the death instinct, Mattessich is not providing just another version of the inevitable return to death. Instead, he sees that gravity, in all its senses also indicates a life-affirming dimension, a ground or principle of creative production (72). In his book, Mattessich also gives this death instinct a historical and social dimension, for he sees a certain affinity between Pynchon’s mode of writing and the strategies of countercultural movements of the 1960’s. What characterized the counterculture was an anomalous sense of time, collapse at the level of content (i.e., political aims), and disintegration, both individual and social. “The most salient characteristic of the counterculture may therefore have been its fractures, its loose confederation of subgroups or undergrounds actuated not by the goal of social unity but by the darker drive toward disintegration” (65). Mattessich argues that Pynchon dramatizes this drive in his writing, and, as in the countercultural movement, it becomes a conscious strategy against the dominant social order.

In the poststructuralist phase of Pynchon criticism the emphasis on writing about death has thus shifted. Besides being a thematic content, death now appears as part of Pynchon’s poetics, a principle affecting the structuration of his prose. These different approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But the question arises, what do they have in common when they use the word *death*? If death is this unremittingly negative

element in Pynchon's fiction, how can it be seen connecting the diverse issues presented above: mortality, mass destruction, the unnameable, artistic creation, and political resistance? How can we understand this many-faced death that in Pynchon's fiction emerges from the other side of life, from the other side of language and representation, and from the other side of social order?

In *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (1993), Jeffrey Nealon posits that Pynchon constantly creates situations where dialectical thinking about death as mere negativity relative to life ruptures and gives way to "an other death, a death radically other to death as productive negativity," and since this other death cannot be characterized in any positive or negative way, the problem is "finding that which permits the reading of the word death without negation" (122–123). Which is not to say that death should be valued as something positive. The affirmation of death and dying does not change anything, for death "resists characterization, resists being opposed in any positive/negative way, resists being placed in any determinate relation at all" (124). In formulating the possibility of this "other death" Nealon refers to Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet whose presence in Pynchon's work is both implicit and explicit. In one of his letters, Rilke writes that "like the moon, life surely has a side permanently turned away from us *which is not its counter-part*" (Rilke qtd in Nealon 1993, 123. Italics JN). Like the other side of the moon, this "other death" has a complex form indicating separation and non-opposition at the same time.

The starting point of my dissertation is in this double articulation of death as both negativity and something indifferent to conceptual oppositions. The moon metaphor is apt, not only because it has a special resonance in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but also because it draws attention to the very act of separating the other side of life from this side—the separation that Pynchon questions throughout his fiction. In Pynchon, the exact moment of death disappears from the narration, the line between animate and inanimate is indeterminate, alternate worlds overlap and fuse, and death in general emerges as antagonistic to rationalization. This indeterminacy about death is something that exceeds the traditional and reassuring notion that life and death, like all opposites, form a dialectical unity. My argument is that by this double articulation Pynchon makes death ambiguous and moving, and opens up the social dimension of death—that is, shows how profoundly metaphysical, cultural, and historical determinations of death affect (wo)man's social being. This social dimension of death includes a wide range of questions—how the opposition life/death is not only biologically, but also socially constructed, how death has a curious double role in relation to social systems and social order, and how conceptual distinctions concerning death reflect social demarcations. Therefore, in my reading of death in Pynchon, the thematic and formal aspects are interrelated: a form always indicates an ideology, and the subversive form that the double articulation of death creates in Pynchon's fiction is seen as characterizing both his poetics and his cultural criticism.

In Pynchon, death is never a mere biological given (or event), for its significance

is always determined from a certain cultural, historical, and ideological context. The line between life and death becomes, as in *Mason & Dixon*, “that grimly patroll’d Line, that very essence of Division” (M&D, 703), a form indicating power relations, and ideological confrontations. It is notable that in spite of deaths abounding in Pynchon’s fiction, the actual passage from life to death is often indeterminate, and the so called “natural death” is almost nonexistent. Whenever his characters die, they die in accidents, or they commit suicide, or they are killed. A short list of Pynchon’s deaths speaks for itself. In his first short story, “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” (1959), a party ends in a massacre. A hurricane has killed hundreds of people in “The Small Rain”. The spy Porpentine is shot at the end of the short story “Under the Rose” (1961). Another spy, Sidney Stencil, is killed in a marine disaster in *V*. Several characters plan to commit suicide in *The Crying of Lot 49*. A prominent scene in *Vineland* is the shooting of a college professor. Both *V*. and *Gravity’s Rainbow* depict war, operational violence, and systematic genocides, but both novels also contain dramatically staged individual deaths: in *V*. the accidental and shocking death of the dancer Mélanie and the “disassembly” of the mysterious Bad Priest, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the sacrifice of the soldier Gottfried. Another “staged” death in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the novel’s ending, where the audience at a movie theatre is told that they are the target of a ballistic missile that is going to reach them any moment. Indeed, *Mason & Dixon* is the first Pynchon novel in which the death of a protagonist is not violent or accidental. After leading Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon through a strange landscape saturated by otherworldly phenomena, the narrator briefly relates their passing in the epilogue.

But the problem here is not simply the absence of natural causes, but the *disappearance of the actuality of death*. Recurrently characters who die seem to continue their existence in some liminal state between life and death, as if what has happened to them is something that takes the form of death but does not involve actual dying, something “like death, only different” (VL, 170). And characters who live constantly feel that they are, in a sense, already dead; that they have changed into machinic beings that only resemble humans, or that they hover like ghosts between existence and nonexistence. The aforementioned shooting of college professor Weed Atman in *Vineland* is one of such obscure deaths. It never takes place in the narration, because the actual shooting is shown in a film, where the roll symptomatically ends at the moment of death. More than ten years after his death Atman, as if not really passed over, returns to the midst of the living and continues a spectral existence. Astonishingly lively, too, is Rebekah Mason, Charles Mason’s late wife in *Mason & Dixon*, with whom Mason has more conversations than when she was still alive. The real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity in *The Crying of Lot 49* and the lady V. in *V*. are dead, but the problem is whether they ever lived as human beings, so intertwined are their supposed existences with the fantasies and projections of the protagonists. The fate of lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is so obscure that perhaps we cannot even say whether it is a death at all, or rather a disappearance or transformation, when Slothrop

scatters into fragments at the end of the novel. Such death is not only a crossing of an ontological line, but an event where several layers—mythical, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic, social—exist simultaneously. A shift takes place, but all references to its reality have been wiped off.

An ontologically indeterminate character is, of course, nothing new in itself, for it is typical of such literary genres as fantasy or gothic, and beyond that, since it can be found in many mythical archetypes, where death, resurrection, reincarnation, and metamorphosis play a prominent role. With his strange deaths (and strange dead) Pynchon's prose partakes in and renews this tradition, but I see that his real contribution is to draw attention to the social implications in indeterminate death. In his fiction, Pynchon creates moments where the indeterminacy of death becomes a question of the interrelationship between ontology and social order. Such a moment is, for example, this strange and rigorous maxim in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

[T]he object of life is to make sure you die a weird death. To make sure that however it finds you, it will find you under very weird circumstances. To live that kind of life... (GR, 742).

This maxim is closely related to the death/transformation of Tyrone Slothrop, and although the passage is obscure, what it clearly conveys is the antagonistic stance. "Weird death" is clearly directed against the notion of "natural" and rationalizable, that is, medically, biologically, and conceptually determinable death. A weird death, like that of Slothrop, is something indefinable, resisting all attempts to locate it in space (the body), or in time (the moment of death). I see that the true emphasis in this strange maxim is in the tiny sentence at the end. It makes clear that there is no conception of death without a certain conception of life, and the conditions under which it is lived, and thus any attempt to have control over death entails having control over life. So, the passage on weird death is political in its absurdity; the escape from rationalization becomes a moment of resistance, not only resistance to any univocal meaning of death, but also to control over the passage from life to death.

The same vagueness about limits characterizes in general the line between living and non-living in Pynchon. He constantly blurs these conceptual boundaries with living objects, unpredictable nature, and with the strange affinity between humans and machines. This writerly preoccupation has evoked various interpretations. In many Pynchon studies, the recurrence of inert material has often been seen as an extension of Pynchon's apocalyptic thematics. While *death* is conspicuously one of the key words in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in *V.* the word is *inanimate*. Kerry Grant (2001, 10) notes that *inanimate* occurs in the novel about 60 times, and "no other word of comparable significance appears as often in *V.*" This constant return signifies to Grant "the humanity's drift toward a kind of inanimateness" (11) that is, toward the state of emotional coldness and alienation, and eventually, toward the lifeless life of the object. This view seems to have become a critical commonplace in many Pynchon studies since

1970's.<sup>2</sup>

The ambiguity between living and non-living things has also been linked to the tradition of the grotesque: “working with modern materials, the author urges a hypothesis traditional in grotesque art and literature: the alive are not so alive, but the dead seem to be taking on a life of their own” (Cooper 1983, 51)—a view that already implies a reversible relationship between the animate and the inanimate, for the way Pynchon describes the material world is profoundly ambiguous. It contains both the thematic of “an indifferent or hostile nature” (Mattessich 2002, 30), like the creeping desert or treacherous sea described in *V.*, and animistic visions of the Earth as a “living critter” (GR, 590) with a “face in ev’ry mountainside, and a Soul in ev’ry stone” (760). Pynchon often juxtaposes these notions with the discourses of the technological and natural sciences, that deal with the “dead,” that is, objectified matter and objectified nature, thus questioning the distinction between subject and object that precedes the “objective gaze” of science. With this blurring, Pynchon often emphasizes the irreducible otherness of matter, which remains beyond the reach of conceptualization.

On the other hand, Pynchon’s interest in technology has also been seen representing his poetics. As Joseph Tabbi argues in *The Postmodern Sublime* (1995), Pynchon reveals affinities between technology and literary production “in representing the way power is exerted over and through instruments, apparatus, and the verbal material of language” (1995, 83). Thus the ambiguity about the limits of the living and the non-living recurs also on the textual plane, where the materiality, the “pure objecthood” of the signifier is often brought forth. A prominent characteristic of Pynchon’s prose is the play of signifiers, and the emphasized artificiality of style, using parody, puns, and literary conventions, creating a metafictional playfulness that is both hilarious and shocking.

The discrimination between what is living and what is not contains a conceptual hierarchy, which can be seen in binary pairs like animate/inanimate or organic/inorganic, where the non-living is determined only through negation. In Pynchon, this hierarchy is given a social impact in the thematics of waste. Waste plays a prominent role in Pynchon’s fiction; whether it be bodily waste or municipal waste, the question is again about conceptual and social boundaries closely related to the boundary between life and death. Waste is something that had originally been part of a system, but has changed into useless residue and expelled. As decomposed material, waste becomes another image of death—death within the body, or the eventual destruction of all material production. Although waste is not always inanimate, it also equals death operationally, for it represents the matter that the system must expel in order to function.

Yet, as Ron Jenkins (1991) notes, waste has a subversive effect, because it blurs

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<sup>2</sup> Similar arguments have been presented by Judith Chambers (1992), Theodore Kharpertian (1990), and William Plater (1978), among others.

the boundaries between the inside and the outside of a system: “By definition, waste is not in the system, and yet, because it is necessary for the operation of the system, it cannot be strictly extrasystemic. It is in the dual position of being *of* the system but not *in* the system” (102). In his fiction, Pynchon associates this dual position with social demarcation, and the waste imagery also marks a social boundary, the inside and outside of a social order. In an early short story, “The Low-Lands” (1960), a dump becomes the scene for the story’s surreal events, “a discrete kingdom” (Pynchon 1984, 67) outside the rationalized areas of modern town planning. The WASTE postal system plays a prominent role in *The Crying of Lot 49*. WASTE is a secret communication channel for the people who live outside the official America, and it uses mail boxes that look like waste containers. Scatological imagery recurs in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and culminates in Tyrone Slothrop’s hallucinatory journey down the toilet into the sewer system, and into a whole different world. Thus the realm of waste, the realm of what is dead from the systemic point of view, also becomes the realm of its subversion.

The alignment of ontological and social separation is also evident, when Pynchon evokes the coexistence of alternate worlds, or rifts in reality that reveal other orders and modes of being. Pynchon’s characters experience these alternate worlds in dreams, hallucinations, or ghostly visitations. Or, as an anarchist announces in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in miracles: “[A] miracle is [...] another world’s intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there’s cataclysm” (L49, 83). This other world can be many things at the same time. One thing it clearly denotes is cultural otherness. In his fiction, Pynchon constantly juxtaposes Western culture with the non-West: African-American, Native American, African, and Asian cultures. Given that Pynchon had written a large part of his work before the cultural effects of colonialism and European ethnocentrism really became an issue in literature, it is noticeable that his writing always shows a particular sensitivity to cultural and racial confrontations. In Pynchon these confrontations are indeed cataclysms, and often those who live on the other side of a cultural border are in one way or another marked by death. A Windigo Indian causes a massacre in “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna,” and the land of the Yurok Indians in *Vineland* is governed by ghosts and spirits. The African Hereros in *Gravity’s Rainbow* do not differentiate between the dead and the living. And when “Strangers from East” come to 18th century England in *Mason & Dixon*, one of the things that marks their cultural difference is their strange gender system: “[...] of Genders they have three, —Male, Female, and the third sex no one talks about, —Dead” (M&D, 195). Against the Western culture and its “rationalized forms of death” (GR, 229) Pynchon recurrently places cultures that do not make a strict difference between life and death, thus showing how different ways of thinking about death reflect other differences —historical, cultural, and ideological.

In Pynchon the difference between “primitive” and “modern” is not the only dividing line between worlds. Another line of social and metaphysical demarcation that Pynchon uses explicitly in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and implicitly throughout his work, is

the Puritan division between the Elect and the Preterite. The Preterites are the opposite of the Elect (those chosen by God to be granted eternal life); Preterites are “God’s lesser children,” who are “fallen out of grace,” and, according to the predestination doctrine of Calvinism, doomed to death already on Earth. Lawrence Wolfley (1992) remarks that this dualism divides not only people into two unequal groups, but the universe itself, “divided into a part that matters (the immortal and immaterial souls of the Elect, predestined for salvation), and a part that does not matter (the souls and bodies of the damned, and the entire natural world)” (879). Wolfley points out that this dualism also includes a geocultural division: the Western Elect and the non-Western Preterite (*ibid.*). Pynchon constantly evokes this dualism in his fiction, and, not suprisingly, his narrative focus and his sympathy have centered on those who have been passed over in life—culturally, economically, and politically. Benny Profane in *V.*, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Zoyd Wheeler in *Vineland*—there is a long tradition in the Pynchon studies to see his main characters (and numerous others) as representatives of this preterite state, characterized by social and/or metaphysical inferiority, failure, and a peculiar sense of the absence of a transcendental ground to the world (meaning, telos, origin). The world of the Preterites is, on the one hand, a world doomed to death, a world from which no transcendental redemption is possible, and, on the other, a world indifferent to the distinctions that characterize the world of the Elect. Here again we encounter death turned into a social form separating the realm of the dead from that of the living, and also the realm of indifference from strict conceptual discrimination. As Mattessich notes, the “preterite state” that Pynchon evokes in his fiction is not just an opposing term in a binary structure, but something that opposes binarism itself (2002, 170).

In Pynchon’s writing there is thus a constant desire for an indeterminate space characterized by otherness, but in Pynchon criticism there is a definite bifurcation when it comes to the role of these alternate worlds. For a large number of critics they represent a counterforce to modern culture and its technoscientific rationalism. Judith Chambers, for example, sees that Pynchon as a postmodernist writer embraces and presents an essentially pluralist world to “symbolize the paradoxical, indeterminate nature of truth and the humanity that attends to it, both of which have been lost to logic, absolutes, dreams of control” (1992, 46). What empowers novels like *Gravity’s Rainbow*,

[I]s not its fragments, its poetry, its puns, its themes, its characters, or even its gestalt, but a feeling-thinking-knowing experience that happens in the impenetrable places that suddenly fall open, places whose tremblingly present connections can never be explained, places that speak a truth that can never be “positively identified and detained”. (172)

Critics like Chambers insist that in spite of the gloomy thematics of Pynchon’s work, we can always find a more positive, humanist tendency towards such goals as love, freedom and community—all states characterized by continuity, unity, absence of

limits.

Another interpretive attitude is to see the alternate worlds in Pynchon as an elaborate parody. A parody, on the one hand, of the different stylistic conventions of the fantastic genre, or of gothic, the fairy tale, science fiction, and so on. And, on the other hand, a parody of the utopian dreams of escape or wish-fulfillment, of Western culture's need for an imaginary, outside realm, from which on to define itself. A commonly held view in these readings is that the textual strivings for this "other" space are doomed to failure, because Pynchon's prose both affirms and ironically undoes its transcendent visions. Pynchon's use of pre-modern cultures has often been seen to serve the same function, representing a "half parodic spiritual realm or some other pre-capitalist myth" (Tabbi 1995, 91). Both Berressem and Maureen Quilligan (qtd in Berressem 1993, 143) hold that Pynchon's writing constantly hovers between logocentric dreams of unity and sameness and their ironic undoing. Despite his scepticism of this "other space" as a utopian vision inherent in Pynchon's work, Berressem nevertheless argues that Pynchon's writing is characterized by an ontology in which psychic and geographical spaces are conflated. The real and the mental territory merge, creating an indefinable space:

In such a topography [...], classical space and the distinction between inside and outside are replaced by a new kind of space, one that is represented by the Möbius strip. In this space, the cut is no longer between inside and outside; rather, the space itself is now in toto defined by a cut that is internal to the structure, so that inside and outside are inextricably aligned in a one-sided, convoluted space. (121)

In his reading, Mattessich stresses that what Pynchon describes in his fiction is not only the desire for an "other" space, but the historicity of this desire as the human condition in Western culture. And in Pynchon the specific historical context for this desire are the countercultural movements of postwar American culture. What links the social movements of the 1960's and Pynchon's fiction, largely influenced by the "spirit" of the 1960's, is what Mattessich calls a "countercultural desire", an attempt to find or create a social alternative to late capitalism. The countercultural attack against dominant society, argues Mattessich, consisted of transforming the representations on which social reality is based. Instead of *real* change, the countercultural movements tried to change the definitions of the real as something indivisible and omnipresent. The counterculture aimed at creating a "counterspace," which was an "abstracted social space in which illusion becomes primary and reference unstable" (Mattessich 2002, 3)—a space where the discursive categories that dominate the social order (man/woman, black/white, real/unreal, etc.) would dissolve, and "an imagination of the world becomes possible through a specific type of awareness" (6). Although Pynchon's participation in the historical countercultural movement of the 60's is, at best, speculative, Mattessich finds this same desire for an alternate social space in Pynchon's fiction. The characteristics of this literal "counterspace" in Pynchon are "arrested



temporality, a suspension of the real, a fantasmatic disavowal of the animate and the sensual, and a close connection to the death instinct” (2002, 127). On the textual plane, the death instinct means for Mattessich a textual desire for disintegration and loss of signification.

From the perspective of this dissertation, the question whether Pynchon’s alternate worlds—like the “Zone” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the “other America” in *The Crying of Lot 49*, or the Yurok land in *Vineland*—represent a genuine utopian dream or a parody of that dream is not decisive. What is important is that this “other” space, which in this study I will call the Other Side with capital letters—both for the sake of brevity and because this is Pynchon’s own formulation in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—turns out to be a locus both marked by death, and a locus where the reversion of conceptual oppositions takes place. And in Pynchon, this reversion always has a social impact.

Pynchon’s Other Side, both real and unreal, has elements of a long literary tradition, namely that of Utopian literature and Menippean satire. In both genres alternate worlds and death are interrelated. In his essay “Utopia, Modernism, Death” (1994), Fredric Jameson remarks that death plays a constitutive role in all Utopian literature. Traditionally this has meant that the very idea of Utopia has been grounded on the abolition of death. Jameson sees that Utopian literature has usually been largely positive, creating an other world relying on fantasmatic compensation and repression of what is negative in life, “leaving out the negative and the body, suffering and death, as well as everything that cannot be solved in interpersonal relations” (74). But, another and equally strong and persistent tendency in Utopian literature relies according to Jameson on the “protoreligious belief in that [...] otherworldly space that might itself somehow be the Utopia of this one” (117). Death and otherworldly spaces play a prominent role also in the tradition of Menippean satire—a genre that has often been associated with Pynchon’s mode of writing<sup>3</sup>. Pynchon’s alternate worlds often appear in the text as carnivalized spaces, where opposites merge and boundaries—like the one between life and death—are ignored. Death is constitutive of the Menippean satire also in another way: journeys to the underworld (as in *Vineland* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*) and dialogues with the dead (as in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*) are typical Menippean topoi, where the hierarchies and values of this life are challenged. In the Menippean carnivalized space, social subversion often takes place in and through death.

It would be easy to say that in Pynchon alternate worlds, life beyond death, or indeterminateness about what is living and what is not only represent “imaginary” solutions to a “real” problem—which is a typical literary strategy. But if we look at the Western cultural history of death, it appears that attitudes towards death, even when they present themselves as the most rational, always rely on a certain imaginary of death; also, changes in conceptions of death reflect cultural changes, and moreover, result in real social discrimination and exercise of power. This characterizes at an essential level the era of modernization we have been living since the 17th century. This

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Kharperitian (1990) see, for example, Weisenburger (1995).

era is also the era of Pynchon's historiographic interest. Puritanism, the Enlightenment, industrialism, scientific revolutions, global economy, information explosion, simulation—throughout his fiction Pynchon is very much a writer of modernization, of its historical preconditions, aims, and limits. And what is often foregrounded in his fiction is the curious, two-fold relationship between modernization and death. In many ways death appears as something inherent in modern culture, the “culture of death” (GR, 176) that has enabled mass destruction and great ecological damage. But death in Pynchon is also something that radically opposes the principles of modernization—rationalization, progress, labor, freedom, individuality—and challenges them from within.

To understand how death is related to both Pynchon's cultural criticism and his poetics, I will compare it to the death analyzed by another writer of modernization, Jean Baudrillard. An important theoretical frame of reference in this study is Baudrillard's genealogy of the modern notion of death, in which I see similar critical preoccupations as in Pynchon's work. In Baudrillard's genealogy, presented in his early works, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) and *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (1976), the classical philosophical question of what death is is historicized and transformed into a question of the place of death in the conceptual discriminations of Western thinking. For Baudrillard, death is the double of modernization, the dark background against which the modern project emerges as something positive and progressive, and the history of modernization is also the history of death's “social exile,” that is, death's gradual withdrawal from social life.

Baudrillard is, of course, not the first twentieth-century thinker to draw attention to the social and cultural exclusion of death in the modern way of life. In 1915, Sigmund Freud wrote in his essay, “Thoughts on War and Death,” that our cultural and conventional attitude towards death is to eliminate it from our life, because we can't stand our mortality (1991, 77–79). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that the disturbed relationship with the dead is one of the symptoms of the “sickness of experience” in modern life (1979, 215). In modern culture the dead are expunged from the memory of the living, which fate in old religions was considered the worst curse (*ibid.*). The reason for this oblivion is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, that “men have ceased to consider their own purpose and fate; they work their despair out on the dead” (216). A well-known work on the cultural history of death, Philippe Ariès's *Western Attitudes Towards Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1976), describes a profound cultural change in attitudes towards death during the modern era. This cultural change culminates in the 20th century in what Ariès calls the “forbidden death,” which means the “unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so” (87). And a writer who has had a seminal influence on Pynchon, Norman O. Brown, argues in his *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (1959) that

“anxiety before death does not have ontological status [...]. It has historical status only, and is relative to the repression of the human body” (1985, 108). For Brown this era of repression is coexistent with Protestantism, which preaches the evil of the world and of flesh. And as a result, argues Brown, an entire culture experiences a withdrawal of libido from life: “whereas in previous ages life had been a mixture of Eros and Thanatos, in the Protestant era life becomes a pure culture of the death instinct” (216).

Baudrillard’s contribution to this cultural history of death is to formulate it in terms of exchange, which makes death a profoundly social issue. What characterizes the modern Western conception of death is to Baudrillard the fundamental and rigorous separation of life and death. This separation characterizes conceptual discriminations as well as social practices surrounding death, and it is historically and culturally unique. The irreversibility, objectivity and exactitude of biological death are characteristics created by modern science, and specific to our own culture. All other cultures, argues Baudrillard, maintain that death begins before death, that life continues after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death (243). Baudrillard links this ontological and social separation to the historical emergence of the notion of value (1976, 221–226)—that is, the rise of rationalism and capitalism. In Baudrillard’s theory there is an intrinsic bond between the notion of death as negativity in opposition to the positivity of life, and value, the grounding logic of modern political economy. When associated with value, the modern conceptual and social discriminations surrounding life and death—like birth control or the exclusion of dying and the dead from social life—are seen in relation to the capitalization and normalization of life.

This process has already been analyzed by Michel Foucault, and Baudrillard’s genealogy of death is in many ways indebted to Foucault’s work. But Baudrillard takes the notion of normalization further by arguing that the relationship between life and death in modern culture is pervaded by the logic of value that requires universal equivalence and exchangeability. When the conceptual opposition “life vs. death” is seen in terms of value, the positivity associated with life and, inversely, the negativity associated with death, mark this capitalization. Life is capital because it is seen in terms of use and value: life can be rationalized, that is, divided into segments (of time) that can be used or lost. The problem of death, however, is that in spite of increasing medicalization and technologization surrounding death, it cannot be rationalized accordingly; death seems to present a limit and a challenge to rationalization. Death cannot be given a proper meaning, it cannot be exchanged for anything, it has no equivalent. Death cannot be properly determined in terms of value, and therefore it is conceived as negativity (i.e., non-value). The modern image of death as the haunting adversary of life and the absolutely positive value invested in it is, according to Baudrillard, due to repression; death is repressed because it represents a counterforce and a possible undoing of value. But by repressing death modern culture becomes haunted by its repressed part, and abolished death returns, and “makes its symptomatic mark everywhere” (Gane 1991b, 113). For Baudrillard as for Pynchon, modern culture

is a culture of death.

In analyzing the historical and cultural specificity of the modern notion of death Baudrillard compares the economy of coded exchange value to the form of exchange prevailing in archaic or premodern societies, the form he names symbolic exchange. In his discussion of the institution of gift exchange (*potlatch*, *kula*) analyzed by Marcel Mauss, Baudrillard maintains that what runs this archaic social form is logic that not only historically precedes capitalism, but is also radically antagonistic to it. While capitalism is grounded on the principle of coded exchange value, and its endless proliferation, i.e., turning into capital, a characteristic of the archaic exchange institution is constant undoing of value. Any gift is always reciprocated with a counter-gift that abolishes its value, so that all gifts are always already counter-gifts, parts of a symbolic exchange that leaves no value untouched (1976, 291–292). With symbolic exchange, Baudrillard refers to a principle of reciprocity reified in interdependent giving and receiving that constitutes a social relation. Although the gift exchange also involves a power relation, the reciprocity of the exchange always retains the possibility of its reversion. Similarly, Baudrillard sees death in archaic cultures in terms of reciprocal exchange; in rituals concerning birth and death, in initiation rites, or in sacrifice death appears not as a biological event, but as something symbolically given and received within the community. The partners in this exchange are men and gods and—what usually amounts to the same thing—the dead. As Baudrillard emphasizes, the symbolic knows neither “this side” of existence nor the hereafter: the reciprocity between the dead and the living is not phantasmal, but is given a concrete form in the symbolic exchanges (220).

The determination of death as non-value also unites economy and semiology for Baudrillard. Because death is the blind spot in all formation of value, it is also the blind spot in relation to normal communicative discourse that uses signs for their value. This does not only mean that death is beyond representation. It means that in any loss or subversion of linguistic value (i.e. referent) emerges the reciprocal economy of the gift and the counter-gift, the symbolic economy in its discursive form. In Baudrillard’s thinking, this ambivalence characterizing the value of the sign is actualized in poetic discourse, where significance emerges as something both present and absent, assembled and dispersed.

In the next chapter, I will focus more closely on Baudrillard’s distinction between symbolic exchange and sign value exchange, its relationship to death, and its parallels with Pynchon’s mode of writing. The key issues in this chapter are those uniting both writers: the historical and cultural specificity of the modern notion of death, the repression of death, the relationship between death and social control, and death as the locus of the subversion of value—both economic value, and the value of the sign.

The following chapters, from 3 to 7, provide a series of readings where the relationship between death, value, and social being in Pynchon’s fiction is analyzed

from different angles. In chapter 3, I analyze the indeterminate relation between animate and inanimate in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the challenge the inanimate represents in both novels to conceptual thinking. In *V.* we encounter a radical questioning of the distinctions that define “human” through conceptual discriminations (human/animal, human/object, human/machine), in which the negative term (the non-human, the non-living, the inorganic) is always marked by death. My reading of *V.* provides a critical revision of the theme of “dehumanization” in the novel. Dehumanization, which has been a concept often used in Pynchon studies and in relation to *V.* in particular, refers, on the one hand, to the objectification or fetishization of individuals, and on the other, to the loss of humanity in social relations. In my reading, I argue that in *V.* as well as in his other novels, Pynchon subverts the conceptual hierarchy implied by notions like dehumanization. In *Gravity's Rainbow* I analyze the bond between rationalism, technological worldview, and death by focusing on one emblematic passage in the novel—the monologue of the late Walter Rathenau. The passage deals with the underlying logic of chemical syntheses and industrialization—the control and use of nature—which Rathenau announces to be an enterprise of “death converted into more death” (167).

Chapter 4 focuses on the biggest possible death imaginable, the apocalypse. As I pointed out above, in critical responses Pynchon has often been seen as an apocalyptic writer whose work stems from severe pessimism and critique of the destructive forces imminent in the technologization and commodification of Western culture. This view relates especially to Pynchon's first three novels, *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*. But in Pynchon there is always a certain ambiguity that prevents such univocal readings. This is admitted also by critics like Kharpertian, who otherwise emphasize the writer's pessimism: “Pynchon's apocalypse [...] is ambiguous: it contains both destruction and creation, end and beginning, sterility and fertility” (1990, 113). Although in novels like *Gravity's Rainbow* the dark spiral towards destruction is so overwhelming, that it is (and has been for many readers) hard to see other ways of reading it, the novel manages both to affirm and to question the idea of a total and remainderless destruction. Apocalyptic literature has always reflected its social, cultural, and historical context, and in Pynchon's fiction the image of apocalypse appears as a particularly Western way of thinking about death and time. A thematic in Pynchon that crystallizes this ambiguity about death as the End is entropy. Originating in 19th century physics, entropy is a term and a scientific model for irreversible processes of dissipation, and from the very beginning of its history in the mid-19th century the term has been loaded with metaphysical connotations of apocalypse and death. But the way Pynchon uses entropy as both a scientific term and a metaphor reveals the mobility of this notion: being susceptible to diverse readings, entropy eludes determinate interpretation. Consequently, entropy turns into a mirror that reflects the underlying premises and ideologies of the reader.

Chapter 5 focuses on a recurrent experience of Pynchon's characters—the

experience of being at the limit. This experience relates to the sense of mortality, but also to the limits of language and conceptual understanding. Therefore, this being at the limit also contains a revelation, a sense of another order of being. This experience is analyzed in terms of temporality, rationalization and language in *Mason & Dixon*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*. Rationalization of time plays a prominent role in *Mason & Dixon*, and through it Pynchon describes how the emerging technopolitical order starts to take possession of citizens' lives through time in 18th-century Europe and North America. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon also evokes the question of what is left out in this rationalization process, is there an "outside" of time? The desire to overcome death is a recurrent theme in *Gravity's Rainbow*. For some characters, this desire becomes an obsession that Pynchon openly compares to the scientific desire to reach and expand the limits of knowledge. The historical irony that weighs heavily in *Gravity's Rainbow* is that the characters who want to transcend their own mortality are those who design and construct weapons of mass destruction. In connection with *The Crying of Lot 49*, I'll focus on the intense "threshold experiences" that recur in Pynchon's fiction. Pynchon depicts his characters at the moment of transcendental revelation that also means death, and the narrative tone in these moments is a complex mixture of horror and enchantment. On the textual plane, these scenes reify what Peter Brooks has called the desire of narrative, that is, the desire for the end (of representation) that orients a narrative (52). These scenes also embody what Gilles Deleuze in *Masochism* (1991) has called the "pure state of waiting" characteristic of masochism, the suspension of the real and the retaining of the illusion—for Deleuze, an aesthetic state par excellence. In *Crying of Lot 49* I analyze the protagonist Oedipa Maas' explicit death wish as an attempt to reach the Other Side via communication.

Chapter 6 deals with what I call "liminal figures" in Pynchon's fiction—characters whose ontological status is ambiguous—and how their indifference to oppositions like living and dead, or here and hereafter can be seen as a social and ideological question. The lines of social demarcation are usually drawn in order to separate the society from its others. But what about the line between the living and the dead? Pynchon's ghosts may be otherworldly, but they pose problems that have very mundane implications. Does the socially marginal status of the ghostlike Thanatoids in *Vineland*, or the unreal Schwartzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow* reveal that they represent something that civilization cannot tolerate? In this chapter, I will approach these liminal figures from three perspectives. The first one is the tradition of gothic literature in the ghost figures of *Mason & Dixon*. What do the visitations of ghosts in the middle of a scientific project mean in the novel? The second perspective is Bakhtin's view on death in Menippean satire and carnivalized literature applied to *Vineland*, and the third Baudrillard's notion of the symbolic gift of death in *Gravity's Rainbow*. A common denominator in the latter two is the idea of symbolical reversibility articulated through death. In Bakhtin, this reversibility is actuated in the carnivalistic principle of reversion and mesalliance of opposites, which always has an

ideological impact. In *Vineland*, the carnivalized realm of the dead represents a satire of the lifestyle and values of the (still) living. A more complicated subgroup of liminal figures is the Schwartzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The Schwartzkommando is a tribe consisting mostly of African Hereros (a Bantu tribe) that wanders about the occupied Zone of Central Europe in the summer of 1945, and their mission is racial extermination. I'll analyze this mission as a symbolic challenge to the economic and political power structures of postwar Europe.

In chapter 7, I will focus on a thematic in which the social aspect of a symbolically articulated death is most evident—sacrifice. This thematic recurs especially in two novels, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. In both novels, there are many violent deaths, but the most striking among them are deaths that have a certain dramatized, more or less ritualistic aura about them. In this chapter I approach the thematics of sacrificial death as the intertwining of being and textuality characteristic of these novels. Both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are quest stories. In *V.* the quest is for the secret of a woman named *V.*, and in *Gravity's Rainbow* the quest consists of determining the forces that affect both the protagonist's identity and the course of WWII. In both novels, the recurrent images of articulated violence and bodily dispersion represent the eventual impossibility of the quest. The body, both as an object of desire and as an epistemological locus of truth fractures, and thus it becomes an image of the lost referent. Likewise, the textual corpus of these novels is fragmentary and incoherent, as if the work, like the body, existed only in order to be dispersed in the course of reading. Another part of my approach is to analyze what I call the “poetics of sacrifice” operating in Pynchon's writing—the intertwining of death with the dynamic of signification. From this perspective, we can see death as a symbolic undoing of signifying structures, as an economy that volatilizes those textual instances with greatest value (i.e. significance). This textual economy creates the unique intensity of these novels.

## 2. Death and Value. Jean Baudrillard and the Genealogy of Modern Death

The business of the World is Trade and Death,  
and you must engage with that unpleasantness,  
as the price of your not-at-all-assur'd Moment  
of Purity (M&D, 247)

how much of the world's "economic" activity  
is really a flight from death  
(Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*)

In an interview book *Paroxysm* (1998) Jean Baudrillard is asked about the possibility of an alternative to modern Western culture and late capitalism. Typically, Baudrillard's answer contains both the rhetoric of loss and a prophecy:

I don't seek to locate the counterpoint to the West. That there is an alternative I don't doubt, but it's not in space: it's first and foremost metaphysical, it's in forms. [...] The problem with us Westerners is not the problem of alternative, but of the alterity we have lost and which all those who are copying us are also losing. We have lost alterity and death. (41)<sup>4</sup>

In many of his works Baudrillard has analyzed this loss of alterity in late capitalist society, but nowhere with the same rigour as in his early works, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) and *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (1976). The former is a study in which Baudrillard analyzes the ambiguous formation of value in consumer society. Baudrillard criticizes the classical Marxian distinction between use value and exchange value, and reformulates it in terms of semiology. He sees a structural analogy between signs and objects in economic circulation. Thus the distinction between exchange value and use value parallels the semiological distinction between signifier and signified. The use value, just like the signified, has no positive value outside this structural disjunction. For Baudrillard exchange value is not, as it was for Marx, a way of measuring the amount of labour bestowed upon a material product, but, basically, a coded difference, an abstract value, that abolishes all social relations on which the object is grounded (the object as a product of human work, or as an instrument of human work). Purified of all social relations, this sign-object (*objet-signe*) is a commodity, an object of consumption. The modern political economy, understood as the relationship between economic phenomena and underlying social relations, is for Baudrillard basically the circulation, consumption, and constant reproduction of signs

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<sup>4</sup> As Julia Witwer, the editor of *Vital Illusion* (2000) notes, Baudrillard's "we" should rather be read as "we the legatees of Enlightenment thought" than exclusively "we Westerners" or "we Anglo-Europeans" (Baudrillard 2000, 88).



(or objects turned into signs). The structural principle governing this “political economy of the sign” is equivalence: the signifier equals the signified, the commodity equals the exchange value. Because of this structural analogy Baudrillard calls exchange value a *sign value*: “it is the placing of a sign on a thing and the logic of this process of signification is the true essence of capital” (Poster 1975, 5). Baudrillard’s critique in *Pour une critique* is directed against this structural principle as an ideological form, as a form of power that tends towards universality by subsuming everything it encounters in the code of equivalence. Thus in criticising the principle of equivalence, Baudrillard is also criticising Western rationalism as a mode of thinking based on coded differences.

In *Pour une critique*, Baudrillard presents for the first time his hypothesis of an alternate form of exchange, a *symbolic exchange*, that historically precedes sign value exchange and is radically antagonistic to the principle of equivalence. Derived from anthropological notions of non-economic exchange (potlatch, the gift, sacrifice), and developed throughout both studies, the symbolic exchange comes to represent for Baudrillard a field or a state of ambivalence in which the notion of value as an abstract positive entity ruptures, and the exchange of objects and things is inseparable from the social relations they actualize. Although the dominance of the sign value in modern culture is nearly total, Baudrillard in *Pour une critique* as well as in his following works sees the symbolic exchange (or symbolic order) emerging whenever the principle of equivalence is challenged.

In Baudrillard’s following work, *L’échange symbolique et la mort*, this distinction between sign value exchange and symbolic exchange is given a more specific historical and ideological context. In analyzing the formation of value, and its relationship to social power, Baudrillard links the principle of equivalence to the evolution of modern “normalization” processes already theorized by Michel Foucault. Foucault’s work on the historical construction—the genealogy—of madness, medical perception, systems of punishment and sexuality<sup>5</sup> in the modern era has foregrounded both the underlying power relations inherent in discourses of knowledge, and the formation of subjectivity within these discourses. For Foucault, normalization is the manifestation of power taking charge of men’s existence. Since the 18th century, social power has more and more emerged in a form characterized by control and classification. Both operations produce relations based on negation. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*:

[W]hat it produces, if anything, is absences and gaps; it overlooks elements, introduces discontinuities, separates what is joined, and marks off boundaries. Its effects take the general form of limit and lack. (1990, 83)

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<sup>5</sup> *Madness and Civilization (L’Histoire de la folie, 1961), The Birth of the Clinic (La Naissance de la clinique, 1963), History of Sexuality, vol. 1 (La Volonté de savoir, 1976), and Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison, 1977).*

In *Madness and Civilization*, for example, this negative relation determines the notion of mental illness in the Enlightenment. Foucault depicts anxiety in the face of madness as the dark side of the Age of Reason: the declaration of human rights and humanity in general were to him the result of the separation between reason and unreason —the modern man and the madman.

Michel Foucault's work on genealogies has had a profound influence on Baudrillard's thought, but, as Mike Gane has noted, Baudrillard often takes an idea and forces it beyond the fields of application in Foucault (1991, 84). Like Foucault, Baudrillard also speaks of normalization, but for him it does not only mean the urge towards uniformity in all aspects of the social life. Normalization as such implies the emergence of a system of values, and value is always based on conceptual discrimination. Thus normalization becomes for Baudrillard the social manifestation of the principle of equivalence. In tracing the historicity of this principle in *L'échange symbolique*, Baudrillard refers to Foucault's genealogy of madness, thus acknowledging Foucault's historical analysis as a model for his own work. But, Baudrillard argues with a reference to Foucault, among the series of social discriminations that start to emerge at the modern era there is one profound exclusion that precedes all the others and is even more radical, serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death (1976, 195).<sup>6</sup> The sick, the mentally disturbed, and criminals all have their mental and physical place in modern society and in the modern metropolis, but the dead have none (*ibid.*). In our culture the dead disappear, argues Baudrillard, because being dead is not *normal*; it is a deviance that cannot be cured, and this is the thing that separates our civilization from preceding ones (196).

In the latter half of *L'échange symbolique*, death becomes the critical point in Baudrillard's analysis of modern political economy.<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard's theoretical project is to construct a genealogy of the modern notion of death that shows an intrinsic historical, structural and ideological bond between the social repression of death and the emergence of rationalism and capitalism. The crucial factor is the disparity and antagonism between death and value. What Baudrillard sees as the radical otherness of death is that it cannot be determined through value: death cannot be given a significance, which means that it cannot be subsumed in the principle of equivalence. In *L'échange symbolique* Baudrillard takes this negativity or non-value of death as his

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<sup>6</sup> In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault states that since the 16th century madness comes to represent death in the imagination of modern man, and the anxiety about madness comes to replace the former anxiety about death (Foucault 1973a, 15–16). This argument is probably what Baudrillard is attacking.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard's work is usually divided into two phases, and *L'échange symbolique et la mort* is generally regarded as the most important of his early works, which also include such analytical treatises on consumer society as *Le Systeme des Objets (The Object System, 1968)*, and *Le Mirroir de la Production (The Mirror of Production, 1975)*.

starting point, and his genealogy is largely a deconstruction of the rationale surrounding the modern notion of death.<sup>8</sup> For Baudrillard, death is not only a blind spot in relation to the formation of value—it eventually becomes a counterforce and a threat to the principles of modern rationality: unlimited progress, unlimited growth, individualism, control over nature (245). Death becomes the adversary of all that, an absolute limit, a dysfunction in the social machine, a principle of destruction, and a source of anguish in individual life. Death becomes, as Zygmunt Bauman has formulated it, the ultimate Other of modernity (1992, 131).

As Gary Genosko (1994) has pointed out, death is for Baudrillard a *form* in two senses. First, death is a dynamic form, a counterforce or reversion of any dominant order, and second, it is a social form, a realm strictly separated from life, which is a result of the imaginary disjunction between life and death (91–92). This perspective turns out to be fruitful also when thought in relation to the ontological and social divisions of Pynchon’s fiction. In the following, I will approach this relationship between death and value in Baudrillard’s writing, and see what kind of parallels Baudrillard’s ideas form with Pynchon’s mode of writing.

### The Ghetto Beyond the Grave

In his genealogy, Baudrillard delineates an irreversible cultural process in which the dead, little by little, cease to exist socially. An important image of this profound social exclusion is modern town planning, from which the physical place of the dead—the cemetery—has already disappeared. Baudrillard notes that the cemeteries that were still in the Middle Ages important centers of public life, gradually started to lose this status during the modern era. In villages and small towns, the cemetery can still be found at the center, in the midst of the living, but when small towns change into big cities, the cemetery is banished more and more to the periphery, and from modern town planning the cemetery has already disappeared (1976, 195–196).<sup>9</sup> The physical and the mental place for the dead disappears because the dead have no place in modern society and its functioning.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In Baudrillard’s efforts to subvert the hierarchical binary pair life/death and show its formation as a result of conceptual and social repression one can see a strategy reminiscent of deconstructive approach. Some critics have also seen a certain affinity between Baudrillard’s analysis and Derridean deconstruction (see, for example Kellner 1989, 102).

<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, remarks Baudrillard, in some cities in America as well as in France, the traditional cemeteries are the only green or vacant areas in the urban milieu (196).

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard emphasizes that the modern social exile of the dead is not the same thing as the social abjection of the dead body that is known in all cultures. A dead body

This process can also be seen in Pynchon's fictional cities. In *The Crying of Lot 49* the lawyer Metzger briefly mentions that in the building of the San Narciso freeway, a cemetery was ripped out: "it had no right to be there, so we just barrelled on through, no sweat" (41). During the novel, this destroyed cemetery becomes an important image of the abandoned past, and the heroine Oedipa Maas's frustrated attempts at communication can be seen as attempts at connecting with the dead that have vanished from the culture she is living in. The city of Vineland in *Vineland* includes no place for the dead, therefore the dead in the novel live their spectral life in the backwoods, forgotten by the living. (This socially marginal role of the dead in Pynchon's fiction will be treated in chapter 6.)

What parallels this long withdrawal of the dead is the concept of immortality, which for Baudrillard only marks the social exclusion of the dead. Baudrillard's theorizing is here somewhat schematic, and lacking in historical contextualization, but his central claim is that immortality as an idealized condition of the "soul" betrays that the bond that unites the dead to the living in social life has been cut. In cultures where the dead were considered as present, as partners of the living in various symbolic exchanges, the dead need not be immortal, only different from the living (197).

Baudrillard sees that the notion of immortality is always associated with social power. In ancient cultures that believed in immortality, such as Egypt in 2000 B.C., immortality was a privilege, reserved only to the pharaoh, to the priests and to the members of the highest social class. Immortality, in this sense, was an emblem of power and social transcendence (198). Along with the emergence of universalist religions, particularly Christianity, the immortality of the pharaoh or the king (who were considered gods) changes into the notion of immortal God. As a result, argues Baudrillard, the source of the social power is abstracted as transcendent (*ibid.*). Baudrillard remarks that, as in ancient Egypt, early Christianity also considered immortality a right not immediately admitted to everyone: pagans, women, children, and criminals had only the right to die, not the possibility of an afterlife (199).<sup>11</sup>

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invokes terror because it is no longer *social*, that is, a source of signification. In premodern cultures, however, this terror did not lead to negation and rejection of the dead, because they still had a certain specified social function (274–275).

<sup>11</sup> Similar notions have been presented by Philippe Ariès, whose studies on the social history of death (*L'homme devant la mort*, 1977, and *Western Attitudes Towards Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 1976) retraces changes in various practices concerning dying, mourning of the dead, burial, images of the afterlife, etc. Ariès also mentions that the afterlife was in early Christianity a right reserved only to members of the church. Until the twelfth century, "the dead who belonged to the Church and who had entrusted their bodies to its care [...] were at rest until the day of the Second Coming, of the great return, when they would awaken in the heavenly Jerusalem, in other words in Paradise [...]. The wicked, that is to say those who were not members of the church, would doubtlessly not live after their death; they would not awaken and would be abandoned to a state of nonexistence" (Ariès 1976, 29–30).

The political implications of the notion of an afterlife are important to Baudrillard, for he sees that the foundation of *real* social discrimination is laid here, in the imaginary immortality of certain social groups (199). The emergence of the afterlife, although later democratized for everyone, gives birth to a social control that is based on the interdiction of death. It also gives birth to the instance that guards this interdiction. Historically, it is clerical power which had a monopoly over death and control over dealings with the dead (200–201). Baudrillard argues that the power of the church is based on the separation of afterlife from life, on the separation of the life on earth from the Kingdom of Heaven, and this bar against death was the first separation on which social control was based (200).

Since the emergence of “materialistic reason,” the religious attributes of the afterlife have faded and the concept has been given a secular significance, which serves in particular the political interests of the state (221). Social authority lies no longer in the church, but in the state, and whereas the church offered immortality to its members, the state offers protection from death to its citizens. The notion of the afterlife, Baudrillard argues, has simply been transported into this life; the administration of life as the true, “objective” afterlife is what guarantees the power of the state (221). The power of the state is much stronger than the prior power of the church, for it is not based on the control of the imaginary of the afterlife, but on the imaginary of this life (*ibid.*). With this Baudrillard means that the attributes of the afterlife (peace, happiness, absence of pain and suffering, absence of death etc.) are in our secularized era the attributes of a perfect, idealized life, no less imaginary than the former religious notion of the afterlife.

In this respect, the difference between the modern era and earlier historical periods is that immortality is no longer defined within a religious framework. Zygmunt Bauman (1997, 152–164) notes that in modernity immortality can be achieved by two strategies. The first one is collective: individual humans fuse their life with human totalities of which they are a part. The Church, the Nation, the Party, the Cause will live, if not forever, at least much longer than their individual members. Another strategy is to gain the status of an extraordinary individual. King, general, philosopher, poet, artist—the deeds of an individual may give him/her a posthumous life in the human memory. Bauman also delineates a third alternative, “practical immortality,” which means the technical and medical prospects of considerably prolonged life. “Practical immortality” is, however, not for everyone: “biological immortality has every chance of turning into a factor and an attribute of individualization—the preservation of the ‘most deserving’”. As once was the right to live forever in the human memory, the right to perpetuity of biological existence would need to be earned (or inherited, for that matter)” (Bauman 1997, 159). Thus the fantasy of endless medical deferral of death becomes the immortality of our times.

## Death as the Other of Modernization

The social demarcations and restrictions concerning death and the dead are a common feature in all cultures,<sup>12</sup> but the essential difference for Baudrillard is that during the modern era death gradually lost its social dimension and became a realm strictly separated from life. Where death in pre-modern cultures was still essentially a social (and in many cases public) event, involving the whole community, in the modern era death is more and more conceived as a fate that everyone must face alone. Baudrillard sees that this change in attitudes towards death started to emerge in Western culture from the 16th century onwards (223–224). The characteristics of this change I have summarized in the following as death's individualization, medicalization, naturalization, and exterritorialization.

Baudrillard sees that death's individualization begins in Protestantism, which insists on a personal relationship between man and God (223). To him the image of death before the 16th century is still collective; death is still seen as the grand equalizer, who invites everyone—the rich and the poor alike—to the Dance of Death. But gradually from the 16th century onwards this collective figure starts to vanish. Death is individualized and interiorized, and turned into a constant source of anguish: death emerges at the horizon of everyone's individual life, and everyone has to face it alone (223–224).<sup>13</sup> Philippe Ariès, on the other hand, sees signs of death's individualization already at the end of the Middle Ages, when the doctrine of the Last Judgement changes death from a meticulously ordered and public ritual—the extreme unction—into a more abstract spiritual moment “where the individual traits of each life, each biography, appeared in the bright light of the clear conscience—a place where everything was weighed, counted, written down, where everything could be changed, lost, or saved” (Ariès 1976, 105). Ariès describes how the actually very modern idea that the true objective of life can be known at the moment of death begins to emerge already in the 13th century. And along with it grows the personal anxiety before death:

[F]rom the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, three categories of mental images were brought together: the image of death, that of the individual's knowledge of his own biography, and that of the passionate attachment for things and creatures possessed during one's lifetime. Death became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself [...]. Since the early Middle Ages Western man has come to see himself in his own death: he has

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the rules governing the procedure of dying, of burial, of the ways to deal with the dead, to speak about them, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard admits, however, that there has been a tradition of pessimistic and individual thought on death since the Stoics. Montaigne, Pascal, Jansenism—all mark for him the beginning of the modern anguish surrounding death (1976, 223).

discovered *la mort de soi*, one's own death. (1976, 45, 52)

Individualized, the moment of death becomes charged with fears and hopes concerning both the value of the individual's life and his/her fate in eternity.

[This period] laid the bases of what was to become modern civilization, a more personal, more inner feeling about death, about the death of the self, betrayed the violent attachment to the things of life but likewise [...] it betrayed the bitter feeling of failure, mingled with mortality: *a passion for being, an anxiety of not sufficiently being*. (105)<sup>14</sup>

Since the meaning of life is something that exists beyond life, the "anxiety of not sufficiently being" means that an individual's life emerges as measured against a universal and transcendental model.

The personal anguish over mortality and the evanescence of life, the *vanitas*, that emerged already in the Middle Ages and paved the way for the modern anguish of death is from Baudrillard's perspective a symptom of this cultural change. Unlike Ariès, Baurillard's emphasis is on Protestantism, for it abandons collective ceremoniality in religion and imposes the notion of *individual* salvation, a personal relation between the soul and God (1976, 223). At the beginning, salvation is based on faith only, but, gradually, it turns into a real economic relationship involving the accumulation of noble deeds and merits and their equivalents in the final calculation (222–223).<sup>15</sup> In Baudrillard's argument one can see the influence of Max Weber, who, as we know, formulated the historical and metaphysical link between Protestantism and the "spirit" of capitalism. Baudrillard refers to Weber a couple of times, but what can be considered his own formulation is the idea that the urge towards a total rationalization of life that emerges in Protestantism works as a shelter from death.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon reflects this cultural history of death through the image of the Rocket, which appears in the novel as a condensation of different attitudes

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<sup>14</sup> It has to be noted that Ariès does not emphasize the role of Protestantism in this process, since his cultural and historical framework is closer to Catholicism.

<sup>15</sup> Historical contextualization is, again, lacking here, but similar argumentation can be found in Ariès. He mentions that the notion of the afterlife did not involve individual responsibility, that is, the counting of good and bad deeds, before the second half of the Middle ages, from the twelfth to the fifteenth century (Ariès 1976, 29–30). But what changes the notion of afterlife is the doctrine of the Last Judgement. From the twelfth century onwards, religious imagery begins to depict Christ as a judge, who weighs the good and the bad deeds of each man, deeds that have been inscribed in a book. "This book, the *liber vitae*, must first have been conceived of as a cosmic book, the formidable census of the universe. But at the end of the Middle Ages it became an individual account book" (32). The important change in the idea of the Last Judgement is that the account of each life did not take place at the moment of death, "but on the *dies illa*, the last day of the world, at the end of time" (33).

towards death. The Rocket is in the novel both a minutely described weapon of mass destruction, and a mythical “angel of death”—both a killing machine, and, in its sublimity a technologized image of death itself. But at the same time, Pynchon makes the reader aware that the death that the Rocket symbolizes is not one, but a projection of different attitudes towards death. In the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a statistician, Roger Mexico, who calculates the probabilities of the V–2 rocket hits in London 1944, notes that “Everyone’s equal. Same chances of getting hit. Equal in the eyes of the rocket” (GR, 57). What Mexico refers to are the mathematical odds of dying in a bombing. But underlying his remark is also the actually very medieval idea of a personified Death, the grand equalizer, who will take everyone, the rich and the poor alike. But at the end of the novel the Rocket changes again from an object of mythical or religious interpretations to a personal fate:

[E]ach will have his personal Rocket [...] each Rocket will know its intended and hunt him, [...] through our World, shining and pointed in the sky at his back, his guardian executioner rushing in, rushing closer... (727)

This image of the “personal Rocket” and the anguish it provokes anticipates also the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the sense of approaching death suddenly changes to a very personal experience for the theatre audience, when they are told that they are going to die any moment, because the Rocket is already approaching the theater faster than sound. (The Rocket will be treated more closely in chapters 4 and 5.)

For Baudrillard, the doctrine of individual salvation is already a manifestation of the new political economy. What creates life as value is the possibility to exchange it for salvation. The notion of salvation that extends beyond death is crucial, for it means that the final account or equation of symbolic debts—the final reward for good or bad deeds—that was important in premodern cultures and still in early Christianity, turns into a possibility that will never be actualized in *time*. Baudrillard sees that the ethic of accumulation that somehow would abolish death and guarantee eternal life becomes fundamentally the motor for the rationality of the political economy, creating an ethic of accumulation also in material production (223–224).

From the 18th century onwards, the religious notion of death begins to give way to the emerging natural sciences and the biological determination of death. Foucault points out in *The Birth of the Clinic* that modern medicine, as the first scientific discourse concerning the individual, begins with the corpse. The development of pathological anatomy in the eighteenth century made death a source of knowledge in a radically new way.

Death is the great analyst that shows the connexions by unfolding them, and bursts open the wonders of genesis in the rigour of decomposition[...]. Analysis, the philosophy of elements and their laws, meets in death what it had vainly sought in mathematics, chemistry, and even language: an un-supersedable model, prescribed by nature, it is on this great example that the



medical gaze will now rest. (1973, 144)

The definition of life is dependent on death, because death becomes that against which life is exposed as a positive truth: “It is at death that life and disease speak their truth” (145).

The modern idea of death as a biologically defined event, argues Baudrillard, is characterized by notions referring to mechanics and functionality: a machine either functions or not. Similarly, a biological machine is either living or dead (1976, 243). Thus death is localized in a definite place within time and space: the body. Baudrillard argues that biology supposes in a fundamental sense a duality between the body and the soul, which duality is a kind of death in itself, since it objectifies the body as residue. Because of this dualism the body turns out to be the brute, objective thing, the destiny of sex, anguish and death—the “reality,” that exists only to be condemned to death (244–245).

The idea of biologically defined, so called “natural death” is to Baudrillard the cornerstone of social control over individual death and life. As Giorgio Agamben notes in *Homo Sacer* (1998), “life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts, which as such acquire a political meaning precisely only through a decision” (164). Because natural death stems from the demand for a just duration of life, society, along with science and technology, becomes responsible of the death of an individual. The natural death turns out to be a social norm, and, consequently, any deviation from it a scandal (Baudrillard 1976, 248–249). For Baudrillard this does not mean that modern culture is more humane than preceding ones. The notion of natural death marks the capitalization of life. When life is conceived as accumulation of value, the “natural” death arrives when everyone has exhausted his/her biological resources. The individual’s right to his/her life contains nothing more than the obligation of living as long as possible: life is thus reduced to mere quantity (248–249).<sup>16</sup> The naturalization and medicalization of death eventually means in Baudrillard’s analysis that while death is determined as a personal event, people are denied their own death (that is, the possibility of deciding the time, the place and the manner of their own

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<sup>16</sup> As an example Baudrillard mentions the weakened status of old age in modern society. Baudrillard calls modern old age, or “the third age,” a dead weight within the social system, because it is deprived of meaning. In other cultures, the symbolical prestige of the old age is indisputable, because age—“years”—is socially exchanged into authority and power. Whereas in our culture, where the living live as long as possible, thus “gaining” on death, old people function as living models of the accumulation and saving of life. But the prolonged life expectancy has led to social discrimination of the old, because their accumulated years can only be computed, not exchanged symbolically into power or social status (249–250). The logic in this life-calculation is disturbing: when life is conceived as capital, to consume one’s life too fast is forbidden. But those who have “saved” their lives—old people—have a capital that is socially inexchangeable.

death). Dying, in modern society, is a technical phenomenon managed by medical experts.

Along with death's medicalization emerges also death's *exterritorialization* (276)—the displacement of the site of death from home to the hospital and the disappearance of the sick and the dying from public space. The majority of us no longer have the opportunity to see a person die. There are many rational—medical—reasons for this exterritorialization, but to Baudrillard the fundamental reason is that the sick or the dying, the biological corpse, no longer has any place except in the technical milieu (276–277). Ariès, who calls this displacement the “forbidden death” characteristic of the 20th century, notes that between 1930 and 1950 an important change took place: one no longer died at home, but in the hospital, alone. The role of the hospitals has changed during the centuries. In the Middle Ages the hospital had been a shelter for the poor, for pilgrims, then it became a medical center where people were healed, where one struggled against death (1976, 88). Nowadays the hospital has become the place to receive care which can no longer be given at home. The hospital still has a curative function, but people are also beginning to consider a certain type of hospital as the designated spot for dying (*ibid.*).

Today the initiative has passed from the family, as much an outsider as the dying person, to the doctor and the hospital team. They are the masters of death—of the moment as well as of the circumstances of death [...]. Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care, a cessation determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team. Indeed, in the majority of cases the dying person has already lost consciousness. Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps, which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped. All these little silent deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death, and no one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost a part of its meaning [...]. (87–89)

Medicalized death, remarks Foucault, is multiple and dispersed in time. First, the sensorial extinction, then the slowing down of brain activity, rigidity of the muscles, paralysis of the intestines, and then immobilization of the heart. There is no absolute, decisive point where life ends, since the medical analysis divides the process into successive stages: “gradually, here and there, each of the knots breaks, until organic life ceases, at least in its major forms, since long after the death of the individual, minuscule, partial deaths continue to dissociate the islets of life that still subsist” (Foucault 1973, 142).

The undecidability of the moment of biological death—(What causes the death? Heart attack? Then a level encephalogram? Then what?)—shows Baudrillard that there is an indeterminacy about death at the heart of science itself (1976, 243n). This

indeterminacy in the seemingly objective progression of biological death betrays an imaginary disjunction of life and death. One of Baudrillard's central critical tendencies throughout *L'échange symbolique* is the questioning of the disjunction between real and imaginary. Reality, he argues, is nothing more than the imaginary of the other term. The terms "real" and "imaginary" are results of the disjunction of terms, and the excluded term is always the imaginary of the prevailing term (206). Thus, in the disjunction between man and nature, on which our conception of science is based, the "objectivity" and "materiality" of nature is the imaginary of already conceptualized man. In the sexual disjunction between man and woman, onto which the principle of sexual "reality" is based, the excluded term, the "woman," is nothing else than the imaginary of man. Also with the distinction life/death: the price we pay for the "reality" of life and its positive value is the continual fantasy of death. To us, who have defined ourselves as the living, argues Baudrillard, death is the imaginary (ibid.).

For Baudrillard the rationale and social control surrounding death is repressive because it entails the social control over life. The argument that social power is in modern culture inclined to the preservation and controlling of life has also been formulated by Foucault in *History of Sexuality*. The power of death, which in the ancient society meant the sovereign's power to take life or let live, is in the modern society something else. Power, argues Foucault, is nowadays situated and exercised at the level of life (1990, 137). The social power has become, in Foucauldian terms, *bio-power*. Baudrillard sees that this process is the outcome of the extraction of death: death control follows birth control, and in both cases people are compelled to die or to survive. The point is that people cannot make the decision any more, that they can never freely live or die, but that they live and die according to social license (265–266). When the morality once commanded "You shall not kill," he argues, it nowadays commands "you shall not die," at least not without the permission of law and medicine (266).<sup>17</sup> This dark side of bio-power emerges also in *Gravity's Rainbow* (and even before Foucault). In its paranoid world, life and death are equally controlled and manipulated. Even WWII itself, it turns out, is nothing but controlled, operational death:

Mothers and fathers are conditioned into deliberately dying in certain preferred ways: giving themselves cancer and heart attacks, getting into motor accidents, going off to fight in the War. (GR, 176)

Douglas Kellner has argued that Baudrillard's view of the motivation of social control is deconstructive: "society is interpreted as a death culture, and its means of processing and even preventing death are interpreted as means of controlling life" (1989, 106).

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<sup>17</sup> Or should it be "you shall not die without the proper insurance?" The logic of life insurance, remarks Guy Debord, is that a person makes adjustments to cover up the economic loss his/her death will cause to the economic system. It is reprehensible to die without such arrangements (Debord 1994, 115).

Kellner argues further that the social repression of death ensures that our lives will be haunted by a fear of death and obsessed with a desire for immortality (103)—either in the old religious sense of eternal life, or in the profane sense of medically prolonged life. Despite his critical attitude towards Baudrillard's thinking in general, Kellner considers this linking of the denial of death and social control insightful. He summarizes the human condition described in *L'échange symbolique* as follows:

Modernity itself is thus characterized in part by the repression of death and the production of an individual subject who, haunted by the thought of his or her own death, takes refuge in the Church, the State, the accumulation of goods and wealth, or his or her own anxious inner life as fundamental protector and guarantor of survival. Such refuge weakens social life, subjects the individual to control by external powers, and unleashes untold amounts of repressed aggression and death in social life. (Kellner 1989, 103)

For Baudrillard, the final stage in the rationalization process is that death turns out to be operable as a social service, intergrated in the system like health and disease (1976, 267). As an example he refers to the story (or urban legend?) of “motel-suicides” in the USA, where, for a comfortable sum, one can arrange one's death like any other consumer good, under most agreeable conditions (266). Why wouldn't death become a social service, asks Baudrillard, functionalized as individualized and computable consumption in social input and output? The Thanatos centres would charge for death just like the Eros centres charge for sex (ibid.).

Baudrillard's argument here sounds fantastic, and it is not suprising that one can find ideas of consumable death or immortality in literature. Philip K. Dick's science fiction classic *Ubik* (1969) uses the idea of purchased afterlife: people wealthy enough do not die, but continue their existence in a kind of medically maintained lethargy, from which they can be awakened so their relatives and friends can speak with them. As early as 1932, in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, dying was described as a totally programmed operation, something the heavily medicated individuals do not even recognize happening:

It was a large room bright with sunshine and yellow paint, and containing twenty beds, all occupied. Linda was dying in company—in company with all the modern conveniences. The air was continuously alive with gay synthetic melodies. At the foot of every bed, confronting its moribund occupant, was a television box. Television was left on, a running tap, from morning till night. Every quarter of an hour the prevailing perfume of the room was automatically changed. “We try,” explained the nurse [...] “to create a thoroughly pleasant atmosphere here.” (1977, 160)

Pynchon's *Vineland* also describes a situation in which death has turned into a simulated and consumable image, when the protagonist Zoyd Wheeler is offered a virtual suicide. Zoyd has gone to Hawaii to solve his marital crisis, and when he realizes

that his wife has left him, he falls into depression. Zoyd is offered help from his hotel clerk, who, recognizing a possible suicide case, starts to persuade him to purchase a virtual suicide instead of committing a real one:

Hawaii is where men from California bring their broken hearts, seeking exotic forms of self-injury not so readily available on the mainland. Some specialize in active volcanoes, others in cliff-diving, many go for the classier swimming-out-to-sea option. I can put you onto several travel agents who offer Suicide Fantasy packages, if you're interested. (VL, 60)

Zoyd is, however, not interested in virtual suicide at this phase in this life.

“Fantasy!” Zoyd was sniffing again. “Who said anythin’ about make-believe, dude? Don’t you think I’m serious about this?”

“Course, of course, but please, just—”

“Only thing that holds me back,” Zoyd blowing his nose at length, “is the indignity of lying there all splattered by the pool and in my last few seconds on Earth hearing Jack Lord say, ‘Book him, Danno—Suicide One.’” (ibid.)<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, some years after his divorce Zoyd gets part of his income from fake suicide attempts. The Suicide Fantasy Package reflects perfectly the era of simulation. “All risk-situations, which were once man’s natural lot, are today re-created artificially in a form of nostalgia for extremes, survival and death” (Baudrillard 2001, 29).

#### Trade and Death: Pynchon, Brown, and Baudrillard

In Baudrillard’s analysis the rationale surrounding the modern notion of death is due to repression, for there is something in death that always remains outside the sphere of biology and resists attempts at rationalization. Baudrillard sees that just as there is a repressed and abolished social element in the formation of exchange value, there is a repressed social element in the conception of death as negativity in opposition to the positivity of life. This repressed part is what Baudrillard names the *symbolic*. With this notion, there opens up a perspective on death that is profoundly social, for the Baudrillardian symbolic involves relations and pacts—in short, an exchange radically different from the sign value exchange and its logic of equivalence.

The relationship between death and exchange is foregrounded several times also

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Lord (1920–1998), an American actor who was closely identified with the television character Detective Steve McGarrett, whom he portrayed for 12 years on the series “Hawaii Five–O”. Detective McGarrett’s frequent closing line was “Book’ em, Danno.” “Lord, Jack.” *Britannica Book of the Year, 1999*. 2006. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 7 Nov. 2006 < <http://search.eb.com/eb/article/9123961>>.

in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the first part of the novel Tyrone Slothrop, an intelligence officer, ponders over the history of his family, the Slothrops, from the 18th century onwards. He recollects his visit to a churchyard in Mingeborough,<sup>19</sup> Massachusetts, where lie several generations of Slothrops. On a tombstone of one of his 18th century Puritan ancestors is an inscription: "Death is a debt to nature due/ which I have paid and so must you" (GR, 26). Slothrop—or the narrator who momentarily takes over—develops further the idea of debt as a principle that links the generations together:

Each one in turn paying his debt to nature and leaving the excess to the next link in the name's chain. They began as fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon, went on into glassmaking, became selectmen, builders of tanneries, quarriers of marble. Country for miles around gone to necropolis, gray with marble dust, dust that was the breaths, the ghosts, of all those fake-Athenian monuments going up elsewhere across the Republic. Always elsewhere. The money seeping its way out through stock portfolios more intricate than any genealogy: what stayed at home in Berkshire went into timberland whose diminishing green reaches were converted acres at a clip into paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word. They were no aristocrats, no Slothrop ever made it into the Social Register or the Somerset Club—they carried on their enterprise in silence, assimilated in life to the dynamic that surrounded them thoroughly as in death they would be to the churchyard earth. (GR, 27–28)

This passage unwinds an intricate network of relations: a piece of a family history<sup>20</sup> and the accumulation (and eventual loss) of its wealth, associated with the general history of industrialization, colonialization, and the devastation of nature. In a highly elaborate way, Pynchon makes the excess of wealth mirror the excess of life. It is not just a simple analogy, but an intertwining of two kinds of capital to the point where one cannot be reduced to the other. Money is given life: it is made a free agent in the family history, where it circulates, until it reaches a paradoxical state where it generates itself; money "causes" the timber trade that leads to the manufacturing of, among other things, paper money. And, vice versa, life is seen as money, as capital: the "excess" that passes from generation to generation signifies both wealth and heredity. Although both processes result in death or the inanimate, these deaths are different. Having used up the gift of life, the family members end up in the Mingeborough churchyard, and assimilate with the earth, while money proliferates, creating a sphere for the endless circulation of

<sup>19</sup> A fictional locale (Weisenburger 1988, 28).

<sup>20</sup> As many critics have noted, Pynchon has used various miscellaneous details from his own family history for the background of the Slothrops in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The history of the Pynchon family in America begins in the year 1630, when Pynchon's Puritan ancestor, William Pynchon, brings his family to the New World. William Pynchon, besides being a prosperous fur trader and politician (he founded two towns in Massachusetts, Springfield and Roxbury), was also a writer. In 1650 he published in England a theological tract, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, which led him into open theological conflict with the New England Puritans, and the tract was publicly burned in Boston. See Matthew Winston's article, "The Quest for Pynchon" in *Mindful Pleasures* (1976), and, for a more detailed account of William Pynchon, Deborah Madsen's "Family Legacies: Identifying the Traces of William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*" (1998).

signs—and waste as a byproduct. But without death as the original debt the family history would never have been existed.

In many ways this passage reflects the ideas of Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*, a work that has been seminal to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Lawrence Wolfley argues in his essay “Repression’s Rainbow” (1987), that Brown’s influence can be seen in *Gravity's Rainbow* in the novel’s apocalyptic imagery, in Pynchon’s elaboration and criticism of many central Freudian notions, and, most importantly, in the way Pynchon in the novel presents Western history as the history of repression. One of Brown’s major theses is that the repression of death, or better, the denial of the biological unity of life and death is what causes death’s constant return in our culture in morbid forms: as an aggressive desire to dominate and destroy, and as man’s alienation from his own body. Brown sees that man’s inability to accept his mortality results in two things: the denial of the body as matter exposed to death, and sublimation, that is, the projection of repressed instinctual wishes onto things. Like Freud, Brown sees that what we call civilization—religion, culture, history, art—is largely due to this sublimation process that depraves instinctual life and eventually converts animate into inanimate.

The historical series of cultural patterns [...] exhibit a dialectic of two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, ever increasing denial of the body, and on the other hand, the slow return of the repressed in an alienated form. Actually these seemingly contradictory trends are two sides of the same coin. The ever increasing denial of the body is, in the form of a negation, an ever increasing affirmation of the denied body. Sublimations are these negations of the body which simultaneously affirm it; and sublimations achieve this dialectical tour de force by the simple but basic mechanism of projecting the repressed body into things. The more the life of the body passes into things, the less life there is in the body, and at the same time the increasing accumulation of things represents an ever fuller articulation of the lost life of the body. Hence increasing sublimation is a general law of history. (1985, 297)

What Wolfley passes over in his essay is how Brown, especially in the last chapters of *Life Against Death*, links ideas of sublimation and death to economy. Brown sees that the process of accumulation inherent in linear temporality (history understood as cumulative time), the accumulation of wealth and property in capitalism, and the accumulation of cities in every civilization are the outcome of the same process, the process of sublimation. Brown’s reasoning here is not so much psychoanalytical, but economical, for he sees that the structure of accumulation itself is a sign that something has not been abolished properly—it is a sign of an unpayable debt. With reference to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Brown emphasizes the structural connection between debt and guilt in the archaic economy, in which everything present is seen as a debt owed to ancestors. “In the archaic consciousness the sense of indebtedness exists together with the illusion that the debt is payable; the gods exist to make the debt

payable” (1985, 271). Nietzsche postulates that with the rise of civilization, the sense of indebtedness to ancestors increases, climaxing in Christianity as a theology of unpayable debt (267). The modern consciousness, argues Brown, although no longer limited by a religious framework, has an increased sense of guilt, but also an awareness that the debt is unpayable (ibid.) This secularization of economy, however, does not mean the disappearance of religious notions, only their transformation: “the illusion that Christ redeemed is abandoned, but not the illusion that Adam fell, and therefore man must punish himself with work. The economy unconsciously obeys the logic of guilt” (272). This logic creates, according to Brown, the cumulative time of interest and the constantly postponed future of enjoyment that drives capitalism, and the growth of cities whose whole economy, cut off from primary production, is based on economic surplus. “We no longer give the surplus to God; the process of producing an ever expanding surplus is in itself now our God” (261). In accumulating wealth and possessions, the modern man tries to get rid of his guilt, but at the same time, he transfers his life into things:

And being the man’s life, things become alive and do what the man would like to do. Things become the god that he would like to be: money *breeds*. [...] Money inherits the infantile magic of excrement and then is able to breed and have children: interest is an increment [...]. (279)

When Pynchon in the passage above delineates the history of the Slothrop from fur traders to shareholders, and describes how the timber trade, “the wholesale slaughtering of trees” (GR, 268), changes living trees into the medium of “shit, money, and the Word” (28), he uses Brownian ideas of sublimation. The “fake–Athenian monuments” made of marble can be seen in relation to Brown’s view that all cultural constructs made to endure are but signs of man’s flight from death; thus the illusion of an animated, breathing marble represents the life that the Brownian “possessive individual” turns into his property. In Brown’s analysis, money is sublimated excrement; he sees a direct link between the “quantifying rationality” promoted by money (again, the “capitalist spirit” of Weber), and what Freud has named an anal character, dominated by possessive instinct (1985, 234–6). The thinking that proceeds by making abstractions in terms of exchange is in *Gravity’s Rainbow* also openly connected with Puritanism. When statistician Roger Mexico and intelligence officer Pirate Prentice are discussing statistics and the chances of getting hit by a V-2 rocket in London, Prentice refers briefly to the paying of one’s dues as the human condition. Mexico is irritated by the remark: “it’s the damned Calvinist insanity again. Payment. Why must they always put it in terms of exchange ?” (GR, 57)

Although many of Brown’s ideas can be subjected to criticism, when it comes to the relation between death and economy, Brown appears to me as an intermediary between Pynchon and Baudrillard. This said, some reservations need to be stated. Although both Brown and Baudrillard share the view of death as repressed in modern



culture, and Freud's notion of the return of the repressed, they understand this repression differently. For Brown, it is a question of the repression of libidinal impulses, which is one of the basic premises of psychoanalysis, but for Baudrillard repression is inherent in the logic of political economy and the social power attached to it. While Brown, with his view of instinctual liberation as necessary for curing the disease called culture, can be seen theorizing the sexual liberation of the 60's, Baudrillard, writing fifteen years later than Brown, always retains a critical stance towards psychoanalysis. And like Foucault, he sees that all ideologies of liberation eventually serve the ends of political economy.

But when Brown questions the premises of what he names quantifying rationality, that is, thinking which is "abstract, impersonal, objective, and quantitative" (234–5), and links it to the wish to abolish death, he comes close to the thinking of Baudrillard in *L'échange symbolique*. Like Brown, Baudrillard places the exclusion of death at the very core of capitalism. For him the ultimate motivation for the capitalization of life is to expose life as something positive and enduring, as an ultimate model for the proliferation of value from which the very idea of non-value, death, is excluded. Baudrillard also sees the phantasm of abolishing death as distributed throughout our culture. It emerges from the ideas of afterlife and eternity in religion, from the idea of truth in science and from the ideas of productivity and accumulation in economy:

Accumulation de la valeur, et en particulier du temps comme valeur, dans le phantasme d'un report de la mort au terme d'un infini linéaire comme valeur. [...] L'accumulation du temps impose l'idée de progrès, comme accumulation de la science impose l'idée de la vérité. (224)

For Baudrillard, the political economy governed by sign value exchange is an economy of death, because it turns death into economy (indefinite accumulation and reproduction of dead value) and inserts it into its discourse (236). When Baudrillard sees the value as dead, he refers to the principle of equivalence as thinking that has the form of an abstract digitality. This thinking, which to Baudrillard is also the form of Western rationality, is something that has gradually emerged during a historically long period, and its logic is to subsume everything into its own code which is that of general equivalence. The term "general equivalence" is Baudrillard's remodification of the classical Marxian notion of exchange value, which basically means an imaginary value bestowed upon a product of human labour and the resulting monetary exchange of commodities. Mike Gane notes that Marx already saw that exchange value does not concern only commodities; it is a structural principle that gradually tends to expand to all kinds of areas—objects, services, culture, knowledge, politics, etc.—and corrupt them (1991a, 110–111). This principle of equivalence forms a bond between economical logic and semiology: the "law of value" means *investment of things with value*. Once invested with value, everything can be seen as a commodity, or, more

fundamentally, as a parcel of *capital*—a number of rationally segmented units that are measurable, calculable and exchangeable according to a certain code.

In Baudrillard's analysis, death is the shadow that is always present in the functioning of the principle of equivalence in political economy. In order to eliminate non-value (death), value has to be established over and over again. What follows is the repetition and accumulation of value. But this infinite accumulation of equivalent units reveals the return of the same—death. As an example of this relationship between death and value, Baudrillard mentions the structural analogy between the interiorization of death and the process in which the circulation of materials in the economic exchange gives way to the general equivalent, money, that is universal and personal simultaneously. Similarly, death as a symbolic collective event has to give way to the vision of death as a personal fate that is the same for everyone. This, according to Baudrillard, is not a coincidence; our modern death *is* this general equivalence (1976, 224). This argument reflects one of Baudrillard's central ideas, that is, the structural analogy between the principle of equivalence and the endless reproduction it creates, and Freud's hypothesis of the death instinct conceived as endless repetition. The structural analogy between the pure and simple reproduction of value, and the Freudian notion of the "compulsion to repeat" represents to Baudrillard the paradoxical relationship that our culture has with death. The political economy tries to abolish death by piling death over death—by re-producing the same. But this return of the same is also what characterizes the death instinct. Baudrillard argues that the special resonance that a notion like the death instinct has in our culture is that in its form—endless repetition of the same—the death instinct is a *mirror of production*, inscribed in the system of values. Death, conceived as an endless repetition of the same, turns out to be that which drives the system and which the system tries to exclude—the system and its double, simultaneously (1976, 233). In Pynchon, the logic of accumulation and its twofold relationship with death is foregrounded especially in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when the aims of multinational corporations and industrialization in general—the objectivation and use of nature as a source of economic surplus—is described as "Death converted into more death" (167). (I will return to this problematic more closely in chapter 3.)

The epitaph from *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, "Death is a debt to nature due," contains traces of a thinking much older than Puritanism.<sup>21</sup> "Debt to nature" implies that life is something that has to be paid back, and death is a demand of return inherent in life, without which life would not exist. In the same passage, the idea of death as a paying back echoes also in the epitaph of another late Slothrop, in words from Emily Dickinson: "Because I could not stop for Death/ He kindly stopped for me" (GR, 27)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> The epitaph, as Weisenburger notes, is heretic, for to Puritans "the debt [...] is due not nature but God—a crucial difference" (1988, 28).

<sup>22</sup> Emily Dickinson, "Because I could not Stop for Death," *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. (712)

In Dickinson's poem death also appears as a point of reversion, not only the reversion of conceptual opposites life/death, but also of subject and object, cause and effect. Throughout the novel, Pynchon evokes the idea of paying back, an undoing of the debt as belonging to the order of things, emerging from cybernetics—"the deep conservatism of Feedback" (GR, 239)—to economics:

Just as there are, in the World, machineries committed to injustice as an enterprise, so too there seem to be provisions active for balancing things out once in a while. Not as an enterprise, exactly, but at least in the dance of things. (GR, 580)<sup>23</sup>

This idea of paying back or turning of the scales as a principle that operates in the world independent of human agents, can easily be labelled as belonging to the realm of mythical thinking, fatalism, or what someone might call "poetic justice." In Baudrillard's theory this idea of reversion or paying back is seen as a form of economy and thinking he names *symbolic exchange*.

### Reversion and Reciprocity: The Symbolic Economy

To break the law of value, Baudrillard argues in *Pour une critique*, means that one has to restore the exchange suppressed and paralyzed by the coded value (1972, 267–268). In sign value exchange, the object, although "exchanged" as a commodity for its exchange value, is neither given nor received, for it does not derive its meaning from any concrete relation between two persons, but from a differential relation in regard to other objects (62–63). The sign-object appears as autonomous, intransitive and opaque, and so it begins to represent the abolition of the social relation (ibid.). In *Capital*, Marx had already argued that the value of a commodity does not originate in its use-value (i.e. its capability to fit to certain human needs), but in its exchange value, which is basically a socially determined relation between products of human labour. For Marx commodity was in itself a non-natural thing that had taken over the natural relation between men and objects; it was a result of the social means of measuring the amount of labour bestowed upon a material product. But for Baudrillard the use-value is not more natural

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<sup>23</sup> This idea of payback is also evoked in terms of Newtonian physics both in *Mason & Dixon* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. When discussing the idea of *perpetuum mobile*, Dixon feels suspicious: "He is a Newtonian. He wants all Loans of Energy paid back, and ev'ry Equation in Balance. Perpetual Motion is a Direct Affront. If [it] be a message, why, it does not seem a kind one" (M&D, 318). The same idea also appears in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when Slothrop, hallucinating, hears the Chorus of Nuts singing and speaking to him in Zürich. Their speech reflects Slothrop's own suspicions about the spies around him, who seem to offer him all kinds of information and supplies without asking anything in return: "you can spot right away what's wrong, every one promises ya somethin' fer nothin', right? yes oddly enough, that's the main objection engineers and scientists have always had to the idea of [...] perpetual motion or as we like to call it Entropy Management" (GR, 260). In both novels, *perpetuum mobile* becomes thus the image of capitalism, and its principle of accumulation.

than exchange value, and in *Pour une critique* he criticizes the notion of use value as Marx's idealism for a value-free or natural state of objects. Baudrillard stresses that both exchange value and use value are grounded in the same abstract logic of equivalence: exchange value equals a certain abstracted amount of labour, and use value equals certain abstracted utility (155–156).

In order to provide a profound critique of this law of value, Baudrillard focuses on the repressed element in the formation of exchange value: the social relation. Baudrillard sees that what enabled the historical emergence of exchange value and the capitalist mode of production is the repression of the symbolic element within every exchange. In the margins of economic exchange we can still see traces of this symbolic exchange in gifts, feasts, spectacles, and certain other forms of non-utilitarian expenditure. While the sign value exchange operates with objects (or objects transformed into signs), the object in symbolic exchange cannot be conceived as an autonomous entity; it is nonseparable from the social relation that it actualizes (61). The paradox of the object in symbolic exchange is that it has no value, no exchange value or use value; it is arbitrary and unique at the same time. It can be any kind of object, but its uniqueness consists every time of its being given, and of the fact that it requires a response. While the logic operating in sign value exchange is that of equivalence, the logic of symbolic exchange is that of ambivalence. Thus the symbolic exchange, as Gane notes, is a basic model for fundamentally ambiguous relations, for what is given and received in symbolic exchanges is often relatively arbitrary and cannot be codified as distinctive elements (Gane 1991a, 82). The roots of Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange are in the gift theory of Marcel Mauss, presented in the essay, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies (Essai sur le don, 1950)*. The anthropological theories of the gift institution in pre-modern cultures usually distinguish two kinds of exchange. The first one is the economic exchange of useful goods. The second, often not clearly distinguishable from the first, is a system of exchanges conceived as reciprocal obligations that include all aspects of social life. For Mauss the gift exchange was what he called a "total service"—a public affair that involved the whole community.

The gift exchange is a form of social contract that includes all kinds of objects, even services and gestures, and although it appears to be voluntary it is in fact a fundamental social rule consisting of three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate (Mauss 1990, 39–43). Mauss emphasized the ambiguity of the gift exchange. The ultimate result of the exchange is the intermingling of things and men, because things exchanged are not inactive; they are endowed with power that comes from their previous owners, and therefore,

[O]ne must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul. To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal, not only because it would be against law and morality,

but also because that thing coming from the person not only morally, but physically and spiritually [...] exert[s] a magical or religious hold over you.  
(12)

Correspondingly, “by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one ‘owes’ *oneself*—one’s person and one’s goods—to others” (46). Baudrillard remarks that a characteristic of the institution of primitive exchange, in which certain objects circulate endlessly within the community, is the constant act of reversion (1976, 291–292). What takes place in symbolic exchange is a challenge in the form of an offering, and submission in the form of receiving. Although the exchange thus always establishes a power relation, the ambivalence and uninterruptedness of the exchange also enables its constant reversal.

Another thinker who has much influenced Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange is Georges Bataille. Bataille’s theory of expenditure and sacrifice, presented in the essays “La notion de dépense” (1933) and “La part maudite” (1949) deals with the different forms of economical and social thinking in archaic cultures and modern civilization. In “La notion de dépense”, Bataille introduces what he calls the “principle of loss” (*principe de la perte*) governing the archaic notion of acquisition and richness. This principle of loss Bataille sees as a need more fundamental than the need for production and conservation. When economy in the conventional sense (or what Bataille names a “limited economy”) is based on notions of utility, needs and conservation, the principle of loss emerges as something totally opposed to it. In archaic cultures, argues Bataille, richness, power and social status are determined not through acquisitions but through their loss in ritualistic exchanges like the potlatch, where power entails the power to lose property (1967, 34–35).

Notions like the principle of loss are in the background when Baudrillard, in *L’échange symbolique*, further elaborates the notion of symbolic exchange by linking the principle of reversion and death. When it comes to death, argues Baudrillard, the crucial distinction between our culture and what we call “primitive” or “archaic” cultures is that death in the latter is always defined as a social relation (1976, 202–204). Which is not to say that death as a natural or biological event has been denied; people die, but the important difference is that their death gains its significance only socially. Dying is an important social event including manifold symbolic practices that give the event its sense, for without the symbolical, ritualistic articulation, death has not taken place. What is essential in the primitive cultures is death as a form, which is the form of a social relation (202). Death, too, is a gift that is symbolically exchanged, given and received, made soluble through symbolic articulation (203). This exchange of death unites the living with the dead in two kinds of symbolic practice: sacrifices and initiation rites.

For Mauss, the sacrifice was an offering, a gift to the gods and the forefathers that is necessarily reciprocated (Mauss 1990, 16). Bataille, whose notion of the sacrifice was different, sees the principle of loss affecting also in sacrifice. For Bataille, sacrifice

is expenditure without profit; it is the ritualistically ordered expenditure of goods, animals and humans that has an important social function, since the accursed share allows the society to reproduce itself. What is sacrificed is the “accursed share,” something that is ripped off from reality, sacralized, and therefore destined to death, and through sacrifice the community achieves a temporal equilibrium. In *Paroxysm*, Baudrillard comments on the notion of the accursed share as follows:

In Bataille’s conception, the accursed share is something which cannot be exchanged in accordance with conventional exchange procedures, and must therefore be sacrificed if a form of functional equilibrium is to be recovered. Primitive societies have two cycles, two levels. There is routine exchange and there is what goes into the cycle of sacrifice; Bataille says this latter is expended in vain (though not really, since it re-establishes the equilibrium). (1998, 26)<sup>24</sup>

Another kind of symbolic exchange of death is the initiation rite, in which the initiates go through a symbolic death and rebirth. Baudrillard emphasizes that in the primitive community, natural birth is conceived as a gift and if it is not paid back it would cause a dangerous disorder in the form of a symbolic debt. Therefore, the disequilibrium between life and death should be solved by the initiation ritual, in which the life of the initiated is symbolically given back to death (1976, 202–203). The initiation ritual is reciprocal: after the symbolic death, the initiates are given new life as social beings.<sup>25</sup>

What is important for Baudrillard is that in these symbolic exchanges the biological “reality” of death disappears. It is not denied or abolished, but it loses its position as a referent underlying the events on the symbolic plane from which the disjunction life/death can be determined. Baudrillard emphasizes that this reciprocity between the living and the dead does not end in death. Death as non-existence, as we conceive it, is in the primitive communities something else: non-existence results from the deprivation of symbolic exchange, caused by banishment or another social negation—for example, a person exorcised from the community is regarded as non-existent (207). From the perspective of symbolic exchange, summarizes Baudrillard,

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<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard sees that Bataille’s notion of the accursed share has often been misunderstood: “it’s been argued that in consumer societies waste is the equivalent of potlatch, and everything that has no economic rationality has been put down as a kind of accursed share.[...] We’re up to our necks in this excessive culture of material production, but that’s not enough to make it an ‘accursed share’. The unrestrained growth of everything doesn’t give rise to sacrifice, merely to waste. For there to be sacrifice, things have to be yielded up to evil, not simply to misfortune” (1998, 27–28).

<sup>25</sup> In describing the importance of the initiation rites in religious life, Mircea Eliade notes in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1961): “when a child is born, he has only a physical existence; he is not yet recognized by his family nor accepted by the community. It is the rites performed immediately after birth that give the infant the status of a true ‘living person’; it is only by virtue of those rites that he is incorporated into the community of the living” (Eliade 1961, 184–85). Similarly, the passage from life to death is “not only a ‘natural phenomenon,’ but also a change of ontological and social status; the dead person must undergo certain ordeals that concern his own destiny in the afterlife, but he must also be recognized by the community of the dead and accepted among them”(ibid.). If these passages are not undertaken ritualistically—for example, the burial according to a certain custom—the person is not considered dead.

that which can no longer be returned back to the cycle of exchanges is dead (ibid.).

The notion of the symbolic is crucial for Baudrillard, but it is also a rather confusing notion, since for him the symbolic cannot be an object of theorizing in a traditional sense. It is not a concept with a positive reference; it is neither an instance, nor a category, nor a structure (204). Therefore, to give a precise description (denotation) of the symbolic is impossible. The symbolic cannot be named except by allusion and by infraction, since signification, too, speaks the language of values (sign-value, i.e. meaning) (Baudrillard 1972, 196). What increases confusion in the reader is that the term “symbolic” also has many other connotations in 20th century French thinking. In Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology, the symbolic refers in general to mythic thought in pre-modern cultures, as opposed to modern Western rationality. Baudrillard, however, clearly dissociates himself from Lévi-Strauss, whom he criticizes for having misinterpreted the symbolic as an *ideal* compensation for the contradictions on the real plane, thus reducing the symbolic to the imaginary (1976, 206n). Baudrillard stresses that the symbolic is an act of exchange, a social relationship that invalidates the real, and, consequently, the opposition between real and imaginary (204). Here Baudrillard’s use of the terms “symbolic”, “imaginary”, “real” also refers to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic apparatus, in which “symbolic” designates the realm of language (network of signifiers), and “imaginary” is the prelinguistic realm, characterized by nondifferentiation. The Lacanian “real” designates the area beyond the symbolic and the imaginary that directs the other two registers but cannot be grasped through them. The “real” (which is in a sense identical to the unconscious) cannot be defined otherwise than as a lack or a void, and encountering the real is to the subject always a treshold experience. In *L’échange symbolique*, Baudrillard’s use of the terms symbolic, imaginary and real, however, differ radically from the Lacanian use, which is undoubtedly a critical gesture in itself. He clearly distinguishes his notion of the symbolic from that of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the symbolic must not be identified with the primary processes or with the unconscious (Gane 1991a, 115)<sup>26</sup>.

Baudrillard does not accept the Lacanian “real” because it is based on the idea of the always lost object that can never be apprehended (1976, 206n). What Baudrillard wants to formulate with his “symbolic” is an order that puts an end to the real, even as absence or lack. What takes place in symbolic exchanges is the “liquidation of the real,” which is in inverse relation to the rationalist notion of reality. The entire principle of “reality” is to Baudrillard a result of conceptual discrimination, a generalization of a disjunctive code (205). The symbolic is something that puts an end to this disjunctive code and to the separate terms. In the symbolic operation the opposed terms life/death, nature/culture, body/soul lose their “reality principle” (ibid.).

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<sup>26</sup> Another influential determination for the term *symbolic* can be found in Julia Kristeva, for whom the symbolic (derived from Lacan’s work) means the sphere of communicative language as opposed to the ‘semiotic,’ the materiality of language.

Baudrillard's use of the famous Freudian concept reveals, again, a critical stance towards psychoanalysis. To Freud the reality principle means the ego's capability of distinguishing itself from the outer world. The reality principle is crucial for the ego's development, for it also directs the superego's way of repressing the libidinal impulses by reminding the ego of things that cannot or must not be done, thus enabling the human being to be a member of society. What Baudrillard aims at by re-using and subverting the concept is a severe criticism against what he calls the normativity of the concept of reality, based on the imaginary of the excluded term (207).

Despite the ambiguity between life and death inherent in Baudrillard's theory, it is evident that he is not seeking a mystical fusion of the terms; on the contrary, he is very careful in avoiding such solutions (Genosko 1994, 93). It can be said that death in Baudrillard's thinking has no meaning if it is not given and received, that is, *socialized* by the exchange (1976, 253). When death, in modern society, is deprived of this social and symbolic sphere of giving and receiving, it means that life is also reduced as something doomed to perish along with the corpse (202–204). And when life is understood in terms of value, that is, conceived as mere accumulation, its biological termination is emptied of social significance (ibid.). Baudrillard's severe criticism against the notion of natural death stems from the conviction that natural death has no social significance, for it does not involve the community, but only the individual, or the family unit.

Baudrillard can be criticized here for total negligence of the experiences of loss and mourning at the moment of death. Another thing that Baudrillard does not ponder very deeply is the question of death's social significance within small-scale collectives like family and friendship groups. In *L'échange symbolique*, Baudrillard leaves completely aside the possibility that something of death's symbolic potential could have persisted in small-scale collectives. However, in one of his later essays, "The Remainder" (1994), Baudrillard refers briefly to mourning as a collective celebration in which death is (symbolically) resolved. But these kind of views do not appear in *L'échange symbolique*. Baudrillard has been accused of anti-humanism since he openly questions the value of human life, and he has done nothing to discourage such critical response<sup>27</sup>. What I see in Baudrillard's anti-humanism is an attempt to think about the life-death antinomy apart from the question of value. In *Vital Illusion* he declares:

Life "means" nothing, not even human life; if it is precious, it's not as a value but as a form, a form that exceeds all individual and collective value. Today, life is preserved insofar as it has value, that is, insofar as it has exchange value. But if life is precious, it is because it has no exchange value—because exchanging it for some ultimate value is impossible. (2000, 28)

Baudrillard sees that although the social institution of the gift exchange has largely

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Kellner (1989). In his essay "On Nihilism" (1994), Baudrillard openly declares "I am a nihilist," but treats nihilism in a way that alters the conventional meanings of the term.



vanished in modern society, the symbolical principle of reversion hasn't. Since real symbolic exchanges with death have become more and more rare, what is left is fascination whenever the possibility, however imaginary, of such exchange appears. The collective fascination around accidents and catastrophes, argues Baudrillard, means that we are obsessed by the exiled death, and this is the specific perversion of our culture. Baudrillard sees that the accidental, violent death is something that requires a collective and symbolic response (1976, 252). What is fascinating in artificial death is that it implies technique, hence, a will. In comparison to the empty natural death, a willed death has social significance (ibid.). The collective fascination with non-natural deaths reveals to Baudrillard the repressed symbolical dimension of death. Our culture, he argues, has a phantasm of non-natural, controlled, and socially ordered violence, and the violent, accidental, aleatory death touches our imagination because it represents a break with the rationality of the natural death. Whenever death escapes this rationality it turns into a public affair (1976, 251–252). This repressed and rejected symbolical potential of death re-emerges from any lapses of the rationally ordered system. Baudrillard sees that our culture has a longing for rites efficient enough to absorb death and its energy of rupture (ibid.). And because we don't have them any more, we find strange pleasure (or a strange mixture of horror and pleasure) in unrationalizable death.

### The Symbolic, Utopia, and Literature

Baudrillard's theory of the symbolic belongs to a long series of interpretations of the primitive gift exchange. Therefore, it is not surprising that Baudrillard has been criticized, like Mauss or Lévi-Strauss before him, for being nostalgic and idealistic. With a reference to *Pour une critique*, François Lyotard argues that Baudrillard's conception of the primitive society and the symbolic exchange is nothing else than an attempt to find an imaginary, external reference for political economy. To Lyotard the symbolic exchange is also economic exchange; it is only its dramatized, theatrical form (1993, 122–123). Lyotard argues further that the whole conception of the primitive gift exchange from Mauss to Bataille is still a very Western idea, since it presupposes a subject with "a limit of his proper body and his property, and the generous transgression of this property" (ibid.). I think that Lyotard partly misses the target of his critique, since in Mauss as well as in Baudrillard the emphasis is neither on the subjects (the agents) of exchange nor on the objects exchanged but on the social relation that the exchange actualizes. A characteristic of the gift exchange is that the notions of subject and object do not apply:

[S]ouls are mixed with things, things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and

exchange are. (Mauss 1990, 20)

Mike Gane points out that the theory of symbolic exchange is, most of all, adopted as a position from which a new challenge can be made to contemporary society (1991a, 81). For Charles Levin (1981, 21), Baudrillard's theory posits a kind of "no man's land of pure otherness" based on the anthropological evidence of non-utilitarian exchange.

Baudrillard sounds like a visionary when he declares that against the discontinuity (that is, conceptual disjunction) inherent in the *topics* of Western thinking, he wants to expose the *utopia* of the symbolic, characterized by reversibility and exchange (220). But this vision proves to be fruitful when thought in relation to the alternate spaces of literature, and particularly in relation to a writer like Pynchon, whose fiction is pervaded by loss of distinctions and the "radical though plausible violation of reality" (GR, 704). What unites Pynchon's *Other Side* and Baudrillard's "utopia of the symbolic" is that in both death is not a separated realm, but something that forms a continuity with life. The symbolic is surely a utopian notion, but not in the sense commonly attached to the word: an imaginary space from which contradictions and obstacles of this world have been removed. What defines utopia as a genre and as a mode of thinking, writes Fredric Jameson, is a serious attempt to think beyond what is conceived as real:

[T]he truth value of fantasy, the epistemological *bon usage* or proper use of daydreaming as an instrument of philosophical speculation, lies precisely in a confrontation with the reality principle itself. The daydream can succeed as a narrative, not by successfully eluding or outwitting the reality principle, but rather by grappling with it, like Jacob's angel, and by triumphantly wresting from it what can precisely in our or its own time be dreamt and fantasied as such. (1994, 75)

To Jameson, every utopia is profoundly social:

The ultimate Utopian drive, however, whether it be expressed in religious or salvational terms [...] seems to have something to do with this recovery of other people; but its difficulty of conception, of formulation and representation, then at once itself comes to be represented by a forgetting—as though the Utopian also were anamnesis, the deep recovery of what is both forgotten and known since before birth. (1994, 96)

When we think of Baudrillard's influential and controversial status as a cultural critic, the genealogy of death presented in *L'échange symbolique* plays a relatively minor role in it. *Simulation, hyperreality, seduction, the consumer society, the masses*—these notions have been more prominent in the critical discussions on his work<sup>28</sup>. One of the

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<sup>28</sup> Bryan Turner (1993, 74) notes that "the attraction of Baudrillard's work probably lies in its recognition of the failures of traditional social science frameworks for cultural analysis (especially the analysis of the production and consumption of signs)." Turner

reasons for such an oblivion is Baudrillard's renunciation of symbolic exchange in some of his later works, which has led some critics (especially Kellner) to conclude that he unambiguously rejects the theory presented in *L'échange symbolique* in his later writings<sup>29</sup>. Despite Baudrillard's presumed renunciation of symbolic exchange, he returns to the theme time after time. Both Genosko and Gane consider that the object theory Baudrillard constructs in his later works is a variation or re-emergence of the symbolic exchange. In *Fatal Strategies (Les Strategies Fatales, 1983)*, for example, the reciprocity, ambivalence and challenge characteristic of symbolic exchange now emerge in the realm of objects. Unexpected events, surprises, strange coincidences—what creates symbolic reversibility and the aura of negativity in the totally programmed and rationally functioning modern society is the irony of the objects. What Baudrillard seeks in his object theory is a reversion of the axioms of traditional epistemology. He challenges the superiority of the subject in relation to the object by asking;

Perhaps unhappy with being alienated by observation, the object is fooling us?  
Perhaps it's inverting its own answers, and not only those that are solicited?  
Possibly it has no desire at all to be analyzed and observed, and taking this  
process for a challenge (which it is) it's answering with a challenge. (1990, 82)

In *Fatal Strategies* the world of objects (both material and conceptual objects) is not passive or inanimate, but something that actively follows its own logic, seducing the human subject into deciphering it. This logic is necessarily evil, since it is indifferent to human needs. Baudrillard argues against the scientific conception of an objective (dead) universe: "if one wishes to be a materialist, one should by no means attribute to matter this inertia and passivity, but instead a genie, even an evil one, able to undo all attempt to subjugate him" (84). Baudrillard appears in his later writings as a spectator, fascinated by the reversibility inherent in the order of things<sup>30</sup>.

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sees that Baudrillard's later works, especially *America* (1989) and *Cool Memories* (1990), have the quality of a "sociological fiction," and he compares *America* on the other hand to Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835), and Franz Kafka's unfinished *Amerika* (1946) (ibid.).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Gane (1991a, 139).

<sup>30</sup> In Baudrillard's later writings the notion of symbolic exchange has developed into a cosmic principle of reversion working against all systems grounded on value. While sign value exchange is the prevalent form of *all* exchanges, symbolic exchange has turned into its demonized shadow. In a world in which the positivity of value reigns, symbolic exchange appears as a principle of negativity that always haunts it. "Commercial exchange, exchange of meaning, sexual exchange—everything has to be exchangeable. With all things, we have to find their ultimate equivalence, have to find a meaning and an end for them" (2001, 14). But this attempt is always doomed to failure. "Everything which sets out to exchange itself for something runs up, in the end, against the Impossible Exchange Barrier. The most concerted, most subtle attempts to make the

Baudrillard's writings have inspired many of Pynchon's academic readers, but until recently readings have mostly concentrated on the role of simulation in Pynchon's fiction. Two critics, however, Mattessich and Berressem, have both briefly commented on Baudrillard's theory of the symbolic exchange, and its relevance in Pynchon. In *Pynchon's Poetics*, Berressem sees an analogy between Baudrillardian and Pynchonian critiques of rationality, "the identification of the *real* with the *rational* (especially in and since the Enlightenment)" (43). Berressem also sees that when Pynchon evokes in his fiction the dream of creating a totally artificial, deathless culture, his vision is comparable to that of Baudrillard (192–193). Berressem, however, considers Baudrillard's theory of the symbolic "a visionary, utopian position" (196), "the utopian dream of the subject," and a promise "of the closure of the breach between human and world, thinking and being" (197), which he sees analogous to the utopian visions that emerge in Pynchon's prose. But, since irony pervades Pynchon's writing, any utopia of genuine community, love, or realm beyond language is constantly undone. And therefore, argues Berressem, "Pynchon's implicit 'humanism' and 'nostalgia' have to be read as rhetorical positions" (193).

Mattessich in his *Lines of Flight* is not as sceptical as Berressem. In fact, although inspired by the latter's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mattessich criticises him as a representative of the all-encompassing "tragic sensibility for absence and lack" (2002, 280). Whether it be the absence of meaning, or subjectivity, or genuine human relations, or, on the political level, the impossibility of any real escape from the dominance of late capitalism—to Mattessich this "tragic sensibility" is the point at which many readings of the novel come to a halt, and "to stop short of such an inquiry is to consign the text to a kind of pessimism from which no redemption is possible" (127). Although Mattessich does not deny the possibility of a critique of capitalism from the point of view of an alternative, symbolic exchange (264n), he relies heavily on Lyotard's (and Berressem's) view of the symbolic exchange as an utopian notion. (As to the notion of symbolic exchange, it is suprising how often Lyotard is used as a tool with which to hammer Baudrillard, without questioning Lyotard's own premises.)

In his reading of episode 19 (pp. 154–167) of *Gravity's Rainbow*—the story of the short marriage of Leni and Franz Pökler—Mattessich uses the terms symbolic exchange and sign value exchange in analyzing the difference in the world-views of Franz and Leni. Both characters appear in this episode and in the whole novel as representatives of different ideological stances and different notions of time. Franz, an engineer, represents the causal logic of realism, while Leni, his wife, who in this episode turns into a political activist and leaves Franz, believes in the utopia of socialist

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world meaningful in value terms, to endow it with meaning, come to grief on this insuperable obstacle [...]. Death, illusion, absence, the negative, evil, the accursed share are everywhere, running beneath the surface of all exchanges" (6–7).

revolution. For Mattessich, Leni represents an idea of non-linear time. When Leni tells her husband how she lives at the height of a revolutionary moment that is going to change the world, she explains it in terms of temporality: “There is the moment, and its possibilities. [...] It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms” (GR, 159). Franz’s enthusiasm for the nascent rocket science also reveals a utopian dream: a dream of changing his own life by partaking in “something that [...] no one ever did before” (162). Franz’s idea of temporality is linear, he is “the cause-and-effect man” (159). Mattessich argues that Pynchon, throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is evoking these two ways of understanding time, but does not provide any solution to this dualism. On the contrary:

The two versions of time presented by Leni and Franz constitute [...] another dualistic system [...]. This does not entail a collapse of the binary pairs so much as their exaggerated display, their overt foregrounding in the narrative. (2002, 110–111)

Although I agree with Mattessich that the exaggerated display of binary pairs is the mode of Pynchon’s writing, always verging on mythical, Manichean dualism, to me his way of seeing Leni in this passage as a representative of the Baudrillardian symbolic order is dominated by a Lyotardian perspective. In his reading, Mattessich sees that “Leni’s desire (for symbolic exchange)” is “an intellectualized or analytic need for sameness, agreement, conformity” (2002, 269n), but this desire is incapable of offering any real alternative to the technoscientific rationality of Franz. Yet, none of the attributes mentioned—sameness, agreement, conformity—characterizes symbolic exchange in Baudrillard’s theory, where the symbolic always involves a relation and a pact. This pact is totally ambivalent by nature, reciprocal in good as well as in bad. As the citation from *Paroxysm* at the beginning of this chapter shows, for Baudrillard symbolic exchange is not an alternative that can be chosen at will, but a form, a logic radically different from the logic of sign value exchange, and capable of undoing it. I also maintain that the validity or explanatory force of Baudrillard’s distinction between symbolic exchange and sign value exchange cannot be thought apart from his analysis of death.

Although Mattessich’s reading of Pynchon’s fiction is theoretically inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a certain strong affinity with Baudrillard’s symbolic can be seen in Mattessich’s theorizing of the “discursive time” and “nomadic space” of nondifferentiation that constantly emerges in Pynchon’s writing. A characteristic of these otherworldly spaces in Pynchon’s work is the dissipation of the real as an external reference.

[W]here tension between form and matter, figure and ground, surface and depth, center and periphery, relaxes and gives way to a general nondistinction, to a formal, figural, or structural difference that is internal to itself and so not determinable in an empirical sense [...]. (Mattessich 2002, 54)

In Baudrillard's theory, symbolic exchange and sign value exchange are not separate systems of signification, but implicated in one another, like doubles. The symbolic is present also in coded value, but comes to the fore when the rationality of value loses its grip. Then the symbolic emerges, not as a state of general nondifferentiation but as a form that entails a subversion and ambivalence of coded differences. The determination of symbolic exchange only as an idealistic notion reflecting the utopian dreams that Pynchon ironizes in his narration prevents us from seeing the affinities between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the textual dynamic of Pynchon's writing. In the following chapters, I will look for this textual dynamic in Pynchon's fiction—moments when death, social demarcations and confrontations, and the question of value appear as interrelated.

### 3. Life & Non-Life: Ontological Cuts and Crossings in Pynchon

The material world—objects, physical phenomena, nature—and its eventual uncontrollability constitute a pervasive element in Pynchon’s prose: the earth appears as a “living critter” (GR, 590), objects are given a life of their own, and they turn into sublime beings that are far above the comprehension of men; the attributes of animate and inanimate are blurred. Living objects or personified natural phenomena are, of course, very literary beings, usually situated under the rubric of “fantasy,” which gestures to something essentially different from realism. In Pynchon’s prose, however, realistic accuracy and fantasy appear superimposed, impossible to separate. What is thematized in such a mode of writing is the distinction itself—the distinction between real and unreal, human and non-human, organic and inorganic—and thinking that proceeds by making such distinctions. In short, rationalism. As the poststructuralist discussion on the metaphysical ground of binary logic has shown, the very act of conceptual separation involves power. Although the binary form presupposes symmetry on a formal level, the binary pair always contains a hierarchy, for the one term is always defined positively while the other has a negative existence that can only be determined in relation to the positive term. Separation in itself reveals a deeper complicity between the opposing terms, and it can be seen both as a precaution against this complicity, and as an expression of the need to control it.

In the following, I will analyze Pynchon’s way of questioning the abstract binarism of life/non-life and the conceptual hierarchy inherent in it in three novels, *Mason & Dixon*, *V.*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In these novels, Pynchon constantly evokes situations in which the ontological distinction between what is living and what is not is aligned with social discrimination. The abstract binarism animate/inanimate or organic/inorganic is given a social impact by showing how the realm of the non-living is also the realm of the non-human: objectified nature, or less-than-human beings. But in Pynchon this Other Side is also something that challenges such conceptual dichotomies from within.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part functions as a kind of prologue, as in it I will approach Pynchon’s critique of rationalism and the complicity of conceptual boundaries in his fiction through the example of two “prodigies” from *Mason & Dixon*—a talking dog and a mechanical duck. Both cases evoke the interrelated questions of conceptual discrimination and value. In *Mason & Dixon*, the determination of these creatures as *non-human* equals their lower status, and yet, since they possess unqualified properties, they remain anomalies in relation to any classification. The dog can talk, and the duck exists as a generic hybrid with both human and machinic qualities. One of Pynchon’s typical twists, in questioning the

grounds of rationality, is to demonstrate it through those who allegedly cannot have access to it. Thus, for example, the prodigies in *Mason & Dixon* reflect on their own situation, and are aware that they remain in the indeterminate and negative realm of the non-human, a realm whose existence only confirms the positivity of the concept “human”, and that this hierarchy is somehow constitutive of the entire conceptual system. Pynchon’s prodigies tend to undo the presuppositions of Enlightenment thinking by appearing as the necessary shadow from which alone the positivity of humanism can emerge.

Also in *V.*, the distinction between what is living and what is not is aligned with the question of humanity and its boundaries. As Baudrillard argues in *Paroxysm*: “the idea of the human can come only from elsewhere, not from itself. The inhuman alone can bear witness to it” (1998, 27–28). In *V.*, this inhuman other, always associated with death, with the inorganic and the artificial, issues a challenge to the positivity of the living and the human. My approach to *V.* is centered around the notion of dehumanization as something that the novel both thematizes and subverts. The term *dehumanization*, although it does not appear in the novel, is much used in Pynchon studies, because it resonates with the novel’s thematic of “falling-away from what is human” (*V.*, 405). But Pynchon’s way of writing about the loss of humanity is thoroughly ambiguous, for one can also see in it a strong tendency to subvert the conceptual hierarchy inherent in notions like de-humanization.

In the third part of this chapter, Pynchon’s questioning of the life/non-life dichotomy is analyzed most straightforwardly in terms of economy. I will focus on one particular passage in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the so called “Rathenau monologue,” in which Pynchon lays out in a very intricate way the relationship between technoscientific thinking, the logic of accumulation and death. The mining of coal, the condensed waste of organic species, the objectifying of nature that results in its manipulation, the use of nature as a source of surplus value, and finally, the accumulation of waste—in the Rathenau monologue, Pynchon rewrites Western industrial history as a vicious circle permeated by death.

### The Unclassifiable: Prodigies in *Mason & Dixon*

*Mason & Dixon* is set in the Age of Enlightenment, in the latter half of the 18th century. The novel is written in a style reminiscent of the literature of the period—Henry Fielding and, more particularly, Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*—making it both “a maniacally sustained parody of English diction at the time” (Mattessich 2002, 231), and an attempt to understand, from a contemporary point of view, the age of transition called the Enlightenment. *Mason & Dixon* tells about two men, Charles Mason (1728–1786) and Jeremiah Dixon (1733–1779), who drew the Mason–Dixon -line during the years 1762–1767. Their line separated Pennsylvania from Maryland, and a century later



became the borderline of the Civil War. But *Mason & Dixon* is also a novel about the emergence of the natural sciences and of technoscientific thought. Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the astronomer and the land-surveyor, are both men of science, but in drawing and surveying the Line they have to question the inner logic and the social consequences of their “pure” scientific work of measuring and calculating. They also become aware that their rationalism is a result of conceptual discriminations, metaphysical line-drawings that separate the real and measurable world from dreams, hallucinations, visions—everything unclassifiable. Like the talking dog:

I may be præternatural, but I am not supernatural. 'Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf?  
(M&D, 22)

The dog, who introduces himself as the Learned English Dog, is a kind of curiosity in Portsmouth, where Mason and Dixon meet for the first time. The dog joins their company for a while, and—to their astonishment—enters into a conversation about its being a prodigy. Mason, anxiously, tries to define the talking dog by asking: “Have you a soul, —that is, are you a human spirit, re-incarnate as Dog?” (22). To which the dog responds by questioning the difference between men and animals. The reason for its humanlike behaviour, the dog explains, is not any miracle, but an attempt to survive among men:

Once, the only reason Men kept Dogs was for food. Noting that among men no crime was quite so abhorr'd as eating the flesh of another human, Dog quickly learn'd to act as human as possible, —and to pass this Ability on from Parents to Pups. So we know how to evoke from you, Man, one day at a time, at least enough Mercy for one day more of Life. [...] we go on as tail-wagging Scheherazades, [...] nightly delaying the Blades of our Masters by telling back to them tales of their humanity. (ibid.)

Thus the survival of dogs is tied to their role as poor imitations that both mirror human traits and maintain the superiority of men over animals. This discussion with a talking dog<sup>31</sup> reflects and ironizes the questions evoked by Enlightenment-era natural philosophy, and by writers like Julien de la Mettrie. De la Mettrie published his famous essay, *Man a Machine* (*L'Homme Machine*), in 1748, and presented far-reaching arguments, first, about the similarities of men and animals, and secondly about the machinic nature of both. The essay was written as a critique of Descartes, and particularly against the latter's body/soul dualism which lead to the argument that animals, because deprived of soul and conscience, are pure machines, and therefore inferior to men. De la Mettrie, a doctor by profession, insisted on the similarity of men and animals. By drawing attention to the mechanistic and material causes in human

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<sup>31</sup> Another dog capable of speech in *Mason & Dixon* is Snake, a ratter, that however feels so suspicious about men that it has never revealed its talent (M&D, 643–644).

behaviour he argued that, basically, humans are machines too, strikingly similar to animals in many respects. And animals strikingly similar to men:

The transition from animals to man is not violent, as true philosophers will admit. [...] a being to which nature has given such a precocious and enlightened instinct, which judges, combines, reasons, and deliberates as far as the sphere of its activity extends and permits, a being which feels attachment because of benefits received, and which leaving a master who treats it badly goes to seek a better one, a being with a structure like ours, which performs the same acts, has the same passions, the same griefs, the same pleasures, more or less intense according to the sway of the imagination and the delicacy of the nervous organization—does not such a being show clearly that it knows its faults and ours, understands good and evil, and in a word, has consciousness of what it does? [...] what is there absurd in thinking that beings, almost as perfect machines as ourselves, are, like us, made to understand and feel nature? (De la Mettrie 1912, 103, 116)

To illustrate man's machinic being, de la Mettrie uses the analogy between the human body and a watch: "the human body is a watch, a large watch constructed with such skill and ingenuity" (141)—which analogy Pynchon inverts in *Mason & Dixon* by "humanizing" timepieces. The crucial aspect that separates men from animals, argues de la Mettrie, is education and the ability to use language: "What was man before the invention of words and the knowledge of language? An animal of his own species with much less instinct than the others" (1912, 141). Only with the assistance provided by education (i.e. the learning of rational thinking) can men compensate their less effective instincts and rise above the animals. But, suprisingly, this possibility is not granted to all men:

Thus nature made us to be lower than animals or at least exhibit all the more, because of that native inferiority, the efficacy of education which alone raises us from the level of the animals and lifts us above them. But shall we grant this same distinction to the deaf and to the blind, to imbeciles, madmen, or savages, or to those who have been brought up in the woods with animals; to those who have lost their imagination through melancholia, or in short to all those animals in human form who give evidence of only the rudest instinct? No, all these, men of body but not of mind, do not deserve to be classed by themselves. (1912, 114)

To de la Mettrie, therefore, the essential characteristic that separates men from animals is rationality, which definition leads to a strict conclusion: because some men are incapable of proper reasoning, they should not be regarded as human. The paradox with de la Mettrie is that on the one hand he insists on the universal biological definition of a living organism, which makes no fundamental distinction between men and animals. From this *operational* perspective, both can be seen as similarly functioning machines. But, on the other hand, because some man-machines are incapable of perfect

functioning, de la Mettrie considers them lower than clever animals. The similarity between man and animals does not, however, mean any change in their mutual hierarchy: animals are defined, not in their own terms, but insofar as they are equivalent to men. De la Mettrie is willing to assume, for example, that under favourable conditions a clever animal—such as an ape—can be taught language, which achievement would make it: “no longer a wild man, nor a defective man, but [...] a perfect man” (103).

What we see in de la Mettrie’s thinking is not only the beginnings of a machinic conception of man, but also the logic of equivalence, and, in embryo, the social discrimination it entails. Before the era of normalization, and the emergence of the system of values, argues Baudrillard, the principles of social demarcation were different. For example, it was typical of the members of the primitive community to call themselves “humans,” while everything outside the community (gods, forefathers, strangers, animals, the earth) was considered as “something else,” and the task of the “humans” was to deal with the “others,” by exalting them and by protecting themselves from them (1976, 193). The “others,” although different from “humans” were all considered parts of the primitive *socius* (194n)<sup>32</sup>. In comparison, modernity has enlarged the word “human” into a universal concept bearing an absolute value. This value is based on strong discriminations defining everything excluded from it as valueless (193). For the primitives, who called themselves “men,” the others were “something else,” but to us, who believe in the universal concept of “human,” the others are nothing (*ibid.*). The logic of equivalence operates by reducing all ambivalence: what cannot be submitted to its code is not allowed a positive existence. Accordingly, de la Mettrie’s equation man=animal does not provide for a definition of beings that cannot be subsumed into the equivalence. De la Mettrie’s strong refusal to accept “malfunctioning” men as “humans” is a mark of this conceptual discrimination: what cannot be named “human,” or analogous to the human, is an anomaly, a non-value, the existence of which only strengthens the positivity of the code<sup>33</sup>.

Throughout his fiction, Pynchon comments on such thinking, and on how it necessarily leads to violence. The problematic in the Learned Dog’s tale has its precursors in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, perhaps most strikingly in a historical flashback that tells about the extinction of dodos in Mauritius in the 17th century. To the European

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<sup>32</sup> Unlike the tradition of anthropology, Baudrillard does not consider primitive cultures as animistic in the sense of idealizing everything as living. The point is that the primitive cultures do not privilege the dead any more than the living, because they simply do not make a distinction—that is, a hierarchy—between them (1976, 205n).

<sup>33</sup> Although we nowadays, unlike de la Mettrie, consider all humans “humans,” the universality of the concept has not weakened. Baudrillard points out that since the Enlightenment the concept “human” has, in fact, become more and more rigorous under the sign of “normal human,” which is basically a biological definition (1976, 194n).

invaders, who systematically hunt the dodoes, they clearly represent an anomaly, since they are birds incapable of flying, and “so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation” (GR, 110). The protagonist of this tale, a Dutchman named Frans van der Groov, fantasizes that if the dodoes, who in his story represent an irreducible otherness, were given the gift of speech, they could be co-opted into European values—*made human*, as it were. Which makes his fantasy an allegory of colonialization, since the dodoes could now be “saved” even if their fate is to be exterminated:

... For as much as they are creatures of God, and have the gift of rational discourse, acknowledging that only in His Word is eternal life to be found...And there are tears of happiness in the eyes of the dodoes. They are all brothers now, they and the humans who used to hunt them [...]. (GR, 111)

In *Mason & Dixon*, the well-educated Learned English Dog is clearly against the logic of equivalence, since it refuses to be defined by analogy, and since it openly reflects on its own role as an anomaly that confirms the status of men by “telling back to them tales of their humanity” (M&D, 22).

*Mason & Dixon* also reflects on another crucial point in de la Mettrie’s thinking, namely, the machinic determination of men and animals. This happens when Vaucanson’s famous mechanical Duck enters the narrative. Jacques de Vaucanson (1709–1782) was a French mechanist and inventor, who became famous in the mid-18th century for his automata—a mechanical flute player, a duck that could swim, eat and digest, and a self-operating loom for weaving silk. In *Mason & Dixon*, Vaucanson’s Duck has broken away from its historical and geographical particularity, and becomes a figure with which Pynchon can again evoke the notion of a sublime object, and parody the transcendental Rocket figure from *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Or what else to think of a mechanical duck that is not only a perfect imitation of an animal, but can also speak, and fly, not like a real duck, but at supersonic speed, rendering it invisible to human eyes! The Duck appears first in a story about a French chef, Armand Allègre, who claims that the Vaucanson’s famous Duck has followed him to America because it is somehow infatuated with him. In a lengthy and hilarious passage (pp. 371–381) Allègre tells to a bunch of listeners his “Iliad of Inconvenience” (370) caused by the mad Duck. It begins in France when Vaucanson supplies the Duck with genitals in order “to repeat for Sex and Reproduction, the Miracles he’s already achiev’d for digestion and Excretion” (373). This addition results in a mysterious metamorphosis that changes the Duck (who now is a female) from an inanimate object into a free agent, with a life of its own:

“[T]hat final superaddition of erotick Machinery may somehow have nudg’d the Duck across some Threshold of self-Intricacy, setting off this Explosion of Change, from Inertia toward *Independence, and Power*. Isn’t it like an old Tale? Has an Automatick Duck, like the Sleeping Beauty, been brought to life by the kiss of...*l’Amour*?”

“Oo-la-la,” comes a voice from the corner, “and toot ma flute.”  
 “Frenchies, –marvelous i’n’t it,” comments another, “ever at it, night and day”.  
 (373)

Of course, Allègre’s listeners do not at first believe in the existence of an invisible duck. But things change when the land-surveying party becomes the object of sudden unexpected and invisible attacks from the sky, followed by the sound of quacking. Towards the end of the novel, the Duck occasionally reduces its velocity (“over seven hundred miles per hour”) and becomes visible. It visits the surveyors, who admire its technical perfection, and follow its flying in much the same way as people watched a rocket’s trajectory in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

She ascends, one evening after the Mess, and as the Party, with their tents, all go rolling away into the Shadow, they in their Turn watch her, pois’d above the last lid Meridian, recede over the Horizon and vanish. (M&D, 669)

The Duck, just like the Rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, represents Pynchon’s way of fusing the non-natural with the preternatural, or, in other words, the artificial with the sublime. While mechanistic views of men and animals rely on the “naturalness” of their functioning, Pynchon instead gives his machines a *supernatural* aura. A sublime machine, like the Duck, is both animate and inanimate, and it openly questions the basis for such distinctions. The anomalous Duck appears in a historical moment when natural sciences and pathological anatomy in particular are developing radically, and through its figure Pynchon shows the necessary violence of analytic perception. One of the reasons why the mechanical Duck followed Allègre to America was to escape the role of an exhibit item:

The true humiliation came at the end of each Exhibition, when Vaucanson actually open’d me up, and show’d to anyone who wish’d to stare, any *Bas-mondain*, the intricate Web within of Wheels, levers, and wires, unto the last tiny piece of Linkage, nay, the very falling Plummet that gave me Life, [...] They pointed, titter’d, sketch’d exquisitely in the air, —Indignity absolute. He would never allow anyone the least suspicion that I might after all be real. Inside me lay Truth Mechanical, —outside was but clever impersonation. I was that much his Creature, that he own’d the right to deny my soul. (M&D, 668)

To the reader, much of this mechanical Duck’s woe would seem absurd, were it not a re-emergence—and, a self-parody—of a problematic that Pynchon already elaborated in his first novel, *V*. In *V*, Pynchon introduced us to creatures in which human and machinic qualities are fused, and the conceptual discrimination between what is living and what is not was questioned for the first time.

“But What’s a Human, After All?” Dehumanization and *V*.

If I say, “The world is man,” I shall always gain absolution; while if I say, “Things are things and man is only man,” I am immediately charged with a crime against humanity. (Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy”)

A theme that turns out to be a persistent one in *V.*, and in the novels following it, begins somewhat abruptly. In the third chapter (the Cairo episode), two agents, Porpentine and Bongo-Shaftsbury, are on a railway journey from Alexandria to Cairo in 1898. They discuss the moral principles spies are not allowed to have while on duty. Bongo-Shaftsbury, the younger one, declares that the people he and Porpentine deal with are not to be afforded a humanity by “loving, hating, even showing some absent-minded sympathy” (V, 81). Porpentine, a representative of what seems to be an old-fashioned moral code, is struck by such claims, and he asks the inevitable, puzzling question that echoes throughout the novel: “what is humanity?” Bongo-Shaftsbury’s ominous answer is: “you ask the obvious, ha, ha. Humanity is something to destroy” (ibid.).

Just previously, Bongo-Shaftsbury has proudly shown to a young girl, Mildred, the electric wires sewn into the skin of his arm and called himself an “electro-mechanical doll” (80). The purpose these wires serve is unclear, but when Bongo-Shaftsbury claims that they run straight into his brain, he suddenly becomes an uncanny figure, with an electric switch controlling his mind and behaviour. The “destruction of humanity” is not only metaphorical, but suddenly also literal: Bongo-Shaftsbury seems to belong to a new kind of human race that will gradually displace the preceding ones. But, in a manner typical of Pynchon, the sinister prophecies manifested in Bongo-Shaftsbury’s body and discourse are counterpointed by the ponderings of Waldetar, the conductor, who hears the discussion of the spies through the compartment door. Besides being a conductor, Waldetar is a self-made philosopher of a kind of transcendental materialism, according to which the inanimate environment is always stronger than the human consciousness, and works in ways that humans cannot understand<sup>34</sup>. Convinced that the “soul cannot commend no-soul” (V, 78), Waldetar has almost religious respect for the inanimate forces, such as cataclysms, storms, and earthquakes, that hold people at their mercy. Waldetar himself is at the mercy of the train, which has not been on

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<sup>34</sup> The seemingly contradictory term “transcendental materialism” was first used by John Tyndall, a 19th century natural philosopher. Tyndall’s view was that matter, the ultimate constituent particles of nature, is not a dead thing, but something endowed with a source of vital power reducible to the attractive and repulsive powers of the atoms. This power determines the form of the objects in the physical world, be they organic or inorganic, and the human intellect can never entirely comprehend its workings. (Stephen S. Kim, *John Tyndall’s Transcendental Materialism and the Conflict Between Religion and Science in Victorian England*. Lewinston: Mellen University Press, 1996.)

schedule for seven years. Schedules are for humans, but the train “ran on a different clock—its own, which no human could read” (V, 77).

This relatively short passage depicts on a miniature scale the co-existent and yet divergent ways of articulating the relationship between the human and the non-human, which, as it turns out, is a theme to be varied throughout Pynchon’s work. In a manner emblematic of the whole novel, the dialogue between Porpentine and Bongo-Shaftsbury contains both the nostalgic longing for “humanity” as something irrevocably lost, and the medical/technological urge to move beyond the deficiencies of human life—sickness, degradation and finally, death—by enhancing the human body with artificial supplements<sup>35</sup>. And finally, not actually entering into the discussion but silently questioning its premises, there is Waldetar and his conception of the inanimate as a transcendental force, something beyond men, uncontrollable and unrationalizable. Like the three men on a train, these different ways of understanding the relationship between human and non-human are placed within the same textual machinery. The discussion does not conclude, and neither does the profound ambiguity between these poles.

When dealing with the human/non-human dichotomy in Pynchon’s fiction, and in *V.* in particular, it seems that over the years Bongo-Shaftsbury’s declaration of the “destruction of humanity” has gotten most of the critics’ attention. In the critical responses to *V.*, “dehumanization” has been a frequently used expression for describing Pynchon’s “cultural pessimism,” or his “entropic vision,” i.e. the writer’s critical concern with the mechanization of modern man and of modern society, and the destructive powers inherent in this process. Pynchon does not use the term dehumanization in *V.*, but it appears twice in his short story “Entropy” (1961), in a conversation between Meatball Mulligan and Saul. Saul’s wife Miriam has left him after a quarrel about communication theory, infuriated by Saul’s remark that human behaviour can be seen as a program fed into a computer. Meatball tries to excuse Miriam’s anger:

“Maybe she thought you were acting like a cold, dehumanized amoral scientist type.”

“My god,” Saul flung up an arm. “Dehumanized. How much more human can I get? I worry, Meatball, I do”. (SL, 90)

Although dehumanization as a label does not exactly fit Saul, the term has, like the famous title of the story, had a life of its own in the critical discussions on Pynchon. The strange affinity between humans and machines is an issue that comes up most often in

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<sup>35</sup> Bongo-Shaftsbury, however, is not the first electro-mechanical doll in the novel. A similar electronic switch is described in the second chapter, which is set in 1955 in New York. Fergus Mixolydian, an experimental artist and a TV addict has turned himself into a kind of living remote control by fusing himself with his TV set. But what seems only like Fergus Mixolydian’s bizarre experiment becomes more threatening when connected to Bongo-Shaftsbury’s prophecy in the third chapter.

*Gravity's Rainbow*, but *V.* was the novel that started this discussion. Interestingly, many otherwise radically divergent critical approaches to the novel are somewhat similar in their treatment of dehumanization and related issues in the novel. Alice Jardine, for example, characterizes the picture *V.* gives of the 20th century as “an uncanny falling away from the human, a progressive dehumanizing tendency, as appalling and frightening as it is beyond human control” (1985, 250). Edward Mendelson has stated that *V.* is simply “the overgrown elaboration of a single idea”—namely, “the decline of the animate into the inanimate” (Mendelson qtd. in Tanner 1982, 40). To Theodore Kharpertian “the inanimate in *V.* represents a historical pattern of the nonhuman’s intrusion into and possible absorption of the animate,” which is “an overarching Pynchon theme” (1990, 63). Tony Tanner has argued that the central theme in *V.* is the way in which 20th century man is devoted to the destruction of all living things. For Tanner dehumanization is something that dominates the relations between characters. The characters see themselves and others as inanimate objects and, therefore, fail to see each other as real individuals, leading to exploitation and fetishism (1971, 158–159).

But—to use Pynchon’s own rhetoric—what is dehumanization, anyway?<sup>36</sup> The quotations above show at least two things. First, that dehumanization is something unambiguously negative, and second, dehumanization not only indicates the fatal and irrevocable crossing of the boundary between human and non-human: it is also intertwined with such oppositions as real/unreal and living/dead. The question of humanity inherent in de-humanization is also the question of what is real, living, and good—all in danger of disappearing along with humanity<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> What I have in mind here is Pynchon’s hilarious rhetorical twist in the essay “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?” (Pynchon 1984). After using the word “luddite” four times in the introductory part of the essay without explanation, as if using a term widely known among his readers, Pynchon suddenly breaks his presentation by asking: “and come to think of it, what is a Luddite, anyway?” The irony is, of course, directed at people who use words that sound “hip” or “cool” without knowing exactly what they mean—just like the writer did in his youth (see Pynchon’s “Introduction” in *Slow Learner*). Pynchon’s essay on Luddism deals with the relationship between humans and machines, and he defines Luddism as a love/hate feeling about machines rather than simple technophobia. The historical Luddism’s resentment against machines, Pynchon points out, stemmed not from an irrational horror, but from the political and economical consequences of the industrial revolution: the concentration of capital and the replacement of human work by machines.

<sup>37</sup> The term “dehumanization” does not always have negative connotations in critical discourse. José Ortega Y Gasset, for example, argues that modern art is essentially “dehumanizing,” because in order to achieve “pure art,” it tends to dismiss realistic mimesis and any resemblance to the “human,” that is, ordinary experience. “For the modern artist, aesthetic pleasure derives from such a triumph over human matter.” (Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968: 23.) In this regard, Pynchon is a dehumanizing artist *par excellence*.



“Dehumanization” thus indicates that Pynchon’s characters are somehow “less human,” both literally and metaphorically. In *V.*, the scale of artificiality within the human body extends from prostheses and other artificial body parts to humanlike inanimate figures (mannequins, automata, crash test dummies). The human body is never a mere biological given, but something that articulates the conceptual differences between living/dead, real/artificial, subject/object, male/female, and human/non-human. The clearest emblem of this loss of humanity caused by the mechanization of the human body is, of course, “V.,” the woman of Stencil’s fantasies. From one story to another, she (or the women who represent her) undergoes a gradual transformation from a flesh and blood woman to a mock-human whose body is composed mostly of mechanical parts.

There is also a thematic link between the increased use of prostheses, and inhumanity, the lack of all human traits in behaviour—this means especially emotions, compassion, and sympathy. Several scenes in *V.* show the human subject turned into an object of operational, inhuman violence. Fundamentally, it makes no difference whether this violence takes place during a medical operation (Esther’s nose job), or systematic genocide (the massacre of the Hereros in South-West Africa in “Mondaugen’s story”). The novel depicts this rise in inhumanity as an irrevocable process in the culture itself. The timespan between the historical episodes and the present of the narration is nearly 60 years (from 1898 to 1957), and it is described as a gloomy succession of wars, uprisings, revolutions, and all kinds of minor conflicts. Parallel to the growing mechanization of large-scale killing the woman presented as “V.” turns gradually from a human being into a machine. “V.” is always somehow involved in this growing violence, but the question remains open, as to whether “V.” should be seen as a symbol of the violent and destructive 20th century, or its victim, something that modern life has destroyed<sup>38</sup>.

Dehumanization as the tragic fate of humanity is one possible way of seeing the theme in *V.*, easily supported by textual evidence, if one passes over the fact that Pynchon is a master of ideological polyphony, and in his fiction every thematic argument sooner or later meets its counter-arguments. Dehumanization, the “falling-away from what is human” is undisputably an ethical tendency in *V.*, but there seems to be more to it than the rhetoric of “decline” and “fall” implies. Which is not to say that the critical discussion on dehumanization in Pynchon has lead us astray. What I am arguing here is that terms like dehumanization imply a pretextual, cultural conception of humanity as something with an absolutely positive value and, inversely, the negativity or non-value of anything non-human. This non-human negativity is the place of death,

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Chambers, for example, sees “V.” clearly as a victim, matriarchal nature wounded and destroyed by patriarchal logic and technology, though she has to admit that Pynchon certainly was not writing a radical feminist polemic back in 1963 (1992, 69).

inhumanity, inanimate objects, artificiality, beings that are “against nature,” whereas on the positive side the concept “human” is linked with the ideas of living, natural, true, good, original, and so on. In his fiction, Pynchon blurs these culturally absolute boundaries in a way that makes any simple moral positioning very difficult, and radically problematizes the contingent ways of understanding and defining the “human” as something cut off from the rest of the world, be it organic or inorganic.

A great deal of this blurring in *V.* is created by wordplay in which the words *animate* and *inanimate* are circulated in the novel. The confusing sameness inherent in this binary pair is probably the effect Pynchon had in mind, since he often places these words in close connection with each other in the text. The reader cannot avoid noticing the countless recurrence of these words: “V.” as “an inanimate object of desire” (411), the seaman Benny Profane as an “animate yo-yo” (217), who cannot live in peace with “inanimate objects” (37); the tourists wandering in a landscape of “inanimate monuments and buildings, near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides” (408), and so on. And like other recurrent motifs in the novel, the words *animate* and *inanimate* are given to the reader as over-emphasized clues for interpretation. Tony Tanner has, however, pointed out that, even if these concepts play a prominent role in the novel (the word *inanimate* can, for instance, occur five times on one page), they may not pose a thematic riddle after all: “if indeed it is not so over-visible and over-stressed that perhaps something else is going on” (1982, 40). This “something else,” as I intend to show here, is the ironic reversion of the premises upon which terms like “dehumanization” are based. Consequently, the cut that separates the animate from the inanimate, or the human from the non human, does not cease to exist, but turns out to be movable.

This ambiguity, which both affirms the difference between the animate and the inanimate and tends to abolish it, is comparable to other ambiguities in Pynchon’s fiction: for example, the ending of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which juxtaposes the approaching death (of the theatre audience, of the civilization, of the reader, of the novel itself) and the animistic universe, in which there is a “face in ev’ry mountainside / And a Soul in ev’ry stone...” (GR, 760). The paradoxical devotion to death, and death’s liquidation characterizes the tribes of the Hereros in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the Yurok Indians in *Vineland*, to whom the dead are as real as the living. The characters in *Mason & Dixon* ponder their own mortality and feel that their physical environment is a sentient, living being. In Pynchon’s fiction, there is always continuity between the human and the non-human, which culminates in those great epiphanic moments, when the giving up of the notions of subject and object, or the living and the dead, grounds the world anew:

One of those moments Hindoos and Chinamen are ever said to be having,  
entire loss of Self, perfect union with All, sort of thing. Strange Lights, Fires,  
Voices indecipherable —(M&D, 10).

Although these moments can only be hallucinated, their recurrence in Pynchon's fiction questions the self-evident ideas of uniqueness and sovereignty inherent in the notion of humanity.

In the following, I will focus on the relationship between the human and the non-human in *V*, and the ways in which Pynchon both affirms and questions the dehumanization theme. First, the animate/inanimate relationship is conceived as a strange alliance within the human body. The connection between the aesthetics of the human body worked by technology is always imminent in Pynchon's work, and it has been a topic widely discussed in Pynchon criticism<sup>39</sup>. In *V*, the mechanization of the human body is often inseparable from the character's position as an erotic and/or epistemological object, and, therefore, it has to be understood in relation to the strategies of power and knowledge. Second, the non-human is analyzed in terms of transcendental force. As Berressem and many others have pointed out, in Pynchon's fiction there is always the in-human, the "enigmatic other," that the characters and the reader have to face—a sovereign object that no longer can be humanized (Berressem 1993, 46). Pynchon's characters are often haunted by their need to encounter the limits of their knowledge and language, and to them dehumanization means a dream of losing the borders of one's identity and becoming "finally subject to the laws of physics" (*V*, 321).

With these approaches I intend to show that the transformation from the human to the non-human and from the animate to the inanimate is in *V*. not only the irreversible, entropic "fall" towards death. The relationship between these opposite poles is in Pynchon's fiction always characterized by reversibility: the oppositions can, momentarily, change into one another. The living and the dead circulate like the words animate and inanimate throughout the novel, creating "a transvestism, not between sexes but between quick and dead" (*V*, 410). This reversibility compels the reader to look at the dehumanization theme from another angle: not as mere resignation, but as a means of cultural criticism.

### The In-animate and the Boundaries of the Body

As the expression suggests, the in-animate is not only an external realm in relation to the animate, but also something that can exist *within* the animate. The first and most imminent locus for such interaction in *V*. is the human body. This problematic emerges already in the first pages of the novel in Profane's dream:

Somehow it was all tied up with a story he's heard once, about a boy born with a golden screw where his navel should have been. For twenty years he consults

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, McHoul and Wills (1990) and Berressem (1993).

doctors and specialists all over the world, trying to get rid of this screw, and having no success. Finally, in Haiti, he runs into a voodoo doctor who gives him a foul-smelling potion. He drinks it, goes to sleep and has a dream. In this dream he finds himself on a street, lit by green lamps. Following the witchman's instructions, he takes two rights and a left from his point of origin, finds a tree growing by the seventh street light, hung over with colored balloons. On the fourth limb from the top there is a red balloon, he breaks it and inside is a screwdriver with a yellow plastic handle. With the screwdriver he removes the screw from his stomach, and as soon as this happens he wakes from the dream. It is morning. He looks down toward his navel, the screw is gone. Twenty years' curse is lifted at last. Delirious with joy, he leaps up out of bed, and his ass falls off. (V, 39–40)

Mattessich sees that this comic and anecdotal story underscores the mutuality of animate and inanimate forces in the construction of subjectivity (2002, 36). To him the golden screw represents the “malady” of culture that the subject cannot abide in himself: in order to find a “natural” and innocently “human” body, a body without a screw, the boy looks for help from various doctors, that is, interpretive discourses (ibid.). The boy is thus caught in a double bind: he tries to escape his malady and find another way of being, but at the end of the story comes the realization that the malady is necessary for his constitution as a subject (ibid.).

The coexistence of the animate and the inanimate within the human body does not always involve prostheses or other artificial supplements. It can be found, for example, in a tooth: “the pulp is soft and laced with little blood vessels and nerves. The enamel, mostly calcium, is inanimate” (V, 153). Even the most natural process generating new life within the human body—pregnancy—is from the start endowed with non-human elements. The “mystery about motherhood” argues the poet Fausto Majstral in *V*.

[I]s only a way of compensating for an inability to live with the truth. Truth being that they [mothers] do not understand what is going on inside them; that it is a mechanical and alien growth which at some point acquires a soul. They are possessed. Or: the same forces which dictate the bomb's trajectory, the deaths of stars, the wind and the waterspout have focussed somewhere inside the pelvic frontiers without their consent, to generate one more mighty accident. It frightens them to death. It would frighten anyone. (322)

Being possessed by unknown forces is a recurrent theme in Pynchon's fiction, extending from homicidal Windigo psychosis in “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” to Tyrone Slothrop's conditioning to Imipolex G polymer in *Gravity's Rainbow*. And although this possession is always more or less frightening—an alien, non-human thing working within the individual—one cannot fail to recognize that it often resembles religious submission. Esther's experience of the nauseous nose operation, for example, is a mixture of threat and voluntary submission: she sees herself both as the plastic surgeon Schoenmaker's helpless victim, and as a pure object under operation, somehow

liberated from being human:

It was almost a mystic experience. What religion is it—one of the Eastern ones—where the highest condition we can attain is that of an object—a rock. It was like that; I felt myself drifting down, this delicious Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: only Being... (V, 106)

But the fantasy of reaching something transcendental by identifying with the inanimate is not only liberating. Esther's religious experience of self-dispossession does not last long: very soon she realizes that Schoenmaker, who after the nose job becomes Esther's lover, only wants to make her an object of his own desire by reshaping her body.

“Esther, I want to give. I want to do things for you. If I can bring out the beautiful girl inside you, the idea of Esther, as I have done already with your face...” [...]

“It isn't me you love,” she kept saying. “You want to change me into something I'm not.”

In return he could only argue a kind of Platonism at her. Did she want him so shallow he should only love her body? It was her soul he loved. What was the matter with her, didn't every girl want a man to love the soul, the true them? Sure they did. Well, what is the soul. It is the idea of the body, the abstraction behind the reality: what Esther really was, shown to the senses with certain imperfections there in the bone and tissue. Schoenmaker could bring out the true, perfect Esther which dwelled inside the imperfect one. Her soul would be there on the outside, radiant, unutterably beautiful. (V, 294–297)

Schoenmaker's view of the body/soul –relation is, however, a peculiar one. In Platonism the ideal is beyond the reach of the senses. The soul or the essence of a being cannot ever come into sight. However, Schoenmaker thinks that the perfect body *is* the soul itself and not only its reflection. By splitting his beloved's body, Schoenmaker can reach the universal “truth” of her essence. Esther refuses Schoenmaker's proposals, which doesn't mean that she cannot herself do violence to her own body. By having an abortion later on in the novel, she protects herself from another bodily transformation, which only shows that she has, in a way, given in to Schoenmaker's and other men's desires regarding her body.

Schoenmaker's twisted Platonism, his urge to bring out the ideal behind the bodily appearances by using his scalpel represents what Leonard Orr calls “the aesthetics of mechanical transcendence” in Pynchon's fiction: the adding of inanimate material to the human body in order to achieve perfection (1995, 131). Schoenmaker's desire to bring out things that should remain hidden also represents the epistemological/technical urge towards hypervisibility that Baudrillard names obscene. Baudrillard's *obscene* does not merely designate the over-sexualization of the human body; it is a principle of turning all structures inside out leading eventually to their banalization. The obscene means the absolute proximity to the thing seen, which

abolishes the *scene*, that is, the distance necessary for signification. The obscene is the hypervisibility of what has changed into an empty form—the simulation of reality on the TV screen which is more real than the real, or the medicalized and sexualized model of the human body which is truer than the true (1990, 50–70). Schoenmaker realizes this principle when he promises Esther that after the required operations “her soul would be there on the outside, radiant, unutterably beautiful.” To Esther this promise only means that she no longer has a “soul”: she will turn into a model made by the surgeon.

Besides Esther, Bongo-Shaftsbury and Fergus Mixolydian, there are many other characters in *V.* who need a plastic surgeon. For example, pilot Evan Godolphin, whose face is rebuilt with inert substances, or the seriously malformed people in Schoenmaker’s office who wait to be operated upon. But what gives to the inanimate/animate alliance its strangest and most ominous resonance is the transformation of lady “V.” Her character (and I call her a character here just for the sake of convenience) represents the extreme possibility of adding inanimate material into the human body, which forces the reader to ask whether she is a human being at all. To what extent can her body still be considered human, if it contains more artificial parts than human flesh? And, since artifice always indicates the presence of a maker, an artist, who has made this Frankensteinian monster of a female gender? She herself, or someone else? And for what purpose?

At first it seems that things were not so bad with her to start with. Victoria Wren, in chapters three (Cairo 1898) and seven (Florence 1899), is still a very traditional character. But something happens along the way, and in the fourteenth chapter where Stencil speculates about the possibility that a mysterious woman in Paris in 1913 could, in fact, be middle-aged Victoria, the idea of transformation is made explicit. Stencil (or the third person narrator) imagines how the woman would look in 1956, in the chronological present of the novel, at the age of seventy-six. She would have preserved her appearance through the years, because the destroyed tissues of the body and the inner organs would have been replaced by artificial materials, to the extent that she would resemble more a machine than a human being:

[S]kin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. Solenoid relays would be her ganglia, servo-actuators move her flawless nylon limbs, hydraulic fluid be sent by a platinum hearth-pump through butyrate veins and arteries. (V, 411)

This fantasy of an ageless monster woman stems from Stencil’s conviction that the woman his father knew as Victoria Wren has been involved with something that has fatally changed her:

If she were Victoria Wren, even Stencil couldn’t remain all unstirred by the ironic failure her life was moving toward [...] that Victoria was being gradually

replaced by V; something entirely different, for which the young century had as yet no name. (V, 410)

“V.” is thus not a person, but “something entirely different” that has intruded into a human being, replacing what had been in her. “V.” could perhaps be best characterized as nothing but this *replacement* itself—not an entity, but a gesture, an act of exchange, recognized in the text when it has already happened. Everything in and around “V.”—in her identity, body, history and her discourse—is made of replaced and rearranged parts to resemble something more original that was never there in the first place, and this realization meets the reader far sooner than the protagonist Stencil. “V.’s” dehumanization, her transformation from a “living” character to an inanimate object-construction is actually a threefold process: it consists of her mechanization through the extended use of prostheses, her fetishization through the narrative emphasis on her bodily appearances, and, finally, her textualization, i.e. her transformation from a character to a purely discursive construction. In all these cases the inanimate takes over the animate, the false takes over the true and the artifice takes over the real thing. But “V.’s” transformation is not something that just happens: it is inseparable from the protagonist Stencil’s erotic and epistemological desire for her.

First, there is the bodily fragmentation. Victoria Wren, Veronica Manganese, Vera Meroving—the closer Stencil gets to these women the more they start falling to pieces. Clothes, accessories, hairdo, make-up, jewellery, and behind them, prostheses and plastic surgery. Even their facial expressions, as one observer in the novel suggests, are unreal. And when the identity of “V.” has become multiple and shattered, her body, the last material instance that can still be conceived of as her own, is likewise a fragile composition of heterogeneous parts. Its fragility is suggested by the shocking death scene of one of her incarnations, the Bad Priest. The Priest is a mysterious figure in Valletta in 1942. Valletta is besieged by the Germans, whose bombs fall on the city day after day. One day, after one bombing, the children, the Priest’s disciples, find him on the street mortally wounded, and find out that his cloak actually shrouds a woman. They also notice that this woman has a wig, artificial limbs, a glass eye, and they begin to pull her apart. The Priest turns out to be not a human being, but a monstrous assemblage of human flesh and artificial body parts. A Maltese poet, Fausto, who witnesses this scene, has a violent fantasy about the dying woman being disassembled into the smallest parts:

I wondered if the disassembly of the Bad Priest might not go on, and on, into evening. Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs be peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococo heart. (V, 343)

Fausto’s and the childrens’ urge to know what the woman is about leads to tearing her apart. By seeing her purely as an object, they can ignore her cries (“so unlike human or even animal”) and her suffering. (The death of the Bad Priest is also one of the many

sacrificial scenes in the novel, which thematic will be analyzed more closely in chapter 7.)

Fausto's reaction to the disassembly of the Priest mixes horror and enchantment, for the violently detached parts are exquisite. Similarly, on the textual plane, "V.'s" mechanization is intertwined with her fetishization. If the mysterious female figures—Victoria Wren, Veronica Manganese, Vera Meroving, and their nymphette-like companions Hedvig Vogelsang and Mélanie l'Heuremaudit—incarnate "V.", then in order to know "V." one has to know what kind of women they are. But, covered by all kinds of veils, they seem to escape investigation. These women have dashing looks but nobody can properly look at them—they are, like the mysterious lady in Paris in 1913, women hidden behind their accessories:

She [...] wore tonight a Poiret-inspired evening dress of crepe Georgette the color of a Negro's head, beaded all over, covered with a cerise tunic which was drawn in under her breasts, Empire style. A harem veil covered the lower part of her face and fastened behind to a tiny hat riotous with the plumage of equatorial birds. Fan with amber stick, ostrich feathers, silk tassel. Sand-coloured stockings, clocked exquisitely on the calf. Two brilliant-studded tortoise-shell pins through her hair; silver mesh bag, high-buttoned kid shoes with patent leather at the toe and French heel. (V, 399–400)

These women embody Joan Rivière's argument about womanliness, according to which "womanliness [...] could be assumed and worn as a mask," because its essential function is to hide (both castration and the possession of "masculine" properties, such as ability) (1986, 38). Therefore, argues Rivière, there is no such thing as a "genuine womanliness" in comparison with this masquerade: "whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (*ibid.*). There is, however, another aspect to this masquerade, which goes beyond the veiling/unveiling of the castration inherent in the Freudian conception of fetishism. In his psychoanalytic approach to Pynchon, Berressem refers to Lacan's argument that, in order to gain the phallus she initially lacks, the woman can turn her own body into a phallus, a gesture facilitated by the complementary male desire. This is the "phallic economy" of psychoanalysis, in which "both men, who have the phallus but fear its lack, and women, who lack it, desire (to be) the phallus" (1993, 60). Berressem argues that with the inanimate material that covers her body, woman can enter and, more importantly, change the fetishistic game. The single fetish has turned into a collection of various materials, that all have the same function: "the missing phallus is not equated with a single fetish (her shoe, her underwear) but is spread out over her entire body as phallic object" (*ibid.*, 59–60).

The female body, covered with inanimate material that functions as a phallic substitute, has turned into a fetish-repertoire, and in this process the fear of castration is in a constant state of deferral and, finally, loses its importance. The body proper, which Freudian psychoanalysis considers as the referent beneath the bodily signs, has again turned into another surface, another sign. This over-fetishization means that the crucial



difference between a fetish and a “real thing” no longer exists. In *V.*, this disappearance of the real body becomes most evident in Mélanie l’Heuremaudit’s “case”: Mélanie has completely internalized other peoples’ desires and changed into an erotic object—also to herself. Mélanie admires above all her own mirror reflection, which splits her character into two images that desire each other. Mélanie has a love affair with an elderly lady named V., whose desire for her makes her yet again a living fetish in her entirety. In the love affair between Mélanie and “V.” Pynchon has described a relationship between two objects, which is, ironically, short but one of the happiest in the whole novel.

The detailed and therefore fetishized descriptions of the prominent female characters<sup>40</sup> emphasize that “V.” is a sign-construction. A literary character is always a construction made of signs, but since “V.” is nothing but a collection of stories gathered and remodelled by Stencil, she/it is decidedly an empty sign, a sign with no value. She is the writing about herself, and the novel bearing the same name appears as a gigantic fragmented body that shares the fate of the bodies it tells about. “V.’s” textualization means that she becomes inseparable from the interpretative discourses used by Stencil (and, most importantly, by the sophisticated reader) to explain her, and in the novel this problematic is openly reflected:

The smallest realization ...that she fitted into a larger scheme leading eventually to her personal destruction and she might have shied off, come to establish eventually so many controls over herself that she became—to Freudian, behaviorist, man of religion, no matter—a purely determined organism, an automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh. Or by contrast, might have reacted against the above, which we have come to call Puritan, by journeying even deeper into a fetish-country until she became entirely and in reality [...] an inanimate object of desire. (V, 411)

“V.’s” lot is, metaphorically, the same as the dismembered Priest’s: like any human

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<sup>40</sup> The recurrent analogy the novel creates between knowing/possessing a female body and epistemological problems continues a long tradition in Western literature. In *Body Work* (1993) Peter Brooks argues that the body in modern narrative often comes to represent for the protagonist the ultimate good, since it appears to hold within itself the key to satisfaction, power, and meaning. And on the plane of reading, the desire for the knowledge of this body and its secrets becomes, for the reader, the desire to master the text’s symbolic system. But as a counterforce to this desire the narrative is constantly arrested by something that surrounds the body, conceals it from sight: descriptions of bodily supplements, accessories, masks, and so on. The narration is thus fixed, fetishistically, not on the “thing itself,” but on the partial objects taken away from it. If literary representation is understood as a gaze, it constantly fails to *see* its object, because something paradoxical is in the structure of narrative desire itself. This paradox, is, according to Brooks, that of the fetishist: the terrible sight of non-being (castration) is always deferred in the course of description. This is the reason why the represented bodies can be known only partially and metonymically (1993, 145-146).

being under scientific scrutiny she turns into a purely determined organism—a human machine, who does not need to be respected. “V.’s” voluntary turning into an “inanimate object of desire” is thus, paradoxically, the only way to resist interpretation, labelling, and the reader’s control over her. When she can no longer be conceived as human, she can retain her integrity and her secret.

As textualized, “V.” belongs to the inanimate. But, although “V.” in Stencil’s speculations goes through a gradual transformation towards inanimateness and bodily dispersion, at the early stages of his quest “V.” represented new life to him, activity and vividness that were formerly beyond reach. “V.” gives Stencil a “sense of animateness” which he does not want to give up: “To sustain it he had to hunt V; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness?” (V, 55). Death haunts Stencil at both the beginning and the end of his search, and continuing his absurd project is his way to avoid the inevitable.

The impossibility of Stencil’s search derives from the ambiguous nature of his (and the reader’s) desire, which, in order to grasp its object, changes the animate into the inanimate. And Stencil seems to be aware of this. After a conversation with Fausto Majistral, Stencil, for the first time, becomes doubtful about his entire mission. Stencil’s thoughts at the moment of fatal suspicion show him that he possesses only piles of inert matter, “the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects” (V, 445). In trying to find something real, the seeker gathers only piles of inanimate material. Eventually, as Baudrillard argues, the real is nothing more than “the stockpiling of dead matter, dead bodies, and dead language” (1979, 71).

### Non-Human and the Other Side

Although Berressem partakes in the jeremiad of Pynchon’s “dark vision of modern society,” caused by the “inanimate’s growing invasion into the animate,” he also points out that Pynchon’s critique is also directed at the humanistic illusions concerning the status of the subject (1993, 57). Pynchon’s characters indeed seem to be aware, at least momentarily, of the vast realm of the non-human that resists their rationalization. This realm includes the physical environment, objects and machines, and, more generally, forces more or less beyond human control: history, economy, fortune, weather conditions, and so on.

Fausto Majistral declares that only exceptional humans can understand the power of the inanimate and the human illusion of having control over it. Fausto considers such exceptional humans poets:

[W]hile others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as a human form with beard measured in light-years and nebulae for sandals, Fausto’s kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which

simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the “practical” half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they.

Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: And if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry. (V, 325–326)

To Fausto a poet like himself is someone who lives in a world “in which things simply are”, beyond meaning and conceptual frameworks, and his task is to create illusory links that represent the world as a mirror of the human subject. Fausto describes this mindless sphere of objects as the “kingdom of death” or “the other kingdom”—both allusions to Eliot’s “Hollow Men” (1925)—and asks, “how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom” (V, 325). What Fausto seems to suggest is that the poet cannot go beyond representation and conceptual frameworks, but his task is to find language that could be respectful of the “innate mindlessness” of things.

Fausto’s view that the banality of anthropomorphism, the “Great Lie,” derives from language is also close to Baudrillard’s claim that we need to be respectful of the inhuman, for “the gods can only live and hide in the inhuman, in objects and animals, in the sphere of silence and objective brutishness, and not in the sphere of man, which is that of language and subjective brutishness” (1990, 183). The question of the limits of language is also reflected in *V.* in the famous opening line of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), “the world is all that the case is,” which Kurt Mondaugen discovers from secret code in “Mondaugen’s story.” In his work Wittgenstein, the “engineer-poet,”<sup>41</sup> states that the meaning of the world—the how-it-is-organized—is something that necessarily has to be outside the world, since in the world everything is the way it is. The metaphysical totality of the “world” falls beyond language: it cannot be expressed in a language that only refers to perceptible entities. The other side of language, the inexpressible, can only be conceived through some kind of illumination: “there is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical” (6.522).

The fear that inanimate forces run the world according to their own ominous logic, thus posing a serious threat to humanity, is what drives Herbert Stencil. In order to find out this logic, the paranoid Stencil looks for the universal plot of “V.,” which quest he inherited from his father Sidney Stencil. But, unlike his son, the elder Stencil understood better the things he could not understand. To Sidney Stencil the metaphor that characterizes the world is the Situation: a political or historical situation, in which several intelligence services gather information for their own purposes. The Situation with the capital letter represents, like Wittgenstein’s “world,” the totality of how-things-

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<sup>41</sup> McHoul and Wills 1990, 165.

really-are and hence it is necessarily an incomprehensible concept.

The Situation is always bigger than you, Sidney. It has like God its own logic and its own justification for being, and the best you can do is cope. [...] Don't act as if it were a conscious plot against you. Who knows how many thousand accidents—a variation in the weather, the availability of a ship, the failure of a crop—brought these people, with their separate dreams and worries, here to this island and arranged them into this alignment? Any Situation takes shape from events much lower than the merely human. (V, 483)

The Situation, “which refused to make sense no matter who looked at it, or from what angle” (V, 189) is, of course, one of the novel's self-representations. The Situation is something beyond chaos and order: it cannot be reduced to any kind of conceptual order and yet it has elements that are connected with each other, that tempt each other, creating causal and temporal chains that are not controllable by the human subject<sup>42</sup>. Another version of this idea appears in chapter fourteen, where Itague, the director of a ballet group, is drawn into an argument with Kholsky the anarchist about the nature of historical progress:

[Itague: ] “If history were cyclical, we'd now be in a decadence, would we not, and your projected Revolution only another symptom of it”  
 “A decadence is a falling-away,” said Kholsky. “We rise.”  
 “A decadence,” Itague put in, “is a falling-away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories.[...] Your beliefs are non-human,” he said. “You talk of people as if they were point clusters or curves on a graph.”  
 “So they are,” mused Kholsky, dreamy-eyed. “I, Satin, Porcépic may fall by

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<sup>42</sup> The word “Situation” no doubt contains a reference to Jean-Paul Sartre, who was an important figure in postwar intellectual debates. With the characters of the New York episodes, existentialism indeed seems to be in. Benny Profane in his spare time reads “an avant-garde western called *Existentialist Sheriff*” (V, 284), and his companion Pig Bodine tries to impress women with a reference to Sartre: “what do you think of Sartre's thesis that we are all impersonating an identity?” (130), which, ironically, reveals that the Whole Sick Crew is already aware of the identity problems crucial in the novel. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (*L'Être et le Néant*, 1943) was translated into English in 1953, and one of its key terms was the “situation,” which means the relationship between human consciousness (or, in Sartre's terminology, the “being-for-itself”) and the “given”, i.e., material conditions. The Sartrean situation has various elements, including the physical environment, the body, one's personal past, other people, and so on, and its conditions are either obstacles or aids for the practice of freedom, which is the ultimate goal of being in Sartre's existentialism. Freedom, however, is a limitless, but paradoxical concept, for it exists because of the obstacles: “there is freedom only in *situation*, and there is situation only through freedom” (Sartre 1965, 465). In the Pynchonian Situation, however, the material conditions are always stronger than the human consciousness.

the wayside. No matter. The Socialist Awareness grows, the tide is irresistible and irreversible. It is a bleak world we live in, M. Itague; atoms collide, brain cells fatigue, economies collapse and others rise to succeed them, all in accord with the basic rhythms of History. Perhaps she is a woman; women are mystery to me. But her ways are at least measurable.”

“Rhythm,” snorted Itague, “as if you listened to the jitterings and squeaks of a metaphysical bedspring”. (V, 405)

Decadence—“the falling away from the human”—is another formulation of the dehumanization theme, and the term appears frequently both in the New York episodes and in the historical episodes. The passage above, however, shows again a certain ambivalence, when Itague’s apology for humanism confronts Kholsky’s non-humanist worldview. Kholsky does not deny decadence as such, but does not see it as the final state of the humankind. Decadence is only one period in the course of history—history, which is itself a totality of inanimate forces, causes and effects that regulate the “human” life. The argument between Itague and Kholsky reflects the “dynamic theory of history” in Henry Adams’ *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), a seminal work explicitly mentioned in V. The protagonist in Adams’ biography creates theories of historical processes by combining the laws of physics with human emotions and expectations. In Adams’ novel, the transcendental powers in religion and philosophy are analogous to, or in fact the same as the invisible forces of physics and mechanics: the energy created by the dynamo, or by the law of acceleration, is the same as in faith or sexual attraction, for example. In Adams’ “dynamic theory of history” the real agents in historical processes are not only people, but also the development and economy of “forces,” and a force is, by definition, “anything that does, or helps to work” (Adams 1918/1970, 474).

Man is a force; so is the sun; so is a mathematical point, though without dimensions or known existence. Man commonly [takes] for granted that he captures the forces. A dynamic theory [...] takes for granted that the forces of nature capture man. The sum of force attracts; the feeble atom or molecule called man is attracted; [...] he is the sum of the forces that attract him; his body and his thought are alike their product; the movement of the forces controls the progress of his mind. (ibid)

The famous essay on the Dynamo and the Virgin in *Education* considers the power of the Dynamo equal to the moral and sexual power of femininity, represented by the mythical dual pair Virgin and Venus. The Dynamo is described not only as a machine but as “a symbol of infinity,” a “symbol of ultimate energy,” “a moral force” whose “value lay[s] chiefly in its occult mechanism”(380–81). Occult force characterizes also the mythical “Woman,” the “animated dynamo,” who exercises “vastly more attraction over the human mind than all the steam-engines and dynamos ever dreamed of” (385). The narrator of *Education* announces that in the course of history this occult force has played a prominent role, and that in the future it will be even more important, because

the idea of femininity as a force is something long familiar to European culture, but still unknown to “American thought.”

The thematic resemblances between Adams’ novel and *V.* lie not only in the references to Virgin and Venus, or in the analogy between woman and machine. The narrator in *Education* also makes no definite distinction between human and non-human: inanimate and animate attractions are basically the same. Pynchon, however, ironizes Adams’ ahistorical materialism and idealized visions of femininity by using metaphors of economy and sexuality more openly. In *V.*, history, economy and sex are linked together: historical and economical ups and downs are the squeakings of a “metaphysical bedspring” or otherwise sexually attributed. One of these parodic theories of history stems from the mind of Benny Profane. In it, historical development is due to inanimate, non-human forces, but here they serve human needs. In Profane’s theory, the emphasis is not on development or progress, but on exchange and consumption:

Material wealth and getting laid strolled arm-in-arm the midway of Profane’s mind. If he’d been the type who evolves theories of history for his own amusement, he might have said all political events: wars, governments and uprisings, have the desire to get laid as their roots; because history unfolds according to economic forces and the only reason anybody wants to get rich is so he can get laid steadily, with whomever he chooses. All he believed at this point, on the bench behind the Library, was that anybody who worked for inanimate money so he could buy more inanimate objects was out of his mind. Inanimate money was to get animate warmth, dead fingernails in the living shoulderblades, quick cries against the pillow, tangled hair, lidded eyes, twisting loins... He’d thought himself into an erection. (V, 214)

In Profane’s view, history is run by economy, and economy is a constant exchange between the animate and the inanimate. Human labour is exchanged for inanimate money, which, in turn, is exchanged either for the warmth of a human body or for inanimate material objects. In the first case (the work of a human body → money → another human body), the process is self-consuming, while in the second it is cumulative (the work of a human body → money, inanimate object → more inanimate objects). Profane strongly resists the cumulative model, because it does not provide immediate sexual pleasure (which argument leads us back to Brown’s view of history as instinctual repression, presented in chapter 2). The economic exchange here, however, is not so simple as Profane likes to think: the exchange of money for bodies, that is, prostitution, does not bring Profane back to the carnal “reality,” for prostitution makes the body again a carrier of exchange value, turning it into a commodity; thus “a whore isn’t human” (V, 291). On the other hand, the cumulation of inanimate objects that Profane resists is not only frustrating but dangerous as well; in the long run the cumulation produces waste that can no longer be consumed.

The waste thematics is pervasive in Pynchon’s fiction, and as an image of the

relationship between a system and its expelled other it is connected to the relationship between life and death. According to Ron Jenkins, waste also functions as a reversion of the system: “a system’s waste can either become a system in its own right or feed back into the system in ironic and suprising ways” (1991, 94). Similarly, the inanimate material always plays this kind of double role in Pynchon’s fiction: it represents both something inferior and something superior to human beings, and the change from one to another often takes place without notice.

An example of such sudden change is the relationship between Benny Profane and SHROUD, in which a machine teaches a human being respect for life. SHROUD, which Profane meets at the Anthroresearch company, is a crash test robot, who openly mixes the attributes of human being and a machine. SHROUD puzzles Profane, for he is at times uncertain whether it is entirely inanimate. SHROUD’s uncanniness is further enforced when Profane starts to have conversations with it. (Whether these conversations are actual or only imagined by Profane is unclear, since SHROUD’s discourse does not have quotation marks.)

[Profane:] “What do you mean, we’ll be like you (...) someday? You mean dead?”

Am I dead? If I am then that’s what I mean.

“If you aren’t then what are you?”

Nearly what you are. None of you have very far to go.

“I don’t understand.”

So I see. But you’re not alone. That’s a comfort isn’t it? (V, 286–287)

SHROUD itself does not scare Profane; what in fact puzzles him are his doubts about his similarity to it. The possibility that he will someday be like SHROUD contains another uncanny aspect for Profane. But what goes beyond this traditional horror effect is the analogy SHROUD makes between the junkpile of old cars and the human bodies stacked up like a junkpile in Auschwitz. What is wasted is something that has no value any more, and with this chilling parallel Pynchon aligns industrial process with operational death. In *V.*, the destruction of humanity is not so much caused by the proliferation of objects: the guilty party is, paradoxically, other human beings, and the logic that permits the discrimination, expulsion and extermination of other human beings. Racism, argues Baudrillard, is a modern phenomenon (1976, 195). The ignorance or subjugation of a different kind of people is known in all cultures, but racism goes further, because it is based on the universal definition of the “human.” And when the concept “human” has an absolute value, it also means that everything excluded from it is valueless (*ibid.*).

In *V.* Pynchon shows how in certain historical situations exclusion is only one step away from extermination. The German colony in South-West Africa, in which the massacre of the Hereros in “Mondaugen’s story” takes place, is for the protagonist Mondaugen the Kingdom of Death. Not because of the war itself, but because of the organized extermination of the aboriginal people, which turns Mondaugen numb. He

does not feel guilty for what he does, but the massive amount of dead black bodies he sees every day makes him aware that Western civilization, the interests of which he is defending, is based on a continuous crime against anything excluded from it<sup>43</sup>. And within this process, it is not only humanity that is in danger: humanity, determined by the exclusion of anything surrounding it, contains that deadly danger in itself.

[F]inally, humanity was reduced [...] to a nervous, disquieted, forever inadequate but indissoluble Popular Front against deceptively unpolitical and apparently minor enemies, enemies that would be with him to the grave: a sun with no shape, a beach alien as the moon's antarctic, restless concubines in barbed wire, salt mists, alkaline earth, the Benguela Current that would never cease bringing sand to raise the harbor floor, the inertia of rock, the frailty of flesh, the structural unreliability of thorns, the unheard whimper of a dying woman, the frightening but necessary cry of the strand wolf in the fog. (V, 274)

In the passage above Pynchon takes the logic of exclusion to absurd lengths in order to show how humanity is reduced because of the logic of exclusion inherent in it. Dehumanization, therefore, is a theme about borders. Pynchon's dehumanized characters are either those who have gone too far and cannot come back to the human community, or those who dream that the borders may be erased. And, most of all, those who always find themselves on the wrong side of the thin line.

#### Synthesis and Control: Death and Technology in Gravity's Rainbow

It is difficult to bear freedom —difficult, perhaps, to bear life itself as a break with the inorganic chain of matter. This is the revenge of matter, of the species, of the

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<sup>43</sup> Mattessich's elaborate analysis of the intertwining of temporal and narrative structures in "Mondaugen's Story" shows that the layers of narrative tones are so complicated in this chapter, that although Mondaugen is the nominal focus of narration, other narrative voices momentarily take over. Thus there is no way of telling whose experiences are narrated—Mondaugen's, Foppl's, or Stencil's, to whom Mondaugen tells his story. To Mattessich these displacements of narrative voice represent Pynchon's ultimately parodic writing "purging the utterer from the utterance" (2002, 31). "The writer of parody [...] absolves himself of any responsibility for his discourse by disappearing from it" (ibid.). According to Mattessich, Pynchon's parodic writerly strategy is, however, centered on the question of responsibility rather than avoiding it. I think that the narrative intertwining of voices and tones can also be seen as a thematic gesture: in the historical context of imperialism, there is no fundamental difference between a voyeur (such as Mondaugen) or an agent (such as Foppl in 1904). The narrative structure of "Mondaugen's Story" suggests that there is no safe "outside" position, not even a moral one.



immortal beings we thought we had won  
out over. (Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible  
Exchange*)

Technology in its various forms has a prominent role in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Theoretical and engineering physics, organic chemistry, medicine, rocket technology—the novel tells a great deal about the unprecedented scientific and technological progress of the first half of the 20th century. In addition to technology's outward manifestations, Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* also focuses on the ideology behind it: what kinds of aspirations and needs drive it? Pynchon also questions the nature of technoscientific thought as a mode of thinking built on the abstract principles of binary logic, functionality, and value. Understood from this perspective, technology turns into a metaphysical relationship between humans and the rest of the material world, involving, as Stefan Mattessich has argued, “humanity's relationship to the earth, to its informing of things, tools, and works as an activity taking its own manipulation of material to be the model of being for things in general. That is to say, all things become technology, or appear in the world in the guise of their availability for use” (Mattessich 2002, 74).

Historically, the rise of technology has meant mastery over nature, but in Pynchon's fiction, as many of his critics have noted, this mastery becomes very fragile and vulnerable. First, in Pynchon, technology never means simply a set of useful tools. In its unpredictability technology gains an occult power of its own; it becomes an alien force that can turn against those who think of using it for certain determinate purposes. Second, in Pynchon's fiction there is always something in nature that resists rationalization and escapes manipulation. Technoscientific thought presupposes a hierarchical relationship between a human subject and a non-human object, but in Pynchon these positions are often strangely reversed. As, for example, near the end of the novel, when the narrator announces that the purpose of men is to fight against the “constant flow” of nature. The narrator's biblical tone is slightly ironic, but the passage indicates clearly that the urge to control and manipulate nature is closely tied to a more primordial fear of the untouchable and the unknown:

This is the World just before men. Too violently pitched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly. They are meant only to look at it dead, in still strata, transputrefied to oil or coal. Alive, it was a threat: it was Titans, was an overpeaking of life so clangorous and mad, such a green corona about Earth's body that some spoiler had to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart. So we, the crippled keepers, were sent out to multiply, to have dominion. God's spoilers. Us. (GR, 720)

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, this urge towards mastery over nature gets perhaps its most striking description and analysis in the so called “Rathenau monologue” in the first part of the novel. One of many emblematic passages in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it seems to reflect questions that have relevance to the entire novel. In the following, I will

concentrate on this particular passage and show how in it technology becomes, eventually, an expression of the need to control death.

### The Voice From Beyond the Grave

The monologue is part of a longish flashback of Berlin in the 1920's, and it culminates in a séance held sometime near the end of the decade. The voice of Walter Rathenau, the late foreign minister of Germany who was assassinated in 1922, speaks through medium Peter Sachsa to an audience consisting of Nazi-leaning industrialists and financiers. Among them, the most important are the representatives of IG Farben, the notorious chemical conglomerate founded in 1925. The participants of the séance have gathered in Peter Sachsa's apartment in order to make contact with Rathenau's ghost. It appears that Rathenau is wanted for some kind of consultation: being "the architect of the cartelized state" (GR, 164), the historical Rathenau was a spokesman and a visionary for a fully rationalized political economy. The fact that Rathenau was also a Jew has no crucial significance here; what is essential is the intellectual heritage that Rathenau seems to represent to his audience, the "corporate Nazi crowd" (ibid.). What happens in the séance, however, is that Rathenau provides a radical otherworldly insight of processes that made possible the rise of IG Farben, and reveals the hidden agenda of its industrial activities<sup>44</sup>.

The key word in this passage is *coal tar*, a by-product of the distillation of coal. Coal tar was considered a useless residue until the end of nineteenth century, when it turned out to be a true treasure for the rising chemical industry and a basis for the development of synthetic materials. However, what Rathenau develops out of coal tar in this occult and fragmentary monologue is something that exceeds the history of a well-known industrial process, and turns into an analysis of the logic inherent in the

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<sup>44</sup> The reference to IG Farben gives a particularly ominous resonance to this passage. IG Farben was Germany's largest industrial cartel during the thirties, and, together with Krupp, a crucial factor in the German rearmament program (Weisenburger 1988, 48). IG Farben was a multinational cartel manufacturing drugs, industrial chemicals, synthetic fibers and rubber, films and dyes (ibid.). The cartel had close ties to the Nazi regime, and was in many ways involved with the management of the holocaust. After WWII the chief executives of the cartel were accused in the Nuremberg trials for many serious war crimes. IG Farben had a factory in Auschwitz that made use of 83 000 slave laborers, and the cartel held a patent for the Zyklon B pesticide used in the gas chambers (for further references, see Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology. IG Farben in the Nazi Era*, 1987). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, IG Farben has a crucial role, and it is used as a model for multinational corporate capitalism, and it embodies the intertwining of economical and military interests in the postwar era. The products of IG Farben—chemicals, plastics, drugs, synthetic dyes and fibres, film—appear frequently in the novel, often associated with usurpation and ecological damage.

technoscientific world-view. To illustrate the complexity of the passage I will quote it in full:

Messages tonight, borne on the lights of Berlin...neon, incandescent, stellar... messages weave into a net of information that no one can escape...

“The path is clear,” a voice moving Sachsa’s lips and rigid white throat. “You are constrained, over there, to follow it in time, one step after another. But here it’s possible to see the whole shape at once—not for me, I’m not that far along—but many know it as a clear presence ... ‘shape’ isn’t really the right word... Let me be honest with you. I’m finding it harder to put myself in your shoes. Problems you may be having, even those of global implication, seem to many of us here only trivial side-trips. You are off on a winding and difficult road, which you conceive to be wide and straight, an Autobahn you can travel at your ease. Is it any use for me to tell you that all you believe real is illusion? I don’t know whether you’ll listen, or ignore it. You only want to know about your path, your Autobahn.[...]

“Consider coal and steel. There is a place where they meet. The interface between coal and steel is coal-tar. Imagine coal, down in the earth, dead black, no light, the very substance of death. Death ancient, prehistoric, species *we will never see again*. Growing older, blacker, deeper, in layers of perpetual night. Above ground, the steel rolls out fiery, bright. But to make steel, the coal tars, darker and heavier, must be taken from the original coal. Earth’s excrement, purged out for the ennoblement of shining steel. Passed over.

“We considered of this as an industrial process. It was more. We passed over the coal-tars. A thousand different molecules waited in the preterite dung. This is the sign of revealing. Of unfolding. This is one meaning of mauve, the first new color on Earth, leaping to Earth’s light from its grave miles and aeons below. There is the other meaning ... the succession ... I can’t see that far yet...

“But this is all the impersonation of life. The real movement is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death-transfigured. The best you can do is to polymerize a few dead molecules. But polymerization is not resurrection. I mean your IG, Generaldirektor.”

“*Our* IG, I should have thought,” replies Smaragd with more than the usual ice and stiffness.

“That’s for you to work out. If you prefer to call this a liaison, do. I am here for as long as you need me. You don’t have to listen. You think you’d rather hear about what you call ‘life’: the growing, organic Kartell. But it’s only another illusion. A very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows. Look at the smokestacks, how they proliferate, fanning the wastes of original waste over greater and greater masses of city. Structurally, they are strongest in compression. A smokestack can survive any explosion—even the shock wave from one of the new cosmic bombs”—a bit of murmur around the table at this—“as you all must know. The persistence, then, of structures favoring death. Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign, just as the buried coal grows denser, and overlaid with more strata—epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city. This is the sign of Death the impersonator.

“These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the

signs. All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer to us here. If you want the truth—I know I presume—you must look into the technology of these matters. Even into the hearts of certain molecules—it is they after all which dictate temperatures, pressures, rates of flow, costs, profits, the shapes of towers ...

“You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?” (165–167)

This monologue, delivered by the voice of a dead man, represents in itself another “net of information” that holds several important threads of the novel together. One of them is the questioning of the principles of causality and reality that also affects the textual plane. The narrative structure of the entire flashback sequence (pages 154–167) consists of multi-layered narrative frames. Every bit of information comes, literally, through mediums: Rathenau speaks through medium Peter Sachsa sometime in the late 1920’s; Sachsa, who in turn died in 1930 is now, in the narrative present of the novel in 1944 also one of the restless dead, encountered by Carroll Eventyr, a London psychic endowed with a “weird talent” for being possessed by the dead. Presumably the succession of events is a reconstruction made by someone listening to Eventyr’s fit, when the voices of the dead speak through him<sup>45</sup>. The reader is thus not given access to any actual voice, or any original event. Instead, the entire passage unveils a set of messages, transmitted from one medium to another. As Stefan Mattessich notes, the “thematic of communicating with the dead recenters the narrative’s preoccupation with media, with mediation, thus with the frame, the principle, or the condition necessary for its own appearance” (2002, 122). When a message comes through a medium, its origin is effaced; what is left is the structure of mediation that has absorbed its origin as something precedent and absolute, and thus, as the slogan goes, “the medium is the message.” By establishing a certain historical setting—Berlin in the 20’s—Pynchon provides yet another frame to emphasize the impossibility of naturalization. The monologue of Rathenau which culminates and ends this passage emerges through so many narrative frames that its actuality is distorted. Paradoxically, this gives Rathenau a strange authority to speak beyond the limits of time and place, and to announce that “all you believe real is illusion” (GR, 166).

The disappearance of the reality of events that characterizes the narrative structure of the Rathenau monologue is closely tied to his undermining of the notion of reality. A perplexing aspect in Rathenau’s monologue—if we ignore the fact that he is speaking from the other side of the grave—is his questioning of historiography. Rathenau’s focus is on something more important than the “secular,” that is, linear history of successive

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<sup>45</sup> In the first part of the novel Eventyr is in London, frequently consulted by a psychological warfare research team. The motivation for this research is the attempt of British Intelligence to gain occult information from IG Farben, about its involvement in development of V-2 rockets.

events. Being beyond linear history he can see “the whole shape at once” (165), history as a structure, “a transhistorical movement that renders humanity’s history, its time, virtually obsolete” (Mattessich 2002, 123). This kind of insight is typical of many of Pynchon’s characters, who look for structure behind the immediate world<sup>46</sup>. To Lawrence Wolfley, Rathenau’s (and Pynchon’s) view is phenomenological in the sense that “official pronouncements and the interpretations of establishment historians are meaningless in the face of the reality of the event” (1992, 874).

Speaking to an audience comprising experts from the chemical and war industries, Rathenau starts to unfold the history of a certain industrial process in order to reveal its inner logic and true implications. His focus is on coal tar, a substance long known only as a by-product of the distillation of coal in the production of coke. Coal, which plays a prominent role in the rise of industrialism, is the “original,” condensed waste of dead species. Mined from the Earth, coal is used in a number of ways: as a fuel—solid, liquid and gaseous—and as a rich source of chemical compounds. Coal tar, a viscous and foul-smelling substance, is thus the “waste of the original waste,” and here Rathenau refers also to the fact that coal tar was wasted in the production of coke for a long time, since no one saw any use value in it (“Coal Tar Product,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*). But, Rathenau notes by evoking the Puritan dualism typical of Pynchon, this “preterite dung” that was “passed over” in the industrial process turned out to be an essential substance for the chemical industry. Historically, this happened in the latter half of the 19th century, when certain scientific discoveries paved the way for the industrial uses of coal tar derivatives. The key factors in this development were the rich molecular structure of the coal tar (hundreds of chemical compounds), and the versatile molecular structure of coal which enables polymerization, that is, the process of combining long chains where simpler molecules are repeated over and over again (*ibid.*).

Coal tar provided the basis for the emergence of a whole new world of synthetic substances so essential to modern culture: dyes, drugs, explosives, plastics, fibres, films, pesticides, paints, rubber. As Rathenau points out, the first and the most important step in this development was the discovery of mauve, “the first new color on Earth,” (166) the first synthetic dye, created accidentally by chemist William Perkin in 1856 (“Perkin, William,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*). As Weisenburger notes, the business opportunities provided by synthetic dyes and their pharmaceutical properties were directly the basis for the fortunes of Imperial Chemicals in England and IG Farben in Germany (1988, 95).

What Rathenau develops out of such “secular history” is something that goes

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<sup>46</sup> Such Pynchonian historians include, for example, Herbert and Sidney Stencil in *V.*, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Typically, Pynchon both evokes totalizing (or paranoid) explanations of history in his fiction and parodies them.

beyond the mere industrial process, for in his monologue the course of historical events is revealed as a manifestation of a single fatal pattern. Rathenau announces that polymerization, that is, the combining and repetition of the molecular chains taken from coal, is something structurally analogous to the repetitive structure of mass production, and further to history itself, as a chain of repetitive events, where traces of past lives pile up indefinitely, “epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city” (167). Rathenau announces that all these processes, however organic they may seem, entail the recurrence of inorganic, lifeless matter. Therefore, the pure positivity of such goals as progress, expansion, growth, or welfare is only “illusion” created by “Death the impersonator” (ibid.). In this overall downward movement that extends from molecular chains to history itself Pynchon clearly evokes Freud’s notion of the death instinct as a principle of compulsory repetition. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) Freud defines the death instinct as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things”, and since inorganic life preceded organic life, the death instinct is formulated as “an instinct to return to the inanimate state” (1991, 36, 38). At first, the death instinct was seen in relation to the individual psyche, but in Freud’s later essay, “Civilization and its Discontents” (1930)<sup>47</sup>, the death instinct is used as a cultural metaphor representing his pessimism about the inherent need for destruction in Western civilization.

In Brown’s *Life against Death*, Freud’s notion of the death instinct is seen directly affecting the way we understand the shape of history and linear time. To Brown, the possibility of mass destruction was the ultimate manifestation of a cultural death instinct, and only by becoming aware of our cultural unconscious can this fatal course be avoided. Wolfley argues that *Gravity’s Rainbow* reflects Pynchon’s sensibility to this central fear of fifties intellectuals (like Brown)—the massive threat of atomic war (1992, 875).

Freud was right in positing a death instinct, and the development of weapons of destruction makes our present dilemma plain: we either come to terms with our unconscious instincts and drives—with life and with death—or else we surely die. (Brown 1985, xviii)

In writing about Freud’s notion of the death instinct, and its historical and cultural implications, Baudrillard notes that for Freud death emerges as Thanatos, as an indestructible principle opposed to Eros. This irreducible duality between the two instincts, argues Baudrillard, is something beyond subject, class or history, and it evokes, in a way, the ancient Manichean conception of the world created by endless antagonism between good and evil (1976, 229). Freud’s vision is very powerful, argues

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<sup>47</sup> “Das Unbehagen in der Kultur”(1930). Interestingly, one of the metaphors Freud uses in this essay in order to describe the structuration of the individual psyche is the city of Rome, where ruins of past epochs are layered one upon the other (1991, 256–258).

Baudrillard, since it derives from archaic cults and their intuition of the specificity of death and evil. And it is insupportable by the Church, which for centuries has struggled to replace this dualism with the pre-eminence of the good (God), and the banishment of evil in the form of Lucifer (230). This dualism characterizes “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” especially, but in “Civilization and its Discontents” death is given pre-eminence; the death instinct is what characterizes the history of civilization, and historical development is only a long detour before inevitable destruction (ibid.). However, Baudrillard emphasizes the fundamental ambiguity of the death instinct, which makes it impossible to decide whether it is a biological or a psychological (somatic or psychic) fact, or whether it is to be taken as a scientific theory, or rather as a myth (Kellner 1989, 106). Furthermore, he asks whether this ambiguity means that the “death instinct” is not a rationalization of death at all, but something else (1976, 234).

Something other than the Brownian “psychoanalytical meaning of history,” seems to be at stake also in the Rathenau monologue—a rewriting of Brown’s insights within a certain historical context. Rathenau’s audience, the executives of IG Farben, ended up making decisions that would effectively promote exploitation and mass destruction in WWII, but in the Rathenau monologue these historical events become the outcome of a development that in the late 1920’s is already in progress.

Joseph Tabbi has argued that Pynchon often builds occult connections with different sign systems on the formal and semiotic level, thus generating new meanings:

The idea is not to discover known causes [...], but to move through technological “signs and symptoms” to the unconscious and the unknown. The signs of modern technology—its products, methods, and apparatus—are symptoms of forces that are latent or immanent in the world. Such immanence is not transcendent idealism in another, psychological form [...]. Nor should we think of this latent meaning as being “hidden” behind the form of the dream, as conventional psychoanalysis often conceives of a meaning “beneath” appearances that the form of the dream is meant to hide. Meanings in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are not at all “deep” in this sense; they exist right on the surface, in the form and mechanisms of the dream-work itself. (1997, 87)<sup>48</sup>

Thus the Rathenau monologue is also a dialogue with Freud, treating his pessimistic

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<sup>48</sup> Typically, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* Pynchon creates such “occult connections” also between technology and textual processes. One example of this is Oneirine, a drug that Rathenau mentions in passing as one of the substances made from coal tar derivatives. The name *oneirine* comes from the Greek *oneiros*, “to dream” (Weisenburger 1988, 96), and the strangely dreamlike effect of this fictional drug plays an important role in the novel. Oneirine, it turns out, causes hallucinations that keep recurring over and over again, haunting the drug addict, and creating a certain “narrative continuity” quite unlike any other drug. Oneirine is, therefore, both a drug that causes narrative experience (is it used because the users lack a sense of continuity?), and a poetic metaphor for the dreamlike narration of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where certain elements of the story keep recurring over and over again.

view of the downward movement of Western culture as a symptom in itself, not only as an explanatory frame for historical events. Rathenau's true target is in the structural analogies between technological processes and the repetitive form that Freud has named the death instinct and in this sense Pynchon comes very close to Baudrillard's view. Baudrillard points out how Freud installs the principle of repetition into the core of psychic functioning, and this happens at the same time as the more general social and economic change from production to reproduction (1976, 227). This coincidence forces Baudrillard to ask whether there is a relationship between the genealogy of the concept of the death instinct and a certain historical situation, in which case the death instinct could characterize the entire political economy and its functioning (ibid). Somewhat similar are the implications Pynchon makes in the Rathenau monologue. When Rathenau speaks of the "persistence of structures favoring death" (GR, 167) he not only foretells the unethical business activities of IG Farben in certain historical situation. His otherworldly vision also enables him to show that death is "persistent" because it is somehow inherent in the rational principles underlying all production.

### The Indispensable Negation

The "succession" that Rathenau delineates between different industrial processes is thoroughly marked by death. It starts from coal, "down in the earth, dead black, no light, the very substance of death" (166), and results in ecological damage, and the vision of global disaster embodied in the "cosmic bomb"(167). For his audience, Rathenau's speech must be partly incomprehensible, for the scientific development that led to the atomic bomb was still in embryo in the late 1920's. But again, what looks like an anachronism to the reader is motivated by Rathenau's transhistorical position beyond the grave, which enables him to see successions that remain hidden from his audience<sup>49</sup>.

As Rathenau notes, this death is, again, a by-product. The representatives of IG Farben are focused on the economic growth and expansion of the "Kartell," which is so dynamic it looks organic, as if the Kartell had a life of its own. Rathenau shocks his audience by reversing this image and announcing that the Kartell is in fact a "structure favoring death" (167). Rathenau's monologue is an open challenge; he seems aware that his audience is neither used to this kind of analysis, nor willing to associate industrial plans and prospects of high profits with death. As Tabbi notes, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon recurrently "reveal(s) operations within or behind the industrial process that

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<sup>49</sup> Tabbi sees in the Rathenau monologue a representation of a stage in industrial culture in which the distinction between material production and the production of signs could still be made (1997, 84). But at the time Pynchon was writing "we were already well into a post-industrial culture in which signs and exchange value had taken on a greater importance than the 'industrial process'" (1997, 84).



escape even those characters who are most involved in it but are too locked into their own system to see beyond it” (1997, 87). Rathenau’s insight is that technoscientific thought has a double attitude towards death: although death represents a negative principle in comparison to the dynamic ideas of limitless growth and progress, death is somehow indispensable, something that the structure of that thought not only “favors,” but essentially requires.

In *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (1993), Geoffrey Nealon has analyzed the Rathenau monologue as representing the intrinsic bond between dialectical thinking and death. In reference to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Nealon argues that Rathenau’s demand that “you must look into the technology of these matters” (GR, 167) refers especially to the “technology” of dialectics. Or, vice versa, to the principles of dialectical thinking inherent in technoscientific thought, end-oriented research, capitalism—in short, thinking oriented towards ends, results, profits, use (Nealon 1993, 116–120).

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, then, it seems one is compelled to analyze not only the death-dealing products of a certain technological worldview, but the *structure* of the worldview itself—and to ask if these movements and structures can be disrupted in any way. (118)

In *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Hegel argues that what moves thought is the “negative in general”—the disparity between subject and its object. Thinking needs the negativity of what is non-actual and unrealizable in order to attain the higher unity of understanding (Nealon 1993, 117). In the introduction to *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel openly makes an analogy between this structural negativity and death: “death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength” (1977, 19). The Hegelian Spirit, or reflective consciousness, should not, however “shrink from death” : Spirit gains its power only “by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it” (21). This negative is something that emerges as dismemberment, separation, or devastation of the object, and only by “converting” negativity into being (by giving it a positive existence) can Spirit take hold and master it. As Nealon summarizes, for Hegel:

[T]he negative moment of the dialectic, the necessary “dismemberment” of totality or surety wherein truth “finds itself,” is the only productive moment of thought. [...] The dialectic confronts death—the absolutely other that dismembers life—and masters it, thereby allowing thought to master anything else in its path. (1993, 117–118)

Dialectical thought needs death as its other (death understood as non-being, non-actuality, dismemberment). Thought can master death only by “making sense” of death, transfiguring it into productive negativity. Therefore, argues Nealon, the brilliance of dialectical thinking is to master the other of thought by forming a relation to it, by

renaming it as productive negativity:

[T]he dialectic [...] *acknowledges* the potentially dismembering effect of something other than thought (other than life and reason) but goes on to master that other (that fracturing irrationality) in an ever-stronger and more rational unity. This other-than-thought is trapped in a productive relation with thought and becomes other-to-thought, thought's opposite, dialectically contained within thought as thought's other, and can thereby be taken up in a philosophical relation and used toward the ends of thought. (122)

In the Rathenau monologue, the endlessly “growing, organic Kartell” (GR, 167) becomes the image of such a relationship between dialectical thinking and death. On the one hand, it represents technology that uses objectivized (dead) nature, produces synthetic materials in which the possibility of degradation is indefinitely postponed, and creates ecological damage as a by-product. On the other, Rathenau's questions—“What is the real nature of synthesis? What is the real nature of control?” (167)—refer to something beyond chemical synthesis (the combining of molecular chains). It refers also to the *form* of technoscientific thought as something that uses death in the form of productive negativity.

As Nealon notes, the question of rationalizing and using death is prominent in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Experimenting on animals and men, rocket science, even the war itself, all appear in the novel as attempts at controlling and using the destructive power of death, “if in no other way than through the knowledge that human's can (re)produce death, control its randomness, make death's negativity productive, put it at the service of a cause or a useful end (1993, 122). Or, as Wimpe the drug dealer and IG Farben's contact man announces in the novel:

We know how to produce real pain. Wars, obviously... machines in the factories, industrial accidents, automobiles built to be unsafe, poisons in food, water, and even air—these are quantities tied directly to the economy. We know them and we can control them. (GR, 348–349)

Baudrillard sees death, in the ultra-modern society, as devoid of any imaginary substance and turned into the most banal reality; it is inscribed in the very principle of rationality that governs our daily life (1976, 281). All material production is nothing but a gigantic armour with which we will hold death at bay: but death is enclosed in the very armour we thought would protect us from it (271). For Baudrillard, death is the double or the mirror of political economy, and like doubles always, is characterized by repression and constant return. Since we live in a culture in which the ambivalence and reversibility between life and death has ceased to exist, we have entered into a process of accumulating life as value, but, since accumulation itself involves the repetition of the same, it is permeated by death and this repetition in turn perverts the idea of life-as-value (226).

C'est l'infini du capital qui passe dans l'infini du temps, l'éternité d'un système productif qui ne connaît plus la réversibilité de l'échange/don, mais seulement l'irréversibilité de la croissance quantitative. [...] dans l'un et l'autre cas, ce qui s'accumule ne s'échange plus symboliquement et devient une dimension *objective*. À la limite, l'objectivité totale du temps, comme l'accumulation totale, c'est impossibilité totale d'échanger symboliquement— c'est la mort. (ESM, 224–225)<sup>50</sup>

Baudrillard sees this paradox also in the notion of the death instinct, which for him represents the conceptual place of death in our culture. The death instinct figures death as a repetitive cycle that always tends to demolish the linear structuration of life (1976, 231). But in its form (endless repetition of the same), the death instinct is analogous to the principle of production.

In the Rathenau monologue, all attempts to hold sway over death rationally result in its re-emergence in unexpected and morbid forms. But this logic of the double makes death also a challenge and a counterforce to the one-sided logic of accumulation and value. As Nealon argues, “death cannot be negated, used, understood, or even really chosen”; not responding to a rational analysis, death means the absence of all relationality, which “has the potential to cripple dialectical thought” (1993, 121).

## Back to Earth

Although the progression from coal-mining to the nuclear bomb that Rathenau foretells in his monologue provides “death converted into more death,” its initial motivation lies somewhere else, in the fantasy of overcoming death. As Rathenau notes to his audience: “you’d rather hear about what you call ‘life’” (167). For those in charge of keeping the production going and making profit, death and destruction represent on the conceptual plane the ultimate obstacle that has to be removed. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon repeats this logic on the level of individual experience, thus intertwining abstract ideas of limitless growth and unstoppable progress with the personal hopes of individuals in relation to their own death. The necessity of conceptually overcoming the negative moment appears as inseparable from the dream of overcoming one’s own mortality, and the role of science and technology is to provide means to control the “natural law” of inevitable death and degradation. (The thematic of overcoming mortality will be treated more closely in chapter 5.)

But, as with gravity, the downward movement is, ultimately, inevitable. This

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<sup>50</sup> The infinity of capital passes into the infinity of time; eternity of a productive system no longer familiar with the reversibility of gift exchange, but instead with the irreversibility of quantitative growth. The accumulation of time imposes the idea of progress, as the accumulation of science imposes the idea of truth: in each case, what is accumulated is no longer symbolically exchanged, but becomes an *objective* dimension. Ultimately, the total objectivity of time, like total accumulation, is the total impossibility of symbolic exchange, that is, death (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, pp.146–147).

falling back to Earth is the great structural and metaphysical force in the novel. One of its most evident symbols is the parabolic arc of the rocket (one possible explanation for the novel's title, "gravity's rainbow") that rises high but always returns back to earth. This downward movement has, however, a double significance in the novel. In the Rathenau monologue, it can be interpreted as the repetitive and inevitable return to the inorganic state, to death. As Rathenau's analysis of IG Farben shows, all attempts at "transfiguring" death result in the emergence of a truly lifeless, inorganic structure—a monster-like polymer that does not degrade, or a monster-like cartel that lives on the accumulation of inert matter: synthetic products, capital, waste.

But then the narrative structure of the Rathenau monologue reveals another significance. Speaking from the Other Side of life and the rationalizable world, Rathenau's ghost represents a continuity that is indifferent to the abstract binarism of life and death. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the metaphor of "falling back" to earth contains the images of both death and birth, decomposition and growth. From this angle, death is not a mere negation, but becomes a point of reversion that makes all attempts at total control fail. Nature can be objectified, but, as Tabbi argues "there is an order in nature that determines the possible uses we can make of it, and beyond which no social, political, or technological order can go." (1997, 83). In Pynchon's fiction, this challenge to technoscientific thought does not come from the living, but from the dead.

In the next chapter I will continue with a thematic that already emerged briefly in my analysis of *V.*, and more prominently in the Rathenau monologue—the apocalypse. Especially in the first phase of his work—the early stories, *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*—apocalyptic imagery has been so prominent that Pynchon has often been labelled a cultural pessimist. My intention in the following, however, is to show how Pynchon, especially in *Gravity's Rainbow*, depicts apocalypse as stemming from the same imaginary as the notion of limitless accumulation and growth—as the forbidden and terrifying image of the absolute End.

#### 4. Waiting for the End: Pynchon's Apocalypses

*Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's major novel, ends with a bang. Or, to be more precise, with a bang to be, one about to take place in Los Angeles. Most of the novel is set in the last years of WWII, but in the end the narrative present has suddenly shifted to something resembling the early 70's, the time of the novel's publication. People who have come to watch a midnight movie show in the Orpheus theatre are about to die in an explosion because they happen to be the target of a ballistic missile falling from the sky faster than sound. The film has broken, and the audience stares at the suddenly darkened screen, becoming aware that they are now going to see something they cannot ever look at directly:

[I]n the darkening and awful expanse of screen something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see...it is now a closeup of the face, a face we all know—

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t.

There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs...or, if song must find you, here's one They never taught anyone to sing, a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print, sung to a simple and pleasant air of the period. Follow the bouncing ball:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
Though thy Glass today be run,  
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
Find the last poor Pret'rite one...  
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,  
All through our cripl'd Zone,  
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,  
And a Soul in ev'ry stone...

Now everybody— (GR, 760)

The novel ends here, with the narrator's invitation to a song that is about to begin simultaneously with the explosion.

Pynchon's readers have been and will perhaps always be puzzled about the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Its complexity and efficacy is what makes it perhaps one of the most analyzed pieces of Pynchon's writing, an emblematic moment that presents in a

very condensed form many of the writer's central preoccupations, writerly strategies, aesthetic as well as political juxtapositions. The end leaves the novel in an unresolved tension, where several elements remain dramatically staged: the anonymous audience in the dark, the prophetlike narrator who proclaims the inevitable fate just before it happens, the Rocket, the central figure of the novel, that seems to travel in time as well as in space, the film that changes into something unexpected and yet familiar, the terrifying face on the screen that like Medusa's head petrifies the ones who look at it, the time that has suddenly stopped, the song that, historically and thematically, comes from another world, and the call for a communion that seems to exceed the limits of fiction.

In the following, I will focus on Pynchon's apocalyptic and catastrophic imagery, of which the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most famous example. In this highly ambiguous ending, the End seems to be at the same time imminent and impossible, and with this writerly strategy Pynchon leads the reader to bring in his/her own conception of the End (of the world, of the realm of fiction, of the novel) to the reading. The apocalypse or the catastrophe is also a profoundly social image of death, since it is something beyond the individual subject, and it always involves certain cultural notions of death, temporality and teleology. This becomes evident especially in the thematic of *entropy* that has played an important role in the first phase of Pynchon's work from the early stories to *Gravity's Rainbow*. When the thematics of death on a global scale in Pynchon is at issue, the notion of entropy is the most obvious way of approaching it. It is also a frequently used approach, and therefore any interpretation of the role of entropy in Pynchon cannot do without a certain reader-response history into which I will plunge in the second part of this chapter. In the last part of this chapter, I will analyze how Pynchon with the image of the Rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* juxtaposes two kinds of temporality, the linear and the cyclical, and how this juxtaposition also foregrounds in terms of temporality the double articulation of death that characterizes his fiction.

#### Beyond the Zero: the End in *Gravity's Rainbow*

One of the ambiguities of the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* is that it exposes, simultaneously, a sense of an absolute limit and a transgression of that limit. We are not told whether the audience is ever going to answer to the narrator's call and start singing, but the image of a collective meeting its death while singing is very powerful, for the singing is posited as a sign of continuity against the absoluteness of the approaching death. The name "Orpheus theatre" contains both a cultural reference to the Apollo theatre in New York, and a literary reference to Rilke, whose poetry is an important

intertext in *Gravity's Rainbow* and throughout Pynchon's work<sup>51</sup>. In *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Die Sonette an Orpheus*, 1923), Rilke posits that the singing of Orpheus, the poet-god, is "pure existence" that does not fade in death: "Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes" (sonnet 3, book 1), "Er ist einer der bleibenden Boten/ der noch weit in die Türen der Toten/ Schalen mit rühmlichen Früchten hält" (sonnet 7, book 1). In Rilke's sonnets, the singing of Orpheus is, however, ambivalent: it opens up a space in which things emerge and disappear—a space of simultaneous creation and destruction that echoes also in Pynchon's big novel.

To a reader who has waded through the 760 pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is clear at the end that this missile will destroy more than a movie theatre. In the convolution of textual and physical space at the end of the novel, the anonymous theatre audience, the fictional world, the text, and the reader are all on the verge of destruction. That this destruction is set in a movie theatre is not accidental. Films and film-making have featured prominently throughout the novel, which is why the broken film, the "film we have not learned to see," has often been seen to represent the entire novel as an incomprehensible, hypothetical movie<sup>52</sup>. Another perspective is that the text at the end exceeds its own limits as literary representation by turning into a film. Berressem uses the term "filmic writing" in relation to *Gravity's Rainbow*, which term refers not only to the simulation of filmic visuality throughout the novel, but to Pynchon's way of exposing in his narration the structural parallels between perception and film. Berressem sees that with filmic writing Pynchon's text manages to radically undermine the written word, because writing poses as something it is not. And what happens at the end of the novel is that the text stages "*its* annihilation via film" (1993, 198). Thus the descending Rocket does not interrupt narration, but stands for its impossible limit *as* narration. Berressem, who has compared the narrative space of *Gravity's Rainbow* to a Möbius strip, sees that at the end, the Rocket

[S]eems to have transcended the book's interior narrative space and to have become a 'real' rocket, no longer a textual concept but now a referent—although this transition does of course take place in a fictional space [...]. The narration now, for the first time, includes both the reader and the text itself in a virtual space that is neither textual nor 'real' [...]" (Berressem 1993, 198)

Another transgressive gesture that reappears in the final scene is apostrophizing. The "you" the narrator addresses is an anonymous, empty pronoun that can be occupied by anyone, individual or collective, and the question whether they are "fictitious" or "real"

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<sup>51</sup> About Rilke's influence on Pynchon, see, for example, Nealon (1993, 197–131), Chambers (1992, 179–183), and Preben Jordal's essay "The Savage Flower —reading Pynchon reading Rilke" (2002, 103–123).

<sup>52</sup> See, for example Wolfley (1992, 873) and Chambers (1992, 182).

(characters, or narratees, or readers) has no significance here<sup>53</sup>. Brian McHale has analyzed Pynchon's use of the second person pronoun in *Gravity's Rainbow* and argued that the problem with the novel-as-movie hypothesis and its linking to the second person is the resulting naturalization of the novel's narrative strangeness: "then we have a readymade formula for determining who *you* is in every instance. *You* will always be read as addressed to a narratee imagined to be sitting in a movie theatre—in short, a character-narratee, located within the world of the fiction" (1992, 111). McHale doubts whether anyone can read *Gravity's Rainbow* consistently in this way, and thus the novel-as-movie hypothesis is revealed as serving the critic more than an average reader of the novel. But, despite his critique against any univocal reading of the second person in *Gravity's Rainbow*, McHale admits that this rhetorical gesture *does* also involve the reader, in ways that cannot be easily defined:

*You* is a sign of dialogue, conveying some vocative appeal, some sense of address, even in its most 'innocent,' impersonal instances, and we cannot help but respond dialogically to it in some measure. Thus through our surrogate in the text, the narratee, a role we both identify with and distance ourselves from, we the readers are constantly being solicited to participate in the text structure and the text's world. (112)

An the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the only thing that unites all "yous" is the approaching end, the explosion and the ending of the narrative. Or, to be more precise, the end would unite them, if it arrived. But it won't. There is no more time at the end; in the final passages of *Gravity's Rainbow* time is transformed from linear succession of events into an eternal Now, in which the missile stays in infinite descent. In the convolution of the film and the descending Rocket ("just at this dark and silent frame") the "descent" of the Rocket has turned into an endless succession of filmic frames—a kind of modern version of Zeno's paradox, as many critics have noted. Or, as Jefferey Nealon has formulated it: "the now is exploded, and along with it goes the continuity between the past and the future [...] the present [...] becomes a perpetual crossroads that stands in no determinate relation to the known past or foreseeable future" (1993, 129–

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<sup>53</sup> The idea of radically open "yous" (and the song that unites them) has appeared already in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Mucho Maas, Oedipa's deranged husband, claims that he can hear the spectrum (the overtone series) of any sound: "Listen to anything and take it apart again. Spectrum analysis, in my head. I can break down chords, and timbres, and words too into all the basic frequencies and harmonics, with all their different loudnesses, and listen to them, each pure tone, but all at once. [...]" Everybody who says the same words is the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? [...] 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, 98–99).



130). At the end of the novel the future is indeterminate, characterized only by the approach of death that, paradoxically, will never come.

In describing the *sense* of an ending rather than the end itself, *Gravity's Rainbow* belongs to the tradition of modern apocalyptic fiction. In *Sense of an Ending* (1966) Frank Kermode argues that in the modern apocalypse the end of the world is not a proper end, but an endless phase of transition in which the end is immanent rather than imminent (101). What Kermode calls a “myth of Transition” means that “before the End there is a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* [the age or the era] preceding it” (12). This period of transition was known already in the early Christian apocalyptic tradition, but it has gained a much more important status in the modern era (the beginning of which Kermode sees already in the Middle Ages), when transition has been increasingly conceived of as an age in itself. No longer an imminent historical event, the End in the modern apocalypse has become a predicament of the individual and of civilization. According to Kermode, typical of the modern historical consciousness is the “end-feeling,” the constant feeling that one is living at the turning point of time, or in the last days of an era (27). The transitional stage “in-between” has become *endless*. In the modern apocalypse the notion of an end is thus paradoxical: although the end does not happen, for it is in constant state of deferral (or becoming), it is immanent in the sense that every moment is contaminated by the “end-feeling.”

The sense of impending destruction is one of the central preoccupations in modern American literature, argues Zbigniew Lewicki in his study *The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature* (1984). Lewicki connects Pynchon to the tradition of apocalyptic fiction in American literature, emerging in the 19th century in the cultural pessimism and apocalyptic themes of such writers as Herman Melville and Mark Twain. In the 20th century, apocalypse has in American literature been more and more intertwined with notions adapted from the natural sciences. *The Education of Henry Adams* used models adapted from physics for explaining historical processes, and introduced to literature the term *entropy*, referring to the inevitable and irreversible decay of all natural processes (entropy will be treated more closely in the following). It was due to writers like Adams, argues Lewicki, that the old religious notion of apocalypse was now given secular impact by reshaping it as a scientific law. Adams did not have immediate literary successors in American literature, but both apocalypse and entropy were revived as literary concepts in the 1950's and 1960's (Lewicki, xv-xvi). Pynchon was an important figure in this revival.

In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon rather sarcastically comments on the pervasiveness of apocalyptic thematics in his early stories: “A pose I found congenial in those days—fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults—was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline” (1984, 13). In the short stories “Entropy,” “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna,” and “Under the Rose,” apocalyptic imagery indeed recurs in various forms. In “Mortality and Mercy,” the massacre at the

end of the story contains mythical and religious elements, but this catastrophe is still limited in scope and scale. In comparison, the fictional world in “Entropy” is a closed system, doomed to an inevitable end according to the laws of physics. Inevitable destruction threatens the Western world in “Under the Rose,” in which a British spy, Porpentine, feels that the colonial wars in Africa in the beginning of the 20th century are like an avalanche in international politics, bound to result in an “Armageddon [that] would sweep the house of Europe” (Pynchon 1984, 117). That avalanche is, again, followed in *V.* (in which a slightly modified version of “Under the Rose” reappears as an embedded narrative). Herbert Stencil believes that the “V.” he hunts is a nexus for deliberate coincidences that have determined the fatal course of the 20th century. The century with two global wars, massive genocides, and the atomic bomb, Stencil figures, follows a plot made by forces unknown, and “if the coincidences are real then Stencil has never encountered history at all, but something far more appalling” (*V.*, 450). Written and published in the cold war era, *V.*’s apocalyptic overtones are more or less openly linked to the threat of nuclear war<sup>54</sup>. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, apocalyptic imagery is not so explicit, but the secret of Tristero (as the secret of “V.” in *V.*) contains the possibility of revelation and of the violent destruction of civilization<sup>55</sup>. And, since the thematic of entropy pervades the novel, the idea of the disintegration of all structures is inscribed in it. But *Gravity’s Rainbow* is, in every respect, an apotheosis of this thematics in Pynchon, the Grande Finale of those apocalyptic insights presented in his earlier works.

The end of the novel culminates the sense of destruction present already in the beginning, when the V-2 rocket strikes hit London in 1944. The Rocket that comes to destroy the fictional world at the end of the novel flies, like those smaller ones, faster than sound and its arrival is thus unperceivable. On the other hand, the Rocket has been on its way since the end of the WWII, its destination calculated long ago. This apocalypse is thus a willed one, a logical outcome of several interrelated and irreversible processes—historical, political, economic, technological, psychological—set forth in the past, and coming now to destroy the present. The narrative structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow* mirrors this impending destruction by tending towards disintegration on all levels—plot(s), characters, symbols, narrative continuity. With the descent of the Rocket, everything else in the novel seems to go down. As Lawrence Wolfley summarizes: “The end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is, in ordinary terms, pessimistic: the Counterforce fails, Slothrop is lost, Blicero’s romantic affirmation offers only sterility

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<sup>54</sup> Judith Chambers even argues that the story of the emergence of “V.” in the course of history is, in fact, Pynchon’s parable of the scientific discoveries that lead to the construction of the atomic bomb (1992, 70–83).

<sup>55</sup> One of the puns associated with the word Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, as Peter Cooper points out, is *dies irae*, the Day of Wrath, the apocalyptic last day of the world (Cooper 1983, 71).

and death, the Schwartzkommando are eliminated from history, the bomb falls on us all in Los Angeles, the world ends” (1992, 884). Many readings of *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasize that the novel and particularly its ending represent the actualization of a cultural death wish, Western culture's inherent need of its own destruction, which the narration openly comments on several times in the novel.

Despite the overwhelming end-feeling that culminates at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the reader cannot help noticing that there are several elements that stand against or undermine the absoluteness of the ending. The first and most apparent is the mixing of parodic and serious tone typical of Pynchon. The apocalypse and divine intervention of the narrator takes place in the middle of a movie show, which is in itself a parodic gesture. The cheerful bouncing ball that the audience is asked to follow refers to the community singing in movie theatres before and in between the shows with lyrics on screen that was customary in the 1940's and 1950's. But the bouncing ball can also be seen as an image of the force of gravity, the same that creates “gravity's rainbow,” the parabolic trajectory of the Rocket that inevitably leads it to its destination.

Another prominent element in the ending is the juxtaposition of linear and cyclical temporality. As many critics have noted, an element that unites the beginning and the end of the novel, thus making it an infinite loop instead of a story(line), is the screaming of the Rocket. It can be heard in the beginning of the novel—“A screaming comes across the sky” (GR, 3)—and again at the end in Los Angeles: “the sound is greater than police [siren]. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains further than any mortal could ever move...could move in time...” (GR, 757). Moving faster than sound, the rockets in the novel seem to represent a violation of causality, an idea used throughout the novel. If the Rocket that arrives at the end signifies the end of the world, then this apocalypse, as Peter Cooper remarks, “is so fast that one hears it approaching only *after* the fact” (Cooper 1983, 72). Accordingly, the first part of the novel is entitled “Beyond the Zero,” indicating a life after destruction. The title can be interpreted as referring to posthumous life (which could explain the ghostliness of the setting, London in December 1944), or to life after the apocalypse, after the end. The peculiarity of this apocalypse is thus that it has been, somehow, lost before its arrival. As W.T. Lhamon has argued, “V. and the rest of Pynchon's novels ‘behave’ as if the End were past and most of the world didn't even know it” (Lhamon 1976, 70). Thus, another perspective on the gloominess of the ending to *Gravity's Rainbow* is that in it Pynchon depicts a culture for which the possibility of its destruction, no longer actual, has turned into a dream, “a gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation,” (V, 206) and for some reason the culture has a perverse need for the image of its own destruction.

In his essay “No Apocalypse, not Now” (1984) Derrida argues that the apocalyptic threat of our own age, total nuclear war, is, unlike any other war that has preceded it, *fabulously textual* (1984, 23). By this Derrida means not only that nuclear weaponry is dependent on information technology, coding, decoding, structures of

language, but that total nuclear war exists only through what is said and written about it. It cannot take place, since total nuclear war would also entail the remainderless destruction of all symbolic capacity.

[N]uclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred itself; it is a non-event. [...] For the moment, today, one may say that it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may be also called a speculation, even a fabulous speculation. The breaking of the mirror would be, finally, through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war. Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? dreaming of it, desiring it? (Derrida 1984, 23)

In *Paroxysm*, Baudrillard has similarly argued that “the idea of the decadence of the West is part of its cultural language. The West has always delighted in imagining its own death” (1998, 41). What Baudrillard means by this is that because we have lost our confidence in endings as belonging to the order of things, the fantasy of an absolute end, the apocalypse, persists in our cultural imagery.

An essential difference between the old tradition of apocalyptic fiction and the modern tradition, argues Kermode, is that in the former the end of the world also meant a change in the world order, when the earthly time, *chronos*, succumbed to eternity—or at least it meant a change from one era to another (1966, 102). But in the modern notion of the apocalypse this kind of change is no longer possible. The idea of an endless transition reflects our lack of confidence in ends and our mistrust in the apportioning of history to epochs. Therefore, argues Kermode, “our epoch is the epoch of nothing positive, only of transition” (ibid.). Initially, as Lewicki points out, Christianity considered apocalypse as an optimistic image, since it meant the destruction of the old world and the birth of the new and infinitely better world, and any faithful Christian should welcome rather than fear it (1984, 3). Lewicki sees that the historical and ideological background for the “vision of total annihilation” that featured prominently in American literature lies in Puritanism and, in a sense, the early Puritans’ conception of America as God’s promised land, as the New World, was grounded in apocalyptic imagery. It was only later, when frustration and skepticism about history arose, that the religious sense of the apocalypse as regeneration gave way to the conception of apocalypse as destruction (ibid.).

The ending of *Gravity’s Rainbow* contains a historical reference to that old apocalyptic tradition in the song of William Slothrop, the 17th century Puritan ancestor of the protagonist Tyrone Slothrop. The song—which is written in 17th century style but is not exactly a Christian hymn<sup>56</sup>—contains a prophecy of a change to come, of the

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<sup>56</sup> William Vesterman remarks that the hymn at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* both uses and abuses the conventions of 17th century English poetry. The hymn starts with iambic

turning of time, and of a world in which the difference between life and death is not decisive. With the song, a different conception of death emerges in the midst of an apocalypse, one that undermines the absoluteness of the end inscribed in linear temporality. The song brings forth something “forgotten” and “out of print,” something “They” don’t know about, which clearly marks it as a sign of resistance. “They” is the name for the anonymous and omnipresent power structures that almost totally control the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—not only the course of the war, but also the way people perceive it. Thus “They” is real as a conglomeration of forces that secretly affect the course of history, and non-real as an ideology, as a principle of control that the people have internalized. There is very little in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that They don’t know about, and therefore a song “They never taught anyone to sing” is not only heretic and socially repressible, but also represents something unthinkable, something that cannot be defined within the confines of ideology. Like the screaming of the Rocket that overcomes the sound of control (the police siren), the song is something that overcomes the conception of death as absolute limit, and with this structural parallel, limit and control come to represent thinking that conceives death only as the opposite of life.

Thus in the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, two notions of death appear as intertwined and antagonistic: the notion of death as the absolute limit, and death that is indifferent to limits. The social impact of this difference also comes across in the way Pynchon writes about entropy. In the theme of entropy we encounter, again, the image of an apocalypse that is, paradoxically, immanent and yet in a state of constant deferral.

#### Pynchon’s Entropy: A Short History of a Key Term

[Y]ou can’t win, things are going to get worse before they get better, who says they’re going to get better. (Pynchon 1984, 87)

The discussion of the role of entropy in Pynchon’s fiction has continued almost as long as his career as a writer. One thing commonly considered a novelty in post-war American fiction and that partly established Pynchon’s reputation as a writer was his way of using scientific and technological concepts both metaphorically and as explicit subjects in his works. Such terms as entropy have been used in postwar American

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tetrameter, “a form traditionally associated in English poetry with plainness, sincerity, and seriousness” (Vesterman 1976, 110). But, although the typographical illusion of regularity continues, the hymn very soon starts to break this form, associating now more to the irregular iambic tetrameter typical of parodic 17th century poems of Samuel Butler. The hymn, summarizes Vesterman, is serious, while its manner is “not frivolous but speciously confused” (111).

fiction, but the usage is usually loosely metaphorical, referring to disorder and decay in general. Pynchon's way of using entropy is, however, both metaphorical *and* scientifically exact.

In thermodynamics, entropy is a ratio that measures the inevitable degradation of heat within an isolated system. According to the second law of thermodynamics, formulated by Rudolf Clausius in 1852, entropy always tends to increase. Every isolated system tends towards homogeneity, the disappearance of differences. In thermodynamics this means that within an isolated system, differences between temperatures tend to disappear, which eventually leads to the stagnation of the system when there is no more energy available. A well-known theoretical implication of the second law of thermodynamics is that this homogenization of temperatures works also in the universe, dissipating every heat reservoir, until the universe eventually reaches a final equilibrium, a "heat death," in which the temperature stabilizes near absolute zero (−273 degrees Celsius).

The apocalyptic overtones in thermodynamic entropy were perhaps the reason why the principle of entropy was so easily applied to social philosophy at the end of the 19th century, when powers of decay and disorder were seen to be working in history as well. By the beginning of the 20th century, the notion of entropic dissolution had become a cultural metaphor, a metanarrative of the decline and final destruction of Western civilization. Oswald Spengler, author of the notorious *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) was convinced of the mythical power inherent in the notion of entropy and announced that "what the myth of *Götterdämmerung* signified of old [...] the theory of entropy signifies today." Henry Adams applied the notion of entropy to social philosophy, and portrayed society as composed of separate (isolated) groups that are, like any other system in nature, eventually submitted to degradation, according to the laws of physics (Lewicki 1984, 72)<sup>57</sup>. Thus the turn-of-the-century concern for "decadence" was given a scientific model—a parallel that Pynchon openly uses in *V.*, where several isolated social groups tend to maintain their existence by repeating the same behavior over and over again. Decadence in *V.* signifies not only moral decline, but the eventual disappearance of energy and any possibility of change: "Decadence, decadence. What is it? Only a clear movement toward death [...]" (V, 321).

As information theory developed in the 1950's, the term entropy emerged again, now in relation to the transmission of information processed by machines. One of the most famous theoreticians of entropy, Norbert Wiener (also known as the father of

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<sup>57</sup> Lewicki points out that although entropy as a term hadn't been used in literature before Adams, the same basic assumption of the eventual decay of the physical world and men had been present in works such as Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) (1984, 77–79). In this story, Bartleby, the young scrivener, gradually abstains from all motion, work, food, and communication until he dies. He thus becomes an image of the stagnation of a closed system (although it is highly unlikely that Melville would have been familiar with the theories of Clausius presented a year earlier).

cybernetics), opposed entropy to information and argued that it is possible to treat sets of messages as having entropy similar to sets of states of the external world (that is, physical phenomena). In information theory, entropy measures the amount of noise and distortion in the process of transmission, and just as entropy is a measure of disorganization, the information carried by a set of messages is a measure of organization. Thus information is *negentropy*, the opposite of entropy. Claude Shannon, an engineer and a contemporary of Wiener, held the opposite view that entropy is identical to information. According to Shannon, the increase in a system's disorganization (entropy) means that more information becomes available, because entropy is related to the unpredictability of information. In information theory, entropy was associated with the information explosion theorists foresaw in the 1950's. The sinister threat of entropy, as Katherine Hayles has commented, was thus not so much that "the universe will run down, but that the information will pile up until it overwhelms our ability to understand it" (1990, 49). Therefore, the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* can also be understood, as Joseph Tabbi shows, as a metaphor for information explosion. Tabbi sees in the whole novel a clear connection between the apocalyptic "Cosmic Bomb" and global communication. "The fulfillment of either one could mean an end to history" (1995, 74).

The importance of information entropy to literature of the 1950's was that "rather than translating physical terms into literary ones, writers understood that the very matter of fiction, communication among people, was also influenced by entropy" (Lewicki 1984, 73). Pynchon's early works openly reflect these ideas. In the short story, "Entropy" (1961), the theories of thermodynamic entropy are used explicitly, and the "heat death" theory is made literal and concrete. The story is set in Washington, in a building with two apartments. While the one has been the scene of an endless and chaotic party for two days, the other is a quiet and artificially sealed hothouse whose inhabitants have almost completely withdrawn from the external world. Both apartments are metaphors for isolated systems tending towards increasing entropy and an unavoidable end, despite what the people inside think or do about it. The wild party, where loud music is coming from different sources and everybody is talking to or screaming at each other and breaking all kinds of rules, represents information entropy, while the quiet hothouse above them represents thermodynamic entropy. The story has a disquieting, claustrophobic atmosphere. There is no outside—even the temperature seems to remain constant at 37 degrees Fahrenheit, which comes to symbolize the eventual stagnation of the fictional world.

The cosmologists had predicted an eventual heat-death for the universe (something like Limbo: form and motion abolished, heat-energy identical at every point in it); the meteorologists, day-to-day, staved it off by contradicting with a reassuring array of varied temperatures. But for three days now, despite the changeful weather, the mercury had stayed at 37 degrees Fahrenheit. (Pynchon 1984, 85)

In *The Crying of Lot 49* the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, is given a detailed description of the laws of thermodynamics and information entropy, and after trying the machine of inventor John Nefastis, she becomes a kind of walking Maxwell's Demon<sup>58</sup>. Oedipa's quest for the hidden meaning and structure behind the novel's events is openly described as a process of sorting out messages from seemingly random pieces of information. Apart from *The Crying of Lot 49*, there are very few explicit references to entropy in Pynchon's other novels, but as William Plater has remarked, while Pynchon's early short story discusses entropy, his novels reveal its workings (1978, 7)<sup>59</sup>. Each of Pynchon's first three novels evokes the quest for order and signification, and their preconditions—a quest that affects Pynchon's characters and readers alike. Therefore, it is not surprising that entropy, a term related to disorder, or to the eventual impossibility of order, turns into a dominant metaphor in the secondary literature.

Pynchon's background as an engineering student and the prominent role of natural sciences in his novels led critics especially in the 1970's to use entropy as a key term in explaining both Pynchon's world view and the lack of coherence that characterizes his novels. Plater, for example, has argued that Pynchon uses a closed system as a metaphor for the world, and according to the laws of thermodynamics this world is an organization that tends increasingly toward chaos (1978, 1–2). In his reading of *V.*, Richard Patteson saw the workings of entropy in all kinds of disorder in the novel: “political anarchy, decadence, mindless sexual activity, tooth decay, irrational

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<sup>58</sup> Maxwell's Demon is a notorious thought experiment (or “heuristic fiction,” as Katherine Hayles calls it) in thermodynamics, proposed by James Clerk Maxwell in 1871. Maxwell's hypothesis was that entropy could be resisted in situations in which a vessel is divided into two portions, and a small hole connects them. If one could suppose the existence of a microscopic being who could separate fast-moving molecules from slow ones by opening and closing the hole, the gradual reduction of the differences between temperatures could be overcome, for the temperature in the one part of the vessel would always be higher than in the other. This microscopic being, later on called Maxwell's Demon, has been a subject of much controversy, but it has turned into a figure that unites thermodynamic entropy with information entropy in a profound way, since, as Hayles points out, “Demon is a liminal figure who stands at a threshold that separates not just slow molecules from fast but an ordered world of will from the disordered world of chaos” (1990, 43). In *The Crying of Lot 49*, this being at a threshold between chaos and order precisely characterizes Oedipa's situation.

<sup>59</sup> The name Herbert Stencil in *V.* alludes to the 19th century philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose speculative social Darwinism makes use of such concepts as entropy. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the idea of *perpetuum mobile* is characterized as “entropy management” (GR, 260). And, as careful readers have found out, the name of Tyrone Slothrop is an anagram of the words “sloth or entropy.” Lewicki points out that entropy is symbolized in physics by the letter S, and S-shaped structures and figures appear frequently in *Gravity's Rainbow* (Lewicki 1984, 94). The same can be said about *V.*, which plays with the visual repetition of the V-figure in sine curves, serpents, saw-edges, etc.



acts of violence, and the apparent randomness of history” (Patteson 1974, 30). Given that in thermodynamics total entropy is synonymous with stasis and inertia, some critics have seen the same features in Pynchon’s characters as well (see, for example, Chambers 1992, 26). The long cultural history of entropy as an image of irreversible degradation and decline has also been found to be at work in Pynchon’s fiction, representing the writer’s concern with the destructive powers inherent in modern society.

Much Pynchon criticism of the 1970’s used entropy as a primary model for the structure of Pynchon’s narratives—as a metaphor of the dissolution of meaningful structures into semantic chaos and uncertainty. A typical approach was to analyze the complex relationship of chaos and order (or informational entropy and negentropy) in Pynchon’s novels<sup>60</sup>. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a rich and complex novel, with its 760 pages, and more than 400 identifiable characters, multiple discourses, and highly complex narrative structure, has been compared to information explosion itself: there is simply too much information, too much for any reader to handle, and the novel itself is a semantic chaos in which all meaningful structures tend to dissolve. However, an obvious counterforce to this chaos in Pynchon’s fiction is always paranoia, the idea that everything is somehow connected as part of an immense conspiracy directed against the individual. It is one of Pynchon’s major ironies that paranoia, by definition a mental disease, is also a metaphor for order in his fiction, and every attempt towards order, whether made by a fictive character or the frustrated reader, has paranoid characteristics. The critical tendency to lock onto entropy/negentropy dialectics as the overarching theme of Pynchon’s fiction became so overwhelming that it led the writer to complain in the introduction to *Slow Learner* that “people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do” (Pynchon 1984, 12). In the same introduction he noted, quite sarcastically, that the meaning of entropy in the short story “Entropy” derived mainly from the ideas of Norbert Wiener and Henry Adams.

A self-reflective phase emerged in Pynchon criticism in the 1980’s and 1990’s, when postmodern skepticism towards master discourses started to gain ground. Critics like Molly Hite, Deborah Madsen, Liisa Saariluoma—to name a few—argued that it is questionable to look for some overall model, like entropy, whose meaning is to be revealed through interpretation. A characteristic of Pynchon’s texts is that they seem to affirm some totalizing scheme, and yet this scheme is constantly ironized and undermined. Hite, for example, thinks that such notions as entropy are inadequate to elucidate Pynchon’s novels, because in them such totalizing approaches are constantly undermined. With reference to V., Hite has remarked that “to attach names like ‘entropy’ or ‘decadence’ to the V-symbol is to limit the resonance of that symbol to a certain frequency” (1983, 27). Deborah Madsen has pointed out that as a term entropy

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Plater (1978), Tanner (1971), and Anne Mangel’s essay “Maxwell’s Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*” in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, George Levine and David Leverenz (eds.). Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976.

has no connotations of metaphysical depth, and that there is no basis for using it as a metaphor for such pretextual images as the fall of man or the decay of history (1991, 17–19). In Pynchon’s texts the meaning of entropy is often ambiguous, resisting such pretextual explanations. Liisa Saariluoma has pointed out that since scientific explanations are often parodied in Pynchon’s fiction, the relevance of explanatory models such as entropy is always provisional (1992, 246). In a fictional work entropy can only function as a metaphor, and within Pynchon’s fiction, metaphors and symbols cannot be regarded simply as keys to textual locks (*ibid.*).

Katherine Hayles’s *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (1990) emphasizes that terms like entropy embody the interplay of scientific theories and cultural contexts. Because theories and concepts are constituted in language, they always carry cultural connotations that affect the way they are linked with each other. Therefore, argues Hayles, “metaphors in general, and the information-entropy connection in particular, directly threaten science’s ability to separate ideas from the language it uses to express them” (1990, 50). To Mattessich, Pynchon’s use of scientific concepts such as gravity or entropy is a twofold narrative tactic, since these metaphors both naturalize cultural space and relativize objective reality. This complicity represents to Mattessich a “critique of the technological paradigm at the heart of scientific institutions and methods” (2002, 19). Mattessich sees that Pynchon’s way of writing about science and scientists, and the material and ideological preconditions of their work, makes it clear that “science is first and foremost cultural, subject to a logic not conformable to its causal empiricities” (198).

Reading Hayles’ book, or John Johnston’s study of the role of media in American literature (*Information Multiplicity*, 1998), it becomes clear even to a reader who lacks expertise in physics and information theory that entropy is a highly controversial concept. The theorists seem to agree only that entropy sometimes increases and sometimes decreases. All the rest, including the relationship between thermodynamic entropy and informational entropy, seems to be disputable. Nowadays, thermodynamic laws are understood as statistical generalizations rather than laws in an absolute sense, and the absoluteness of the “heat death” theory has been questioned (Hayles 1990, 40). Recent applications of information entropy in chaos theory have linked disorder and uncertainty to the initial condition of a system rather than to its end. Hayles remarks that the diverse meanings of entropy have to be seen in relation to the diverse cultural and historical contexts.

[I]t makes no sense to ask what entropy “is,” as though it were possible to find in this protean signifier a transcendent signification. Instead we must ask, what it meant to whom, for what reasons, in what context, and with what consequences. (38)

Entropy is thus a term that always returns to the discourse of criticism. Because entropy indicates the movement “from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to

sameness” (Pynchon 1984, 88), the discussion about entropy, when it is predictable and canonized, loses its informational content and, according to the premises of information theory, turns into noise. Therefore, if one is truly attached to the idea of entropy, one should look for novelty from within the critical discourse as well.

Pynchon both uses the ideological overtones of the concept and challenges them by questioning the metaphysical grounds of end-oriented ideologies. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, one can surely detect the idea of the decline of the West, but eventually this master narrative turns out to be one story among others, born in a certain cultural context, namely, that of the West. The way Pynchon deals with the question of entropy challenges the threatening image of the end and indicates that what is worse than ending is something that goes on endlessly.

### Degradation and Resistance: Entropy’s Social Element

When it comes to entropy, Pynchon’s reader is in a dilemma. Ignoring the concept means that the reading lacks an important frame of reference, while using it as a constitutive metaphor for his writing always brings with it the “cosmic moral twist,” as Pynchon himself has put it (1984, 13). As the history of the term has shown, entropy is a term of specific cultural resonance, because as an end-oriented metaphor it is conceptually linked to the notion of the end in general and to death in particular. But if we take entropy as a scientific model for death, we have to ask what kind of death it is.

Entropy is something that cannot be given a proper meaning. It is something inherent in the material world, and although it can be momentarily controlled, all attempts at total control—whether it be human intelligence and will fighting the forces of nature, or information set against disorganization—eventually fail. But, though entropy has the tendency to increase in isolated systems, the basic problem that has often been pointed out is that there are no completely isolated systems in nature. At some point the closed system always fractures so that it is no longer isolated; therefore the ultimate end of an entropic process, the state of absolute and limitless entropy, turns out to be a statistical generalization, or, in other words, a version of the “fabulously textual” apocalypses mentioned by Derrida.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, these two characteristics of entropy—uncontrollability and eventual impossibility—are set in social, political and historical context. A juxtaposition that pervades the novel is the opposition between control (the control involved in the use of technology, social control, the control over life and death), and the forces that resist it. The place where the powers of control and powers of anarchy meet is the Zone, Central Europe during a brief period in the summer of 1945. The ideological dimension of disorder and uncontrollability becomes apparent in the discussion between Tyrone Slothrop and the anarchist and utopist Francisco Squalidozzi in Zurich. The discussion is about whether the extraordinary conditions of the Zone will

persist after the war is over.

[Squalidozzi] “In ordinary times,” he wants to explain, “the center always wins. Its power grows with time, and that can’t be reversed, not by ordinary means. Decentralizing, back towards anarchism, needs extraordinary times...this War—this incredible War—just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it.*”

[Slothrop] “Sure. For how long?”

[Squalidozzi] “It won’t last. of course not, but for a few months... perhaps there’ll be peace by the autumn (...)

[Slothrop] “Yeah but—what’re you gonna do, take over land and try to hold it? They’ll run you right off, podner.”

[Squalidozzi] No. Taking land is building more fences. We want to leave it open. We want it to grow, to change. In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless.” Then, as if struck on the forehead, a sudden fast glance, not at the door, but *up at the ceiling*—“So is our danger.”(GR, 264–265)

The idea of the Zone as a “free-floating, anarchical space” (Hayles 1990, 6) contains both utopian space and reference to the unique historical situation at the end of WWII, when the political order of the former Third Reich was more or less in ruins. But the center or the regime that people like Squalidozzi are set against now appears as an anonymous “They,” a conglomerate of the Allies (U.S., The Soviet Union, U.K., France) and multinational corporations. As They want to stay in power, their aim is to control all kinds of disintegration. In Squalidozzi’s declaration of the “openness” of the Zone the opposition entropy/negentropy is given a political impact. While the forces of control tend toward unity, uniformity, networks, co-operation, functionality, any tendency towards disintegration is an attack to that order. Mattessich has argued that eventually entropy in Pynchon appears “not as a force to be resisted but as the actuating principle of resistance” (2002, 19), and this is the role of entropy from the social perspective. That the possibility of this resistance is closely related to death is made explicit in *Gravity’s Rainbow* on numerous occasions.

An important storyline in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in which social control is linked at a profound level with the control of entropy concerns the invention of plastics in chemistry. Plastic is a material that practically won’t degrade, a kind of immortal, artificially constructed material. One of the many flashbacks of the novel tells about the discovery of the benzene ring by chemist Friedrich Kekulé von Stradonitz in 1865. While trying to analyze the molecular structure of benzene, he has a dream about a snake with its tail in its mouth, and this age-old symbol of fertility and cyclical regeneration now becomes the model for cyclical benzene rings and the principle for the structuring of synthetical molecules that paved the way for the manufacturing of plastics. The true scientific revolution with plastic, as Pynchon indicates in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is the overcoming of nature, and this control over degradation is given openly political overtones:

[T]he chemists were no longer [...] at the mercy of Nature. They could decide now what properties they wanted a molecule to have, and then go ahead and build it. At du Pont, the next step after nylon was to introduce aromatic rings into the polyamide chain. Pretty soon a whole family of “aromatic polymers” had arisen: aromatic polyamides, polycarbonates, polyethers, polysulfanes. The target property most often seemed to be strength—first among Plasticity’s virtuous triad of Strength, Stability and Whiteness (*Kraft, Standfestigkeit, Weiße*: how often these were taken for Nazi graffiti [...]). (GR, 249–250)

With plastics, the process of degradation has been eliminated because it is not good for business: in order to keep production going and make profit, death and destruction (in the form of degradation) have to be eliminated. For those who control the development, production and sale of plastic products in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, plastic comes to represent, eventually, the fantasy of overcoming death. But paradoxically this urge to remove and defy processes of disintegration results in a threat more terrifying than that of entropy:

Kekulé 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 this 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 that the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (GR, 412)

Here Pynchon clearly delineates a process in which the logic of accumulation results from giving up symbolical reciprocity—“taking and not giving back”—and because this symbolic demand of return has been indefinitely deferred and suppressed, it turns into a monstrous double, a dreadful image of absolute destruction that political economy cannot get rid of. Here, again, Pynchon is close to Baudrillard’s ideas in *L’échange symbolique*, where he argues that the entire system of political economy has become a finality without end. With reference to Walter Benjamin’s famous argument, that in fascism politics has turned into a source of aesthetic enjoyment,<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard argues that we are all victims of production become spectacle (1976, 282). The aesthetic vertigo of productivity without end, delirious production and reproduction, is closely tied to our awareness of the imminence of catastrophe in every spectacle. Death is

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<sup>61</sup> Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936).

imminent to political economy, which is why the latter sees itself as immortal (ibid.).

## End and Return

As the notion of apocalypse suggests both the destruction of the old and a new beginning, the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* marks a change in Pynchon's thematics. Apocalyptic imagery, so prevalent in his first three novels, is absent from *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* (but reappear in Pynchon's latest novel, *Against the Day*). Joseph Tabbi has remarked that "the overwhelming dread of the one great unimaginable event would seem to have been replaced [...] in Pynchon's writing after *Gravity's Rainbow* with a series of distractions, minor shocks, and endless stimulations of consumer desire" (1995, 76)<sup>62</sup>. It would be easy to say that the reason for this change is that apocalypse, at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* both an event and a non-event, can never be repeated with similar effect. Another, and more profound reason is that already in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon depicts the withdrawal and impossibility of the End as anything but a cultural self-representation; which makes this end of the world a postmodern one par excellence. The impossibility of the End as a total closure of history or as a transcendental revelation of truth is ironically reflected already earlier in the novel, when the medium, Carrol Eventyr, is possessed by a voice from beyond the grave. The voice announces in a biblical tone:

Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the Creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the Kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home—only the millions of last moments...no more. Our history is an aggregate of last moments. (GR, 148)

In his reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Geoffrey Nealon has analyzed the postmodern era as one of ends—the end of metaphysics, the end of religion, the end of history. This "end" is another name for the withdrawal of transcendental ground: the promise of meaning beyond the physical realm has gone into crisis, and therefore any system or discipline grounded on such a promise is rendered problematic (Nealon 1993, 73–74). When "first principles" appear as arbitrary, fictional, invented—in other words, products of a certain kind of thinking—they are no longer transcendental (ibid.). "The peculiar and pernicious problem in all this, however, is that the notion of ground and the concepts of philosophical thinking cannot simply be abandoned" (76). The apocalypse once meant revelation, but the notion of apocalypse as the end of metaphysics (conceived, necessarily, from within metaphysics) does not contain a revelation of truth, but only its withdrawal—no truth but impasse (80). The postmodern consciousness,

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<sup>62</sup> With "Pynchon's writing after *Gravity's Rainbow*" Tabbi here naturally refers only to *Vineland*.

argues Nealon, is the consciousness of being a survivor, of living under the shadow of mass destruction, an apocalypse without revelation (83). However, this postmodern conception of the end is not altogether tragic:

A conception of end in this thinking differently about metaphysics and about literature—end as other than simple limit—allows us to thematize this approach without arrival of meaning, [...] as other than a lamentable situation. (Nealon 1993, 99)

Baudrillard also sees the End as a promise of meaning that has gone into crisis, but he formulates this crisis differently. In his essay “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media” (1983) Baudrillard approaches the notion of informational entropy by theorizing the *implosion*, that is, the neutralization of meaning, medium, and the real in the endless simulacrum created by information. “Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one” (1994, 80). But, as the endless reproduction of value only betrays the return of the same, the endless circulation of information eventually results in entropic indifferentiation and volatilization of meaning. That this mode of production is inherently *catastrophic* has been one of the leitmotifs in Baudrillard’s work. But Baudrillard is not a doomsday prophet; he insists that desperation in the face of the disappearance of meaning belongs to the idealism of communication through meaning that dominates our whole view of information (83). It is possible that in this catastrophic situation, we are facing something that cannot be conveyed in terms of meaning (and value):

[O]ne must realize that “catastrophe” has this “catastrophic” meaning of end and annihilation only in relation to a linear vision of accumulation, of productive finality, imposed on us by the system. Etymologically, the term itself only signifies the curvature, the winding down to the bottom of a cycle that leads to what one could call the “horizon of the event,” to an impassable horizon of meaning: beyond that nothing takes place *that has meaning for us*—but it suffices to get out of this ultimatum of meaning in order for the catastrophe itself no longer seem like a final and nihilistic day of reckoning, such as it functions in our contemporary imaginary. (1994, 83)

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon reifies this ambiguous double significance of the catastrophic curvature in the image of the Rocket. The technical achievements that led to the rocket industry—the development of the V-1 and V-2 rockets in Germany during WWII, nuclear physics, the atomic bomb and the moonflights—all form an apocalyptic bond of death in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Thus the Rocket, written with a capital letter, turns into a central figure of death from which—if we keep in mind the novel’s ending—no one can escape. For the Rocket to rise from the ground it needs to conquer gravity, but eventually, as the parabolic arc of its trajectory reveals, gravity pulls it back to Earth. This double movement of rising and falling creates an analogy between death and

gravity that is explicitly commented on in the novel: “everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return” (GR, 209). Therefore, many critics have seen the parabolic arc as an image of the “movement toward death” (Plater 1978, 185), or an image of the course of linear history, both individual and collective: “a life, a history, is like a rocket trajectory” (Tabbi 1995, 91).

But, as has often been stated, the Rocket is not a simple metaphor but rather a conglomerate of metaphors. In the Rocket, as Plater has remarked, “Pynchon integrates life and death with as many attendant forms as possible, from mathematics to vegetation myths” (1978, 156)—each reflecting the different desires, hopes and fears of the people around it. “The Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it—in combat, in tunnel, on paper” (GR, 727). For those who took part in the construction of rockets in Germany (technicians, scientists, army personnel), “it was impossible not to think of the Rocket without thinking of *Shicksal*, of growing toward a shape predestined and perhaps a little otherworldly” (416). The paradox with the Rocket is that it appears both as an image of destruction and as a means of an imaginary escape from death (in the form of gravity). These two sides of death remain unresolved, creating in the novel a Manichean dualism of “two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins [...] of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide, the two perpetually in struggle” (727).

Such excess of meaning is why Tabbi has named the rockets in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and especially the last of the German V-2’s, the unofficial 00000 Rocket, as representatives of the “technological sublime” in Pynchon. A V-2 rocket appears in the novel unexpectedly like “a ghost in the sky,” (48) or an “angel of death” (760, et passim) —as a sublime being and a messenger from beyond. But with “technological sublime” Tabbi means that the Rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow* becomes an image of how technological systems produce a totality that is incomprehensible to any single individual (1995, 104–108). The trajectory of the rockets requires a complex interplay of ballistics, aerodynamics, engineering, electronics, radio guidance—both the hardware and the net of sign systems all affecting each other. Such a complex machine, Tabbi argues, resists integration into any single explanatory framework; its incomprehensibility verges on the sublime, for it also shows the limits of symbolization (80–81). Thus, when the arrival of the Rocket signifies the end of the world at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this end is already something beyond meaning.

As has often been noted in criticism, Pynchon in all of his novels evokes the question of the nature of time through unresolved tension between cyclical, eternally returning time, and linear time with a definite ending. Cyclical time emerges both in the characters’ experiences of the Other Side beyond linear time, and in the repetitive structures of the narration; linear time is evoked especially in Pynchon’s preoccupation with end-oriented processes, both “natural” and “cultural”—entropy, gravity, history,



life. Pynchon's ambiguity about the End, however, also affects the image of the Rocket and its parabolic trajectory. Even if the trajectory of the Rocket is described as a "shape [...] of no return" (GR, 209), its absolute linearity is questioned in the novel many times. As Wolfley argues, the parabolic arc of the Rocket is a broken cycle "a cycle cut off, stopped midway, unable to swoop down and return again" (1992, 880) that represents a connection between the cyclical time of eternal return and Western, linear time "that demands a complete end someday" (ibid.). This complex connection between two modes of temporality emerges in *Gravity's Rainbow* through gravity.

In Pynchon's way of both affirming and questioning the analogy between gravity and death, Mattessich sees a critique openly directed at the death instinct as a generalized cultural notion. A prominent aspect in Pynchon's way of using technology in his writing, argues Mattessich, is his metaphoric use of science and mathematics not only in terms of technology or technical production but as necessity and physical law as well (Mattessich 2002, 197).

One conspicuous instance of this is the designation of gravity as a death instinct. The metaphor implied here supposes that the latter borrows from the former its force as a law that cannot be contravened. As a result, Pynchon imports into a cultural space all the solidity and self-evidence of a "natural" fact. (Mattessich 2002, 197)

And through the Rocket imagery "human self-destructiveness becomes so extreme as to seem like a law of nature" (Mattessich 2002, 74), and gravity becomes "an ultimate constraint or ground for history, as that death or negation against which life struggles but also that suffuses life itself in its material forms" (188). "No surprise, no second chances, no return"—many characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* hold on to this conception of death because they are affected by its absoluteness, "hopeless as the one-way flow of European time" (GR, 724). But, Mattessich argues further, Pynchon's way of "troping" science, that is, of writing over the language of science and turning it against itself, is the strategy with which *Gravity's Rainbow's* critique is played out (2002, 200).

[T]he association of a death drive with the law of gravity says more about the pseudoscientific nature of the former than anything else [...]. When the death drive becomes for Pynchon as necessary as gravity, [...] not by way of reducing one to the other so much as fracturing the code that differentiates science from nonscience, undoing both signifiers, breaking down and through the discursive or symbolic structure that defines things as pure presences that can be ordered, measured, organized, and substituted. (ibid.)

Such a writerly strategy emerges when Pynchon turns the parabolic arc, the mathematical function of the eternally approaching zero, into a cycle. The image of the cycle returns in an ambiguous passage at the end of the novel, when the African officer Enzian has a vision about the parabola of the Rocket as something that is not

[A]s we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it “rises from” and the Earth it “strikes” No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it’s only the *peak* that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world. (GR, 726)

With this *tour de force* Pynchon has inverted the significance of the parabolic arc from an image of linear time with a definite ending to an image of return, in which Earth signifies both death and rebirth. The absoluteness of gravity as a metaphor of death is radically questioned also in another visionary passage, where businessman Lyle Bland has a fantasy of going “underneath” history: “he imagines that he has been journeying underneath history; that history is Earth’s mind, and that there are several layers, set very deep, layers of history analogous to layers of coal and oil in Earth’s body” (589). And this realization leads to another, namely that “...Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock to find a body and psyche...[...]. To find that Gravity, taken so for granted, is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth’s mindbody.” (590)

Underneath the Earth is the “other silent world” (726), an other order of things beyond the immediate. This world is no doubt fantastic and utopian, impossible to reach in any positive sense, but important as a locus from where the axioms of This Side can be challenged. The importance of a utopian text, argues Fredric Jameson, is that “the Utopian text really does hold out for us the vivid lesson of what we cannot imagine: only it does so not by imagining it concretely but rather by the way of holes in the text that are our own incapacity to see beyond the epoch and its ideological closures” (1994, 75).

The image of the Rocket creates a bridge from this chapter to the next, in which the sense of an ending is evoked in relation to individual mortality. In it, I will analyze Pynchon’s characters’ recurrent experience of *being at the limit*—at the limit of their own individual life, but also at the limit of language, and conceptual thinking—and how Pynchon through these holes in the narration evokes a conception of death that is other than a simple limit.

## 5. Take it to the Limit: Experiencing the Extremes of Life and Language

Zoyd [...] usually found himself listening to the Eagles' *Greatest Hits*, in particular "Take It to the Limit," basically his whole story these days. (VL, 374)

In the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop investigates the places where V-2 rockets have hit London during the December bombings of 1944. Slothrop's investigations are part of his job as an intelligence officer, but soon they turn into Puritan self-examination in the face of death: "Ruins he goes daily to look in are each a sermon on vanity. [...] Slothrop's Progress: London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable" (25). Seeing the traces of bombings day after day, and knowing that since the rocket flies faster than sound, none of its victims can hear it coming, Slothrop begins to think that he is one of its destined victims, too. Somewhere there is a rocket with his name written on it, and the fact that he is still alive is nothing but a mere chance. As he explains to his colleague:

"[L]isten, I don't want to upset you but ... I mean I'm four years overdue's what it is, it could happen any time, the next second, right, just suddenly ... shit ... just zero, just nothing ... and ..."  
It's nothing he can see or lay hands on—sudden gases, a violence upon the air and no trace afterward ... a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever." (ibid.)

Besides how the Rocket brings death, it becomes in itself the very image of death that escapes representation. The lethal Word that the Rocket carries is already something beyond language.

But when Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* openly makes the connection between the sublime Rocket and death, he is providing more than a modern, technologized allegory of divine intervention—be it an angel, or some other avatar of a transcendental force<sup>63</sup>. The parallel works also the other way around by revealing the interconnectedness of people's conceptions of death and the surrounding historical and

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<sup>63</sup> On the angel imagery in *Gravity's Rainbow* see, for example, Brian McHale, "Gravity's Angels in America, or, Pynchon's Angelology Revisited" (Pynchon Notes 42–43, Spring-Fall 1998: 303–316). As many critics have noted, the angels in *Gravity's Rainbow* are not especially Christian, but closer to Kabbalistic, Gnostic and Islamic spirits. For example, the Islamic Angel of Death, *Malaku 'l-Maut*, is a spirit that both causes death and takes the soul (Bardis 1981, 51).

ideological conditions. If we see death as the Rocket, we see, on the one hand, death as an anonymous, technologized and calculated event that takes place with the coolness of an industrial process, and, on the other, death as a source of anxiety, as a personal fate that hangs constantly over individual life. As I noted in chapter 2, the Rocket appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* also as a condensation of the Western cultural history of death: the Rocket is the mythical angel of death, the Grand Equalizer (“Everyone’s equal. Same chances of getting hit”), and the very personal “guardian executioner” (GR, 727). When death comes accidentally like the rocket blasts in 1944 London, it means that living has turned into mere survival: subjects, like Slothrop, are haunted by the thought of their own death, and this haunting determines their actions in life. As the rocket parable shows, death in Pynchon is never a purely personal matter, for it always touches (wo)man’s social and historical being.

The focus in this chapter is on Pynchon’s characters’ relationship to their own mortality in three different approaches to three novels, *Mason & Dixon*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*. A common denominator in these readings is the characters’ experience of death as a limit—as the limit of the lifespan or the limit of time in general, as the limit of rationalism and technoscientific thought, and as the limit of language and symbolization. But in Pynchon’s fiction, the limit is not separating being and nothingness, but two orders of being. What characterizes the Other Side of the limit is indifference in relation to the limits, and a peculiar sense of community. Because the emergence of the limit in Pynchon is always related to sudden loss of value, I will in the following read this highly ambiguous transcendental, social, and textual space in terms of the Baudrillardian symbolic. Being at the limit, Pynchon’s characters have an occult sense of connection in and through death; it is either the realization of being a mortal connected to other mortals, or the realization of a connection between the dead and the living. (The discussion of the role of the dead in Pynchon continues in the next chapter.)

In the first part of this chapter, Pynchon’s characters experience the limit in relation to temporality in *Mason & Dixon*, when the emerging rationalization of time, that is, horology, begins to affect 18th-century men. Along with a heightened sense of the lapse of time the sense of mortality also changes; the characters in *Mason & Dixon* are placed in a historical situation in which the rational organization of time makes it a form through which life is also capitalized. But, since this process is yet in its initiatory state, the land-surveyors Mason and Dixon realize that it covers something else, an unknown mode of time and life. In the second part, the limit emerges even more straightforwardly as the limit between death and rationalization in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this novel, Pynchon describes various scientific projects as projects of postponing the limit, both the limit of what can be known and the limit between life and death. This scientific urge also appears on a more personal level as the hope for immortality provided by technology, as the fantasy of controlling and eventually overcoming death. In the third part, the limit is experienced in relation to language and temporality. The

housewife Oedipa Maas's desire to reach the fatal and subversive truth behind words and symbols is in the novel openly associated with a certain death wish. Oedipa's attempt to reach the past and find meaningful language culminates in her attempts at communication that will transcend the ontological limit: communication with the dead.

*Tempus Incognitum: Death and Temporality in Mason & Dixon*

One of Max Weber's arguments on the relationship between Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism was that modern capitalism, although largely indebted to Puritan mentality, no longer required it after its functioning became institutionalized (Schroeder 1990, 71). However, an essential feature left in the secularization of Puritan mentality was the feeling that one's life is constantly subject to assessment—"the godless feeling of sin," as Weber calls it. "Hence even in a secularized age there is still the feeling that one's 'total personality' is constantly being evaluated and that guilt must attach to the failure to live up to this assessment" (Weber qtd in Schroeder 1990, 72). This idea of a constantly evaluated life—the life calculus—is reflected also in *Mason & Dixon*, both explicitly and implicitly. Charles Mason, when reading from I Corinthians about the resurrection of the dead feels, once again, as if his dead wife were speaking to him. Mason's attitude towards these recurring visitations is ambiguous:

If he does not treasure, neither does he cast away, these Lesser Revelations, saving them one by mean, insufficient one, —some unbidden, some sought and earn'd, all gathering in a small pile inside the Casket of his Hopes, against an unknown Sum, intended to purchase his Salvation. (409)<sup>64</sup>

Mason's own version of the life calculus is not strictly Puritan, since instead of noble deeds and merits he collects dreams and revelations. As a character, however, Mason is situated in a historical moment when the principles of Puritan mentality start to emerge in a more profaned form. This cultural change is reflected throughout the novel; the characters seem to be on a threshold between two kinds of thinking, and their experience of the world changes. Still holding on to their Puritan spiritual heritage<sup>65</sup>, they find themselves entering a "new Realm", where a new god reigns, yet where the same sense of persecution and guilt afflicts them: "here must we answer to the Market,

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<sup>64</sup> Pynchon's interest in Weber has been noted several times. References to Puritan mentality, bureaucratization, the impact of science on our culture—these themes are common to both writers. Weber's concepts and thinking are also openly referred to in *Gravity's Rainbow*. See especially Schroeder's article (1990); the theme is also discussed in, for example, Cooper (1983, 58–59) and Plater (1978, 209–210).

<sup>65</sup> Charles Mason's religious background is in the Episcopal Church and Jeremiah Dixon comes from a Quaker family (Clerc 2000, 41).

day upon day unending, for'tis the inscrutable Power we serve, an invisible-Handed god without Mercy.” (627)<sup>66</sup>

An essential element in the life calculus is temporality, the rationalization of time, which features prominently in *Mason & Dixon*. In the novel, as Charles Clerk remarks, “time and space are both related in terms of restraints, that is, the means to limit, to codify, to standardize them” (2000, 97). Not accidentally, the latter half of the 18th century, in which the novel is set, was also an era of great achievements in modern horology. In 1761 John Harrison invented a chronometer that helped to solve the problem of longitudes, and enabled greater accuracy in sailing and land surveying. Toward the middle of the century, the Gregorian calendar became prevalent in Northern Europe and in the British Empire. All these changes have a prominent role in the novel, but on a more general level *Mason & Dixon* tells of the universalization of time and its effects on people, who start to measure their lives with technical devices. Throughout the novel, Pynchon uses the timepiece as a symbol of this process. Personal watches, still rare among 18th-century Americans, abound in Puritan Philadelphia:

Yet whilst the Marylanders, attun'd to Leisure, take the time as it comes, the Gentlemen from Philadelphia, their Watches either striking together with eerie Precision ev'ry Quarter-hour or, when silent, forever being consulted and re-pocketed, must examine for Productivity each of their waking Moments, as closely as some do their Consciences, unable quite to leave behind them the Species of Time peculiar to that City [...]. (327)

Pynchon emphasizes the peculiarity of the new conception of time in fantastic scenes, where timepieces appear as animated beings. The girls of the Vroom family in Cape Town consider their clock a living creature, and the clocks of Mason and Dixon start having conversations during the long sea voyages. There is also the immortal clock, the *perpetuum mobile*, made in the novel by a historical figure William Emerson (1701–1782), an English mathematician and scientist, and Dixon's teacher. Dixon brings the clock (“the Watch”) with him to America, where R.C., a local land-surveyor, enthusiastic about its technical perfection, feels himself compelled to swallow it. Once he has literally *internalized* the clock-time, R.C.'s conception of his life changes: “In the months, and then the years, after he swallows the Watch, as the days of ceaseless pulsation pass one by one, R.C. learns that a small volume within him is, and shall be, immortal” (324). The connection between rationalized time and rationalized value is made apparent in the reactions of Mr. Shippen (one of the American commissioners), who immediately sees the economic potential of the Watch:

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<sup>66</sup> The famous notion of the “Invisible Hand” comes from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). In this work, Smith had the view that the pursuit of wealth is due to a God-given instinct that is stronger than our reasoning, and thus the invisible hand of God affects social and economical life. *Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers*. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (eds.) London: Routledge, 2002: 216–217.

“‘Tis a national Treasure,” declares Mr. Shippen, —“and whoever may first remove it from its present location, shall enter most briskly upon the Stage of World Business, there, will—he nill—he, to play his part. —All at the price of your own Life, R.C., of course, Chirurgickal Extraction and all, but, —that’s Business, as they say in Philadelphia.” (325)

Thus the Watch incident (pp. 318–326) also has its darker side. The story is not so much about a man swallowing a clock, but clock-time swallowing up the man and subsuming his life into the machinery of production. In this sense, Pynchon shares the same critical preoccupation as Guy Debord, who in his main work, *Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*, 1967) delineates the development of our modern notion of time in terms of economic production.

Debord, a French sociologist, considers the temporalization of man and history a social and political question. Time in nomadic and agricultural societies was still cyclical—an enclosed space where things returned over and over again—and eternity, as the return of the same, was internal to this cyclical time (Debord 1994, 92–93). The emergence of the notion of historical, that is, *passing and irreversible time*, is according to Debord inherent to the power structure of class societies. First, irreversible time was an important factor to the dynastic succession of power. Second, the ruling class, which organized social labor, thus gaining the *surplus value* from the work of the other classes, also appropriated the *temporal surplus value* that resulted from its organization of social time. The ruling class had in its possession the irreversible time of the living, and it became the owner and master of historical time. Those who possessed history, gave it an orientation, a direction, and also a meaning (94)<sup>67</sup>.

[H]istorical time flowed independently above its own static community. This was the time of adventure, of war, the time in which the lords of cyclical society pursued their personal histories [...]. For ordinary men, therefore, history sprang forth as an alien factor, as something they had not sought and against whose occurrence they had thought themselves secure. (ibid.)

Debord sees that the historical emergence of the bourgeoisie means the victory of *profoundly historical* time over cyclical time, which changed society permanently. Since the bourgeoisie was the first ruling class for which labor was a value, time was from now on inclined to the time of production (103–107). This profoundly historical time was not static but a movement, governed by the idea of progress.

With the rise of the bourgeoisie, work became that *work which transforms*

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<sup>67</sup> Debord remarks that an important means of possessing history was the written word—the chronicles of the ruling class, the personal histories of the rulers—which became an impersonal memory of administration and enforced the illusory ownership of history (97).

*historical conditions*. [...] History, which had hitherto appeared to express nothing more than the activity of individual members of the ruling class, and had thus been conceived of as a chronology of events, was now perceived in its *general movement*—an inexorable movement that crushed individuals before it. (104–105)

The progress of labor, the quantitative growth of knowledge, commodities and capital transformed the sense of time so that the historical, irreversible time was more and more defined in terms of economy. As a result, the historical time that previously belonged to the ruling class only was now “democratized” to concern each and everyone. But in a society already governed by *economic history*, historical time in the old sense is no longer available (105). Debord thus delineates a certain degeneration of time: when inclined to production, time turns out to be analogous to economic value—cumulative and exchangeable.

What appears the world over *as the same day* is merely the time of economic production—time cut up in equal abstract segments [...] the time of production, time-as-commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. Time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability. (107–110)<sup>68</sup>

The critique of the notion of time as value emerges already with Debord, who was one of Baudrillard’s important theoretical predecessors. For Baudrillard this notion is a symptom and a particular form of our culture’s attitude towards death (1976, 224–225)

The unfortunate R.C. is not the only character in *Mason & Dixon* who wishes to overcome death with the linear infinity of time. In the novel, the story about the Gregorian calendar reform in Britain shows the fragility inherent in the rationalization and codification of time, and the fears underlying it. The story, told in the novel in flashbacks, concerns the reform in 1752, when, in order to synchronize Britain with the Gregorian calendar used in Continental Europe, eleven days were removed. Thus, as the young Mason explains to his father:

“[B]y Act of Parliament, September second next shall be call’d, as ever, September second, —but the day *after* will be known as ‘September fourteenth,’ and then all will go on consecutive, as before.”

“But, —’twill really be September third.”

“The third by the Old Style, aye. But ev’ryone will be using the New.”

“Then what of the days between? [...] —what’s become of the Eleven Days? and do you even know? you’re telling me they’re just...gone?”

<sup>68</sup> Debord argues that in situation where the idea of consumable time has pervaded society, the remnants of the cyclical time are transformed into what he calls a “pseudo-cyclical time”. Pseudo-cyclical time includes “pseudo-events”, such as the annual festivals, the cycle of vacations, weekly work and weekly rest, and so on (1994, 110–112). The “pseudo-” prefix means that these events are now merely consumable segments of time, “consumable images of the authentic *life* we are all supposed to look forward to”(112).



“Cheer ye, Pa, for there is a bright side, —we’ll arrive instantly at the fourteenth, gaining eleven days that we didn’t have to live through, nor be mark’d by, nor age at all in the course of,—we’ll be eleven days younger than we would’ve been.”

“Are you daft? Won’t it make my next Birthday be here that much sooner? That’s eleven Days older, idiot, —*older*.” (191)

In *Mason & Dixon* this historical event grows into a meditation on temporality. First of all, as Clerk points out, the Calendar Reform shows how time is manipulated over the protestations of the populace (2000, 97). Reverend Cherrycoke, the nominal narrator, who tells the story of Mason and Dixon in 1786, considers the reform a profound injustice: “Those of us born before that fateful September [...], make up a generation in all British History uniquely insulted, each Life carrying a chronologick Wound, from the same Parliamentary Stroke” (555). Cherrycoke believes that those who lived through the “Schizochronick year of ’52” (192), will never totally recover from the loss of those eleven days, which revealed not only the limits of rationalized time, but also how time was used as a means of exercising power. Yet, while reading the field-journals of Mason and Dixon in America, Cherrycoke notices that those eleven days keep strangely recurring in their journey: departures and arrivals, pauses and work, often take place in periods of eleven days. Which leads Cherrycoke to a conclusion: “Again and again, this same rough interval continues to appear, —suggesting a hidden Root common to all. And Friends, I believe ’tis none but the famous Eleven Missing Days of the Calendar Reform of ’52” (554).

As a young scientist, Mason considered the tumult around the calendar reform only “a matter of confusing dates, which are Names, with Days, which are real Things” (555). But ten years later, he becomes more and more convinced that somehow the limits of the rationalist world-view he believed in were revealed in the reform. Mason recalls and relates in America the events of September 1752. Those who planned and executed the reform—particularly the historical figures, royal astronomers Lord Macclesfield (1697–1764), and James Bradley (1693–1762)—saw time and astronomy as a mere counting of pure value, “pure Mathesis [...] a simple pair of Numbers, Right Ascension and Declination...Numbers that [...] men of Science are actually paid, out of the Purses of Kings, to find” (194). Rationalized time is the same as rationalized value: “Time, ye see [...] is the money of Science, isn’t it. The Philosophers need a Time, common to all, as Traders do a common Coinage” (192).

But when time is seen as analogous to money, a new threat, namely, the inflation and destruction of this capital in the calendar reform starts to affect the astronomers, particularly Macclesfield. Mason relates:

“Here, [...] purely, as who might say, dangerously, was Time that must be *denied its freedom to elapse*. As if, for as long as The Days lay frozen, Mortality itself might present no claims.” (194)

The loss of value thus equals death. In the following scene, Mason relates how Macclesfield, in trying to prevent the loss of time-capital during the September reform, brings to England “Strangers from east” and hopes that the presence of these strangers, “who liv’d in quite another relation to Time,—one that not, like our own, hold at its heart the terror of Time’s passage” (195), could stop the flow of time for eleven days. The Strangers, presumably buddhist monks, take over lord Macclesfield’s castle and the neighbourhood by performing rituals and playing music with their own instruments: “their Music proceeding, not straight-ahead like an English marching-tune, but rather wandering unpredictably, with no clear beginning, nor end.” (196)

In this strange story the possibility of an alternate world emerges, again, in “a Tear thro’ the fabric of Life” (555) that shows the limits to a total control of time. Clerc remarks that all the fantasies of the book—dreams, hallucinations, surreal phantasmagoria—are ways to escape from the grip of calculation, mathematical precision, reason—in short, science (2000, 97). But Lord Macclesfield’s dream of a total control of time, as Pynchon leads us to think, also contains the dream of stepping outside of time. As the slightly parodic tone of the story implies, Western thought has since the Enlightenment always situated the consummation of this dream somewhere outside Europe. Thus the state of no time (the Strangers), is already present in the rationalization of time as its forbidden, other side. After pondering the mysterious reappearance of eleven days within their journey in America, Mason formulates this co-existence of two kinds of time as follows:

[T]he more he wrestl’d with the Question, the more the advantage shifted toward a Belief, as he would tell Dixon one day, “in a slowly rotating Loop, or if you like, Vortex, of eleven days, tangent to the Linear Path of what we imagine as Ordinary Time, but excluded from it, and repeating itself, — without end.” (555)

Those who dare to look upon the whirl of time, will see, as Mason suggests, “*Tempus Incognitus*” (556),<sup>69</sup> as he believes he saw on the night of September second in 1752: “‘Twas as if this metropolis of British Reason had been abandon’d to the Occupancy of all that Reason would deny” (559). This possibility is frightening and tempting at the same time. For people like Cherrycoke it clearly means the possibility of an alternate social space: “Perhaps we are compell’d, even unknowingly, to seek these Undecamerous Sequences, as areas of refuge that may allow us, if only for a moment, to pretend Life Undamaged again.” (555) But there is also the threat that comes out of the “chronologick Wound.” As Mattessich points out: “The opposite of pure Mathesis is not simply an empirically given earth on which human bodies live but something less tangible, more secret, which shares with transcendental things the quality of

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<sup>69</sup> The inflection form should be *tempus incognitum*. I am indebted to professor H.K. Riikonen for pointing this out.

insubstantiality” (2002, 234). In *Mason & Dixon*, time-value appears as a barrier built against this indeterminate and intangible otherness—a fear inscribed at the core of value.

In the following, I will approach this fear from a different angle. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, rationalization also emerges as a paradoxical process, driven both by the need to set limits, and by the need to cross them.

#### Death In and Out of Control in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Debord argues that when time in the modern era is defined in terms of economy (time is the time of production, cut up into equally segmented units), any attempt to transcend this economic history represents a threat to the social order (1994, 105). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, an awareness of this social and political aspect of temporality reaches the statistician Roger Mexico on a very personal level, when he ponders his doomed love affair with Jessica Swanlake. They both work for the war machine in the psychological warfare unit, and Jessica is to marry her boyfriend Jeremy when he comes home from the front. Roger’s and Jessica’s love has no place, neither in their own personal histories, nor within their historical situation. The lovers live only in a stolen time, as Roger bitterly notices:

[W]e are meant for work and government, for austerity: and these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses and the other second-class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day. (GR, 177)

Jessica and Roger’s troubled love has often been seen as the only genuinely affectionate relationship in the novel. In comparison with Pynchon’s well-known emphasis on death, such rare love affairs in his work have lead critical discussion into such topics as love-versus-death, in which love is often seen as a counterforce to death, as a “sign of life” that strives against the inevitable entropic disintegration of death. William Plater, for example, sees that love in Pynchon’s fiction

[I]s an act of unification and community; it is a relational process, or circuit, between “I” and “you.” Death, on the other hand, is a process of individuation and separation; an awareness of personal death isolates the individual from all others. (1978, 139)

The paradox that love, as a force of equilibrium (“unification”), is also another name for entropy leads Plater to conclude that “dying may thus be viewed as an act of self-love” (ibid.) The problem with such love-death statements is not that they contain paradoxes that tend to jeopardize the entire argument. The real problem to me is that they are often grounded on the separation of love as communion and death as isolation: love is an

interrelation between people while death is a personal fate that separates the individual from the community.

In Roger's and Jessica's relationship, however, love and death are combined in a way that renders such polarizations inadequate. In every way, personal becomes political for Roger and Jessica, and if their love is a struggle, it is not against the death around them but against the machinery of which they are each a part. Roger alone fully understands this. To him their relationship represents something beyond linear time and linear discourse, the cause-and-effect temporality that determines their historical situation

He'd seen himself a point on a moving wavefront, propagating through sterile history—a known past, a projectable future. But Jessica was the breaking of the wave. Suddenly there was a beach, the unpredictable...new life. Past and future stopped at the beach: that was how he's set it out. But he wanted to believe it too, the same way he loved her, past all words [...]. (GR, 126)

Jessica and Roger cannot meet in the paranoid atmosphere of the Psi Section, their research unit, and therefore they have their love nest in the forbidden, evacuated area in London. The only way to avoid all-encompassing control, of "being frisked for cameras and binoculars" (53), is to expose themselves to sudden death in the most dangerous area in London, where the V-2 bombs are most likely to hit, according to statistics. In spite of the danger, Jessica momentarily dreams that the deserted place could somehow form a new kind of community, and the war would recede into a mere distant spectacle:

[S]he does wish there were others about, and that it could really be a village, her village. The searchlights could stay, to light the night, and barrage balloons to populate fat and friendly the daybreak—everything, even the explosions in the distances might stay as long as they were to no purpose...as long as no one had to die...couldn't it be that way? (53–54)

But that dream of a utopia without death breaks up very soon when a rocket blasts nearby, and "the entire fabric of the air, the time, is changed" (59). Roger's and Jessica's time has come to an end; they stay alive, but their relationship starts to fade. For Roger this end is like death itself: "It had begun to reveal itself, how easily she might go. For the first time he understands why this is the same as mortality, and why he will cry when she leaves" (176–177). Towards the end of the novel, Roger realizes that their separation has been deliberately aided by their superiors, and his paranoia breaks into an anarchist rage against those anonymous power structures he has, unknowingly, served. As a man who has been deprived of his life—his sense of independence and his love for Jessica—Roger has now come to face the ultimate question:

[L]iving on as Their pet, or death? It is not a question he has ever imagined himself asking seriously. [...] He has to choose between his life and his death.

Letting it sit for a while is no compromise, but a decision to live, on Their terms..." (713)

The novel does not reveal Roger's decision, for he disappears from it after a carnivalized scene that immediately follows.

Death and control have a totally different significance in *Gravity's Rainbow* in the case of Franz Pökler. Pökler is a German engineer who works for the rocket factory in Peenemünde, North Germany. Leaving his ex-wife and daughter behind, he has dedicated his life for several years to the planning of the V-2 rockets. During his work, Pökler seems to ignore the fact that his wife Leni and daughter Ilse have been sent to a concentration camp because of Leni's leftist activism. Or does he? There is a certain ambiguity in Pökler's actions that implies either a lack of emotions or an attempt to bargain with his superior, SS officer Weissmann, to exchange his engineering work for his family's safety. Paralleling the advancements of rocket technology, Pökler's moral dilemma grows in scale during the war years. He is a designer of weapons of mass destruction manufactured in underground rocket factories in Nordhausen. Next to the factories is the concentration camp, Dora, whose slave laborers assemble the rockets under terrible conditions. Nothing of this reaches Pökler, a technocrat, who seeks safety through concentrating only on his work, and refuses to think its full implications.

Joseph Tabbi has analyzed Pökler's character and how it reflects the important theme of control in the novel. According to Tabbi, Pynchon suggests in *Gravity's Rainbow* that Pökler's dedication to the rockets and control work starts with value. As a young engineer living during the German inflation, when the mark practically lost its value, Pökler, like others of his kind, must have found a certain satisfaction from control work in the engineering profession (1995, 88). Tabbi sees that the social deprivation and economic uncertainty were the background for the desire for order and control that governed men like Pökler, and that led them into planning new forms and methods of control through technology (88–89). This is also suggested by one of the ghostly voices of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which claims that this need for control, because it was especially useful for those in power, was maintained deliberately:

[T]he whole German Inflation was created deliberately, simply to drive young enthusiasts of the Cybernetic Tradition into Control work: after all, an economy inflating, upward bound as a balloon, its own definition of Earth's surface drifting upward in value, uncontrolled, drifting with the days, the feedback system expected to maintain the value of the mark constant having, humiliatingly, failed... (GR, 238)

With all his fantasies of the brave new world, Pökler is only a symptom of a certain historical moment. Against the uncontrolled flight of value, compared in this passage to a drifting balloon, he and his fellow workers design rockets, each with a calculated and controllable trajectory and a determinate goal. But Pökler's control work costs him his life, for while he stays alive, he in turn becomes a remote-controlled object for the

Nazis, and a prop in the war machine.

For Tabbi, Pökler's dedication to the V-2 rockets and isolation from all human relations is due to his "ontological insecurity," that is, his fear of losing his identity (1995, 114). Working for the SS-officer Weissmann, and for the Nazi regime has made Pökler paranoid. In order to protect his fragile identity Pökler has created what Tabbi calls with a reference to physics an emotional "vacuum" (ibid.). This vacuum saves him from both emotional ties and the realization of the destructive implications of his work. When he is allowed to see his daughter Ilse again, Pökler instantly feels unsafe, for "the vacuum of his life threatened to be broken in one strong inrush of love" (GR, 407). Pökler, however, moderates his emotions in the same manner as the rocket engineers moderate fuel burning and control pressures. Since he is allowed to see Ilse only once a year within a two-week period, he settles for it, convincing himself that he hardly knows his daughter any more<sup>70</sup>.

To Mattessich, Franz's desire for isolation represents a kind of death wish, that is, escape from the real world: "Franz is passive, apolitical, a dreaming man without a moral sense capable of resistance or protest. His peculiar talents only thrive in a kind of dehistoricized vacuum, a steady state sheltered from time" (2002, 105). But when the Nazi regime that has provided Pökler his steady state starts to fall to pieces, Pökler's personal vacuum also starts to fade, and he has to step back to the historical time of real events: "Behind this job-like-any-other-job seems to lie something void, something terminal, something growing closer, each day, to manifestation..." (GR, 415). When the Allied troops are nearing Nordhausen and everybody is forced to leave, Pökler finally gets to see the underground factories. There, in the midst of the dead or nearly dead corpses of the slave laborers he finally sees his complicity in the process: "all his vacuums, his labyrinths, had been the other side of this. While he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside...all this time..." (432-433). The reality of the concentration camps is something beyond Pökler's discourse and his rationalization skills. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel about WWII, it is notable that it contains only a few explicit references to holocaust. This tremendous absence, however, as many critics have stressed, affects the text. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, as Mattessich notes, "Holocaust is [...] present [...] only symptomatically, as its limit, its present absence in the novel is pervasive and indeed formally constitutive" (2002, 161).

In the remains of the concentration camp, holding the body of a dying woman Pökler has come to his personal end in the novel. This is far from the end he fantasized

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<sup>70</sup> In spite of his interesting analysis of Pökler's emotional vacuum, Tabbi never mentions the problematics of incestuous desire in Pökler's relationship with Ilse. Separated from his daughter since she was little, Pökler can never be sure, whether the girl Ilse is an impostor, meant to seduce him (a possible lapse that can be used against him), or if she indeed is his lost daughter, in which case he is doubly guilty of both desiring and abandoning her.

as a young engineer in the 20's, when the rocket experiments were still in the hands of individual amateurs. Pökler's wife Leni saw instantly what the growing military interest in rockets meant:

"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 Pökler?"

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

In this passage, Pökler's hope for transgressing the limits of national borders and gravity are fused with a more metaphysical hope of transcending the conditions of life on earth—the hope of a limitless progress of science that overcomes even death. But what Pökler encounters at the end of his story is the unspeakable other side of this hope, the vast crime that the realization of this hope entails. As Tabbi argues, "the rocket's promise of transcendence is [...] indistinguishable from its potential for extinction" (1995, 116), and this dualism is openly reflected on in the novel.

This hope of transcendence through technology is a theme that pervades the novel. It emerges for the first time in the novel's epigraph, a quotation from Wernher von Braun (1912–1977):

Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.<sup>71</sup>

Von Braun is a minor character in the novel but he was a major figure to the contemporary readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* in the early seventies. During WWII, von Braun, a rocket designer, was the leader of the Nazi V-2 rocket program until his notorious defection to the United States at the end of the war, after which he became the director of the US space program. By using von Braun both as a fictional character in the novel and as an "outside" referent, Pynchon creates a continuity that exceeds the limits of fiction, for the historical von Braun's words imply the same double relation to death that Tabbi has described as follows:

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<sup>71</sup> The quotation is from von Braun's text titled "Why I Believe in Immortality," published in 1962 in a collection titled *The Third Book of Words to Live By: Selected by Seventy-Eight Eminent Men and Women*. (Ed. William Nichols. New York: Simon and Schuster). Von Braun's text is quoted in full in the appendix of Weisenburger's essay in *Pynchon Notes* 42–43 (Spring–Fall 1998: 26). For further references on the von Braun quotation, see Inger Dalsgaard's essay "Gravity's Rainbow: 'An Historical Novel of a Whole New Sort'" (2002). In this essay Dalsgaard writes how the existence of the Dora camp was deliberately wiped out by von Braun and Major General Walter Dornberger, who were the technical and military leaders in the Peenemünde factories. When von Braun and Dornberger were interrogated by the US army, they did not mention the prisoners (of which more than 20 000 died at the Dora camp), or say anything about their past or morality that would compromise their future in the United States (Dalsgaard 2002, 93).

For all their differences of class, nationality, and temperament, Pynchon's technocrats and engineers have an identifiable psychology. Being experts in techniques that can transform dead matter into plastics, coal-tar dyes, and steel, and hoping, at times consciously, ultimately to free themselves from organic cycles of life and death, the engineers end by contributing to the design and manufacture of objects that accelerate the deathward movement within contemporary history. (1995, 83)

The von Braun quotation, as Steven Weisenburger has pointed out, is in fact slightly "trimmed," for Pynchon has left out von Braun's claims that it is the belief in *immortality* that creates such moral conduct that would prevent horrors like nuclear holocaust (1998, 12). The salient irony in Pynchon's use of the quotation, remarks Weisenburger, is that nuclear war is "the brainchild of applied scientists like von Braun, who created one of modernity's great weapons of terror" (*ibid.*).

For Weisenburger, von Braun's words also have another significance in the novel, for they also imply the need to rationalize death and the afterlife, a prominent thematic in the first and second parts of *Gravity's Rainbow*. "One of the most insistent themes is the final solution or assault of a bureaucratized, technologized fascism on human life, figured as the attempt to colonize and dominate Death, to rationalize the Other Side" (1998, 13). The center of this attempt in the novel is the Psi Section and its subgroups, where researchers try to rationalize and utilize paranormal phenomena—that is, visitations of the dead. "It began as a search for some measurable basis for the common experience of being haunted by the dead" (GR, 275). The Psi Section organizes séances where mediums like Carroll Eventyr (one of the mediums of the Rathenau monologue analyzed in chapter 3) try to get into contact with ghosts<sup>72</sup>. The goal of this research is to get information from the enemy. Mattessich remarks that this "freak talent" (GR, 145) of some characters is also the talent of self-effacing: those who have access to the other side are turned into pure mediums, and their voices are replaced by the dead voices that speak through them (2002, 95). And so through Eventyr speaks the late Roland Feldspath, an aeronautics expert who now operates in the stratosphere at eight kilometers and, "bureaucratized hopelessly on that side as ever on this" (GR, 238), is frequently contacted in the séances in order to gain information about rocket ballistics. For Weisenburger, these attempts represent a satire on the "degenerate hubris of Western Science" (1998, 23), the target of Pynchon's critique. There is, however, a certain historical background in Pynchon's satire, for especially in England there was a close relationship between spiritualism and psychical research from mid-nineteenth century until the 1930's (Peters 1999, 94–108). With his bureaucratized ghosts, Pynchon only seems to suggest that any rationalization eventually entails questions of

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<sup>72</sup> To speak plainly of *ghosts* is not enough, for as Weisenburger notes, there is a "myriad of ghosts, wraiths, séance visitants, spooks, angels, qliphoth, specters, revenants and haints" in the novel (1998, 13). Pynchon's ghosts will be analyzed more closely in chapter 6.



control and use.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the hope to flee death by using technology is expressed most clearly in Captain Weissmann's character, often considered von Braun's true fictional counterpart in the novel. Like Pökler, Weissmann wants to escape his personal fate and leave the Earth. Weissmann's urge to transcend gravity with the Rocket is openly described as a fantasy of transcending his own death: "I want to break out—to leave this cycle of infection and death" (GR, 192). Weissman's plan to launch a Rocket that would never fall represents an attempt to seize the "arrow of time" (physicians' expression for the one-way direction of time) by turning it into Zeno's paradox. The arrow is not really flying or moving, not really shot or really falling, because what we see is an infinite series of successive states of immobility. What Weissmann wants is to extend indefinitely the *Brennschluss* point, the height of the rocket's parabolic trajectory, the moment before falling, when the force of gravity is momentarily bracketed. Another part of Weissman's project is to construct a rocket that will be able to reach the moon, and these two wishes, the conquering of gravity and the flight to the moon soon fuse in his project. But Weissmann is not going to fly himself, for he uses as his surrogant victim a young soldier, Gottfried,<sup>73</sup> his lover, whom he is going to send away from the Earth. Weissmann's Rocket 00000, his technological dream eventually turns into a nightmare; it becomes an apocalyptic doomsday machine about to demolish the fictional world and the narrative space of *Gravity's Rainbow* at the end of the novel.

Weissmann's fantasy is described as a desire to reach a limit and transgress it : "[S]ometimes I dream of discovering the edge of the World. Finding that there is an end" (722). Before he went into rocket science, Weissman was part of the German colonialist machinery in southwest Africa,<sup>74</sup> and therefore he has often been seen as an embodiment of the colonialist spirit in the novel, "the imperialist drive for conquest at the edge" (Mattessich 2002, 191). Weissmann is the embodiment of the "white man," and whiteness and death are adjoined in his SS code name "Blicero". It is the Latinized form of "Blicker," the old German word for death, and resembles the German verb *bleichen*, "to whiten" (GR, 322). Mattessich notes that this sinister pun carries a double significance, for it denotes whiteness as a form of death but also as a denial of death (2002, 74): "Blicero is the Western mind in its [...] 'whitening' desire, indeed its 'whitening' of the world, its fascination with edges, with limits (frames and grounds), with frontiers, with the 'impulse to empire.'" (191)<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The name Gottfried, "God's peace" contains another reference to the shape of parabolic arc, for the rainbow was the sign of God's peace with men after the Flood.

<sup>74</sup> Weissman also appears in *V.* as an army Lieutenant in "Mondaugen's Story".

<sup>75</sup> An interesting detail—speculative, of course—is that a natural historian named Weisman also appears in Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure principle" (1920), where Freud elaborates his own theory of repetition compulsion and its relation to the death instinct.

One part of Weissmann's dream is to reach the moon, and build there an absolutely virtual and technologized world: "a great glass sphere, hollow and very high and far away" (GR, 723). But since no one can live in a vacuum, Weissmann knows that this future space of mankind in the moon would only be a "deathkingdom" (ibid.)—like the colonies where he lived when he was young: "the colonists have learned to do without air, it's vacuum inside and out" (ibid.). Weissmann's dream of living on the moon is thus the dream of a totally controlled environment, an operationally functioning world. "The moon is a familiar symbol for an escapist territoriality, a place of reflected light where no life is possible, dead and abstract" (Mattessich 2002, 167). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the fantasy of those who, like Weissmann, cling to the abstract notion of life that has not been "infected" by death.

But this abstract notion of the vacuum as the state of no-life and nothingness, and its scientific austerity can also be challenged. This happens at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, when the narrator discusses the possibility of hearing the impossible, the voice of the sun. Hearing the sun is impossible, because sound cannot travel in a vacuum. But, suggests the narrator, suppose that there is no vacuum, that there is indeed an Aether, a medium in space and men have been hearing the sun all along, without knowing it. The sun's voice becomes comprehensible only when it stops, when eddies in the Aether shut off all voices. And the narrator's radical hypothesis—that vacuum is a "scientific lie" (GR, 695)—expands into a great metaphysical question about the nature of vacuum as death, as emptiness that surrounds life:

What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is—what if They're using it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's in *Their interest* to have you believing that? "He won't bother us for a while," They tell each other. "I just put him on the Dark Dream." (GR, 697)

In this passage, the possibility of an impossible perception also represents an ideological challenge, for it subverts the coordinates of reality on which scientific perceptions are grounded. As Plater notes: "[S]uch possibility is a threat to control because it is proof of another order of being, the invisible behind the visible, the silence behind the noise. The idea of the vacuum, then, may be another form of control" (1978, 240). In this respect, I cannot but disagree with Tabbi, when he argues that there is in Pynchon's fiction a "continuing inability to imagine a reality in which any human connection is possible" (1995, 123). The key word in Pynchon is not so much *reality* but *connection*, and this time it is the connection through death:

You are either alone absolutely, alone with your own death, or you take part in the larger enterprise, and you share in the deaths of others. Are we not all one? (GR, 454)

The realization that beyond individual mortality there is also a social dimension of death also characterizes the novel that preceded *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this novel, the line between modern culture and its others is defined through death.

Death, Silence, Language, and Mrs. Oedipa Maas: *The Crying of Lot 49*

A common feature in several death scenes in Pynchon's work is the moment when a petrified and at the same time impetuous character is awaiting an approaching death. To this halted moment Pynchon has returned over and over again in his fiction, first in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." In this story Cleanth Siegel, a civil servant in Washington, has spent hours in a tedious party in a crowded apartment. But in the end the party suddenly changes into a nightmare when a Native American named Irving Loon starts shooting people with a hunting rifle. Loon suffers from windigo psychosis that changes him into a maniac, and Siegel is the only one around who recognizes the apparent signs of the disease. Seeing Loon take a rifle, and realizing his homicidal intentions, Siegel quickly leaves the apartment just before the massacre begins:

Siegel [...] stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. He walked downstairs, whistling. At the first floor landing, he heard the first screams, the pounding of footsteps, the smashing of glass. He shrugged. What the hell, stranger things had happened in Washington. It was not until he had reached the street that he heard the first burst of the BAR fire. (Pynchon 1959, 213)

Siegel's reaction is chilly and puzzling; why didn't he warn the others when he saw what was happening? Was he so frustrated with the other people at the party that he wanted them dead? Or did he consider the approaching death as a fate one can do nothing about? There is a certain religious element in Siegel's thoughts: the savage madman (Loon!) represents divine intervention, or a "miracle" that will put an end to a certain way of life. Just before leaving the apartment Siegel compares the horrible situation to a bullfight: "Here it is. Moment of truth. *Espada* broken, *muleta* lost, horse disemboweled, picadors sick with fear. Five in the afternoon, crowd screaming." (212) But Siegel is not a *matador*—in the end he is only interested in his own survival.

Again, one of the most intense passages in *Gravity's Rainbow* describes the last moments of the soldier Gottfried inside the 00000 Rocket. This metaphysical astronaut, who knows he will die (because the Rocket will blast or because oxygen will run out), is locked in a special chamber inside the rocket. Gottfried's last moments are followed by the final scene of the novel, and the sense of approaching death continues when an anonymous audience inside a movie theatre in Los Angeles is exposed to collective destruction. The novel ends in this transitional stage; the time of narration has in the final passages of *Gravity's Rainbow* changed from the linear succession of events into an eternal Now, in which the rocket remains poised in an infinite descent.

*The Crying of Lot 49* also ends in a closed room. This time it is the auction room where the protagonist Oedipa Maas sits waiting for a final revelation of the novel's mysteries—a revelation that may also mean her own death, since everyone else involved in the story has already died or disappeared. The auction of lot 49, a stamp collection, is an openly ritualistic scene. Oedipa sees a roomful of men in black, and the door is locked:

She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment. Passerine [the auctioneer] spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49. (L49, 127)

But Oedipa does not seem to worry about what is going to happen to her: the ambiguous “crying” that is about to take place at the end of the novel is also a miracle and a moment of truth, and the only thing that matters.

A common feature in all these examples is the characters' and the reader's experiences of being at the limit or *on the verge*; the end of the story is an ontological border from which there is no return, and this border also marks the limit of representation. (Such textual and personal rupture also takes place in Slothrop's “scattering” at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which will be treated more closely in chapter 7.) Here we face again, in the form of personal experience, the same impossible and always deferred end of the modern apocalypse. Death becomes the ultimate moment that orients the narration but will never be actualized. In “Mortality and Mercy,” the massacre anticipates the apocalyptic overtones of “Entropy,” and Siegel's reactions resemble those of Slothrop in London—the consciousness of being a survivor. In novels like *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, the oncoming death at the end is no longer a mere biological event, but a long-awaited completion of the metaphysical quest for truth and meaning that the characters and the reader are woven into. Both are left in an impossible situation: to wait for an end that does not, ultimately, come.

This ambiguous *desire for the end* leads us back to psychoanalysis, which has given us the notion of the death instinct,<sup>76</sup> although in the Freudian context, the death instinct cannot ever be a conscious desire. As Gilles Deleuze remarks, “Thanatos as such cannot be *given* in psychic life” (1989, 30)<sup>77</sup>. Therefore, we have to approach this

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<sup>76</sup> It is notable that the concept varies from one writer to another: whereas Freud himself used the term *instinct* (*Trieb*), many psychoanalytically oriented writers prefer *death drive* or *death wish*. Therefore, the changes in terminology occurring in this study is due to differences in my source texts. Peter Brooks has commented on this terminological problem in *Reading for the Plot*, and noted that “instinct” is inadequate and somewhat misleading, since it loses the sense of “drive” and “force” associated with Freud's conception of *Trieb* (1992, 100n). Therefore, Brooks himself prefers “death drive” (42).

<sup>77</sup> In “Masochism” Deleuze distinguishes between destructive instincts and Death

end-oriented desire as a *narrative* desire, a dynamic affecting the textual plane, driving the story towards its inevitable end, and representation to its limits.

The search for the beyond of language *via* language, and the awareness of the impossibility of such a quest, is a pervasive and much-analyzed element in postmodern fiction, and through the years Pynchon has had the reputation of being one of the most eminent explorers of this problematic in Anglo-American literature. The theme of metaphysical quest, featured prominently in Pynchon, is always more or less openly linked to death. Eventually, all Pynchon's searchers become aware that what they are looking for leads to their own destruction. Novels like *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* embody what Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1984) has called "the contradictory desire of narrative." The *desire of narrative* is a twofold notion: it means both the dynamic of signification and what the story is about, and in stories where these two desires are openly in conjunction we see "the insistence of a desire as persistent as it is incoherent, a desire whose lack of satisfaction gives death as the only alternative, but whose satisfaction also would be death" (58). Brooks stresses the connection between literary and psychic dynamics, and how narrative's time-boundedness is always somehow connected to our sense of temporality and its limits. And therefore, any narrative plot "is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (22). In the endings of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, this internal logic is openly thematized, and the psychological and textual registers fuse.

The philosophical problem Pynchon evokes in his threshold endings is that death cannot be grasped as an experience, since death also means the end of the subject and the limit of representation. Death is at the same time present and absent, inaccessible as an object of narration, and yet the limit that gives form to the narrative. Writing always has to halt before death. Or inversely, death can be expressed in writing only as a rupture and a void within textual functioning. Berressem sees this relationship between language and death as a prominent characteristic in Pynchon's poetics, forming a "double bind of the will to terminate and the will to express—paradoxically, to express this very termination" (1993, 145). In his Lacanian reading of Pynchon, Berressem formulates this double bind as "this always deferred and thus inevitably 'missed encounter' between language and the real" (23). The Lacanian *real* is the impossible

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Instinct with capital letters. The former are something that can be found in the unconscious, always in combination with the life instincts, "so that destruction, and the negative at work in destruction, always manifests itself as the other face of construction and unification as governed by the pleasure principle" (1989, 30). The latter, the Death Instinct, or what Freud named Thanatos, is a principle that cannot even be attained as such, since it is a principle of absolute negation. With the latter Deleuze refers to the repetitive form that governs psychic life, the one that Freud already distinguished in his essay. This repetition has no specific content, but sometimes, as in the case of perversions, its "awesome, independent force" comes to the fore (1989, 120).

and unattainable realm beyond language and conceptual thinking, that makes imaginary or symbolic structuration possible. Within a representational system, in the realm of the *Lacanian* symbolic, the real emerges as a void—as the gap between sign and referent and as the gap between signs—and the desire to bridge this void is what defines the subject’s relation to language (24). The Real is the limit of the symbolic, and yet language constantly tries to reach that limit, to reach the point of its own negation. For, the paradox of this desire, as Berressem points out, is that “an ideal encounter with the real would have to take place in a silent and instantaneous identification, yet such an identification would also denote the end of desire, the text, and ironically, writing itself” (ibid.).

In *The Crying of Lot 49* the protagonist Oedipa has such an experience, when she compares her revelations and insights to an epileptic fit from which nothing but single details—a colour, an odour, a sound—can be remembered:

Oedipa wondered, whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (L49, 66)

Although language cannot represent the real, it can re-create it within the realm of representation, and this possibility is the “hinge” between psychic structuration and literature (Berressem 1993, 26). However, this recreation, as Berressem notes with a reference to Lacan, is a fiction, a *fantasy*. What characterizes Pynchon’s poetics is according to Berressem not so much a recreation of such fantasy (of reaching the beyond of language) but its textualization, which Berressem refers to the evocation of a certain threshold experience between language and the real. Pynchon constantly creates fictional situations in which an encounter with the real or the beyond of language takes place, but since this encounter is impossible, what is left is a structure in which the effect of the real is *real* in the text, but symbolic because it is textualized (22). The resulting textual effect Berressem names *fantastic*, since it produces on the reader the profoundly ambiguous textual *affect* of being on the verge of language (ibid.)<sup>78</sup>. One such situation is the death of Gottfried in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which the “beyond” of language, that is, the moment of death, finally breaks up the chain of signifiers. The narration in this passage minutely follows Gottfried’s last fragmentary thoughts, perceptions, and blurring mental images during the launching of the Rocket, and after it:

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<sup>78</sup> In his notion of the fantastic, Berressem superimposes Lacanian theory on Tzvetan Todorov’s classical formulation of the fantastic as a moment of hesitation between reality and the unreal. For Berressem the fantastic is not so much a generic term, but a limit in itself, “the dividing line/gap between text and nontext, life and death, rationality and irrationality, empiricism and metaphysics” (1993, 225).

[S]hapes going out of focus, shapes Gottfried can't identify as friend or enemy, between him and—where did he—it's already *gone*, no—...they're beginning to slide away faster than he can hold, its like falling to sleep—they begin to blur CATCH you can hold it steady enough to see a suspender belt straining down your thighs, white straps as slender as the legs of a fawn and the points of the black...the black CATCH you've let a number of them go by, Gottfried, important ones you didn't want to miss...you know this is the *last time* ...CATCH when did the roaring stop? Brennschluss, when was Brennschluss *it can't be this soon...* (GR, 759)

For Berressem, another recurring motif in Pynchon that links encounters with the real to language, is the message from an “impossible” outside, that is, outside the realm of representation (1993, 23). This “impossible” message, like the lethal “Word, spoken with no warning into your ear” (GR, 25) in *Gravity's Rainbow* always equals death.

The emergence of such Word is anticipated by Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa's quest begins as a sorting out of the assets of her ex-boyfriend, but soon turns into a quest for the true meaning of the world. While trying to find out who her ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity<sup>79</sup> really was, and what he actually owned, Oedipa steps into a world of secret connections, obscure messages, and a network of communities that live outside the official America and use the secret postal system WASTE, which may in turn be part of a historical conspiracy. The novel does not give any solution to the mysteries, but leaves the opposite chances equal: Oedipa is either a true paranoid, or the connections she has discovered are real—or a massive plot has been planned for her by her ex-boyfriend, or the plot is just in her imagination. In the course of the novel, these either/or solutions give way to a more indeterminate sense of loneliness and despair that characterize Oedipa, and the quest for truth changes into a search for meaningful social ties in her life.

Eventually Oedipa gets more and more frustrated about the gap between language and reality. She finds it impossible to separate her own meaning-making and the connections around her, and, realizing that there is no pure language that could explain the world as such, she dreams of hearing what she cannot possibly hear, the message outside of language: “the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (L49, 81).

Once the quest has been put in motion, what characterizes the novel is growing disintegration. Oedipa dreams of and fears losing herself in drunkenness and madness, and similarly the narrative fabric of her story starts to lose its coherence. One can see in Oedipa's condition a more or less explicitly expressed wish to die, which is even enforced by the explicit death wishes of several other characters resulting in suicide or

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<sup>79</sup> The name is an agglomeration of words like “veracity,” “in verity,” “inveracity,” “rarity,” etc. Their significance suggests that its owner may be either untruth or *in* truth (Grant 1994, 7).

its anticipation. The director and playwright Randolph Driblette (literally, a *dribblet*) sees himself as water dissolving into the Pacific, and eventually he walks into the sea. The old drunken sailor, whom Oedipa sees on a worn mattress, is anticipated to die in flames because of smoking in bed. Although Oedipa does not see his death happening, she imagines how the mattress “flared up around the sailor, in his Viking’s funeral” (88), while walking away from him. In her visits to the fictional city San Narciso, Oedipa is told about a secret society, IA, Inamorati Anonymous, whose members consist of those who are addicted to love, “the worst addiction of all” (77). Instead of group meetings, the IA members are dedicated to isolation, and only a telephone number of another member is provided for communal support. But the IA, besides being a rough parody of modern community (or its lack), is also associated with the suicide thematics. Oedipa hears the story of the founder of the society, a corporate executive who was sacked and nearly committed suicide. The man gave up at the last moment because he realized he was doing it for the wrong reasons: he was sacked not because he was incompetent in his work but because the company’s efficiency expert was having an affair with his wife. So the IA is a network for anonymous and broken-hearted potential suicides who communicate through WASTE. “A whole underworld of suicides who failed. [...] What do they tell each other?” (80). Towards the end of the novel, when Oedipa’s desperation grows, she also turns suicidal: “she went out and drove on the highway for a while with her lights out, to see what would happen. But angels were watching” (122).

When we take into account that only Driblette’s suicide is successful (and his death again, is not actual, but told to Oedipa on the phone), it becomes apparent that this death wish recurring in the novel cannot be reduced solely to a character’s psychic state—desperation, alienation, melancholia. The anticipation of death actualizes in Oedipa something that enables her to see her relation to the world differently. It emerges in passages like the following, describing Oedipa’s experiences during her nighttime journey in San Francisco. After seeing the inventor John Nefastis, who has given her a brief introduction to entropy, and in a way enforced her sense of disintegration, and after a failed attempt to communicate with a dead man (that is, the picture of James Clerk Maxwell), Oedipa suddenly feels exhausted by her quest. She drives to San Francisco, and the following night wanders aimlessly about the city, hoping that her sudden revelations about the existence of secret signs, connections, and communication networks will turn out to be mere hallucinations: “there might still be a change of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix” (75). What happens in the city at night is that she loses her grip on language, a loss which brings her close to her personal end:

At some indefinite passage in night’s sonorous score, it also came to her that she would be safe, that something, perhaps only her linearly fading drunkenness, would protect her. The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so



with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight to its far blood's branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shameless municipal hickeyes, out on the skin for all but tourists to see. Nothing of the night's could touch her; nothing did. The repetition of symbols was to be enough, without trauma as well perhaps to attenuate it or ever jar it altogether loose from her memory. *She was meant to remember.* She faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding-time among the beasts in the zoo—any death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that no gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight. She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (81)

This passage, which has often been commented on in Pynchon criticism, is, again, an ambiguous description of a character at the limit of representation, and Oedipa's vertigo, as when looking too long from a high balcony, recurs on the textual plane in the convoluted sentences. As Mattessich has noted, Pynchon's way of using pronouns in this passage is ambiguous (2002, 61). Oedipa's desire to submit to "it" remains an open possibility that refers both to death and to the giving up of language: signs turn into objects that have their own clarity and "fine chances for permanence." To Berressem, Oedipa's death wish, the desire to lose herself completely, is also a wish to escape the paranoiac nature of knowledge and perception, that is, the realization that there is no objective perception of reality (1993, 93–94). For Berressem, Oedipa's wish to escape is always related to madness or death; she approximates either the psychotic experience of the absolute proximity and immediacy of the objects (the loss of the "buffer" of language), or death, "the subject's reentry into the real" (98). The novel does not provide any solution to Oedipa's problem or to her growing sense of loneliness and despair. This loneliness is both social and ontological, since it is due to her isolation both from close relationships and from meaningful, symbolical anchors in the world. Eventually, all the men around her (ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity, husband Mucho Maas, lover and lawyer Metzger, Driblette, the old sailor, etc.) vanish for various reasons. And, as Berressem notes, with all of these losses, more and more of herself vanishes, and she has to face the void (of the real) that is both around and within her (99). Oedipa's sense of total isolation is called "void," which comes close to the vacuums of *Gravity's Rainbow*:

That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead. (L49, 118)

A slight change in terminology and theoretical register provides a considerably different reading of this desire for the end that haunts both Pynchon's writing and his characters. This change is from *fantastic* to *fantasy*, and from Berressem's Lacanian to Mattessich's Deleuzian reading of Pynchon. The way Mattessich in *Lines of Flight* analyses the interrelated questions of death, desire, and language in Pynchon appears to me as a "counterreading" (sometimes an explicit one) to that of Berressem, and, more generally, a critique of the axiomatics underlying psychoanalytic discourse.

In analyzing Oedipa's situation in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Mattessich also reads the novel in terms of a death instinct—or a "death wish" explicitly mentioned in the novel—as a drive toward disintegration that characterizes both the novel and its heroine. But this time the death instinct is not merely the Freudian return to the inorganic state; it is also related to the repetition that haunts the novel. Oedipa's quest originates with repetitions: the signs of muted post horns, the name Tristero, and the permutations of acronyms all connected to it, the coincidences and clues all keep repeating in the novel to a point of exhaustion. Oedipa is, as "Puritans are about the Bible" or literary critics about books, "so hung up with words, words" (L49, 53). She is an interpreter of signs, fascinated by their reappearance as such.

Mattessich's emphasis on repetition leads back to Deleuze, who in *Difference and Repetition* (1994) has argued that the form of the death instinct is not so much a repetition of the same, but a "repetition of difference," that is, the subject's experience of the empty form of time (Mattessich 2002, 58). With *difference* Deleuze refers to repetition and difference as constitutive of temporality: "difference lies between two repetitions" (1994, 76), and he sees that the repetition that Freud associated with the death instinct does not merely indicate the return to inanimateness. "Death [...] is not a material state; on the contrary, having renounced all matter, it corresponds to a pure form—the empty form of time (112). As an abstract form, death is present for Deleuze in living as a "subjective and differentiated experience endowed with its prototype" (*ibid.*), that is, endless repetition. Although Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* analyses the difference between cyclical time and linear time, the "merciless and straight form" (113), he does not contextualize the difference historically<sup>80</sup>. Nevertheless, Deleuze's formulation of time as an empty form of repetition comes close to Debord's notion of the abstraction and economization of time, time "cut up in equal abstract segments [...] an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals" (Debord 1994, 107–110). From this perspective, the death instinct is embodied in linear temporality.

For Deleuze, however, repetition plays an ambiguous role, and unlike Freud he does not reduce death to negation and opposition to Eros. Against this theoretical background Mattessich's reading of Oedipa's death wish is not as pessimistic as that of

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<sup>80</sup> Deleuze, however, refers to Kant and *The Critique of Pure Reason* as the source of the new sense of the temporality of existence and perception (1994, 85–91).

Berressem. In the passage quoted above, Oedipa's assimilation with the city and its flow of signifiers shows Mattessich that Oedipa's fantasy of disintegration, her "death wish" is from the beginning abstract and textual, intertwined with the endless repetitions haunting the text. Along with Oedipa's desire for disintegration, "Pynchon's text discloses what could be called an absolute or asignifying limit at which grammatical and semantic structure loses its edge and begins to blur" (2002, 60). "Language begins to erode its own content as it plays out its submission to the 'voluptuous field' of its repetitions, and in the process the text becomes a travesty of its own truth claims" (61). Mattessich sees repetition in this process turning into a source of strange pleasure: "the city and Oedipa in it become an inanimate 'repetition of symbols' that is posed [...] as the ground for a pleasure that is indifferent yet 'lovely beyond dreams'" (2002, 60).

This shift from what is repeated to the repetition itself as a source of pleasure is a characteristic Mattessich links to Deleuze's notion of masochism. In his essay "Masochism" (1989), Deleuze argues that a masochist is not someone who derives pleasure from pain; rather, for the masochist pain, punishment, and humiliation are necessary prerequisites to obtaining pleasure (71). This paradoxical structure gives masochism a temporal dimension, which Deleuze characterizes as a division of time into two simultaneous currents:

The masochist waits for pleasure as something that is bound to be late, and expects pain as the condition that will finally ensure (both physically and morally) the advent of pleasure. He therefore postpones pleasure in expectation of the pain which will make gratification possible. (ibid.)

In the context of masochism the Freudian view of repetition and its relation to the pleasure principle is inverted:

Instead of repetition being experienced as a form of behavior related to a pleasure already obtained or anticipated, instead of repetition being governed by the idea of experiencing pleasure, repetition runs wild and becomes independent of all previous pleasure. It has become an idea or ideal. Pleasure is now a form of behavior related to repetition, accompanying and following repetition, which has itself become an awesome, independent force. (Deleuze 1989, 120)

For Mattessich, this inversion that takes place in masochism is not an exception but a limit to Freud's theory of the pre-eminence of the pleasure principle (2002, 117). For Deleuze, masochistic pain "depends entirely on the phenomenon of waiting and on the functions of repetition and reiteration which characterize waiting" (1989, 119).

From the temporal structure of masochism it follows, according to Deleuze, that masochistic experience, in its form, is a state of "pure waiting": "the anxiety of the masochist divides therefore into an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and an intense expectation of pain" (71). And this emphasis on waiting and dramatic, that is, *staged* suspense forms an intrinsic bond between masochism and aesthetic experience. In his

essay, which is an introduction to the fiction of the “father” of masochism, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze points out the central role of immobile, plastic arts. A characteristic of Masoch’s novels and stories is the preoccupation with arrested movement :

The whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending on the victim, are the expression, beyond all movement, of a profound state of waiting closer to the sources of life and death. (1989, 70)

This state of “pure waiting” also features in all of Pynchon’s “threshold endings.” Siegel in “Mortality and Mercy,” Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Gottfried as well as “we,” the anonymous theatre audience in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—all are situated in an indefinite present, wanting and expecting something terrifying to happen<sup>81</sup>.

According to Deleuze, what takes place in masochistic scenes of frozen or arrested temporality is that they constitute a fantasy, in which reality, understood as the “given,” is neutralized and suspended. Deleuze’s formulation does not mean that there exists a certain masochistic type of fantasy with determinate characteristics; rather, he sees that fantasy *is* the form in which masochism appears in psychic life, resulting in the disavowal of reality, and containing the ideal within the fantasy. This disavowal of reality does not mean negation; for Deleuze it is the foundation of imagination, which suspends reality and establishes the ideal in the suspended world (1989, 128). Although Deleuze’s terminology in this essay is more directly related to Freudian than to Lacanian theory, it is notable that he sees fantasy as a form that contains *both* the ideal and the real (73). What takes place in masochism is the creation of an *ideal reality* in fantasy.

Disavowal should perhaps be understood as [...] an operation that consists neither in negating or even destroying, but rather contesting the validity of that which is: it suspends belief in and neutralizes the given in such a way that a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it. (1989, 31)<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Mattessich also refers to Deleuze’s view of the “pure state of waiting” or “suspension of the real” characteristic of masochism, but he uses these notions to describe the entire symbolic space of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (2002, 127). In this novel scenes of arrested motion play a prominent role in relation to rockets, and Pynchon has given them a mathematical determination by using the symbol “delta t,” which is the time differential that indicates changes in velocity in relation to time: “delta t approaching zero, eternally approaching, the slices of time growing thinner and thinner [...] as the pure light of zero comes nearer.” (GR, 159)

<sup>82</sup> Deleuze’s own example of simultaneous disavowal and suspense is fetishism, which is an essential element in masochism (31–32). Giorgio Agamben has also argued about a similar suspension of the real in fetishism and melancholy, which he sees as “operations in which desire simultaneously denies and affirms its object, and thus succeeds in entering into relation with something that otherwise it would have been unable either to appropriate or enjoy” (Agamben 1993, xvii–xviii). Melancholic passion works actively by creating a simulation with a strange persistence: it cannot be lost because it has never been

This notion of fantasy as a moment of creative imagination is far from those fantasized and yet ironized states beyond language that Berressem sees recurring in Pynchon's prose—the ones that indicate only the “initial impossibility of recovering the real” (1993, 26). Mattessich in his reading insists on the *resistance to the real* in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Such resistance creates in the novel a “masochistic transgression of its own realism and truth” (2002, 62). Such transgression in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the new horizon that the word Tristero represents for Oedipa. Tristero, a representative of a secret historical continuum, signifies for Oedipa also the possibility of another social order, “somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in” (L49, 125)—the community of the “dispossessed,” who form the margin of the official America. The social waste that communicates through WASTE:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by US Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. [...] Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (86)

Yet that other world, as Mattessich emphasizes, remains in the novel immaterial, without substance (2002, 63–63). What Mattessich sees as the very contemporaneity of *The Crying of Lot 49* as a sixties novel is this constant reverie of another order that connects Oedipa's awareness to those of the countercultural groups. A characteristic of both is “a negative and differential imagination of the social body” (66), which meant that instead of creating an alternative social order, the countercultural movements exploited “hallucinatory excess to uncover the collective hallucination of the normal” (208).

This neutralization or disavowal of the real in the novel also has a motivation that is not so much related to Oedipa's personal disintegration or death wish. The sudden loss of sign-value that Oedipa momentarily experiences entails more than a psychotic loss of meaning, for through this loss there opens up for Oedipa a specific sphere of communication that exceeds the ontological border: the communication with the dead. In *The Crying of Lot 49* the prominence of questions concerning communication—signs, messages, communication channels, information entropy—has been noted many times in Pynchon studies, but what has often been passed over is that the communication that Oedipa enters into is often in one way or another marked by death.

The letter that starts the novel and ends Oedipa's former life as a suburban housewife is from the executor of Pierce Inverarity's estate. The first and only

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possessed. It belongs nowhere, because it is unreal, and yet it can gain intensity far beyond any “real” object: “the strategy of melancholy opens a space for the existence of the unreal and marks out a scene in which the ego may enter into a relation with it and attempt an appropriation such as no other possession could rival and no loss possibly threaten.” (20)

appearance of Pierce is in Oedipa's recollection of a telephone call a year earlier, and now in her memory Pierce has turned into a "shadow" who "waited a year before visiting" (L49, 7). The telephone call is an impossible dialogue ending in Pierce's voice imitation of the radio detective Lamont Cranston, also called the "Shadow," a gesture which only emphasizes Pierce's ethereal existence. Oedipa's encounter with Mr Thoth in the old people's home also carries a heavy symbolical weight. Mr Thoth, who tells Oedipa about masked marauders who attacked Pony Express post riders more than a hundred years earlier, also has the name of the Egyptian god of scribes. Thoth, the master of language, the written word and medicine, is also the god who weighs the hearts of the dead in the underworld<sup>83</sup>. The secret postal system WASTE is in many ways associated with death. When the old sailor tells Oedipa to mail a letter and look for a WASTE mailbox, he adds that they can always be found "under the freeway" (L49, 86). Oedipa's following journey takes her to a social underworld, where she is walking "among the sunless, concrete underpinnings of the freeway, finding drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, hookers, walking psychotic" (89). Earlier in the novel the lawyer Metzger has told Oedipa about freeways built on destroyed cemeteries, "like the path of the East San Narciso Freeway, it had no right to be there, so we just barrelled on through, no sweat" (41). Thus, communicating through WASTE is in many ways associated with communication with the dead—a kind of shadowy communication that has nothing to do with meaning or information transmission.

In analyzing Oedipa's relation to the signifying systems around her, Dana Medoro emphasizes the role of Oedipa's bodily interaction with the linguistic clues of her quest (2002, 66). Medoro notes that the novel is saturated with references to various liquids, including wine and blood, remedies and toxins (alcohol, drugs, ink), and these substances provide Oedipa access to other systems of meaning that offer her a way out of her solipsism (60). Such connections are made, for example, when Oedipa is given homemade dandelion wine by philatelist Genghis Cohen. The dandelions, Cohen tells, are picked years ago from the very same cemetery that was destroyed for the East San Narciso freeway. Oedipa is at first struck by this connection, but later on she considers it somehow reassuring. If the lost bones of the dead nourish dandelions, then "the dead do persist, even in a bottle of wine" (L49, 68)<sup>84</sup>. Liquids like the dandelion wine, argues

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<sup>83</sup> Many critics have pointed out that the important figure 49 in the novel indicates that Oedipa's quest is somewhat otherworldly, since 49 is in the Christian liturgical calendar the number of days between Easter and Pentecost, the period between the resurrection of Christ and the effusion of the Holy Spirit. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, seven weeks is also the duration of the *bardo* state after death, in which the soul makes a journey in the spirit world. The *Book of the Dead* is mentioned in the novel, but this is usually understood as a reference to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (Grant 1994, 36–37).

<sup>84</sup> Such complex material and semantic relation develops in the novel also between the bones of the dead and ink. The bones of American soldiers that have lain at the bottom

Medoro, give Oedipa a bodily interface, “a passageway to former lives [...]. Oedipa finds the ontological possibility that she is not necessarily trapped and alone with herself nor entirely defined by a single system of meaning” (2002, 60). Another important bodily link in the novel emerges through the recurrent menstrual imagery. In addition to explicit references in the text to “headaches, nightmares, menstrual pains” (L49, 118) and numerous indirect references,<sup>85</sup> Medoro points out how Oedipa’s journeys often appear in a cyclical form, where she finds herself back where she started (2002, 61). With a reference to a writer seminal for Pynchon, Mircea Eliade and his *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1959), Medoro also points out the bond between the menstrual cycle and the cyclical notion of time in the novel. In Oedipa’s story it is her own body that links her to another, a possibly sacred order where waste, death, and regeneration form a succession (Medoro 2002, 56). At the end of the novel, Oedipa’s signifying body manifests itself in her possible pregnancy, and like the word Tristero, she becomes a carrier of some unspeakable meaning: “Your gynaecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with” (L49, 121).

Oedipa’s attempts at communicating with the dead can also be seen as attempts at transcending linear time and language. Besides the phone call with Pierce, two other attempts have a crucial role in the novel. The first one is the scene in John Nefastis’s house where Oedipa tries his “machine,” a box containing, it is said, Maxwell’s Demon itself (about the Demon, see footnote 58 in chapter 4). Oedipa is told that she could reverse the process of entropy if she somehow managed to make telepathic contact with the image of James Clerk Maxwell. Nefastis’s machine, which is a kind of materialized thought experiment, also represents an attempt to reverse linear time and the eventual loss of all energy. In order to get into contact with the image of a dead man, Oedipa has to be a “sensitive” (L49, 60, 72), which is a nineteenth-century word for a medium (Peters 1999, 97)<sup>86</sup>. According to John Peters, the idea of transcendental communication, that is, contact with divinities and the dead has been an essential part of

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of a lake in Italy since the end of WWII are transported to America by the mafia. Instead of proper burial, the mafia sell the bones to a tobacco factory that uses them in filters. Elements of this macabre story return in the Jacobean tragedy *The Courier’s Tragedy*, where Oedipa hears the word “Tristero” for the first time. The bones of the dead soldiers are now made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink, with which fateful messages are written—all of which reflects the problematic of communication, the dead, and the peculiar materiality of the signifier in the novel.

<sup>85</sup> Such references are, for example, Oedipa’s sex and age, 28 (the number of days in an average menstrual cycle), character names like Stanley Koteks (referring to Kotex, a sanitary napkin), or the fact that Oedipa finds some central clues for her quest from the walls of the ladies’ room.

<sup>86</sup> Another character called “sensitive” is Carroll Eventyr in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (GR, 146).

the history of communication, and the spirit world can be seen as a double that always haunts communication: “every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts” (139).

Oedipa’s other and more desperate attempt to communicate with the dead takes place in the waking party on Driblette’s tomb after his funeral (L49, 111–112). The melancholic Oedipa, who almost fell in love with the playwright, now senses that with his death she has lost something valuable:

Oedipa sat on the earth, ass getting cold, wondering whether [...] some version of herself hadn’t vanished with him. Perhaps her mind would go on flexing psychic muscles that no longer existed; would be betrayed and mocked by a phantom self as the amputee is by a phantom limb. [...] She tried to reach out, to whatever coded tenacity of protein might improbably have held on six feet below, still resisting decay—any stubborn quiescence perhaps gathering itself for some last burst, some last scramble up through earth, just-glimmering, holding together with its final strenght a transient, winged shape, needing to settle at once in the warm host, or dissipate forever into the dark. If you come to me, prayed Oedipa, bring your memories of the last night. (111).

All her attempts at transcendental communication are, however, doomed to failure. Against this background, Oedipa’s sadness<sup>87</sup> and desperation can also be seen in relation to her sense of having lost her dead, and this loss reflects symptomatically a whole culture’s relationship to its past. Oedipa realizes that this loss also deprives life, making it only a duration, a mere accumulation of days. Therefore, her visions of alternate worlds—whether they consist of some social or political underworld, or a sacred realm of transcendental signification—can be seen as attempts to find something that could break the empty repetition her life consists of. In the beginning of the novel, Oedipa sees her life as a “fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way” (6). In the end, she realizes that she has to form a relationship with this Other in order to change her life:

[E]ither an accomodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it. (126)

In the next chapter, I will go deeper into the realm of the dead in *Mason & Dixon*, *Vineland*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In these three novels, the ontological border separating this side of existence from the Other Side also becomes an ideological border, and an image of social demarcation.

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<sup>87</sup> The name Tristero is, again, a name with many etymological possibilities. It associates Oedipa’s quest with her melancholy and loss of love, for the name refers to words like the French “triste” (sad), or “eros,” or “tryst,” the secret meeting place (Grant 1994, 43–44). I also sympathize with Medoro’s reading of the word simply as the Italian phrase “ero triste,” (I was sad) written in reverse order (2002, 56).



## 6. Life Outside of Life. Pynchon's Liminal Figures

Spectres haunt the world of Pynchon. Many of Pynchon's characters have a special mode of sensitivity or "freak talent" (GR, 145) for experiencing visitations of the dead and communicating with them. And those who are dead often refuse to stay silent and non-existent. They mingle with the lives of the living, like Pierce Inverarity in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Walter Rathenau in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Weed Atman in *Vineland*, and Rebekah Mason in *Mason & Dixon*. But just as often the life of the living is also compared to ghostly existence, when Pynchon's characters see themselves or other people as something not really living. Anticipating the massacre in "Mortality and Mercy," Siegel sees the other people at the party as already dead, and Oedipa Maas feels at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* that her former self has changed into a phantom that haunts her mind (L49, 111). When Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon feel unreal after being in a sea fight, one of them suggests that "we might have died then, after all, and gone on as Ghosts" (M&D, 75). Similarly, Takeshi Fumimota in *Vineland* has a strange "postmortem" experience, when he sees Brock Vond for the first time and considers Brock his double: "for a terrified second or two it was himself and something radical, like death, had just happened" (VL, 148).

To a certain extent these kinds of experience can be psychologized: they are due, for example, to Oedipa's or Takeshi's unstable mental condition and drunkenness, or Mason's and Dixon's shock. But in Pynchon the metaphorical always at some point merges with the literal. The character's air of unreality can suddenly change into a more direct experience of "another world's intrusion into this one" (L49, 83), and this other world always involves dealings with the dead. However, to call the spirits in *Mason & Dixon*, or Thanatoids in *Vineland*, or the Schwartzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow* "dead" is a simplification, for they are figures who exist on a conceptual borderline, and they often openly ignore the dichotomy between the living and the dead.

With his *liminal figures*, Pynchon confronts not only two worlds, but two ways of understanding the relationship between the living and the dead, and this confrontation forms a persistent strain in his fiction. In Pynchon, the ontological borderline is also an ideological one, and ontological separation parallels social separation. The liminal figures live their spectral life on the margins of society, forgotten by the majority. Thus, whatever their ontological status they are already dead socially—that is, deprived of any social status. Which makes them not a mere allegory of a marginalized group, but the very emblem of social line-drawing.

The realm of the dead is also an Other Side with a long literary history; from folklore to gothic fiction the dead have been representatives of the *unheimlich*, the most familiar otherness. Baudrillard argues that the malignant doubles and restless dead in literature are the horror images of the forgotten dead. The double is a ghost, a vampire,

an avenger, a “restless soul,” which haunts the subject, reminding him/her of death. Thus in the figure of the haunting double the image of the forgotten dead is expelled and demonized just like the ancient gods by Christianity (1976, 217–218). Pynchon takes part in this history in his novels, but whenever there are elements of horror in his fiction they do not stem from the presence of the dead<sup>88</sup>. When encounters with the dead take place, they often have a strange air of familiarity, as if the living and the dead momentarily belonged to the same sphere.

This return of the dead that plays a crucial role in Pynchon’s fiction has several implications. First, it represents a historical demand for justice and recognition. Literary ghosts have usually been seen as representatives of guilt or desire, or of injustices in the past demanding to be solved in the present. These elements can also be found in Pynchon’s liminal figures; they often belong to what Steven Weisenburger (1998) has named a “haunted history”—the history of those who have been exterminated, wiped out, and forgotten. People lost without documents or physical traces, like the African Hereros and the prisoners of the Dora extermination camp in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, or those gone underground, like the Vietnam veterans and failed student revolutionaries in *Vineland*, all these continue an ethereal presence in Pynchon’s world. Weisenburger sees that Pynchon’s preoccupation with those left out of official histories reveals the writer’s participation in a historiographical project, “whose subjects are the almost-erased multitudes, the Others of white, technocratic society” (1998, 16). The dead who demand justice in one form or another represent in this respect the symbolic demand of return and reciprocity that Pynchon often openly juxtaposes to the capitalistic ideology of one-sided growth.

Second, this return of the dead often takes the form of subversion. Ghostly visitations or realms of the dead often appear in Pynchon through parodic excesses and carnivalistic subversion, when the values of the living are subverted in the netherworld—both cultural and ideological values, and the economic value as such. Third, the coexistence of the living and the dead in Pynchon’s fiction can also be seen to represent a critical stance toward the social exile of the dead in modern culture. Consigned to graveyards, memories, and historical documents, the dead have ceased to matter socially. Their constant return in literature can thus be seen as an elaborate form of cultural criticism.

In the following, Pynchon’s liminal figures are analyzed in three novels, *Mason & Dixon*, *Vineland*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and in different literary and theoretical registers. The first two are the literary modes of gothic and Menippean satire, both genres in which the dead and their relationship to the living have an important role. *Mason & Dixon* contains both gothic imagery and explicit references to gothic fiction, and therefore the frequent apparition of ghosts in the novel is already implicated in a

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<sup>88</sup> The one exception to this occurs in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where Pynchon refers a couple of times to the Cabalistic myth of the Qlippoth (The Shells of the Dead) who according to the tradition are malignant “poltergeists.”

specific literary context. In the first part of this chapter I analyze the role of ghosts and the gothic in *Mason & Dixon*, and their relation to the emerging rationalism.

The underworld of the dead is, of course, a topos that goes back to antiquity, and to satirists like Lucian and Seneca. When Pynchon evokes this topos in his fiction, most straightforwardly in *Vineland*, the literary context is always close to that of Menippean satire, the tradition in which the realm of the dead represents a carnivalized mirror world of subversion. The second part of this chapter focuses on *Vineland*, and the way the novel evokes the Menippean underworld in a postmodern cultural context. In the third part of this chapter the subversiveness of the community of the dead is read more directly through the Baudrillardian notion of symbolical exchange, when I analyze the story of the Schwartzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this story the relationship between death and power culminates in the ambiguous *gift of death*, a symbolic offering of death, through which a small number of people challenge the anonymous power structures of the novel.

#### Unfinished Business: The Gothic Condition in *Mason & Dixon*

When Pynchon sets *Mason & Dixon* in the second half of the eighteenth century, the era is the historically significant Age of Reason in which the foundations of modernity are laid. But in literary history, this era also marks the beginning of the classic gothic, the genre known from its supernatural, claustrophobic, and macabre imagery. An interesting detail in the timeline of *Mason & Dixon* is that a novel often regarded as the first representative of the gothic genre, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, was published in 1764, during the land-surveyors' American years 1763–1768. The visitations of Mason's dead wife Rebekah start on the island of St. Helena in 1761, and continue in America. This timing is no doubt deliberate. *Mason & Dixon* contains numerous explicit references to gothic imagery—ghosts, golems, werewolves, vampires, haunted places, intriguing Catholics, etc. It also appears that both Mason and Dixon are readers of a fictitious gothic fiction series named *The Ghastly Fop*, which seems to consist of tales full of adventure, mystery and eroticism. But the gothic in *Mason & Dixon* provides more than just diversion. It also becomes the symbol of the historical confrontation of scientific rationalism and folklore, in which the latter is banned in a way similar to heresies centuries earlier. As the narrator, Reverend Cherrycoke argues:

These times are unfriendly toward Worlds alternative to this one. Royal Society members and French Encyclopaedists are in the Chariot, availing themselves whilst they may of any occasion to preach the Gospels of Reason, denouncing all that once was Magic, though too often in smirking tropes upon the Church of Rome, —visitations, bleeding statues, medical impossibilities,—no, no, far too foreign. One may be allowed an occasional Cock Lane Ghost, —otherwise, for any more in that Article, one must turn to gothick Fictions,

folded acceptably between the covers of Books. (M&D, 359)

The so called “gothic revival” in the latter half of the eighteenth century has usually been seen as a counterreaction against the Enlightenment, invigorated by everything that the Enlightenment philosophers attacked as prejudices, errors, superstitions, and fears, all of which were to be replaced by a vision of universal law (Davenport-Hines 1998, 2–3).

These questions echo already in Pynchon’s essay “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” (*The New York Times Book Review*, 1984). There he handles the gothic, and *The Castle of Otranto* in particular, through a review of C. P. Snow’s famous essay “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution” (1959). Pynchon starts with Snow’s use of the term “Luddite” as a synonym for a “literary” intellectual who is unable to understand and approve of science and technology. But swiftly Pynchon moves on from the historical background of Luddism to other 18th-century intellectual and political currents, among which he includes gothic fiction. The resulting discussion already anticipates the themes of *Mason & Dixon*. In this essay Pynchon sees that the “craze for gothic fiction” that emerged after Walpole’s novel was an expression of resistance to the Age of Reason, parallel to such movements as Freemasonry, Methodism, Luddism, and Radicalism: “Each in its way expressed the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing” (5). In the gothic Pynchon sees a “deep and religious yearning” (ibid.) for an earlier mythic time when supernatural things were still possible. Due to the emerging natural sciences, “what had once been true working magic had, by the Age of Reason, degenerated into mere machinery” (ibid.). But Pynchon’s insight is that the fictional violations of laws of nature that flourished in gothic fiction were not merely an expression of nostalgia: they also revealed a yearning for the possibility of defying a social order that represented itself as unwavering as the laws of nature. What people’s imagination evokes in times of great social and political tensions, argues Pynchon, is the figure of the “Badass”—a superhuman creature with mythical powers and ability to “work mischief on a large scale” (3):

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<sup>89</sup>—who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us? (3)

In *Mason & Dixon* this social dimension of the preternatural becomes apparent in the measuring of the Mason-Dixon line. During the novel the line that moves westward and penetrates into the wilderness becomes an image of science in progress. In the wilderness outside the colonies, land-surveying eventually means that the land is taken

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<sup>89</sup> Among “Badasses” Pynchon includes such fictional characters as Alphonso the Prince of Otranto in Walpole’s novel, Frankenstein’s creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1817), King Kong, and the historical Ned Lud, the destroyer of knitting machines in 18th-century England.

from the Indians and added to the realm of the European landowners. But this drawing of a geographical line also becomes an image of how the folkloric realm of spirits gets narrowed by rationalization. The land-surveyors and their crew encounter in their journey not only settlers and Indians; they also have experiences of supernatural creatures, spirits and ghosts. In *Mason & Dixon* the scientific project does not proceed in a vacuum; it proceeds against some unknowable barrier of which the land-surveyors are becoming more and more aware. The end of the Line is also the edge of reason, where divisions and subdivisions can no longer be made, not even the distinction between the living and the dead:

South Mountain is the last concentration of Apparitions, —as you might say, Shape-’Morphers, and Soul-Snatchers, besides plain “Ghosts.” Beyond lies Wilderness, where quite another Presence reigns, undifferentiate, — Thatwhichever *precedeth* Ghostliness... (M&D, 491)

Supernatural experiences can also occur for personal reasons, as in Charles Mason’s case. The most prominent of the novel’s ghosts is Rebekah Mason, Charles Mason’s wife, who died in childbirth in 1759. After his wife’s death Mason turns the care of his two sons over to his sisters, and sails with his assistant Dixon south of the Equator. The men spend the year 1761 in Cape Town, South Africa and on the island of St. Helena making astrological observations and calculations. When the ghost of Rebekah begins visiting him in St. Helena, Mason, a man of science, is astonished:

And here it is, upon the Windward Side, where no ship ever comes willingly, that her visits begin. At some point, Mason realizes he has been hearing her voice, clearly, clean of all intervention [...]. Rebekah, who in her living silences drove him to moments of fury, now wrapt in what should be the silence of the grave, has begun to speak to him, as if free to do so at last [...]. He tries to joke with himself. Isn’t this supposed to be the Age of Reason? [...] But if Reason be also Permission at last to believe in the evidence of our Earthly Senses, then how can he not concede to her some Resurrection? —to deny her, how cruel! (M&D, 163–164)

Mason is told that the strong sea winds on St. Helena eventually drive its inhabitants mad, and therefore Mason has at first great difficulties in deciding whether he has been hallucinating these visits or not. Later, when he tells Dixon about his experiences, he tries to determine *what* exactly he has seen and heard:

Damme...she was there...Was it *not* her Soul? What, then? Memory is not so all-enwrapping, Dream sooner or later betrays itself. If an Actor or a painted Portrait may represent a personage no longer alive, might there not be other Modalities of Appearance, as well?... No, nothing of Reason in it. —In truth, I have ever waited meeting her again. (165)

Mason’s reasoning here reflects quite openly the philosophical problematic inherent in

the gothic, what Marshall Brown in *The Gothic Text* (2005) has traced back to the Kantian philosophy of consciousness. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 1781) introduced the notion of the "transcendental ego," a conception of mind freed from all empirical constraints. The transcendental ego experiences the world through categories of understanding, such as space and time, which are not empirical givens but forms of consciousness. To Kant the world cannot be known as such; what consciousness perceives are only appearances, not things in themselves. In the operation of the transcendental ego there is thus no fundamental difference between dreams, hallucinations, and empirical perceptions. What finally separates a dream from a waking experience is the coherence and persistence of the appearances. To Kant, all human experience is fundamentally rational but, as Brown argues, Kant's tenet was that human understanding is always impelled toward its limits, towards transcendental entities that haunt the margins of experience (2005, 70). To Brown this preoccupation with mental processes and the limits of experience is what unites Kantian idealism and the poetic imagination of the pre-romantic era —most notably, gothic fiction (70–72).

Rebekah's ghost has such persistence that Mason cannot determine whether she is real or a dream. She exists like the Kantian "thing in itself," *das Ding an sich*, which to Brown is "an eternal signified that is never a signifier [...] not an object of real experience, but a mysterious hypothesis of our reason, the conjectural substratum perpetually hinted at by the world we know" (2005, 10). To name Rebekah the ghost of Mason's late wife is only a partial solution, because in Pynchon those on the Other Side do not make the distinction between life and death. As Rebekah explains: "Look to the Earth [...]. Belonging to her as I do, I know she lives" (M&D, 172).

Beneath all Mason's reasoning are two equally strong emotions in his relation to his wife: guilt and despair. Critics like Mattessich have seen Rebekah's ghost as a remainder of Mason's guilt for having neglected her when she was still alive (2002, 233). Mason's condition as a fresh widower is in the novel openly described as melancholic or "Gothically depressive" (M&D, 680), a state that has always been associated with philosophers and poets (Agamben 1993, 20). There are hints in the text that Rebekah is somehow also the product of Mason's artistic imagination, for example when Mason tells, "tho' not aloud," of his fantasy of a pastoral setting where Rebekah also makes her sudden appearances:

There is a Countryside in my Thoughts, populated with agreeable Company, mapped with Romantick scenery, Standing-Stones and broken Archways, cedar and Yew, shaded Streams, and meadows a-riot with wild flowers [...] and each time, somewhere by surprize goes Rebekah, ever at a distance, but damme 'tis she, and a moment passes in which we have recognized the other, —my breath goes away, I turn to Marble,— (M&D, 165)

Similarly, when the adventuress Eliza Fields enters the narrative, Mason, suprised, sees her as Rebekah's perfect *image*:

You resemble too faithfully One whom I have not beheld, —not in Body,—for seven years. More than merely some general Likeness, Madam, —you are her *Point-for-Point-Representation*. (536)

To Brown the generic topos of the gothic is that of passive observation (2005, 72). But, he adds, “what the typical gothic hero observes is also static. The outside world is reduced to a series of unchanging, discrete pictures” (ibid.). Thus, Mason’s experience of being petrified by the sight of Rebekah resembles what Brown calls a typical *gothic condition* characterized by waiting and suspense (9). Brown determines this condition as the fantastic, when “a mysterious residual freedom of the spirit arises from the petrified corpse” (10). But it is easy to notice a certain similarity between this petrified state of suspense and the masochistic fantasy scene that I discussed earlier in chapter 5. Both are characterized by the suspended state: in masochism it is the anticipation of pain, and in the gothic, the anticipation of terror. As Brown himself argues: “To be sure, terror is a characteristic component of the gothic, but it is far more the terror of suspense—of some mystery held in reserve—than the full power of terror in action” (14).

To Daniel Punday, Rebekah in *Mason & Dixon* is an essentially different ghost from those of Pynchon’s earlier novels. To Punday, ghosts in Pynchon’s earlier fiction—*Vineland* being a kind of border case—represented the traditional image of a spirit seeking to set right debts and wrongs from life (2003, 252). This image, however, still exists in *Mason & Dixon* at some level, and the most prominent example of it is a figure called the Ghastly Fop, a trickster character in the fictional *Ghastly Fop* series of gothic tales:

The Ghastly Fop. He’s seen at Ridottoes and Hurricanes, close to Gaming-Tables, as to expensive Nymphs. But he speaks to no one. No one approaches him. “Not I, thank you, —much too ghastly,” is the postventilatory Murmur among the Belles attending. He is reported to be the Wraith of a quite dreadfully ruin’d young man come to London from the Country, who can return neither there, nor to the World of Death, until sizable Debts in this one be settl’d, —and to reside, tho’ not necessarily to live, in Hampstead.

The Ghastly F., true to his legend, is engaged in the long, frustrating, too often unproductive Exercise of tracking down ev’ryone with whom he yet has unresolv’d financial dealings. To some, he seems quite conventionally alive, whilst others swear he is a Ghost. That no one is certain, contributes to his peculiar Charm, tho’ Admirers must ever sigh, for but One Motrix commands his Attention and Fidelity, —the Account-Book. Some of those nam’d therein have cheated him of money he must collect, others are creditors whom he must repay, and so forth. [...] In his largely Paper Vengeance, he not only traverses England, but the World of Commerce as well, righting Injustices in Grub-Street, prematurely exploding Bubble-Schemes, making wild raids upon the Exchange, Gambling Stacks of what prove to be only Ghost-Guineas, losing all, straightening his Wig, and vanishing before the admittedly sleep-denied Eyes of the Company. (M&D, 527–528)

At first sight, the Ghastly Fop accords with folkloric beliefs that a dead man may be tied to the earth because of unpaid debts. The haunting will usually cease if his debts are paid on his behalf (Ballard 1980, 39). But something has gone wrong along the way, for instead of seeking payment to some particular debts, Ghastly Fop is dedicated to endless debt collection and repayment, making him a kind of otherworldly bookkeeper. While dealing with money he differs from traditional ghosts, whose demands have usually been more concrete—finishing a job, solving a crime, changing the burial place, etc. When Pynchon openly associates dealings with the dead to economy, the question is not so much the allegorization of symbolical pacts as a crude form of economy, but the eerie nature of value. Value, although rationally measured, is in itself spectral, which the Ghastly Fop shows by raiding the stock exchange (an attempt at crashing the value of stocks), exposing the non-value of “Bubble-Schemes,” and playing with “Ghost-Guineas” that turn out to be nothing<sup>90</sup>. Everywhere the Ghastly Fop aims at subversion and the undoing of value: as a Grub-Street<sup>91</sup> writer, as a player, and as a trickster.

To Punday, the Ghastly Fop seems to be something of a nuisance, since he repeatedly determines him as a traditional ghost with the “recognizable human motivations” (2003, 253) of seeking compensation for past grievances, and therefore not a character of theoretical interest. And because many characters in *Mason & Dixon* are reading the *Ghastly Fop* stories, the ghost “haunts Pynchon’s novel as a network of traditional, sensationalized expectations about ghostliness” (ibid.). As a striking contrast to these traditional ghosts Punday posits Rebekah, who does not impose any tasks or demands on Mason, and whose motivation is thus much more difficult to determine. Punday tries to formulate the difference between Rebekah and the other, more traditional ghosts in terms of temporality. The traditional ghost is in itself “an emblem of the past” (259) and of the linear notion of time, since its haunting involves the possibility that the past can return to be dealt with in the present (258). But as Punday notes with a reference to Derrida and his *Specters of Marx* (1994), ghostly visitations evoke reversed temporality: “ghostliness involves our anticipation of a returned past” (256). Which means that we face, again, the complex state of waiting and repetition, which is “at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated” (ibid.), and projected simultaneously into past and future. “Ghosts are not emblems of the past, but things

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<sup>90</sup> The secret of gaming, argues Baudrillard, is that money has no meaning; it exists only as appearance. In the arbitrary rules of the game, the substance of value is volatilized by the play of appearances (1990, 53). This idea also appears in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when Graciela Imago Portales, a gambler, sits playing with cards: “she’d thought it once that by using it only in games, money would lose its reality. Wither away.” (GR, 613).

<sup>91</sup> The Grub Street was in the 18th century a street in London famous for its hack writers. Hence “Grub-Street” as an adjective or noun indicated literature or journalism of a low order. *Guide to English Literature*. Ed. Marion Wynne-Davies. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1994.



always imagined out of the present and projected into the future as part of an ethical task” (259). This ethical task, as Punday argues through Derrida, involves a sense of responsibility, although not responsibility in regard to some specific task or duty, and mourning, in which the ghost appears as a “projected relationship with the past” (257).

When commenting on Derrida’s notion of spectrality, Weisenburger is in fact much more precise than Punday, noting that although ghosts represent “an appeal for justice” (1998, 21), their appearance is significant also in another way, for the ghosts undo the opposition between the actual present and its other (16). In Pynchon, this other present can be understood as the haunted history of the deprived and forgotten, but also as the presence of a non-human otherness. As Brown argues, “the gothic confronts us with a transcendent reality, the reality of the thing in itself [...] in its freedom from empirical conditioning” (2005, 11). The wide range of ghosts and spirits in *Mason & Dixon* all reflect this otherness. Rebekah stands in the novel as a questioner, shaking the philosophical grounds for Mason’s scientific work, and symbolizing the “irrational and invisible element in the earthly that Mason abstracts in his obsession with astronomy” (Mattessich 2002, 233). And when the Mason–Dixon line proceeds westward, the numerous other spirits represent, as Weisenburger has noted, the “chthonic forces of Earth’s tortured body,” which he sees as signs of Pynchon’s increasing ecocritical agenda (1998, 22).

In his relationship with Rebekah, Mason is an empiricist and a spiritualist at once, believing in something his scientific attitude denies him—access to her. And yet this closeness with his dead wife was what he sought as a fresh widower back in England:

Is that why I sought so obsessedly Death’s Insignia, its gestures and formulae, its quotidian gossip [...] hours spent nearly immobile, watching stone-carvers labor upon tomb embellishments, Chip by Chip, —was it all but some way to show my worthiness to obtain a Permit to visit her, to cross that grimly patroll’d Line, that very essence of Division? (M&D, 703)

Mason, who spends hours in a graveyard, reflects well the emerging sentiment of melancholy in the late eighteenth-century, which Ariès has called “the cult of tombs.” Tombs, which for centuries had not been important for ordinary people, now became a locus for pious and melancholy visits:

[T]he living should form a veritable lay cult to show their veneration of the dead. Their tombs therefore began to serve as a sign of their presence after death, a presence which did not necessarily derive from the concept of immortality central to religions of salvation such as Christianity. It derived instead from the survivors’ unwillingness to accept the departure of the loved one. People held on to the remains. (1976, 70)

Mason, however, feels that the barriers separating him and Rebekah are not his own doing. He does not say who the guardians of the ontological Line are, but elsewhere in

the novel all lines are associated with power. Is it the clerical power that rules over dealings with the dead? Or is it the ideological power of the emerging scientific rationalism? Throughout the novel Pynchon parallels ontological and geographical lines and how they function as a means for exercising power. As when the Feng Shui master Zhang criticizes the entire project of geographical line-drawing as a mode of ruling:

To rule forever [...] it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call...Bad History. Nothing will produce bad history more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People. (615)

Able to cross lines, ghosts are beyond the reach of power, and therefore they remain in *Mason & Dixon*, as well as in Pynchon's other works, emblems of resistance. Although Mason can't get to Rebekah, she can visit him as a representative of a "Denial of all that Reason holds true" (769). But when the Mason-Dixon line is done, she stops visiting, which ends Mason's obsession with the past, and leads him into a new phase of his life.

#### Menippean Death and the Postmodern Underworld in *Vineland*

Give these third-worlders a chance, you  
know, they can be a lotta fun. (VL, 380)

While the gothic focuses on the nature of man in isolation, on individuals "deprived of the society of their fellows" (Brown 2005, 69), there is another literary tradition that deals with the supernatural particularly in public space —the Menippean satire. The fictional sphere of the Menippean satire is collective: it stages dialogical and subversive confrontations where the dividing lines, also those of an ontological kind, are crossed. This is also the sphere the reader enters in Pynchon's fiction.

Mikhail Bakhtin, who in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) raised the Menippean satire from theoretical oblivion, saw a direct connection between carnivalistic folk tradition and the form of the modern novel. Bakhtin's famous theory was that one of the basic generic roots of the modern novel can be found in the carnivalistic tradition renewed in old literary forms like the Menippean satire<sup>92</sup>. Bakhtin argued that in the modern novel the alternate social sphere of the carnival, which was culturally important from antiquity to the Middle Ages, is transferred to literature. There it emerges through specific carnivalistic imagery (masks, metamorphoses and grotesque deformations, fire, death and birth) and *topoi* (the road, the marketplace, the

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<sup>92</sup> Other important factors were the rhetorical tradition (dramatized dialogue) and the epic tradition (1973, 89).

underworld, heaven and hell), but also as a structural ambivalence that represents what Bakhtin names the carnivalesque principle or attitude. In carnival, things that are usually separated are brought into contact with each other and the prevalent social order and its hierarchies are suspended (1973, 100–101). In carnivalesque literature, like the Menippean satire, this carnivalesque principle emerges in a dramatized form, and its typical characteristics are comical elements, profanation (that is, subversion of official values), concentration on contemporary topics, free imagination and fantasy, extreme ideologism, stylistic multiplicity, mystical and religious elements, social utopia, and so on (93–97). In many ways, the “*mésalliance*” and subversivity of carnivalesque literature has political overtones, since, as Bakhtin notes, it is permeated by the carnivalesque “*pathos of change*” (109) that tends to undo the prevailing *doxa*, official values, and social power.

Death and the dead feature prominently in the Menippean tradition; journeys to the underworld and dialogues with the dead are typical of the genre (94–95). For Bakhtin, they represent the carnivalesque attitude towards death—familiar and profanizing (1973, 114). Carnival laughter debases and brings down to earth all absolutes, but when it comes to death, this subversion plays a constitutive role. Death is not only ridiculed and deprived of its sacramental status, it becomes the embodiment of subversion itself. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque principle is “the *pathos of vicissitudes and changes, of death and renewal*” (102), and in the carnival images creation and destruction, birth and death follow each other cyclically, forming an ambivalent bond. All carnival images have this dual nature: “they always include within themselves the perspective of negation (death), or its opposite” (102).

The tradition of Menippean satire has often been seen to affect Pynchon’s prose. The best known Bakhtinian reading of Pynchon’s work is Theodore Kharperian’s *A Hand to Turn the Time: The Menippean Satires of Thomas Pynchon*, which analyzes the generic features of Menippean satire in Pynchon’s novels—especially in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which Kharperian considers the first modern representative of this hybrid genre in American literature (1990, 17). In *Satire in Narrative* (1990), Frank Palmeri sees Pynchon as continuing the Bakhtinian “*seriocomic*” tradition of Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, and Herman Melville. Another term often associated with Pynchon’s prose, *encyclopedic fiction*, also has characteristics closely related to the Menippean tradition, since the term refers both to the encyclopedic complexity of his prose, and to the parodic stance that pervades the narration<sup>93</sup>.

Although Pynchon has many times been named the postmodern satirist *par excellence*, the carnivalesque death imagery and carnivalesque attitude towards death that feature prominently in his fiction have not been much discussed in criticism. When

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<sup>93</sup> Encyclopedic fiction has been used by Edward Mendelson in his essay “Gravity’s Encyclopedia” (1976). About the adequacy of the term, see Weisenburger’s discussion in *Fables of Subversion* (1995, 199–207).

critics analyze Pynchon as a humorist, the recurrent death imagery is either ignored, or seen as “dark humor,” or an indication that “the tone becomes more serious” (see, for example, Safer 1994, 48–49). In Kharpertian’s study, for example, the relationship between death and Menippean elements in Pynchon is not discussed, since his theoretical focus is on genre criticism<sup>94</sup>. And yet there are typical Menippean features in Pynchon’s death imagery, like a dialogue with personified Death in *Mason & Dixon* (750), or the underworlds and the communication with the dead in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*. In addition to these generic features, I argue that in the carnivalistic ambiguity that flourishes in these novels one can see a dramatized, literary version of the ambiguity of symbolic exchange, and of its logic of subversion. As to the notion of carnivalistic literature, it appears in Bakhtin’s writings, more than anything else, as a textual economy that cannot be reduced to certain contents or linguistic features. Death plays a crucial part in this textual economy: in the Menippean form, death becomes both an image and a locus of subversion.

In the following, I’ll approach from this perspective the realms of the dead in *Vineland*, which to me is the most straightforwardly Menippean of Pynchon’s novels. In *Vineland* Pynchon makes an analogy between a political underground and the underground of the dead. What unites both realms is historical and cultural oblivion and marginality, while they also represent a locus where the official values of late capitalist consumer culture are challenged and subverted.

Pynchon’s topographies often fuse historical and mythical realms, which is also seen in the description of the novel’s locale, Vineland County. Vineland is a fictional place somewhere on the coast of Northern California,<sup>95</sup> a region with its own capital, Vineland City, and its surrounding suburbia, countryside, and woods. The name Vineland refers to *vinland*, the name Leif Ericsson gave to America around 1000 A.D. And therefore Vineland County has often been read as a miniature “representation of the American land” (Cowart 1994, 9) —a satire of American social reality in the 80’s. The novel is set in the year 1984, but the present is saturated by flashbacks of the past: the 60’s, when the middle-aged characters reminisce about their youth, and the 40’s when the older generation was about the same age.

Vineland is, however, not a mere fictional setting, for it consists of several ontological planes. Vineland City is a coastal town with a harbor, an international airport, shopping malls, restaurants and bars, fast-food stores, a hotel, and a college. One salient feature in Pynchon’s description of this fictional city is that there are no

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<sup>94</sup> For obvious reasons, Kharpertian’s book does not include *Vineland*, the novel that could have changed his somewhat resigned and pessimistic view of the role of death in Pynchon’s fiction.

<sup>95</sup> In New Jersey there is a city named Vineland, the latitude of which, as David Cowart points out, coincides with that of the imaginary Vineland in North California (1994, 9). Cowart also points out a possible reference to the North Californian wine district in the novel’s title.

churches or graveyards; if Vineland City is, as Mark Hawthorne has noted, “a metaphor for the 1980’s American town” (1992, 79), it is a town without a sacred or transcendental realm. Everything in the city is profane; the town consists of commercialized spaces that seem to have no depth, that is, no historical or symbolical dimension at all. Hawthorne has called this fictional city a “model of vacuity,” and its different settings “have the substance of flats on a production set” (ibid.)<sup>96</sup>. But just outside the city there are the old lands of the Yurok Indians, found along a river that runs through Vineland City. The Yurok land, like the Zone in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is a realm in which the historical and the mythical merge:

Once past the lights of Vineland, the river took back its older form, became what for the Yuroks it had always been, a river of ghosts. Everything had a name—fishing and snaring places, acorn grounds, rocks in the river, boulders in the banks, groves and single trees with their own names, springs, pools, meadows, all alive, each with its own spirit. [...] For the Yuroks, who had always held this river exceptional, to follow it up from the ocean was also to journey through the realm behind the immediate. (VL, 186)

Brian McHale has called the fictional space of *Vineland* a “multiple-world space” with several ontological planes (1992, 137). He refers not only to Vineland’s mythical topography, but also to the alternative realities of media, dreams and hallucinations that pervade the fictional space of the novel. As has often been noted, *Vineland* is a media-saturated novel. Like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984) and many other major postmodern novels, *Vineland* depicts a lifestyle in which media and consumption play essential roles,<sup>97</sup> and in which the difference between the real and the hyperreal has vanished. Many of the characters are TV-addicts, and there are numerous references in the novel to authentic TV programs as well as to several radically apocryphal ones. Moreover, it seems that the characters’ reality is always in one way or another modelled by the media, especially by movies and television. Zoyd Wheeler, one of the main characters, makes part of his living by making suicidal “defenestrations” that end up as kiss-off stories on the evening news, Prairie, his daughter, imagines herself as a tv-series teenager, her friend Ché tries to come to terms with her parents by considering her life as a continuous sitcom, the narcotics agent Hector Zuñiga seeks therapy made for the

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<sup>96</sup> This flatness of the setting is typical of the satiric tradition. According to Weisenburger, a carnivalesque setting is decidedly *antirepresentational*: “nothing is what it *seems* [...] the characters move in a space *only* of surfaces” (1995, 25).

<sup>97</sup> *Vineland* is set in the year 1984, and as many critics have noticed, it has certain affinities with Orwell’s *1984* (the themes of television and social control in particular), and the tradition of dystopian fiction. 1984 was also the year when Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* came out, and I cannot help thinking that *this* coincidence is also a deliberate one, for the common themes in *Vineland* and *White Noise* are television, social control, and death.

TV-addicted, and so on.

The characters of *Vineland*, who have excluded the actuality of death and transcendence from their everyday life, thus plunge into other worlds provided by the media. According to McHale, the centrality of TV as an ontological “pluralizer” is typical of many postmodern novels, where the TV set itself often appears as something uncanny and otherworldly, associated with some other order of being (130). This *transcendental* aspect of the media is, however, not a novelty in itself. As Peters has argued, the link between communication channels and the spiritual world has always been part of the idea of communication. In audiovisual media, this connection becomes even more apparent, because in it people appear “apart from flesh”, which makes them analogous to ghosts: “ghosts and angels haunt modern media, with their common ability to spirit voice, image, and word across vast distances without death or decay” (Peters 1999, 75). For McHale, TV is an important medium in postmodern age and art in two ways. First, as McHale notes with reference to Fredric Jameson, TV is postmodern culture’s privileged model or metaphor: “TV, it might be argued, is the medium in which postmodern culture prefers to represent itself to itself” (1992, 125). The flow of worlds and simulation provided by TV embodies the loss of distinction between the real and its image. Second, TV, by providing us access to different worlds, becomes for McHale a model for all other forms of ontological differences (1992, 140). This modeling relates especially to the “ultimate ontological disjunction between life and death” (139). Thus TV is a *medium* in both senses of the word—a machine for communication, and an interface between the living and the dead.

This connection is also made in *Vineland*, too, for among the novel’s TV-addicts there is also the subculture of the Thanatoids, whose ontological status is unclear. What is a Thanatoid? An open question, because as one of them explains, “Thanatoid” means “like death, only different” (VL, 170). The term Thanatoid, it is said, comes from “Thanatoid personality”—a term which parodies Freud’s famous theory of the two basic principles of psychic functioning, Eros and Thanatos. Therefore a Thanatoid is not exactly a ghost, but someone hovering on the ontological border between life and death. A prominent characteristic of the Thanatoids is that they maintain their spectral life by watching the “Tube” all the time. “Thanatoids spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube” (VL, 171). In this regard there is no real distinction in the novel between the still-living TV-addicts and the Thanatoids, and some of the former will realize that they have been Thanatoids all along, unknowingly. When there is no place for death and the dead in the town planning and lifestyle of *Vineland*, the postmodern realm of the dead returns in another form—in the spectral life of and through the Tube.

When the fusion of different ontological planes in *Vineland* is seen in relation to the tradition of Menippean satire, TV emerges not only as a “pluralizer,” but as a postmodernist topos for a carnivalistic fusion of heterogeneous elements. And as a channel to other worlds, TV comes close to what Bakhtin names a “threshold”—a

transitional space or channel between worlds that is typical of the Menippean form (1991, 245). For Bakhtin such a threshold, be it a concrete threshold or a metaphorical one, is a central point in the narration, for it always evokes a crisis, a radical change, death and renewal (ibid.). A threshold thus always implies a symbolic death in one form or another.

Journeys to the transcendental realm, to the underworld, heaven and hell abound in the Menippean tradition<sup>98</sup>. This tradition is also evoked in *Vineland*, for somewhere outside Vinleand City, along the aforementioned river, one can also find the road to Tsorrek, the Yurok's world of the dead. This road, it is said, is traveled by so many that the end of the road has descended under the earth. This underworld indeed appears at the end of the novel, when Brock Vond, a federal prosecutor and in many respects the villain of the story, gets a lift from the mysterious pair Vato and Blood. They take a road that suddenly starts sinking into the ground. At the destination Brock realizes that he has come to a different world from which there is no return. The river has now changed into something resembling the Styx, the river and passage to Hades. But this Hades is not a gloomy place:

Across the river Brock could see lights, layer after layer, crookedly ascending, thickly crowded dwellings, heaped one on the other. In the smoking torch—and firelight he saw people dancing. An old woman and an old man approached. The man carried objects in his hands that Brock couldn't make out clearly. Then he began to notice, all around in the gloom, human bones, skulls and skeletons. "What is it?" he asked. "Please."

"They'll take out your bones," Vato explained. "The bones have to stay on this side. The rest of you goes over. You look a lot different, and you move funny for a while, but they say you'll adjust. Give these third-worlders a chance, you know, they can be a lotta fun."

"So long, Brock," said Blood. (VL, 380)

The scene in Tsorrek has many carnivalistic elements. First, it involves degradation. Brock Vond, a police authority and in many respects a powerful character in the novel, is literally taken to the underground, a fate which ironically reflects his career as the enemy of *subcultures* and *underground* communities. According to Bakhtin, this downward movement is constitutive of the carnivalistic attitude, and it is embodied in the carnivalistic "discrowning" that expresses the relativity of every system and order—that is, every instance of power. This ritualistic abolishing does not, however, signify absolute negation and destruction, for, as Bakhtin emphasizes, "carnival celebrates change itself, the very process of replaceability, rather than that which is replaced. [...] absolute negation, like absolute affirmation, is unknown to carnival" (1973, 103). Thus

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<sup>98</sup> In Lucian's dialogues the satirist Menippus, after whom the genre has been named, travels to the underworld and has dialogues with his rich and famous contemporaries, who now in the underworld have to give up all earthly possessions, wealth, power and fame.

the degradation of an authority is an ambivalent gesture that through symbolic death tends towards renewal:

Degradation [...] means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. (Bakhtin 1984, 21)<sup>99</sup>

Ritualistic degradation is also a form of sacrifice, when the power of the authority is symbolically given and abolished. (This sacrificial thematic and poetic in Pynchon is discussed in the next chapter.)

The figure of the merry and uninhibited feast of the dead is also typical of the Menippean tradition, and for Bakhtin it represents a profanizing and familiar attitude to death<sup>100</sup>. The "third-worlders" is also an expression that can be seen referring to the three-plane cosmology of the Menippean satire: Heaven (or Olympus), the Earth, and the Underworld (Bakhtin 1973, 95). This cosmology is also evoked at the end of the novel, when Sister Rochelle tells the story of the great battle between Heaven and Hell over the Earth (VL, 382–383)<sup>101</sup>.

While Tsorrek is clearly a distinct place in *Vineland*'s mythical topography, a much more "profane" underworld is Shade Creek, the abode of Thanatoids, where these postmodern dead live in their own villages a life that seemingly resembles the life of the living. But due to their ontologically indefinite status the Thanatoids are open to various interpretations. To many critics they represent people "who have condemned themselves to a pseudo-existence by watching so much television and who have so long fled from reality that they are metaphorically dead" (Hawthorne 1992, 81). In this respect Thanatoids can be seen satirizing the couch potato lifestyle and its paralyzing

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<sup>99</sup> In "Masochism," Deleuze formulates, somewhat similarly, the difference between irony and humor: "irony is an upward movement [...] toward a transcendent higher principle," (1989, 88) the inattainability of which enables the debasement characteristic of irony; humor, on the other hand, is "a downward movement from the law to its consequences"(ibid.)

<sup>100</sup> In his study of François Rabelais, Bakhtin mentions the tradition of the "happy underworld," that flourished especially in antiquity and was renewed in Rabelais's work.

<sup>101</sup> It is to be noted that the carnivalistic underworld is not the same as the Christian afterlife. The underworld is in many myths contemporary with the world of the living. In Christianity, the notion of the afterlife is essentially temporal: eternal life does not truly begin at the moment of death, but on the last day of the world. Again, these two notions of the afterlife reflect lines of social demarcation. In discussing the Yuroks in *Vineland* as preterite figures Rosita Becke and Dirk Vanderbeke remark that their realm of the dead "presents an alternative to the transcendental redemption of the elect" (1992, 64).



effects. Another apparent explanation is that besides TV the Thanatoids also suffer from the effects of long-term drug abuse, and these two addictions determine their semi-alive existence.

But these kinds of naturalizing interpretations soon turn out to be inadequate, because what determines the Thanatoids more strongly is their position in relation to the majority. When the Thanatoids' existence has in the novel been described solely as "advancing further into the condition of death" (171), it resembles the existentialist notion that living is essentially living towards death. This time, however, the Thanatoids have concretized this aim and purified their life from everything else. This makes them very Menippean, for, as Bakhtin notes, provoking and testing philosophical ideas is typical of the genre (1973, 94). Except for TV addiction, which is a feature common to both this subculture and the majority, the Thanatoids represent attitudes that are opposed to the cultural values of the living. As a striking contrast to *Vineland's* citizens, the Thanatoids do not appreciate material wealth and consumption: "housing's modular and pretty underfurnished, they don't own many stereos, paintings, carpets, furniture, knickknacks, crockery, flatware, none o'that, 'cause why bother?" (VL, 170). They do not pursue any specific ends (the whole idea of reaching a goal is pointless when you're dead), they barely eat and when they do the food is unwholesome. In *Vineland* there are many "food-crazy" among the living, but the dead do not have to be so careful about what they eat. An openly carnivalized scene is the Thanatoid Roast, an annual get-together of the Thanatoids that takes place somewhere in the backwoods of *Vineland*, at a remote hotel, "hidden far from highways, up among long redwood mountainslopes where shadows came early and brought easy suspicion of another order of things" (219):

What an evening. They told obscure but rib-tickling Thanatoid jokes. They twitted one another for taking inordinate lengths of Earth time to clean up relatively penny-ante karmic business. Thanatoid wives bravely did they part to complicate further already tangled marriage histories by flirting with waiters, buspersons, and even other Thanatoids. Everyone drank and smoked furiously, and the menu featured the usual low-end fare, heavy on sugar, starch, salt, ambiguous about where the meat had come from, including which animal, accompanied by bushels of french fries and barrels of shakes. Dessert was a horrible pale chunky pudding. There was sparking wine, to be sure, but all clues to its origin had been blacked out with felt-tip marker at some unknown stage of its perhaps not even entirely legal journey. As more of this was drunk, Thanatoids grew less shy about lurching up to the mike and reciting insult testimonials to the Roastee, or making with the quips. (ibid.)

This time the object of the mock crowning and subsequent discrowning is the host, the anonymous Roastee. This scene has many similarities with Bakhtin's description of the carnivalized Menippean netherworld he finds in Dostoevsky's story *Bobok* (1873). In it the dead seem to live a paradoxical "life outside of life"—similar to the life of the living, but freed from obligations and restrictions:

A rather motley crew of corpses which cannot immediately liberate themselves from their earthly hierarchical positions and relationships, together with the comical conflicts, scolding and scandals which consequently arise, and on the other hand, the carnivalistic liberties, the awareness of a complete absence of responsibility, frank graveyard eroticism, laughter in the graves, etc. (Bakhtin 1973, 116)

The theme of posthumous life is, of course, widespread in contemporary literature, modernist and postmodernist alike. A modernist underworld can be found, for example, in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Pàramo* (1964), in which the protagonist visits his home village and finds out that all the people have turned into ghosts. The ghostliness in Rulfo's novel is close to the *nouveau roman* aesthetic; the characters are no longer persons, but more or less anonymous voices that mix with each other. Will Self's satirical *How the Dead Live* (2000) tells about the inconveniences of a city life seen from the other side of the grave. The narrator of Self's novel, the late Lily Bloom, claims that most of the old women of the twentieth century are in fact ghosts, because they are socially invisible. The old women are passed over in the street like they do not exist at all, and their pictures have almost vanished from historical documents: "where have we all gone? So few films, photographs and television pictures include us" (1).

In *Vineland* this limbo is also political, for one of the story lines of the novel deals with the countercultural spirit of the sixties and the fading of revolutionary political movements when the generation of flower people grow older. From this perspective the Thanatoids can be seen to represent those who really "dropped out" in the sixties and are now, 20 years later, living outside society and beyond the reach of social control. The word *underground* signifies both illegal and secret activity and the realm of the dead, and in *Vineland* Pynchon has made it a metaphor that unites the former revolutionaries with the dead. Both suffer from social and historical oblivion, and both represent the repressed past that lies there waiting for some kind of resurrection.

Despite the Thanatoids being comical figures, one of the main reasons that keeps them in a transitional state between life and death is the injustice they have suffered from while they were still living. They will tell anyone who will listen "tales of dispossession and betrayal [...] of land titles and water rights, goon squads and vigilantes, landlords, lawyers, and developers [...] injustices not only from the past but also virulently alive on the present" (VL, 172). This is also the fate of the late college professor Weed Atman,<sup>102</sup> the leader of a student revolution who was betrayed and shot in the 1960's and who enters into the narrative present as a Thanatoid. Atman is described as someone who after his death somehow missed the *bardo*, that is, the

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<sup>102</sup> The Hindi name, "atman," means "soul" or "breath". Pynchon's famous playfulness with names appears in the linking of "atman" with "weed."

transitory state in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, when a soul finds a new body to be born into, and so he continues as a restless soul.

While these kinds of “karmic imbalances” (173) continue, the Thanatoids seem doomed to ghostly existence, and in this regard they partake in the long literary tradition of ghosts seeking revenge and rest. But with Pynchon’s ghosts, there is more to it than what Punday describes as “some sort of issue or emotion unresolved at the time of their death” (2003, 252). Like ghosts always, the Thanatoids are emblems of the forgotten past, and in the course of the novel it becomes more and more apparent that they are, in a sense, a memorial of historical and political wrongs that just won’t fade away.

Baudrillard notes that the afterlife was in archaic cultures and even in early Christianity seen only as a kind of reward for inequality among the living. Those who did not get their share of the good or the bad in life were paid in the hereafter, which thus exists not as another life, but as a possibility to abolish the symbolical debt that the political, social and economic inequality has caused in the community (1976, 199). In *Vineland* there are several references to “higher justice” (366) or a “system of eternal repayment” (142)—that is, to the notion of symbolic payback. Brock Vond seems to have got his share when he is taken to Tsorrek, but otherwise the idea of symbolic payback has been radically elaborated in the novel. As a solution to the Thanatoids’ need for revenge, Takeshi Fumimota, a mysterious businessman, introduces the idea of “Karmic Adjustment” (174–175). Karmic Adjustment is a fantastic idea that mixes buddhism and its doctrine of *karma*, that is, metempsychosis, with capitalism. In traditional buddhism, the symbolic reward for the good or the bad often came in the next life, and this, explains Takeshi, is a far too slow process for modern people:

In traditional karmic adjustment [...] sometimes it had taken centuries. Death was the driving pulse—everything had moved as slowly as the cycles of birth and death, but this proved to be too slow for enough people to begin, eventually, to provide a market niche. There arose a system of deferment, of borrowing against karmic futures. Death, in Modern Karmic Adjustment, got removed from the process. (ibid.)

Karmic Adjustment, besides satirizing the capitalization of life, can also be seen as a collision of two modes of value. The Thanatoids’ need for revenge belongs to the realm of symbolic exchange in which every value, symbolic position or deed is ambiguously reciprocal, created and destroyed, given and taken. But the solution Takeshi provides represents the logic of exchange value that tends towards the abstraction of value as a positive entity. According to Takeshi’s model, life is capital that can be borrowed, and the doctrine of metempsychosis guarantees endless resources. Death as the due date can always be deferred. It is like a literal version of the slogan “live now, pay later.” Karmic Adjustment and the ontological credit granting it provides is the perfect image of a culture that sees the relationship between life and death in economic terms. The accumulation of time as value, as Baudrillard has argued, represents the fantasy of deferring death by the linear infinity of value. Even those who do not believe in a

personal afterlife or eternity believe in the eternity of time as capital (Baudrillard 1976, 224).

The Menippean satire has always been a genre that undoes and relativizes values, and in *Vineland* this subversion also extends to economic value, which is shown to be more imaginary than the ghostly Thanatoids. Money cannot make a symbolical payback. Despite all attempts at Karmic Adjustment, the haunted history of *Vineland* appears dominated by "unrelenting forces" that cannot be negotiated with:

[B]eyond cause and effect, rejecting all attempts to bargain or accommodate, following through pools of night where nothing else moved wrongs forgotten by all but the direly possessed, continuing as a body to refuse to be bought off for any but the full price, which they have never named. (VL, 383)

In the following, I will continue with the thematic of symbolical payback that crosses ontological borders in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

#### Schwartzkommando and the Gift of Death in *Gravity's Rainbow*

In his discussion of "countercultural desire" and Pynchon's writerly preoccupation with socially marginal groups, Mattessich emphasizes "the very political point about the nature of dispossessed communities and the bonds [...] on which they are based" (Mattessich 2002, 64). This holds true especially for the people of the "Schwartzkommando" in *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose existence, like that of the Thanatoids in *Vineland*, is ontologically indeterminate, but clear historically.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Schwartzkommando is a paramilitary group wandering about the Zone in the summer of 1945. It consists mostly of people whose origin is in a Bantu tribe called the Hereros. In the years before WWII, the Hereros had been given a military education in Germany in order to establish Nazi-leaning black juntas in Africa, and they had formerly been part of the black military troops of the German Army. But in the postwar chaos, the Schwartzkommando has cut its ties to the Wehrmacht and SS, and is now proceeding towards a military and political goal of its own. It appears that the Zone-Hereros, as they are also called, are the descendants of those Hereros who survived a massacre in South-West Africa (Namibia) two generations earlier. In 1904–1906 the Germans carried out a genocide in their protectorate in order to suppress a Herero rising, nearly exterminating an entire people<sup>103</sup>. After their failed rebellion, the number of the remaining Hereros was slowly

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<sup>103</sup> The story of the genocide of the Hereros in 1904–06 after a rebellion in the German colonies is based on a historical fact. According to some historians, in this "African holocaust," 60 000 people, 75 or even 80% of the Herero population were exterminated by the Germans—an operation that Pynchon in *V.* openly compares to the European holocaust 35 years later.

diminishing due to negative birth rate. In the narrative present, the end of WWII, the Zone-Hereros are planning to bring this extermination to a conclusion through collective suicide.

But there are several hints in the novel that the Schwartzkommando already verges on the supernatural: the black soldiers may only exist in the Zone as a fantasy, or as a deliberate hoax, or as a myth. The Zone-Hereros' hovering between existence and non-existence is also given historical and political reasons. Since they are the descendants of a race that should have been totally exterminated, they also should have been dead, and that's how they see themselves, too.

I think we're here, but only in a statistical way. Something like that rock over there is just about 100% certain—it knows it's there, so does everybody else. But our own chances of being right here right now are only a little better than even—the slightest shift in the propabilities and we're gone—schnapp! like that. (GR, 362)

In the postwar chaos in which the new social and political order of Europe has just begun to take shape, the Zone-Hereros are outcasts. Doomed to perish, they have made death their only mission in life. Or is it the other way round? Are the Zone-Hereros a marginal community because of their exceptional relationship to death? In the following, I will read the story of the Schwartzkommando in *Gravity's Rainbow*—one of Pynchon's most striking stories of weird death—and my aim is to open up a perspective from which the death mission of the Hereros at the end of WWII can be seen as an act of subversion, a symbolic challenge to the postwar power structures. In order to analyze the intertwining of the Schwartzkommando's marginal cultural position, their ontological indeterminacy, and the resistance inscribed in it, I will look at their death mission as a symbolic *gift of death*—as a symbolic offering with which they return the death imposed on the Hereros in Africa back to the heart of the empire.

In Pynchon studies the collective suicide mission of the Zone-Hereros has often been read as an outcome of colonialization and as a tragic submission to the death-promoting European culture. Deborah Madsen, for example, sees that the Zone-Hereros “take into its extreme the colonial project of abjection: in the absence of the colonizer, they colonize, subject and deny or erase themselves” (1998, 39). But when conveyed as an offering, the death mission turns into an ambivalent project. By deliberately risking their lives, the Zone-Hereros make death a challenge to the power structures of the Zone, a symbolic wager placing the highest possible bet: life.

In Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange, as well as in the gift theorists before him (Mauss, Bataille), what takes place in the exchange is a challenge in the form of an offering, and submission in the form of receiving. In the story of the Schwartzkommando, Pynchon has made this symbolic death pact also a cultural and historic one, for it involves both the symbolical debt that colonialism has imposed upon

Europe, and the challenge death represents in relation to social power.

When Pynchon posits a premodern culture against a modern one, or a tribal conception of death against the operational death of the war machine, the former does not appear solely as an image of lost innocence in relation to the latter. With Pynchon as with Baudrillard, it is evident that we are not dealing with anthropology in the traditional sense, but with what Charles Levin has called, with a reference to *Pour une critique*, a “hypothetical primitivism” used as an “open space where one could think alternative forms of living” (Charles Levin 1981, 21). In describing Pynchon’s use of Native American culture in *Vineland*, Rosita Becke and Dirk Vanderbeke argue quite similarly that Pynchon provides

[A] version of primitive society imaginable as a counterpoint to modern experience, yet not a pure, more virtuous one basking in a glorified innocence à la Rousseau [...] mythic thinking is not an alternative capable of counterbalancing the deficiencies of a logocentric culture [...] it is merely the product of different, sometimes undecipherable, social processes. (Becke & Vanderbeke 1992, 73–74)

Pynchon’s writerly strategy is that of superimposition. As the mandala-shaped Herero village is congruent with the mandalas of the launching switch and the four fins of the rocket, both the Zone-Hereros’ cultural heritage, and the technoscientific European culture they are living in can be seen only through each other. Therefore, it can be argued that the Schwartzkommando’s death mission is not only a sad story about colonialization and the infliction of European death-promoting culture on the Hereros. Instead, it conveys a critical rethinking of the modern conception of death, and its historical and cultural determinations.

“Where are the Hereros Tonight?”

The Schwartzkommando, so it seems, comes out of nowhere. In the first part of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it is a myth invented by British Intelligence for purposes of psychological warfare. The fake film material made by the psychological research unit, Operation Black Wing, is intended to convince the Germans that there are alien military groups in their own backyard. Whether actual or imaginary, the existence of the Schwartzkommando—“no one is sure who suggested the name” (75)—is used by the British as a symbolic threat to the Germans. The mythical element is self-evident from the beginning: Myron Grunton, one of the inventors of the hoax, mentions as a model the Northern god Wuotan (Wotan) and his army of furious dead warriors (“Wütende Heer”) who after a battle ride across the sky. The Schwartzkommando, as the PISCES research group believes, are summoned like demons by a magic spell, called into being for some malignant purpose. And when we get to the occupied Zone of Central Europe

in the summer of 1945, it turns out that the Schwartzkommando is a group of real Africans, formerly black military troops of the German Army, “somehow active in the secret-weapons program” (74), now an independent tribe including soldiers and civilians. These Zone-Hereros live in the mountains around Nordhausen and Bleicheröde with other underground African communities, known collectively as the Erdschweinhöhle. The aim of these groups is not to take part in military actions but to look for a final solution for their collective.

Back in South-West Africa, the Hereros were aiming at collective suicide after their failed rebellion against the German landowners. In practice this meant racial extermination through a negative birth rate. In the Zone, the descendants of the Herero people are going to continue this extermination in another way. The assembly of a rocket of their own becomes a symbol of this collective project, but in what form is open to question, since the rocket raised at the end of the novel is never launched. Is it the rocket that will take them to the Moon, from whence death, by mistake, came to the world according to the Herero mythology? Or is the rocket meant to blow them all up and finish “a collective history fully lived” (318)? Many people in the collective believe that the rocket will take them to the Moon. But a radical minority of the Zone-Hereros, called the Otugungurua or the Empty Ones, have taken another direction, for they have openly “opted for sterility and death” (316) by provoking miscarriages and perverse (that is) non-reproductive sexuality. The leader of the Schwartzkommando, the half-blooded Enzian, dreams about a Center, a place beyond time and history, as their true destination. Despite these diverse aspirations, what the Zone-Hereros have in common is that their devotion to death is described as a “political struggle” (316).

In more ways than one, the Zone-Hereros are outsiders, living on the margins of modern culture. But there is more to it than the obvious racial and cultural otherness, for the entire Erdschweinhöhle consists of people of mixed ethnic background. Whatever their ontological status, they are already dead socially:

We have a word that we whisper, a mantra for times that threaten to be bad.  
Mba-kayere. You may find that it will work for you. Mba-kayere. It means “I am passed over.” (362)

The Schwartzkommando and the other Erdschweinhöhlers, who may or may not really exist in the Zone, seem to occupy this impossible place of the dead.

#### Death as a Gift

The Zone-Hereros, it is said, are descendants of a doomed race. A generation earlier, after the genocide of 1904–06 in South-West Africa, in which more than sixty percent of the Hereros were killed, the diminishing population of survivors had chosen a voluntary death that took the form of a negative birth rate:

A generation earlier, the declining number of live Herero births was a topic of medical interest throughout southern Africa. The whites looked on as anxiously as they would have at an outbreak of rinderpest among the cattle. How provoking, to watch one's subject population dwindling like this, year after year. What's a colony without its dusky natives? Where's the fun if they're all going to die off? (317)

The Hereros' voluntary death remains a mystery to the Europeans, since it is the outcome of a different notion of death:

It was a simple choice for the Hereros, between two kinds of death: tribal death, or Christian death. Tribal death made sense. Christian death made none at all. It seemed an exercise they did not need. (318)

The "Christian death" taught by the missionaries can only be implied from the context, but traditionally it has meant personal responsibility for one's life to a Christian God, individual salvation and afterlife. What is the purpose of this other choice, of using death as a response to the systematic extermination made by the Europeans?

To begin with, "being dead" does not in the primitive community mean "being non-existent." Baudrillard remarks that in cultures that do not share our conception of death—the cultures we call primitive—the terms "life" and "death" are not mutually exclusive. Surely, the dead are different than the living, and thus require certain ritualistic precautions, but they exist in the midst of the living, and therefore, being visible (living) or invisible (dead) are only two possible states of a person (1976, 205n). The dead are considered as a distinct but integrated element within the primitive *socius* (ibid., 205). This feature also characterizes Pynchon's Hereros, who, as the psychoanalyst Edwin Treacle remarks in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "carry on business every day with their ancestors. The dead are as real as the living" (153). In the Zone there are no more ancestors, but their symbolic place is occupied by the Empty Ones, who consider themselves among the dead with a ritualistic untying of the leather birth-knot—"a bit of old symbolism they have found useful" (316).

Another characteristic that links Pynchon's Hereros to the primitive communities documented in anthropological studies is the role of death as a symbolic response. In explaining why the Hereros conceive tribal suicide as an act of political struggle, Weisenburger refers to one of Pynchon's main sources, Hendrik Luttig's study of the social organization and religious system of the Herero, written in 1933<sup>104</sup>. According to Luttig, the act of suicide is to the Hereros a kind of blood vengeance: "a person who commits suicide...is also actuated by the thought that the dead are capable of bringing evil and death more effectively than the living" (Luttig qtd in Weisenburger

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<sup>104</sup>Luttig, Hendrik: *The Religious System and Social Organization of the Herero: A Study in Bantu Culture*. (1933)



1988, 162). In “Mondaugen’s story” in *V.*, where Pynchon describes the genocide of the Hereros for the first time, the soldier Kurt Mondaugen also faces this phenomenon:

[T]hey came upon an old woman digging wild onions at the side of the road. A trooper named Konig jumped down off his horse and shot her dead: but before he pulled the trigger he put the muzzle against her forehead and said, “I am going to kill you.” She looked up and said, “I thank you.” Later, toward dusk, there was one Herero girl, sixteen or seventeen years old [...]. After he’d had her he must have hesitated a moment between sidearm and bayonet. She actually smiled then; pointed to both, and began to shift her hips lazily in the dust. He used both. (V, 264)

Conceived as a form of blood vengeance, voluntary dying is not submission but a guarantee that the imbalance of power can be equated on another level.

Whenever the story of the Hereros is referred to in Pynchon criticism, the Zone-Hereros’ struggle is seen as an already doomed one. Theodore Kharpertian, for example, explains that the negative birth rate of the African Hereros is due to the existence of “irrational, sinister motives of a tribal mind at work, which effects through suicide a hopeless, violent repudiation of European manners and morals” (1990, 116). To Kharpertian the death of the Hereros is a “paradoxical affirmation”—recognizing the death that awaits them in the German colonies, the Hereros die voluntarily.

From the perspective of symbolic exchange, this paradoxical affirmation, however, turns out to be an offering. To Baudrillard vengeance means fatal reciprocity; it is neither “primitive” nor “natural,” but a very elaborated form of obligation and reciprocity—a symbolic form (1976, 265). If we follow the logic of the gift, the voluntary dying of the Hereros that Pynchon describes both in *V.* and in *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be seen as a self-sacrifice, as a symbolic *gift of death*. Such an offering is also a *challenge*, because in a symbolic economy a gift always has to be returned (that is, responded to with a similar gift). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* this challenge becomes apparent in Africa in the sinister sense of threat that surrounds the negative birth rate of the Hereros. As if something is required from white men, something that they do not quite understand:

Some of the more rational men of medicine attributed the Herero birth decline to a deficiency of Vitamin E in the diet—others to poor chances of fertilization given the peculiarly long and narrow uterus of the Herero female. But underneath all this reasonable talk, this scientific speculating, no white Afrikaner could quite put down the way it *felt*... Something sinister was moving out in the veld: he was beginning to look at their faces, especially those of the women, lined beyond the thorn fences, and he knew beyond logical proof: there was a tribal mind at work out here, and it had chosen to commit suicide... (317)

The white men feel only a vaguely expressed guilt—“perhaps we weren’t as fair as we might have been” (317)—without recognizing the challenge. This challenge is an evil

one, because it is made to a party that cannot respond to it without risking itself, and as such it represents a reversal of power.

#### Sold on Suicide: European Solutions

The Zone-Hereros, although split off from the tradition of earlier generations, carry on with this symbolic challenge of death.

Inside the Schwarzkommando there are forces, at present, who have opted for sterility and death. The struggle is mostly in silence, in the night, in the nauseas and crampings of pregnancies or miscarriages. But it is a political struggle [...] they mean to carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed. They want a negative birth rate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904. (316–317)

But this time everything has changed. In many respects, the Zone-Hereros are no longer an African tribe. The “bloodlines of mother and father were left behind” (316) and “the old tribal unity” (318) has changed into a collective of several underground communities with an ethnic identity “that few can see as ever taking final shape” (316). The Zone-Hereros, “Europeanized in language and thought” (318), are like their ancestors devoted to racial extermination, but their reasons are more complicated and more opaque, even for themselves:

[They] have found the why of it just as mysterious. But they have seized it, as a sick woman will seize a charm. They calculate no cycles, no returns, they are in love with the glamour of a whole people’s suicide—the pose, the stoicism, and the bravery. (318)

Within primitive cultures, argues Baudrillard, death was never “natural,” but a social, public, collective event—a ritually ordered process in which the biological event of dying is of secondary importance, because the actual change of status takes place in the symbolic, that is, in the realm of symbolically articulated social relations (1976, 202). In modern culture, from which such symbolic practices have largely vanished, this death’s social dimension emerges only in perverted forms—in cases when death appears as a challenge that seems to require a social response, or when life is deliberately exposed. By aiming at collective death the Zone-Hereros evoke this repressed, social dimension of death, which gesture also makes visible in the Zone those forces who ought to and will be responding to this act.

The fact that the Zone-Hereros are of African origin, that is, strikingly non-European-looking, is a mark of their otherness, and in the word “black” (schwartz) racial otherness is associated with death. Wolfley argues that the explicit conceptual linking between blackness, excrement, and death in *Gravity’s Rainbow* shows the

influence of Norman Brown. In his psychoanalytic approach to Martin Luther's writings (and early Protestantism in general) Brown points out that Luther's concept of the Devil is characterized by anal repulsion, since the Devil is seen as a black man (and, by later fundamentalists, as the Negro) (Wolfley 1992, 880). Thus the *Schwartz-kommando* is, literally, the repressed part, the waste, of Europe. This possibility is in the novel openly commented on with Brownian insight, when psychoanalyst Edwin Treacle tries to explain the weird possibility that the Schwartzkommando, whose existence the White Visitation was faking some months earlier, really did exist:

He had not meant to offend sensibilities, only to show the others, decent fellows all, that their feelings about blackness were tied to feelings about shit, and feelings about shit to feelings about putrefaction and death. It seemed to him so clear...why wouldn't they listen? Why wouldn't they admit that their repressions had, in a sense that Europe in the last weary stages of its perversion of magic has lost, had incarnated real and living men [...].(276–277)

But the Schwartzkommando's mission both affirms and exceeds this image. Although they identify themselves as something not actually existing, the Zone-Hereros do not belong solely to the imaginary realm, which makes one think that the reason for the Schwartzkommando's marginal status is not only racial otherness, but also the other conception of death that they represent. The Zone-Hereros are not entirely strangers in relation to European thought, but they have a very complicated relationship to it.

The most prominent aspect of the Zone-Hereros' project is the conscientious refusal of reproduction. The executors of this part of the racial suicide are the Empty Ones, a subgroup of extremists.

These Otukungurua are prophets of masturbating, specialists in abortion and sterilization, pitchmen for acts oral and anal, pedal and digital, sodomistic and zoophilic—their approach and their game is pleasure: they are *spieling* earnestly and well, and Erdschweinhöhlern are listening. [...] It is all seduction and counterseduction, advertising and pornography, and the history of the Zone-Hereros is being decided in bed. (318)

Polymorphous perversion, the exaltation of libidinal impulses all cut off from the prospects of reproduction—an apparent possibility is to see the collective of the Zone-Hereros as representing a hedonistic civilization that has come to its end. In this respect, the Empty Ones have a strong affinity with the people of the *Anubis* ship and their endless orgy—except that there is not a hint of pleasure in anything the Empty Ones do, for the sexual realm emerges as purely operational.

In this respect, the situation of the Zone-Hereros reflects the notorious decline of Western culture announced by Oswald Spengler. Spengler's end-oriented morphology of history, the *Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918–1922), was written largely during the First World War, and, saturated by turn-of-the-century cultural pessimism, it emphasized the unavoidable finality of the modern way of life. In

explaining the present state of the modern Western world through historical comparisons, Spengler distinguished between *culture* and *civilization*. What Spengler names culture is the prototype of every developed human collective, bound by relations of blood, prestige, religion, region, and so on. Culture is always local and limited, while civilization, the degenerated outcome of culture, tends towards universality. Every culture has its civilization, the “most external and artificial state of which a species of developed humanity is capable” (Spengler I, 31). To Spengler civilization represents cosmopolitanism, scientific rationality, naturalism, the masses, the power of money, and most of all, a severe hostility towards the values of culture. In all aspects, announces Spengler, civilization is characterized by inward finishedness; it is a final phase which precedes a collapse (which, of course, can last several centuries). Thus, civilization is another name for decline, in our historical situation the decline of the West.

From the Spenglerian perspective, the Zone-Hereros’ constant refusal of reproduction represents the problematics of civilization. The civilized “brain-man,” announces Spengler, is characterized by mental and physical unfruitfulness, which is a sign of fulfilled destiny (359). Childlessness is, of course, not a unique phenomenon in world history. Spengler mentions that it was common also to the last phase of the great cities of Imperial Rome as well as of Imperial China (*ibid.*). But childlessness is a concrete proof that civilization has no future, and in all civilizations it is at first explained by economic reasons, and after a while it won’t be explained any more. The absence of proper explanations means, according to Spengler, that

[T]he sterility of civilized man [...] is not something that can be grasped as a plain matter of Causality [...]; it is to be understood as an essentially *metaphysical* turn towards death. The last man of the world-city no longer wants to live—he may cling to life as an individual, but as a type, as an aggregate, no[...]. Children do not happen, not because children have become impossible, but principally because intelligence at the peak of intensity can no longer find any reason for their existence. (103–104)

Spengler even uses the expression “race-suicide” (359) in reference to the negative birth rate typical of the great modern “world-cities.” The word *city* is not to be taken literally; rather than an exact location it is a state of mind—or world-feeling, as Spengler names it. Unlike the primitive nomads, who can “loose themselves from the soil and wander” (Spengler II., 102), “intellectual nomads” are always bound to the city, wherever they go: “homesickness for the great city is keener than any other nostalgia [...] they take the city with them into the mountains or on the sea” (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is only appropriate that the Schwartzkommando, definitely a collective of intellectual nomads, is heading for the *Raketen-Stadt* in Peenemünde.

But the analogies between the Spenglerian philosophy of history and Pynchonian historiography are soon exhausted. The ambiguous position of the Zone-Hereros as both “primitive” and “civilized” is something that cannot be grasped through Spenglerian dichotomies and ethnocentrism. Spengler binds culture to the ideas of

nation, destiny, time, and history; despite the fact that the “primitive” people are the only ones to persist after civilization has collapsed, the primitives are to him of minor interest because they do not have a sense of history, and therefore they remain “a mere joint being without depth or historical dignity” (172–173). The Zone-Hereros, however, do not represent something anterior or posterior to Western civilization. Their historical dignity emerges in the paradoxical attempt to put an end to history—a radical symbolic act by which they oppose the ideals of civilization from within<sup>105</sup>.

In critical studies on *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Schwartzkommando's quest for death has often been seen to represent a collective death wish that symptomatically reflects the need for destruction inherent in Western culture, the “culture of death” (176). Theodore Kharpertian sees that in the collective suicide of the German Hereros “the suicidal nature of the System is ironically refracted” (1990, 115). Wolfley argues, quite similarly, that the Empty Ones “have accurately diagnosed the meaning of Western history and intend to imitate the death wish in the microcosm of the tribe” (1992, 880). In this respect, there would be no difference between “structures favoring death” (GR, 167) operating in the Zone, and the Empty Ones' “doctrine of the Final Zero” (525). Enzian's dream of the tribe's returning to a mythical Center “where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place” (319) also parallels Freud's classical definition of the death instinct. But, Enzian, a learned man, is aware of these analogies: “The Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement toward stillness is the same” (319). The notion of the death instinct is also openly ironized—for example, when Enzian suspects that Joseph Ombindi, the leader of the Empty Ones, plans to have him murdered:

You're a hallucination, Ombindi,...I'm projecting my own death-wish, and it comes out looking like you. Uglier than I ever dreamed. (732)

Joseph Ombindi's declaration that “suicide is a freedom even the lowest enjoy” (732) could have been taken from Camus, but the cruel irony of this statement is that Ombindi uses freedom to justify an abortion he has made. These kinds of explicit and ironic references show that the Schwartzkommando's death mission is in many ways bound to European thought.

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<sup>105</sup> The Zone-Hereros' situation is somehow reminiscent of the black community Pynchon describes in his essay “A Journey Into the Mind of Watts” (*The New York Times Magazine*, 12 June, 1966). Surrounded by white neighbourhoods, Watts in Los Angeles is a “country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel” (2). In Watts, a prominent feature for Pynchon is the reciprocity that characterizes all kinds of social actions. Whether it means simply a social system of returning favors, or a repartee with mutual insults between Watts kids and the police (“a ritualistic exchange,” as Pynchon names it), the rule of the game is reciprocity: “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Somehow, sometime” (6).

One of these bonds is Enzian's relationship with his former owner, master and lover Captain Weissmann/Blicero. In many critical treatises of the novel, Enzian has been seen simply as Weissmann's creation, and the death mission a direct result of the technoscientific thought that he represents. Weissmann's grandiose plan to construct the model 00000, and the Zone-Hereros' assembly of a rocket of their own mirror each other, a dualism which is also openly announced by the narrator:

[T]wo 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. (727)

What unites Enzian with Weissmann/Blicero is the urge to reach something transcendent via the rocket. The rocket becomes for the Schwartzkommando not only a means of meeting an ancient destiny, but a kind of divinity in itself.

Nealon has argued that the Schwartzkommando's attempt to build a rocket of their own reveals the appropriation of a European, technological world-view (1993, 123). The Zone-Hereros' attempt to reach the moon in order to complete a mythical quest for the "moon's true message" (GR, 322) shows to Nealon that they are enslaved to the dialectical tradition of the colonizers. Afflicted by a culture dominated by the war machine, the Zone-Hereros have turned into a *people* favoring death (Nealon 1993, 120). Nealon sees this development as a direct outcome of the colonized position of the Hereros, both in Africa and in Europe. The logic behind colonialization, argues Nealon, is dialectical: the other is seen as a version of the same that can be used and analyzed and eventually subsumed into the realm of the same (ibid.). Colonialization thus promoted death in its workings, and set the other in the place of death, that is, in the place of sublatale negativity. Captain Weissmann, who has been in South-West Africa, muses on his colonialist past, and he openly reflects on this relationship between dialectics and death:

In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. [...] now we have only the structure left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas. The savages of other continents, corrupted but still resisting in the name of life, have gone on despite everything...while death and Europe are separate as ever, their love still unconsummated. Death only rules here. (GR, 722–723)

Weissmann is a master of analysis, and therefore he sees clearly the workings and ends of dialectical thinking. The possibility of consummation, of unity, has withered away, but the dialectical movement grounded on this possibility goes on as an autonomous and automatic structure that has no other law than the law of propagation. And there is no

way out. Weissmann wants to “leave this cycle of infection of death” (724), although he knows that if the Rocket will reach the Moon, it will only be another colony, another “Deathkingdom” (723). In some earlier phase of his life, Weissmann has felt guilty for what he and the colonializing machinery has done to non-Europeans. As a boy, when he came to know Weissmann, Enzian noticed that “the man’s thirst for guilt was insatiable as the desert’s for water” (323). But this guilt does not change or even challenge the way Weissmann thinks about his superiority or the superiority of the civilization he represents—guilt is a side-effect, a symptom of the profoundness of his actions, but nothing more.

Nealon argues that Weissmann/Blicero passes on to Enzian, his disciple, the death-worshipping affirmation of dying, which shows that dialectical thinking can only characterize death in a negative/positive way (1993, 124). Weissmann, caught in this metaphysical trap, manages to launch his “angel of death,” the 00000 Rocket, but Enzian’s project changes into something else. This change indicates that the Zone-Hereros’ rocket is not a mere imitation of Blicero’s weapon and the tradition he represents. The text is also ambiguous about whether Enzian’s thinking merely echoes the ideas of Weissmann/Blicero<sup>106</sup>. No doubt, their relationship has been *pederastian*, that is, a combination of sex and education. But in the postwar Zone, it is more and more obvious that Enzian “has grown cold” (GR, 324) and detached himself from Weissmann. The assembly of a Herero rocket turns out to be an unattainable goal, and in this sense the Zone-Hereros’ mission is a failure. In spite of their leaning to Blicero’s dreams of reaching the Moon, they cannot really be part of his dream, since unlike Blicero, they have no need to transcend their mortality.

But if the Empty Ones or the entire Erdschweinhöhlens are, in fact, not Others but representatives of European decadence or also a very European idealization of death, what is the difference between them and all the other searchers in the Zone? And if there isn’t any, why does the Schwartzkommando seem to be the main target of the military actions of the Allies and the unidentifiable “occupying Powers” (362)? When Pynchon uses different notions of death in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it is not simply a question of different perspectives or alternate world-views. The question of death is an ideological question, essentially linked to power.

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<sup>106</sup> Plater, for example, is simply misreading the passage (pp. 324–325) where Enzian tells Joseph Ombindi about his relationship to Weissmann. “Enzian and his followers see in the Rocket a symbol for a new beginning outside time and outside history. To them, ‘the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature.’ Of course this system of belief was taught to Enzian, and the others in turn, by Blicero” (Plater 1978, 40). Enzian, however, is quite straightforward in saying to Ombindi, that his idealism for the Rocket was something he was “obliged by Weissmann to learn” (GR, 324), and that now, when he does not love him any more, he is also disillusioned about the ideals of technology, masculinity, and “devotion to the Leader” (ibid.).

## Death, Value, and Power

Towards the end of the novel, Enzian, who has turned out to be a Pervitin addict and a theoretician of death, begins to understand that the Zone-Hereros' mission is not a separate one, but a response to the ideology of the ongoing war. In search of a death of their own (that is, a death whose time, place and manner they have themselves determined) the Zone-Hereros oppose the legitimized violence of the regime—no longer the Third Reich, but the anonymous They, an immense multinational and secret coalition of corporations. Death that has significance only to the community of the Zone-Hereros is something unthinkable in a historical situation where millions of people die for reasons beyond their own control. The project of negative birth rate is also a political one, because it violates life, the basic value of modern society. During one of his hallucinogenic visions, Enzian realizes the paradox that what runs the war is not death but the principle of life in the name of which the massacres are made. But life, abstracted as a principle, is as terrifying as death:

[T]his War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted...secretly, it was being dictated by the needs of technology...by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be damned, the very life of (insert name of Nation) is at stake," but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more...* (521)

Enzian sounds very much like Michel Foucault, who argued in the first part of his *History of Sexuality* that power is in the modern society situated and exercised at the level of life. In the ancient society, the sovereign had the power to take life or let live; in modern society (the beginning of which Foucault places in the 17th century) this social power is more and more inclined to the preservation and controlling of life, to the extent that the power of death is determined not as mere killing, but as *disallowance of life* (1990, 137–138). The power of the state is bio-power, since it is based on the capacity of the state to ensure and multiply life, and yet, remarks Foucault, the wars between states, which were meant to protect the *life* of the citizens were never as bloody as they have been since the 19th century (136–137).

Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. (137)

When life is posited as an absolute value it means two things: first, that life already



belongs to the realm of value and utility (life is, in other words, capitalized), and secondly, that death is marked by growing disqualification and anxiety. Death becomes the opposite of life as well as the opposite of value.

The Schwartzkommando, although considerably Europeanized, stand in the novel in the position of the double. Their mission is terrifying because it openly mirrors the alliance between technology and death as Nealon (1993, 116) has pointed out—without any abstracted goal (such as life or nation) by which the mission could be legitimated. But the Schwartzkommando has also inherited a different notion of death, a vaguely understood but yet powerful idea of symbolic challenge. The death the Schwartzkommando seeks is collective, and it means enormous waste without any clear political purpose: in the postwar chaos and among millions of fallen, who would care about them? From the rationalist perspective their entire mission is insane, or absurd, or *weird*. But this weirdness turns out to be another name for a misplaced symbolic offering.

What makes the Hereros “Revolutionaries of the Zero” is their attempt to reinstate a realm of symbolic exchange in a world from which it has almost completely vanished. This attempt, seemingly doomed to failure, paradoxically also makes them untouchable. As Foucault remarks, although social power is inclined to death, it also escapes all control: “death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it” (1990, 138). The Zone-Hereros, once part of the SS troops, and now independent, cannot be loyal subjects any more, because their own mission reveals that the social control over human lives is based on an illusory control over death:

They have lied to us. They can’t keep us from dying, so They lie to us about death. A cooperative structure of lies. (GR, 728)

By questioning the line that separates life from death the Zone-Hereros question Their power of holding that line, and controlling the passage from life to death. Another aspect to this resistance is that by deliberately risking their lives the Schwartzkommando take their death into their own hands. In Baudrillardian terms this means that they *give* themselves their own death (1976, 273). People can be exploited to death, he argues, but as long as the exploited retain the choice of life and death, they retain the possibility of a symbolic challenge to the system. This possibility is the “accursed share,” irreducible to the system of values, and, therefore, its only real adversary (*ibid.*).

Baudrillard argues that in a society saturated by the law of value, suicide represents an act of fundamental reversion. There are civilizations, he argues, that would rather die out than see themselves annihilated by the terrorist interventions of medicine, reason, science, and centralized power (273). What is at stake is not so much the actualized death drive, the will-to-die, but the *risking of life*, a symbolic wager on life, which evokes a social challenge. This challenge works both ways: if every suicide becomes subversive within a highly integrated system, then all subversion of and

resistance to the system is, reciprocally, *suicidal* (268).

### No Sense of an Ending

When we get to the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* it becomes evident that the Schwarzkommando is not going to die off. The actuality of collective death gradually diminishes along with the assembly of the Rocket. There is not even a definite ending to their story, only a succession of partial endings. The last mention of Enzian is when he accidentally meets Tchicherine, his half-brother, on a bridge. Tchicherine, blinded by a magical spell, does not recognize the man he was meant to kill, and the two of them part after a short discussion. Towards the end of the novel, signs of Enzian's frustration and his possible displacement from the entire project become more and more apparent. To him the death mission begins to change shape: the search for the Rocket and the idea of collective death should be replaced by the search for truth, the "True Text", and while there is "more information coming in about the enemy, more connections made" (GR, 525), the number of the Zone-Hereros will have to increase, not decrease. Enzian's position within the Schwarzkommando also becomes vulnerable. He fears that his own people will, eventually, turn against him: "his people are going to demolish him if they can" (731)—a threat strangely analogous to the "scattering" of Slothrop at the end of the novel. What Pynchon depicts very clearly in Enzian's character is the degradation of a countercultural movement from the moment people start defining their project in terms of means and ends. The immediacy of symbolic subversion vanishes and is replaced by a series of gradual changes, long-term goals, planning. And so Enzian becomes a leader at a political *Brennschluss*, when an anarchist movement starts to change into *realpolitik*.

The novel's textual fragmentation also mirrors the eventual impossibility of reaching any final solution whatsoever. When the Schwarzkommando has finally arrived at Lüneburg Heath, the assembly of the rocket turns out to be a secret comparable to those given "to the Gypsies...the Kabbalists, the Templars, the Rosicrucians" (737–738). As if the curtain had suddenly fallen, instead of a description of the Zone-Hereros' finally assembled rocket, the model 00001, we are told a famous *kreplach* joke, which suggests that no piecemeal description (or rationalization) can take away the original horror before the *Un-heimlich*, the re-emergence of something "we all know" (760). Therefore, we don't know whether Enzian and the Schwarzkommando ever reach their end. It hangs in the air as a possibility that is never going to be actualized in the time of narration. The linear dimension of the narration becomes weaker and weaker, until it simply vanishes at the end of the novel. Thus the fragmented narration of the final passages of the novel reflects Enzian's vision of stepping outside history:

What Enzian wants to create will have no history. It will never need a design change. Time, as time is known to the other nations, will wither away inside this new one. The Erdschweinhöhle will not be bound, like the Rocket, to time. The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place... (319)

Enzian's vision of the Center is surely utopian in the sense that the Center is a place that cannot be located—not even in the Zone—and Enzian's longing for a state that somehow precedes or exceeds differentiation can be seen as logocentric<sup>107</sup>. But one can also see in Enzian's vision of cyclical, eternally returning time a resistance to history, and from this perspective the urge to find a place or state outside linear time turns out to be revolutionary. As Debord argues, when time is defined in terms of economy, any attempt to gain access to the historical time of *events* is by definition revolutionary (1994, 105).

The assembly of the 00001 Rocket, “the only Event that could have brought them together” (GR, 673) represents such an attempt. Enzian's vision of the Center is unconditional: to open up a space where an alternate way of living (and dying) could be possible, without returning to any past way of life, a past age of supposed innocence. Therefore, the Zone-Hereros seem to stand on a threshold between two notions of time and death. As Hereros they have inherited a cyclical notion of time, in which the distinction between “here” and “hereafter” is not decisive, but, being half European, they have also internalized a linear notion of time and an idea of death as the End, terrifying perhaps, but glamorous in its absoluteness. There is no simple return to the lost tradition of the African Hereros, “to allow the tribal past to disperse [...] there is no point in preserving history with that Final Zero to look forward to...” (320), nor is there any future prospect to cling to. What will happen after the launching of the Rocket 00001 is an impossible question, even to Enzian:

Enzian [...] shudders at what's going to happen after it's over—but maybe it's only meant to last its fraction of a day, and why can't that be enough? try to let it be enough... (673)

So what is left to the Zone-Hereros is the importance of what is happening at the moment, the act of gathering together and meeting their destiny, whatever that will be. It does not necessarily mean death, but death is the only way it can be articulated. All this is enough to make them the enemies of any institutionalized power: “the occupying Powers have just about reached agreement on a popular front against the Schwartzkommando... they're trying to shut us down” (362).

Towards the end of the novel, Enzian's visions are associated with Gnosticism and Kabbalism, or other forms of heretical, that is, unorthodox religious thinking. This

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<sup>107</sup> See, for example, Berressem (1993, 126–127).

context also refers to the possibility of transcending linear history. For Debord, the heretical movements of the Middle Ages were an example of how attempts to realize a non-linear notion of time were socially banished even before the modern era. What characterized heretical movements in the Middle Ages were their vision of immediate eternity, the immediate actualization of heaven and hell on earth, which Debord sees as an attempt to realize a mythical realm in an already historical world (1994, 102). The urge to reinstate a cyclical notion of time in a world bound to Christian eschatology and the linear notion of time inherent in it represents to Debord a political struggle—although still within a religious framework (*ibid.*). For Baudrillard the importance of the heretical movements was that they distributed and exchanged symbolically among themselves (that is, without relying on the authority of the church) the principles of salvation and the afterlife (1976, 222). Instead of waiting for eternity *beyond time* the heretics believed in the *immanence* of the salvation by collective faith (*ibid.*).

As has been documented many times, Pynchon uses Mircea Eliade's idea of archetypal return to the Holy Center as a model for the journey of his *Zone-Heretics*. Therefore, I will only add that one of Eliade's arguments was that reality is something founded simultaneously with the symbolic sphere Eliade calls the *sacred*. The manifestation of the sacred is something that founds the world ontologically, because it reveals an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse (Eliade 1961, 21). The sacred is real while the opposite, the profane, is unreal or pseudoreal (12–13). The sacred is also something equivalent to power. According to Eliade, what characterized the religious life of archaic societies was the tendency to live as long as possible within the sacred sphere, because it also meant being saturated with power, and through it, being a part of reality (21).

In *Gravity's Rainbow* this idea of reality achieved through power can also be seen in the film director Gerhardt von Göll's belief that he has, somehow, forced the Schwartzkommando into existence with his (fake) film, that he has “sow[n] in the Zone seeds of reality” (388). Thus, there are several reasons why the “reality” of death, the biological event of dying, is no longer important for the Zone-Hereros. From the beginning, reality has never been on their side. Their real existence is questioned several times in the narration with references to their non-natural (fictitious) or supernatural (mythical) origin. Their historical existence has never been anything but a statistical deviation:

To those of us who survived [...], it also means that we have learned to stand outside our history and watch it, without feeling too much. [...] Stay in the Zone long enough and you'll start getting ideas about Destiny yourself. (362)

Not to mention that “reality” is a very dubious concept throughout the novel: reality is something they control and manipulate. By giving up the notion of reality—and the question of the reality of their life and death—the Zone-Hereros seem to exist, at least partially, within a sphere that could in Baudrillardian terms be called symbolic, in which

the the opposite terms life/death, nature/culture, or body/soul lose their “reality principle” in the symbolic exchanges, and the notion of reality as an ideal reference point disappears.

In the apocalyptic final scene of the novel Pynchon returns to the theme of collective death. The preceding scene recounting the death of Gottfried inside the 00000 Rocket is, among other things, study of an individual, experiencing his death. But in the last scene death is again a public affair: the presence of death is what makes the anonymous audience of a movie theatre a community. From Gottfried’s isolated “Now” we move on to the “Now everybody” (760). The narrator’s invitation to a song does not mean nostalgia for times past, but an invitation to a sphere opened up by the approaching death, and the collectively shared ritual that the hymn embodies. This invitation also concerns the reader, since in a ritual there are no spectators, only participants. And what is the song about? It is about an open sphere (“our crippled Zone”) in which the notions of life and death are reversible: “a face in ev’ry mountainside / And a Soul in ev’ry stone...” (760). This sphere cannot be found; it happens whenever there is a collective, and something to be shared.

## 7. Sacrifice: The Principle of Loss in Pynchon's Poetics

When a fictional character dies in a way that is somehow vital to the very existence of a narrative, we encounter a sacrificial dynamic in the text. This dynamic is in itself chiasmatic, for it bonds together opposites and creates an ambivalent tension to the narrative. As Northrop Frye notes in his classic study *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), when the death of a hero in a tragedy combines “a fearful sense of rightness [...] and a pitying sense of wrongness” (214), its structure is a mimesis of sacrifice. Frye sees the tragedy's audience as a group of communicants who symbolically share a sacred body. This communion has a double significance. The group achieves its unity by dividing a heroic or divine body. But, since the power of a superior body seems to remain intact in spite of the destruction it calls for, what follows is “the sense that the superior body really belongs to another, a greater, and potentially wrathful power” (215). So, the paradox of tragedy for Frye is that although “the hero must fall [...] it is too bad that he falls” (214). For Frye, as for René Girard, an essential literary mode where this dynamic emerges is tragedy. However, this ambivalence about sacrificial death, whenever it appears in a literary work, is something that exceeds generic frames.

In Pynchon's work we recurrently encounter scenes that are more or less openly sacrificial, with characters in a sacrificial position, that is, in the ambiguous position of the victim/hero. Two novels, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are of particular importance here<sup>108</sup>. Aside from how both novels explicitly refer to sacrifice, their articulated and ritualized violence always seems inevitable and is closely tied to the question of the text's significance and coherence. My approach to sacrificial death in Pynchon is twofold. First, I will focus on the intertwining of being and textuality characteristic of *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*: how the recurrent images of articulated violence and bodily dispersion become inseparable from the structural incoherence of the text. Second, I will analyze the fusion of these two registers, the textual and the bodily dispersion, as a poetic operation, as a form of symbolic economy, in which the text both affirms and destroys the value of its signifying material. Some recent Pynchon critics, most notably Nealon and Mattessich, have pointed to the effect of textual self-destruction and self-consummation, that is, the exhaustion of meaning characterizing Pynchon's prose. The structuring elements of the text lose their force, and the significance of the text understood as something positive is suddenly de-valued. In my approach, this textual effect is analyzed in relation to the sacrificial thematics in Pynchon's prose, since it contains the same ambiguous twofold gesture of elevation and degradation, rise and fall,

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<sup>108</sup> Sacrificial imagery occurs also in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the end scene can be seen as sacrificial. Weisenburger has noted that the thematic of sacrificial killing echoes also in Weed Atman's shooting in *Vineland* (1998, 22).

that is constitutive of sacrifice.

Sacrifice has been an object of wide theoretical interest since the birth of modern sociology in the late 19th century, and as a collective mechanism it has been seen constitutive of any society (Mizruchi 1998). As many theoreticians of sacrifice have emphasized, sacrifice is never a mere ritualistically executed killing or expenditure. It has its own logic and social function, and while sacrifice as an institution has largely vanished from modern culture, sacrificial mechanisms have turned out to be transformational and strangely persistent. Anthropological studies of sacrifice include such works as Sir James Frazer's massive *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), or Henri Hubert's and Marcel Mauss' *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (1898). In the 20th century, discussion of sacrifice spread from anthropology and social theory into cultural philosophy in the works of Georges Bataille and René Girard. Both Bataille and Girard have turned out to be fruitful also for literary criticism, for they see a direct relationship between sacrificial mechanisms and art. Bataille, for example, saw the principle of loss as inherent in works of art: some forms of art, like architecture involve actual and spectacular consumption, some forms, like literature and theatre, arouse horror and anguish by representing loss—degradation or death—symbolically (1967, 30).

In the following, my aim is not to engage in the age-old discussion on the mythical and ritualistic origins of literature, but to look for the specific textual economy affecting Pynchon's prose that I have named *sacrificial poetics*. When he openly exposes sacrificial characters and scenes in his novels, the question is not merely of a seemingly misplaced desire for catharsis, but of the understanding and articulation of that desire. William Johnsen has called modern fiction openly dealing with victimization *postsacrificial*, for it contains a critical comprehension of the relationship between cultural order and violence (2003, 16–25)<sup>109</sup>. This critical comprehension emerges also in Pynchon, but the recognition of a sacrificial mechanism in his fiction does not give the reader a safe vantage point. As some critics have noted, the violence described in Pynchon's fiction refers back to the violence inherent in his writing: “the violence *in* the text belongs properly *to* the text” (Mattessich 2002, 157). By thematizing and textualizing sacrifice, Pynchon forces the reader to recognize his/her complicity in textual violence.

#### Body, Desire and Truth in *V*.

In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks analyzes the close relations between narrative text and body, and, with reference to Roland Barthes, he discusses the claim, presented often in

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<sup>109</sup> An example of such postsacrificial fiction is Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1976), in which the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 has turned into a public sacrifice ceremony.

the context of psychoanalysis, that the body is our primary source of symbolism (1993, 6). In *S/Z* (1970) Barthes also makes this claim by positing that the “symbolic field,” which is one of the five codes structuring the narrative, eventually returns to the human body as its ultimate reference point. Does this mean, asks Brooks, that the body is “the ultimate field from which all symbolism derives, and to which it returns [...] and that literature, in its use and creation of symbols, ever brings us back to this source, as that which its representations ultimately represent?” (1993, 6). Brooks himself refrains from making such a conclusive statement, but he emphasizes that when it comes to the question of meaning, there is always a convergence between a narrative text and the body: “meaning, especially meaning conceived as the text’s self-representations—its representations of what it is and what it is doing—takes place in relation to the body” (7).

In *V.*, this convergence between narrative text and the body is explicitly thematized. As I presented earlier in chapter 3, fragmented text and fragmented body become mirror images of each other in this novel. *V.* is a fragmentary work, but what holds the textual material together is the theme of quest, the protagonist Herbert Stencil’s quest for a woman named *V.* The quest is never completed—instead, the novel provides a heterogeneous assemblage of stories where various elements of the quest are repeated over and over again. While the textual *corpus* of the novel *V.* is fragmentary and incoherent, images of dispersed and broken bodies pervade the novel, as if the work, like the body, exists only in order to be dispersed in the course of reading. This body is in most cases a female body.

Violence is always present when the narration returns to questions of power and knowledge in relation to the female body. The female body in *V.* is the site or locus of various desires, and recurrently in the novel female characters with some kind of symbolic power or status encounter bodily violence. The first time this happens is the gang rape of the Mexican girl, Fina, in chapter six. Fina works as a secretary during the daytime, but in the evenings, it is said, she is the “spiritual leader” of a youth gang in New York. Identifying herself with Joan of Arc, the virgin saint, she leads her own army in street fights and tries to restore peace between hostile gangs. Things change suddenly one night when her gang, who has almost worshipped her before, rapes her.

Fina’s position, if we look at it in the light of Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), is clearly that of a sacrificial victim. For Girard, the ritual victim is a pharmakon, which word in classical Greek means both the poison and its antidote (2005, 100). Thus the victim is someone (or something, for pharmakon also denotes a substance that has this dual function) who is both scorned and venerated, for he/she draws in to him/herself the community’s internal violence and transforms it through death into a divine, sacred violence that Girard sees as the origin of cultural order. The gender of the victim is for Girard nearly always male, for he argues that women are never or rarely selected as sacrificial victims (13). Girard’s reasoning is that the sacrifice of a married woman would cause the risk of vengeance from her clan which



would increase violence instead of suppressing it (ibid.) A characteristic of the victim that Girard sees as essential is that he/she has no significant social ties to the community, or any clear social status, and is therefore expendable: a stranger, a vagabond, a slave, a child or an adolescent. He/she belongs neither inside nor outside the community, but passes freely from the outside to the inside (286). Thus the victim is like an interface, the link between the community and its others—that is, the sacred.

Fina, the female “virgin saint” is like her model Joan of Arc the representative of a sacred order, first venerated as a leader, then violently degraded. In the cultural context of Pynchon’s novel, Fina’s victimized double position in relation to the community she is living in can also be determined from another angle. Besides being female, she is also an immigrant and of the working class, which three characteristics Susan Mizruchi defines as those of a victim in the sacrificial imagery of late 19th-century American literature (1998, 77).

What is striking in Fina’s story is that her rape, although sudden, does not come as a surprise, for it is anticipated by Benny Profane, the focalizer in chapter six. Just before the rape Benny wonders whether the seductive Fina understands her vulnerable position in the gang: “the minute her horny boys caught a glimpse of the wanton behind the saint [...] Fina could find herself on the receiving end of a gang bang, having in a way asked for it” (V, 145). Profane’s thoughts, although presented as a “concern” for her, contain elements of barely disguised misogyny, as if he somehow wants to get Fina deprived of her power. Profane’s concern turns out to be true when after one street rumble Fina is found naked and in a state of shock. Instead of consolation she is punished. When Profane hears Fina’s brother Angel hitting her for disgracing the family, he does nothing to stop him: “He couldn’t go in and stop it; didn’t know if he wanted to” (V, 151). Several months after the rape Profane meets Fina again, and after a couple of futile attempts to communicate with her, Profane says something about the rape: “I did it [...] It was me” (V, 364). The remark is strange, for Profane has had no actual part in the rape. Grant maintains that Profane is here willing to admit some responsibility, that his sexual rejection of Fina, who was a virgin, had somehow caused her to cling to other sexual relations, which eventually caused the gang rape (Grant 2001, 79). To me such speculation is pointless if we don’t compare Fina’s position and fate to that of the other female characters in the novel. When Fina, standing “still as any object” (V, 364) in the street had been a projection of Profane’s desire, a more likely source for Profane’s vaguely expressed guilt is an uncanny “omnipotence of thought,” for he has imagined the rape before it happened.

Profane’s resentment of Fina does not represent a singular moral dilemma, but the problem of desire and power characterizing the entire novel. And in the course of the novel it turns out that the recurrent drama of women first elevated then degraded has an intrinsic bond to *V.*’s textual dynamic. A considerably more elaborated version of this drama can be found in chapter fourteen, titled “V. in love,” which is one of the novel’s embedded narratives. In chapter fourteen, a fifteen-year old dancer Mélanie

l'Heuremaudit comes to Paris in 1913 to perform the main role in an avant-garde ballet strongly resembling Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. Pynchon's fictitious *L'Enlèvement des vierges chinoises* (The Rape of the Chinese Virgins) is also a ballet about the sacrifice of a virgin, this time a Chinese virgin who is tortured to death by the Mongolians<sup>110</sup>. But, when acting a sacrificial victim Mélanie suddenly becomes a real one: she is brutally impaled at the crotch at the climax of the ballet. Mélanie dies because she was supposed to have worn a protective device in the performance, but for some reason she left it off. Thus her death looks like an accident, but the way her character is depicted, and the manner in which her death is exposed, suggests something else. Her allegorical name, "l'heuremaudit," "cursed hour," or "cursed time," already refers to an inevitable fate, as if her death were predestined. By staging her death Pynchon makes the reader aware that with Mélanie we are dealing with a convention. Therefore, this story that ends in a death scene in which a beauty dies on center stage, is—more than anything else—an analysis of those desires actualized in this image, both in the narrative and in the course of reading.

In more than one way, Mélanie is the center of chapter fourteen: she is narcissistic and a fetishized object of desire. The context of fetishism is explicit in Mélanie's story. She is several times referred to as a fetish: first by M. Itague, the theatre director: "Come, fétiche, inside" (V, 395), and then by a mysterious lady V. who later becomes her lover: "Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket ... une jarretiére. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure." (V, 404). This is how Mélanie also sees herself, for she has made her own mirror image her own fetish, which she adorns with exquisite clothes and jewellery. What enforces Mélanie's object-position is that she is an inscrutable character who does not even have a discourse of her own. Her story is told by lady V. to composer Porcépic, and by Porcépic to Herbert Stencil, who might have invented the story altogether—all these overlapping narrative layers only underline

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<sup>110</sup> As many critics have pointed out, the parallels between the avant-garde ballet Mélanie is performing and Stravinsky's scandalous first performance of *Le sacre du printemps* are numerous. In chapter fourteen, composer Vladimir Procepic, choreographer Satin and impresario M. Itague resemble the famous troika of Stravinski, Nijinsky and Serge Diaghilev (for further references, see, for example, Grant 2001, 171–181). The time of the first performance, 1913, is the same in both ballets, and another similarity is the riot among the audience, which ends the performance in a catastrophe. Both performances also expose adolescent sexuality. As Stravinsky recalled later, the first dance of the ballet, *Le dance des adolescents* with young girls already provoked the audience: "when the curtain opened on the group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolita's jumping up and down, the storm broke. [...] I heard Florent Schmitt shout 'Taisez-vous garces du seizième', 'Be quiet, you bitches of the sixteenth'; the *garces* of the sixteenth arrondissement (the most fashionable district of Paris) were, of course, the most elegant ladies in Paris." Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music*. 4th Edition. New York: Norton&Co., 1988: 838).

Mélanie's object-position. She is an artificial, textual being from the beginning—a fetish of some other characters, but also a fetish within a discourse that is itself sacrificial, that defines her as a victim.

In *Pynchon's Poetics*, Hanjo Berressem has made a detailed analysis of Mélanie's character and its relationship to the Freudian concept of fetishism. Berressem argues that in this particular episode of *V.* Pynchon reads psychoanalysis against itself, and this counterreading concerns particularly the concepts of *subject* and *fetish* (1993, 57). Freudian psychoanalysis is based on specific assumptions concerning the subject, and Pynchon questions these assumptions by applying Freudian concepts to a subject that has turned into a purely operational object (*ibid.*). In the Freudian context, fetishism is linked to the male fear of castration associated with female genitals, and the fetish as a material, inanimate object associated with women's bodies functions as a substitute for the missing phallus. The fetish, as Berressem emphasizes, is thus always a phallic object (59). But what happens in Mélanie's case is that she becomes a fetish, a phallic object in her entirety. She has completely internalized other people's desires, and therefore she seems to exist only as a kind of fantasy-projection. In Berressem's analysis this fantasy-projection is that of psychoanalytic discourse itself, and Pynchon in Mélanie's story invalidates Freudian fetishism first by disconnecting it from the male perspective and the fear of castration. Being female and a lesbian, Mélanie cannot be a Freudian fetishist, whose motivation is to give the woman the phallos she initially lacks. Second, Pynchon in Mélanie's character disrupts the distinction between human and fetish (69–70). Similarly, Mattessich argues that if the reader cannot experience Mélanie's death in a fully affective way, it is because she is only an element in a representation of a representation, "an actor in Pynchon's staging of a psychoanalytic scene that determines her fate from the outset" (2002, 34). Berressem's view is that Mélanie's dead body is a symptom of an equally dead culture, a culture in which the body is completely operational. The replacement of the real by simulation that takes place in Mélanie's story works throughout the novel, and it describes a universe which is permeated by the mechanical and the machinic (Berressem 1993, 72–74).

If Mélanie here is a textualized victim, the victim of psychoanalytic discourse, she also bears the crucial marks of a sacrificial victim in the Girardian sense. As Berressem's argumentation above showed, what characterizes Mélanie is a fundamental loss of differences and categories—animate and inanimate, human and object, fetish and the "real thing." This elimination of differences, or better, *inversion* of differences is the feature Girard also associates with what he calls the *sacrificial crisis*, the state that precedes sacrifice. "The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their 'identity' and their mutual relations" (2005, 51–52). The sacrificial victim, the *pharmakon*, becomes the incarnation of this nondifferentiation threatening the cultural order, a polluted and monstrous object, whose death or exile

“purges” the community (100).

This inversion of differences is made apparent in Mélanie’s story in another way. One day Mélanie appears at the rehearsals head shaven and looking like a young boy. After that the entire ballet company starts speculating about the interchangeability of gender roles in Mélanie’s and V.’s love affair.

Speculation among the company was that a peculiar inversion had taken place: since an affair of this sort generally involves one dominant and one submissive, and it was clear which one was which, the woman should have appeared in the clothing of an aggressive male. Porcépic, to the amusement of all, produced at L’Ouganda one evening a chart of the possible combinations the two could be practicing. It came out to 64 different sets of roles, using the subheadings “dressed as,” “social role,” “sexual role.” They could both for example be dressed as males, both have dominant social roles and strive for dominance sexually. They could be dressed different-sexed and both be entirely passive [...]. Or any of the 62 other combinations. (V, 408)

If we follow the Girardian line of reasoning, Mélanie’s death on stage is not only metaphorically but actually sacrificial: the riot among the audience that has started already before the performance is nominally a quarrel about aesthetics and politics, but it can also be seen as a kind of sacrificial crisis. For Girard, the violence that really threatens the existence of the community is the mutual rivalry that leads to mimetic desire, a state of nondifferentiation, where everyone turns against each other. But during Mélanie’s last dance, which ends in her death, the audience is suddenly calmed: “A terrible hush fell over the audience, gendarmes and combatants all turned as if magnetized to watch the stage” (V, 414).

Throughout the novel, Pynchon returns to and elaborates this sacrificial scene, and all his victims mirror each other: Mélanie mirrors Fina, the dismemberment of the Bad Priest that I described in chapter 3 mirrors Benny Profane’s nightmare of losing his body parts. This contagious sameness between characters makes them doubles of each other, which to Girard is also a mark of the sacrificial crisis, for nondifferentiation always entails antagonism and violence: “as the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into ‘twins,’ matching images of violence” (2005, 83).

One of these twins is Herbert Stencil, the protagonist and possible author within the novel—a man who has created both himself and V. There is not much to tell about Stencil besides his quest, except that he always refers to himself in the third person.

Herbert Stencil, like small children at certain stage and Henry Adams in the *Education*, as well as assorted autocrats since time out of mind, always referred to himself in the third person. This helped “Stencil” appear as only one among a repertoire of identities. “Forcible dislocation of personality” was what he called the general technique [...]. (V, 62)

Instead of bodily disintegration Stencil experiences or, in fact, strives after personal disintegration. His reason for this maneuver is never given, but as another author figure,

the poet Fausto Majizal, announces in the novel, self-distancing is a necessary condition for being a writer:

We can justify any apologia simply by calling life a successive rejection of personalities. No apologia is any more than a romance—half a fiction—in which all the successive identities taken on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters. The writing itself even constitutes another rejection, another “character” added to the past. (V, 306)

Kharpertian argues that Stencil’s personal disintegration is in fact Pynchon’s parody of modernist aesthetics:

The modernists [...] viewed poetry, in Eliot’s famous phrase from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as “an escape from personality.” In parodying Eliot’s dictum, Stencil practices not escape but “forcible dislocation,” and his clothing, food, and shelter are as a result comically alien to him. (1990, 72)

Stencil can thus be seen as a Menippean character, who tests a philosophical idea by putting it into practice, which is perhaps the reason why Stencil seems to belong to quite another story than the other characters. Stencil, who has given up saying ‘I,’ is only a stencil that creates images. But the problematics of writing and personal disintegration in *V.* runs deeper than mere parody.

Maurice Blanchot has formulated this solitude of the writer as follows: “to write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself,” and hence the writer is someone profoundly cut off from himself. In writing the writer “belongs to a language which no one speaks,” he is “no longer himself; he isn’t anyone any more” (1982, 26–28). Giorgio Agamben has noted that the tradition of artistic self-distancing stems from Baudelaire, to whom the perfect artist is an observer, whose greatest passion is to step outside his own personality and fuse with the crowd (1993, 48–50). This kind of artist is insatiable for everything outside himself. Baudelaire also praised the dandy figure as a new model for the artist. The dandy’s relation to the materiality of the world, its colours and shapes, is far above the average man. The dandy is also someone who has completely aestheticized his being, so that he has the outside point of view always also on himself (*ibid.*). Agamben sees in Baudelaire’s writings the emergence of a non-human artist image. The task of modern poetry is to redeem objects, to open a new relation to things that grasps their unreal nature, which is something beyond their use-value or exchange value, and in order to do this the artist/poet must become an object himself (1993, 48). In order to reify the nonreifiable the artist must undergo a kind of self-sacrifice and give up traditional notions of intelligibility and authority (*ibid.*). Agamben argues that the principle of self-dispossession has since Baudelaire modelled the modern image of the artist:

Rimbaud’s programmatic exclamation “I is an other” (*je est un autre*) must be

taken literally: the redemption of objects is impossible except by becoming an object. [...] the dandy-artist must become a living corpse, constantly tending toward an *other*, a creature essentially nonhuman and antihuman. (1993, 50)

Thus Stencil, who is only partly human, becomes the same kind of sacred monster as lady “V.”, the object of his quest. The problem of signification that “V” represents in the novel has been treated earlier in this study in chapter 3. Here I will only emphasize the close link between the problem of signification and sacrifice embodied in “V.” For “V.” is both a woman and a textual corpus, and through her/it Pynchon’s sacrificial thematics is textualized. And this is the nodal point in which we have to move on from Girard’s theory of sacrifice to that of Baudrillard. “V.”, who in Stencil’s imagination is both a goddess and an inhuman, mechanical creature only resembling a human being, is the ultimate victim figure in the novel. But along with her bodily dispersion, the letter V is scattered into the text, repeated until exhaustion. This textual dispersion of the letter V parallels what Baudrillard in *L’échange symbolique* has called an anagrammatic dispersion (*dispersion anagrammatique*), a symbolical operation that takes place *within* language, resulting in the extermination of the referent as a positive value. In this process, which Baudrillard sees as analogous to sacrifice, the referent has become the textual victim, the death of which guarantees the coherence of the text.

Baudrillard builds his notion of the anagrammatic dispersion on Saussure’s posthumously published anagram studies, and on the formal regularities Saussure had found in archaic poetry. One of Saussure’s hypotheses was that a poem is organized around a “theme word” (*mot-thème*) (Starobinski, 1971). In his linguistic studies of archaic poetry, Saussure noticed that the poems repeat a certain word, usually the name of a god or a hero, who is the nominal addressee of the poem. But this word is not presented as such: it has been broken into singular phonemes that can be found throughout the poem. The theme word thus becomes like an anagram governing the entire text. These phonemes, woven into the textual fabric, create the internal coherence of the poem, a coherence that has very little to do with the supposed content of the lines.

For Baudrillard the theme word means that in the anagrammatic process the god’s name, the *raison d’être* of the poem, the symbolic referent of the text, is “analyzed,” broken down into smallest parts. Consequently, when the broken name rearticulates the poem in the rhythm of its particles, the special intensity of a poetic discourse emerges (Baudrillard 1976, 302–308). Pynchon’s choice of the letter V for his heroine is therefore ingenious, for the V sign is already part of God’s name: it is one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton (JHVH), which in the Cabbalist tradition “encodes” God’s essence within His name.

Jean Starobinski has defined the anagrammatic process as a recurrence and expansion of an identity, and the poem is a prolonged echo or a fuguelike development of a theme word that remains always identifiable (1971, 61, 107). Baudrillard criticizes Starobinski’s reading for a fixation on the notion of stable identity, which is always seen present in the poem as latent. Similarly, the process of reading aims at identification

(1976, 306–308). Baudrillard argues instead that the structuralists' mistake was to regard phenomena like the theme word only as a product of skillful artistic composition, without seeing the radical otherness and intensity of poetic discourse, which does not consist of the recurrence of an identity, but of its abolishment (ibid.). In the anagrammatic process the question is no more about bringing some hidden name into view; as the name is already known, it would be mere tautology. The theme word as the text's hidden message is thus something which determines the text's organization when absent; once brought into the open it is nothing, an empty sign (ibid.)

This is precisely what happens in chapter nine of *V.*, in "Mondaugen's story." The young engineer Kurt Mondaugen researches radio waves, and convinced that he has found a secret code in an irregular series of signals, he tries to decode it. The message he finds turns out to be a series of letters from which Mondaugen reconstitutes the opening line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "the world is all that the case is," an incomprehensible sentence referring to God, and an anagram of his own name. The primary message—that the world is all that is the way it is—gives us nothing new: "I've heard that somewhere before," (V, 278) says Mondaugen. The question who actually sent the code, and for what purpose, is no longer the point, for when the code has been broken it no longer interests Mondaugen or anyone else.

The question of whether a theme word can be found in a given text is not a true problem to Baudrillard. The formula that took the form of a theme word in archaic poetry can in modern poetry be something else—for instance, a significant structure of the text that cannot ever be isolated "as such" (1976, 308). Baudrillard emphasizes, however, that the anagrammatic dispersion is an effect of a different kind than that of the "cryptogrammatical" texts (302–303). With term Baudrillard refers to texts that have a hidden key or solution, this key being—like in the allegory—another text, through which the first one is read. In these cases the text's signified is drawn away, and the pleasure of reading stems from detour and delay in relation to the hidden key, from the time that it takes to find the missing solution (ibid.). But the pleasure of solving a puzzle has nothing to do with poetic pleasure. The former arises from bringing something final into sight while the latter depends on the impossibility of the final word (302–308).

For Baudrillard the anagrammatic dispersion is a sacrificial mode. When the signifier, in which the name of the god is incarnated, is dismembered in the course of the text, the process is analogous to sacrifice, where the body of a human god or hero is transformed into a symbolic material for the integration of the group (290–291). This happens also in mythology, where the gods/heroes go through metaphorical death or metamorphosis when their bodies are torn to pieces and rebuilt. The idea that archaic poetry was written for the praise of gods, Baudrillard argues, may work the other way round: the goal may also be to annul the gods' power (ibid.). The relations between gods and men are ambivalent, for in primitive cultures gods were not only worshipped but also sacrificed (ibid.).

In the anagrammatic dispersion in *V.*, this ambivalence of the sacrificial dynamics emerges on the level of expression. The resulting textual effect is not the disappearance of meaning, but the reader's awareness of the reciprocity of the signification process: the letter V creates and destroys signification by circulating in the text. Through this materiality of the signifier the novel gains its peculiar intensity.

#### A Living Intersection: Victims and Heroes in *Gravity's Rainbow*

While *V.* can be described as a whirl around one singular letter, *Gravity's Rainbow* revolves around WWII. One of the big questions that the novel puts to its readers is, how did this war ever come into being? What forces really determined both the course of WWII and the course of individual lives in that particular historical moment? Recurrently, both perspectives, the individual and the global, seem to overlap, or fuse in a strange way. As, for example, in the first part of the novel, when a schizophrenic in a mental institution has a strange delusion. The patient thinks he *is* WWII:

His days are numbered. He's to die on V-E Day. If he's not the War then he's its child-surrogate, living high for a certain term, but come the ceremonial day, look out. The true king only dies a mock death. Remember. Any number of young men may be selected to die in his place while the real king, foxy old bastard, goes on. (GR, 131)<sup>111</sup>

According to Girard, what takes place in ritual sacrifice is, in fact, a *double* substitution (2005, 107). One member (the king) is substituted for the community, and in the sacrifice ritual a victim belonging to a specific sacrificial category (the child-surrogate) is substituted for the original victim (ibid.). Girard stresses the important difference between these two victims: the original victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside (ibid.). Girard sees that the king's sovereignty and its permanence in archaic societies derive from this double substitution. "The king reigns only by virtue of his future death," (112) and when his death is not actual, it is acted out through the ritual victim.

Baudrillard, whose views of sacrifice have affinities with Girard's,<sup>112</sup> sees sacrifice in archaic cultures as a way of abolishing the symbolical prestige of a socially superior position. Thus sacrifice becomes a means of preventing the accumulation of power to such a degree that it escapes the group's control (1976, 213). Baudrillard

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<sup>111</sup> V-E Day is the Victory-in-Europe-Day, which is May 8, 1945 (Weisenburger 1988, 19).

<sup>112</sup> But it is notable that in *L'échange symbolique* he refers to Girard only once, in a footnote.



stresses that the ritualistic death of the king is based on reciprocity: death is the price for the superior social status, and, more importantly, a means of preventing the accumulation of riches and power to a single person, which could risk the flux of symbolic exchange (ibid.). Here, argues Baudrillard, is the true meaning of the sacrifice: to volatilize that which is in danger of escaping the group's symbolic control and to settle the symbolic inequation by death (ibid.). The king's death is a ritual in which the king, obligated by the law of reciprocity, gives himself (his body) into symbolic exchange (214). In the killing of the king the divine nature of the king is not abolished, only assimilated back into the group (ibid.)<sup>113</sup>.

Although sacrificial mechanisms have largely vanished from modern culture, in *Fatal Strategies* Baudrillard gives an example of what he calls "the political version of the law of reversibility" (1990, 78): the passion of a people to sacrifice their political leaders, the same that they have chosen to rule them. It does not happen because people do not believe in the authority of their leaders. Something in power itself calls for its own dissolution:

Of course people choose leaders and obey them, of course they invest their representatives with power and legitimacy. But can we suppose that there doesn't always remain the logical necessity to take vengeance on them? Power, whatever it is and wherever it comes from, is a symbolic murder and must be expiated by murder. We may also be sure that every society is perfectly cognizant of this, at the very moment when it puts someone in power and this someone, if he is intelligent, is perfectly conscious of it as well. (ibid.)

But in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this sacrificial mechanism appears in a different light. The king as a sovereign and a representative of transcendental and hence absolute power is

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<sup>113</sup> In his theorizing of the sacrifice, Baudrillard attacks Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of the birth of religion in *Totem and Taboo* (*Totem und Taboo* 1912–1913). Freud suggested that the sense of guilt characteristic of the Oedipus complex originates from a primordial, real killing of the father in the primitive community (Freud 1991, 324–325). Afterwards, the remorse for the bad deed led to the preservation of the father figure as a deity who was worshipped in constant fear of revenge. This violence was repeated from generation to generation, until society reached a phase in which the aggression towards father and father's power (or any individual holding a leader position within a community) no longer led to actual violence. But the sense of guilt, however, persisted. It resulted in the internalization of the father as a psychic agency, the superego that controls and punishes the actions of the ego. (234–332) To Baudrillard this is a misapprehension. The Oedipal killing of the father isn't comparable to the ritualistic killing of the king in primitive cultures. The Oedipus complex and its anguished and guilty phantasm of killing the father is only the result of the loss of sacrificial mechanisms in our society (213–214). In rejecting Freud's theory of the original patricide, Baudrillard follows Girard, who has also accused Freud of having interpreted the primitive sacrifice as a simulation of some original patricide in order to save his psychoanalytic axioms (Girard 2005, 221–222).

no longer a person, but something more abstract and diffuse—a global war. This king is never really threatened, and the role of the king's fool, the schizophrenic, is to act out the fate of those millions of victims who die in WWII for reasons that are beyond their own control. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the death of those victims is no longer an offering made to the fatherland, but a calculated outcome of processes that are put in motion by anonymous economic and military power structures. The war in the novel becomes an image of faceless and absolute power that effectively eludes any attempts at reversion:

The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide this way, and to subdivide, though its propaganda will always stress unity, alliance, pulling together. The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not ever the sort the Germans have engineered, ein Volk ein Führer—it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity... Yet who can presume to say what the War wants, so vast and aloof it is...so *absentee*. Perhaps the War isn't even an awareness—not a life at all, really. (GR, 130–131)

Throughout the novel, this anonymous and amorphous power is called They. Be They real or a paranoid projection, They seem to persist as a conglomeration of forces against which any political resistance is impossible. As the lone preacher Father Rapier announces in his “Critical Mass,” They may even overcome the limit of all power, death:

I think that there is a terrible possibility now, in the World. We may not brush it away, we must look at it. It is possible that They will not die. That it is now within the state of Their art to go on forever—though we, of course, will keep dying as we always have. (539)

The thematization of sacrifice in *Gravity's Rainbow* grows into an analysis of power. As a striking contrast to the millions of people who are involuntary victims, two of the central characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gottfried and Tyrone Slothrop choose to be victims. Their victimization, which has disturbed many of Pynchon's readers, is susceptible of different interpretations, but it makes visible the social power around them.

Gottfried's death in the Rocket 00000 resembles a self-sacrificial, kamikaze flight. Gottfried knows that he will be the first man who has left the Earth and escaped the force of gravity. And he also knows that this experience will cost him his life. But like Mélanie in *V.*, Gottfried is not given a discourse of his own, for he exist only as the projection of Captain Weissmann's fantasies. The young Gottfried is *his* child-surrogate, sent to a sure death so that Weissmann can realize his technological and transcendental dream of overcoming gravity and death. And in a bizarre way, Weissmann indeed survives death. At the end of the novel, the narrator who has turned into a Tarot card reader, foresees Weissmann's future:

If you're wondering where he's gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. (749)<sup>114</sup>

Weissmann, who is the only truly malignant character in the novel, is also a personalized instance of power, one of the kings who do not die. His relationship with his protégé Gottfried is sexual and sadistically suppressive, and before stepping inside the Rocket, Gottfried had been the staged victim of Weissmann's sadomasochistic sessions. Some critics have argued that the relationship between Gottfried and Weissmann does not so much concern homosexuality—sexuality here merely provides a frame of reference for Pynchon's analysis of power relations. Mattessich sees that in Gottfried's sacrifice Weissmann's/Blicero's obsession with transcendence emerges in a sexualized form. Weissmann's relationship with Gottfried is sexualized, not sexual, because, as Mattessich argues, "the sexual in general is here another machine: reproductive, repetitive, autoerotic, dehumanizing [...] in its consummations, travesties a human language of tenderness, love, care. Indeed, Blicero's sexual perversion is precisely what sacrifices or violates innocence here" (2002, 157). Because Gottfried's Rocket is the one that will also explode the novel itself, Weissmann's obsession for Gottfried also becomes the text's obsession: "if *Gravity's Rainbow* is itself 'perverse,' then this sacrifice is also a constituent element of the novel's production" (ibid.).

When Gottfried is tied to the Rocket, it becomes his Procrustean bed, "modified to take him. The boy and the Rocket, concurrently designed" (GR, 750). While Gottfried is becoming literally part of the Rocket, his sacrifice can also be seen as one made to technological progress itself. Gottfried is the necessary offering, a calculated loss that will ensure future profits. Mizruchi argues that in many ways sacrifice has proven fully adaptable to modernization: no longer limited to religious functions, sacrifice has come to serve social morality (1998, 76). Progress and prosperity are now the gods requiring constant sacrifices from modern citizens, and "some bodies are bound to be wasted in the process of securing for so many the pleasures of a new consumer life" (77).

Tyrone Slothrop is in many ways a radically different victim. One of the central storylines of the novel is Slothrop's quest for the Rocket 00000 and his own personal and bodily relation to it. Slothrop finds out that he has been experimentally conditioned to the polymer Imipolex G as a child. The same polymer is used in the German V-2 rockets. So conditioned, Slothrop becomes a living index of the falling rockets (he gets an erection in their presence), and because of this bizarre gift, Slothrop is the only one who can reveal the whereabouts of the 00000 Rocket to the Allies. Slothrop's quest is, however, never completed. When he enters the Zone Central Europe has become in 1945, he, like Pynchon's other searchers, starts to lose his personal integrity. Slothrop's

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<sup>114</sup> Weisenburger notes that Weissmann's postwar life parallels that of Wernher von Braun and Walter Dornberger. Dornberger, an ex-Nazi who also settled in the United States, sat on the Board of Directors of the Bell Helicopter Corporation (1988, 309).

identity changes several times and gradually fractures, until it becomes indeterminate and multiplied in the narrative discourse. Slothrop eventually loses all sense of integrated self, orientation, and sense of time, and what the reader knows of him towards the end of the novel vanishes into a stream of sensations and moods that seem to belong to no one in particular:

...instructing him, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper that he can explain, have been faces of children out the train windows, two bars of dance music somewhere, in some other street at night, needles and branches of a pine tree shaken clear and luminous against night clouds, one circuit diagram out of hundreds in a smudged yellowing sheaf, laughter out of a cornfield in the early morning he was walking to school, the idling of a motorcycle at one dusk-heavy hour of the summer... and now, in the Zone, [...] 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 Pynchon criticism, Slothrop's "scattering" (712, et passim) has aroused different interpretations. For Lewicki, Slothrop's scattering, like the flight of the Rocket, means that "gravity begins to lose its control over him" (1984, 98). Gravity is not only a destructive force, since it pulls all bodies and holds them together. When Slothrop (like Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*) loses all his bearings, "there is no plot around him to justify his existence" (ibid.). As in *V.*, the textual fragmentation towards the end of the novel is intertwined with Slothrop's personal disintegration. He disappears from the narration, and changes into a vague perception or a pure textual being, as in the drug-induced vision of seaman Bodine, one of Slothrop's few friends: "He's looking straight at Slothrop (being one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more. Most of the others gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept)" (GR, 740).

Some critics have emphasized Slothrop's psychotic withdrawal from language and conceptualization: at the end of the novel, the world for Slothrop becomes a mere flow of sense data. "Slothrop has reduced the world to a purely solipsistic reflection of his own decoded subjective states. He sees meaning in everything and nothing, spiraling down into a complete dislocation and autism" (Mattessich 2002, 194). Mattessich sees Slothrop's disintegration also as a way of resisting the control imposed on him that has determined his entire life: "at some level he tries to grasp the nature of what oppresses him so deeply that it cannot be distinguished from himself: it is himself" (ibid.).

When Slothrop ceases to be a subject he can no longer be controlled or manipulated. In the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the questions of domination, control and power pervade all human relations, Slothrop's personal annihilation or death—if that's what it is—represents an escape. This is also what Nealon sees happening at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The "scattering" disrupting Slothrop's subjectivity is also a scattering of the world of determinate relations (subject/object,

cause/effect) that determine him as a self, as an individual. Therefore, to scatter all that (not intentionally, since, as Nealon points out, Slothrop doesn't exactly cause this disruption) represents a gap or a resistance to thinking that evolves only relations of opposition, negation, or sublation (Nealon 1993, 127).

Slothrop's scattering is also an openly sacrificial image: "lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun [...] he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection" (GR, 625), and, as Nealon notes, "Slothrop brings about or calls for(th) a certain disruption" (1993, 126). But it seems that unlike Gottfried, Slothrop is not put to death by any sovereign—rather, at the end of the novel, he becomes a mythical, godlike figure who creates life by taking himself apart:

Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into a consistent personae of their own. If so, there is no telling which of the Zone's present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering. (GR, 742)

But Slothrop is also, like the anonymous schizophrenic, a symptom of a certain historical moment. Mattessich points out that the day of Slothrop's final disappearance is August 6, 1945, which is also the day of the atomic destruction of Hiroshima (2002, 19). Therefore Mattessich sees Slothrop in a dual position: as a Christlike figure who takes on and reiterates the sins of a late capitalist world (208), and as a sign of the text's desire for entropy, the retreat into the zero degree of discourse (19).

### The Self-Consuming Text

It has often been stated that a novel such as *Gravity's Rainbow* is non-consumable. The text refuses to mean, it refuses to be an object with a certain value; the novel's radical incoherence and heterogeneity both call forth various interpretive frameworks and at the same time parody interpretive activity and provide several mutually overlapping interpretations of the work. The textual coherence of the novel is destroyed long before the approaching cosmic bomb finally destroys its fictional space.

The reader's position in Pynchon's fiction is always challenging. Critical readings of the problem of signification in Pynchon's writing have usually taken the dialectical mode, which Tabbi describes as follows:

[T]he reader is left to choose between a world and its inverse, in which one or two conditions holds: either the mind is overwhelmed by meaning in the world outside consciousness (the signified), or a perceived absence of determinate meaning is filled up with a purely linguistic construction—an excess on the plane of the signifier. (1995, 121)

In the wake of postmodernist literary theory, many of Pynchon's academic readers have chosen the latter option, that is, the free-play of signifiers as an interpretive

strategy. This development has, however, produced readings that do not share the polyvalence and heterogeneity of their source text. As Tabbi puts it, “Pynchon in particular has suffered [...] from readings that routinely regard the absence of determinate meaning in his novels as their only significance” (1995, 13). Nealon has also pointed out that the critical tendency to emphasize diversity and unthematizability in Pynchon leads to a situation where diversity and discontinuity is reconstructed as a theme in itself. A paradigmatic case is, of course, *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

Its rich ambiguity becomes, rather, its overarching theme, and the novel becomes an allegory for the ambiguity of the world and of art. In the secondary literature, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is consistently read as a text that affirms a sort of romantic, humanist freedom among myriad possibilities for being; the richness of the text figures the freedom of the reader within the plurality of the world. (Nealon 1993, 108–109)

But what happens, asks Nealon, when criticism encounters a text that *radically resists any thematized reading whatsoever?* (110) With this provocative question, Nealon is not returning to the dialectical opposites. Instead, he states that any use of language involves the pull toward determinate meaning. What Nealon is suggesting is that in *Gravity’s Rainbow* “there is something other than thematization that is not simply the other of thematization” (ibid.). There is in the novel an imperative to read differently and therefore the novel effectively resists both notions of unreadability and consumable readability (ibid.)

When this specific tension of signification in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *V.* is read within the context of sacrifice, the textual fragmentation appears as an ambivalent gesture in which the text itself becomes a sacrificial medium, the value of which is both exposed and annulled. What takes place in both novels is the perpetual undoing of signifying structures, a disruption of those textual instances with greatest value—a central character or a unifying theme. The text is pervaded by this symbolic economy, in which signification both emerges and assimilates back into the textual flux. Thus, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the possibility of the reversal of power takes place on the level of expression. This time it is the power of the sign-value of language.

Some critics have noted the special effect of the exhaustion of signification in Pynchon’s novels. Mattessich, for example, stresses that Pynchon’s layering of signifying networks (cultural references, various discourses, etc.) “have as their cumulative effect to exhaust rather than enrich signification, literally to swamp the connotative depths of the novel to the point where meaning stops or stands still” (2002, 177). Mattessich sees a connection between this exhaustion of signification and the counterculturality of Pynchon’s work. For him a novel like *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a profoundly countercultural work, not because of its cultural context (or Pynchon’s alleged countercultural background), but because of the textual body of the novel that is made unconsumable, indigestible, repulsive. All this discloses “the novel’s ambition to be a fragmentary whole, to produce and thereby elude its own determination by a

capitalist System that works by commodifying everything” (2002, 183). *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Mattessich argues, “does not want to be merely a good commodity, a prop in the theater of [...] consumption” (102).

This resistance to commodification, and in general resistance to signification as a positive and enduring value, is what links Pynchon’s poetics to Baudrillard’s notion of the poetic. The poetic (or, what Baudrillard sees as the “primitive element” in language) does not aim at the production of signifieds, but their exact consummation, a cyclical resolution of signifying material (1976, 297). Poetic discourse seeks to annul the accumulation of meanings by repeating a finite number of materials till exhaustion, and in this process lies the intensity and ecstatic nature of poetic discourse (291–295). For Baudrillard, normal communication is based on the principle of equivalence between the signifier and the signified, of signification as value, and on the use of signs as linguistic capital that can be piled up indefinitely (ibid). This capital that no reversion can ever abolish will be accumulated, stratified, and petrified as an objective dimension of language. Poetic discourse, characterized by reversibility and dissemination, thus remains the other of the economy of signification, of all discursive practices that rely on sign-value. Having absorbed the ambivalence of the sacrificial mechanism, the poetic discourse embodies as a form the same reciprocity and re-volution of power that the sacrificial mechanism represents socially. By textualizing sacrifice, Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow* makes the reading process a true interaction between the text and the reader. A death within a narrative is always symbolical, because it is fictitious, artificial—a mediated death. Even the openly sacrificial death of a character can remain something the reader only contemplates from a distance. But when sacrifice occurs on the textual plane, it also makes the reading a part of the textual dynamic of giving and taking, creation and destruction.

## 8. Epilogue

Because of Pynchon's relatively short list of works, it has often been a practice in studies that involve the corpus of his work to devote an entire chapter to each novel (and an additional one for the short stories). My reasons for not doing this are simple: because this is a synthesizing approach (one, I believe, that must from time to time be made), I have put more emphasis on the similarities between Pynchon's works than on their mutual differences. Certain themes, juxtapositions, attitudes, characters, and tropes recur, although it is also clear that since Pynchon's work has appeared over a period of 40 years, significant changes have also occurred. And as to the theme of death, every text has its own overtones. While I am writing this, Pynchon's next novel, *Against the Day*, is to be published within a few weeks, and according to the editorial reviews, the apocalypse thematic will be making a comeback. It will be truly interesting to see how.

From Pynchon's first published short story, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" to "Under the Rose," "Entropy," and even "The Small Rain," (1959) the image of collective death, in some catastrophic form or another, hangs over the narrative space and gives the story its orientation<sup>115</sup>. This thematic structuration continues in *V.*, where we follow, from the cold war perspective of the narrative present in 1956–57, the history of the first half of the 20th century as a succession of colonialism, international conflicts, general greediness and rising fascism that will inevitably lead to WWII. This gloomy global history is in this novel intertwined with the private histories of individuals, and the global violence and destruction parallels the aggression, indifference or emotional coldness between characters. In this study I have argued that there are good reasons not to read *V.* simply as a great turn towards death. But to me *V.* is nevertheless a darker novel than *Gravity's Rainbow*, for there is no alternative to this whirl of contagious violence, not even much comic relief or subversion. In this respect, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a new opening, despite the fact that the thematics of suicide, melancholy, and personal disintegration plays a prominent role in it.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon for the first time associates social marginality with death, which alignment continues in his following novels. The secret postal system WASTE represents both the social waste—people who are useless from the perspective of the economy and social order—and something that has been expelled from the modern way of life. Throughout this study I have emphasized the relationship between social line-drawing and death in Pynchon's fiction. The question is not so much the allegorization of the relationship between modern society and its others—ethnic

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<sup>115</sup> The only exception in this regard is "The Secret Integration" (1964), which tells of a bunch of middle-class white children, and how they encounter the adult world of racial discrimination. The story is set sometime after WWII, but the war is in this story somewhere in the background, as a part of the adult world to which the children have no access.



subcultures and immigrants, criminals, all kinds of deviants and dissidents, the handicapped, the old people, and so on. What Pynchon clearly foregrounds in *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Mason & Dixon* is that the line between the living and the dead is also one separating two modes of thinking, and it is this ideological difference that matters. We can interpret Pynchon's liminal figures and their recurrent visitations in various ways, but they clearly represent a different attitude towards death, characterized by a continuum between life and death and an indifference in relation to all kinds of conceptual limits. This Other Side is also a locus in which values lose their value, become diffuse or reversible, and from where there therefore emerges a challenge to contemporary late capitalist culture. This challenge does not have a content that can be determined, for it emerges more as a form, as a principle of reversion or payback as opposed to the capitalist ideology of endless growth and accumulation. The ideology of "taking and not giving back" (GR, 142) is juxtaposed with a "system of eternal repayment," (VL, 142) or, to quote the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Vineland*: "secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice" (VL, 369). As I have stressed earlier, Pynchon is not providing here any "divine justice" as an ideal and wishful compensation to the rationalism of economic value formation—it is a question of two modes of economy, and a power relation between them.

My approach in this study has been to read this alignment of ontological and ideological separation in Pynchon through Baudrillard's distinction between symbolic exchange and sign value exchange. My motivation for this parallel is, in fact, twofold. First, my aim has been to draw attention to Pynchon's fiction as commenting on the cultural history of death in the modern era. Seen from this perspective, Pynchon's alleged obsession with death appears as a critical comprehension of the changes that have occurred in attitudes towards death, and how these changes reflect profound changes in social life. Second, by introducing the notion of value in my discussion of Pynchon, I have stressed that the link between death, economy, and signification made by Baudrillard can also be seen affecting Pynchon's work. As I have shown in my readings in the previous chapters, Pynchon recurrently creates moments where death appears as the undoing of value, and the undoing of modes of thinking that the notion of value entails: classification, conceptual separation, control, use. The structural analogy between value, signification, and death as the moment of their undoing also affects the textual level, creating a poetic characterized by reversion and the undoing of signification. Seen from this perspective, death plays an important role in Pynchon's poetics as well as in his politics.

Besides Baudrillard, other critical influences that have been important to this study are Bakhtin and Norman O. Brown., because their ideas have helped me to see further links between Baudrillard and Pynchon. As I have argued in chapter 2, while Pynchon has been familiar with Brown's ideas of the interrelationship between death, the repression of the body, and economy, he has been reflecting and developing these

ideas in his fiction in a way reminiscent of Baudrillard's thinking. Through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque principle in literature it has been possible for me to see how the Baudrillardian symbolic could be understood in relation to the literary tradition. Although Baudrillard has written essays on various arts, including film ("Apocalypse Now," 1994), architecture ("The Beaubourg Effect," 1977), and literature ("Crash," 1991), it is notable that in his early works, *Pour une critique* and *L'échange symbolique*, the notion of the symbolic is not discussed in relation to art and literature (some cursory remarks notwithstanding). Even the short chapter on Saussure's anagram studies functions in *L'échange symbolique* as an appendix, and its ideas are not developed elsewhere in the book.

Therefore, one of my solutions has been to create a kind of working hypothesis of the similarity between symbolic exchange and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque subversion. This analogy is not far-fetched, since Bakhtin also draws on the ritualistic origins of literature in his theory of the carnivalesque principle. In his study on Rabelais, Bakhtin argues that the world of folklore, in which life and death confront each other or co-exist, is completely different from the world in which they are opposed (1965, 50n). The latter is for Bakhtin the world of the modern era beginning in the 17th century—the era in which the carnival forms of folk culture and their grotesque imagery start to fade and become a purely literary tradition (33–34). Therefore, one possible direction for further studies would be precisely this relationship between Bakhtinian poetics and the Baudrillardian symbolic.

Another important and relatively late influence has been Mattessich's view on the "politics of form" affecting Pynchon's writing. When critical readers of a novel like *Gravity's Rainbow* recognize that the novel also assimilates into its fictional world the critical discourse itself, many readings come to a halt, and the novel is seen "to include all political response, either in the novel or to the novel" (Mattessich 2002, 127). Mattessich, however, sees that this kind of conclusion prevents us from seeing that there are in the novel a "range of formal concerns" including arrested temporality, a suspension of the real, and endless repetition, and through these formal features Pynchon can be seen evoking a certain "politics of form," that is, a strategy of resistance to late capitalist culture. Although my approach and my set of questions have been different from Mattessich's, I see the symbolic reversibility that I have foregrounded in this study as something that can also be seen as such a formal strategy of resistance in Pynchon's writing.

The question of the social element in death that I have evoked throughout this study necessarily involves us, the community of readers. One big question that remains to be answered in this study is, to what extent a narrated, that is, symbolical death in literature can be seen to represent the *symbolic* in the Baudrillardian sense? A narrated death nearly always evokes a response from the reader, but does this make it the mark of an essentially different notion of death? Or can we speak of the symbolic only when a writer like Pynchon creates in his fiction a sphere of reversibility in and through

death? Another important question is, what does the return of the dead signify in literature? A conventional answer would be that the dead represent our own secret hopes and fears. Perhaps this cannot be denied, but what the conventional answer misses is the historical context for this question. As the history of literature shows, the great return of the dead in the gothic parallels the beginning of death's social withdrawal. After that, the dead who have ceased to matter socially keep returning in fiction. Is fiction, therefore, the only place left for the encounter and dialogue with the dead, and if so, what does that tell about us? In his fiction, Pynchon reflects on all these questions, and creates scenes where such dialogue can take place, as in the end of *Mason & Dixon*, where the old Mason meets his death during a nightly journey:

[A]t any moment Death may come whistling in from the Dark.

“Well Hullo, Death, what’s that you’re whistling?”

“Oo, little Ditters von Dittersdorf,<sup>116</sup> nothing you’d recognize, hasn’t happen’d yet, not even sure you’ll live till it’s perform’d anywhere,—have to check the ’Folio as to that, get back to you?”

“No hurry,—truly, no hurry.”

“You’ cute Rascal,” Death reaching out to pinch his Cheek... (M&D, 750)

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<sup>116</sup> Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739–1799), an Austrian composer and violinist known from his lighthearted and sometimes sentimental comic operas. “Ditters von Dittersdorf, Karl.” Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 7 May 2007<[http:// search.eb.com/article-9030666](http://search.eb.com/article-9030666)>.

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