

RocketMen

And

Wastelands:

**The Destruction of the Individual and the Redemption of the
Artist in Thomas Pynchon's First Three Novels**

by Marshall Shord

...offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing.

--Benny Profane, *V.*

...twentieth century man seems to be dedicating himself to the
annihilation of all animateness on a quite unprecedented scale, and
with quite unanticipated inventiveness.

--Tony Tanner, "V. and V-2"

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In Which an Overview of this Work is Given, and Pynchon's Artistic Influences are Discussed

Over the course of the next three chapters, the main body of this work, I will demonstrate that, through the identification with the inanimate, the individual in modern society is suppressed and rendered obsolete in Thomas Pynchon's first three novels. The intent of this chapter is twofold; I will introduce and briefly discuss the common themes that tie Thomas Pynchon's first three novels together so neatly. Furthermore, I will examine Pynchon's Modernist influences, namely James Joyce, and, to a lesser degree, T.S. Eliot, and how their views on the development of Western society, the role of the artist within it, and their interpretations of ancient myths in the modern world shape Pynchon's work.

In his first novel *V.*, the desire to regress to the inanimate takes the form of several characters including, and epitomized by, the eponymous V., who gradually replaces parts of her body with material objects. With *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon creates an America where faceless systems—the government, mainstream society, the Postal Service, the legal system, even radical groups against the mainstream society—dominate and oppress the individual. Within these dominant systems, most individuals would rather, paradoxically, submit to them, and lose their individuality, than struggle against the system as an individual and, in essence, stand alone in a terrifying world.

The suppression of the individual and the tyranny of technology culminates in *Gravity's Rainbow* where, using the destruction of World War II as a manifestation of

humanity's growing inhumanity, modern society is exposed as a vast circular conspiracy where governments function in the best interest of the corporations that provide them with weapons to fight wars, which, in turn, gives those corporations more money. This particular arrangement is designed to make life luxurious enough for the individual, by providing technological comforts, that he must submit to what amounts to suicide, the sacrifice of his individuality, in order to provide for his family and to uphold his patriotic duty through the production of weapons designed to kill other individuals who are slaves to the same system but are on different sides.

Marshall McLuhan's reinterpretation of the Narcissus myth in his 1964 essay "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis" will act as a key in this work to better understand V. and many other characters in Pynchon's first three novels. McLuhan's theory of self-amputation through the identification with objects can be used to better understand the process at work within Pynchon's fictional world. The basis of McLuhan's argument is that, "The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image" (41). McLuhan derives Narcissus from the Greek narcosis, which translates to numbness. Narcissus unconsciously identifies with his own image; he *does not recognize* himself. The point of the myth in a modern context, according to McLuhan, is "the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves" (Ibid). Narcissus becomes a "closed system"; he is no longer a social being. Through this process he becomes inhuman; he no longer communicates or thinks, rather, like an object, he just is.

McLuhan applies his interpretation of the myth to a modern context; instead of staring at an actual image of himself, the individual projects his image onto technology, making it an extension of the physical body:

To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it...It is this continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms (46).

McLuhan links the process of self-amputation to traumatic events. To him self-amputation is a way to cope with the difficulties of living in a world where the individual is continually exposed to shocks that the natural body is not designed physiologically to deal with.

For if Narcissus is numbed by his self-amputated image, there is a very good reason for the numbness. There is a close parallel of response between the patterns of physical and psychic trauma or shock. A person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock. Both the loss of family and a physical fall are extreme instances of amputations of the self. Shock induces a generalized numbness or an increased threshold to all types of perception. The victim seems immune to pain or sense" (44).

While McLuhan uses personal examples of an individual falling or losing his parents, he is suggesting that it is the state of the modern world that is causing such physical and psychic traumas.

The body must adapt to a world that is hostile to the individual. But for McLuhan the body can only withstand so much shock before it dissociates itself completely from human consciousness. This extreme form of self-amputation is the result of the huge advances in technology, especially electronic media.

With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal amputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism. It could well be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs since the invention of printing have made too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure (43).

McLuhan's Narcissus is the modern individual unable to cope with the world around him. Because humanity has submitted itself to an almost utter dependence on technology, they are continually identifying with objects, to the point that they relate better to those extensions than to other human beings. They must choose a few specific objects to identify with in order to fend off the rest of the invasion of technology into everyday life. Though this originates as a form of protection, by allowing even a few objects to define them, they submit to all objects. The individual deludes himself into believing he is still independent from objects, but by separating himself from other humans, and by identifying with even a few objects, he projects his image onto those objects and embraces that image rather than his actual self. It is, in a sense, suicide as a form of protection, and examples abound in Pynchon's first three novels.

But Pynchon designs his novels in a binary structure, so that opposing this dehumanizing force is a counterforce that is always beneath the dominant force. These counterforces can be further broken down into binary elements as well: those few characters brave or foolish enough to seek to affirm their individuality in a world that is increasingly systematized; and those groups of characters who are subsumed into a system that attempts to oppose the dominant system, but merely mimics it.

Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil in *V.*; Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*; and Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* all function as characters who are unmistakably individuals. All, besides Profane, are on a quest for a sense of personal meaning within a world that oppresses the individual in favor of the system. Profane is important as an individual because he is unable to relate to objects in the way that almost every other character in *V.* can. Common among these characters is a tendency towards being nomadic. None of them can stay in one place for long; Profane terms himself a human yo-yo because he spends most of his time moving up and down the East coast; Stencil travels over much of the world looking for V., or people who knew her. Oedipa, after leaving her home to execute Pierce Inverarity's estate, never returns to it; instead, she travels all over Southern California searching for clues. While Slothrop moves about Europe in the aftermath of World War II trying to avoid being captured by Allied agents who want to examine him. This rootless existence allows each character to evade the paralysis of living within a system, of fulfilling a role and developing a routine. Though they exercise no influence on the system—really, they change nothing—they establish themselves as individuals with all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in being human.

For those four characters who actually achieve a sense of individuality, who retain some sense of humanity, many of the other characters in the novels are integrated into a system; even those who attempt to subvert and protest the dominant system are eventually swallowed up by it. From the ennui and the paralysis of the Whole Sick Crew in *V.*, to the mimetic nature of the Trystero and the Counterforce in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, respectively, the systematization of protest renders the spontaneity and power of such subversion impotent. Rather, these subversive systems,

composed of individuals seeking refuge from the dominant system, are integrated into the dominant system to give the illusion that dissent is allowed and encouraged in mainstream society.

Thus, neither Pynchon's individuals nor the counterforces exert any sort of influence upon society. They too, like McLuhan's Narcissus, are closed circuits. For Pynchon, the only true individual with power in modern society is the artist. This power doesn't exist in reality though, it exists in his art. Pynchon is able to portray the outside world however he wants to within his fiction. He can manipulate; he can add or negate whatever he wants in his art. As an artist, he is not constrained by tradition or a censorious power. Elaine Pagels, writing about the iconoclasm championed by the Gnostics, sums up the artist's position within modern society as well: "They celebrated every form of creative invention as evidence that a person has become spiritually alive. On this theory, the structure of authority can never be fixed into an institutional framework: it must remain spontaneous, charismatic, and open" (*The Gnostic Gospels* 25). By creating his own world within his work, with its own power structures and systems, Pynchon is able to evade being integrated into the dominant system. He generates a freedom in his creativity that no one within the technocratic modern world is afforded anymore.

The idea of the artist as standing apart from the system and the influences of society in Pynchon can easily be traced back to James Joyce. Stephen Dedalus, near the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, says, "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (220). He continues with

this line of thought: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile and cunning” (269). The arms that Stephen will allow himself are of his mind; to free himself, he will not use violence nor will he use technology, but the spectacle of his imagination.

He also rejects those structures with which most humans define themselves: nationality, language, religion—the structure of mainstream society in general. Rather than define himself using criteria that he has no control over in determining himself, Stephen will assess himself by the standards that matter to him: inventiveness and erudition. His father will no longer be the failed businessman who regales all who listen with stories of his quintessentially Irish heritage, but the mythical Daedalus, the great artificer who created the labyrinth at Crete¹.

It is interesting that Joyce, who, through Stephen, rejected his biological father and adopted a mythical father in order for the son to form his own artistic identity in his literature, has become to many writers of the past half-century a patriarchal figure. Pynchon, then, is his most direct descendant; but it is the genius of both men that their most direct literary influences can be lost behind their dazzling virtuosity². Pynchon, to extend the metaphor, has done what Stephen Dedalus intended to do: he has forged an artistic identity unmistakably his own, and a body of work distinctive to his own time, but resonant throughout future generations. Yet, at the same time, he is indebted to his spiritual father, James Joyce.

This influence mainly manifests itself in the mythical structure that both writers impose on their novels. T.S. Eliot, in a review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, explains the significance of the use of myth to structure what many reviewers mistake for "an invitation to chaos, and an expression of feelings which are perverse, partial and a distortion of reality" (176). Eliot continues:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. ...It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. ...Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires (177-178).

Pynchon does pursue after Joyce what Eliot proposes. Myth in both Joyce and Pynchon is used as an ordering principle; its submerged presence acts as a touchstone, something for the reader to be familiar with in a dazzling, unfamiliar world.

The use of myth is used not only, as Eliot suggests, to contrast the modern and the ancient, to keep them parallel but separate, but also as a means of showing a thread of continuous humanity, thus melding the two eras together. It is, in a way, an act of reassurance from the writer to the reader in a modern society where humanity is dwindling in the face of technology that humanity, through art, is essentially the same as it was. The circumstances may change, but those stories and characters that enthralled ancient audiences are still familiar and still carry the same narrative impact that they used to, even if they are filtered through the lens of the modern artists' sensibilities³.

Joyce's patron mythical figures were Daedalus and Ulysses. Both men excelled at cunning and invention rather than brute force to survive as heroes. But where

Daedalus recognized the limits of knowledge, Ulysses, infected with wanderlust, pursued it to the ends of the earth, ultimately unable to satisfy his passion for knowledge or to return to his family. Joyce's idea of the artist takes the sensibility of Daedalus and combines it with the desire to throw off those social strictures that hold a man back from pursuing his passion (i.e. the man must support and be with his family) of Ulysses.

Pynchon doesn't theorize extensively about the artist's role within society in his fiction—he leaves it for the reader to interpret—rather, his use of mythical figures illustrates the bifurcation of the individual in modern society. Very simply, the populations of Pynchon's novels can be divided into two groups: those who are Narcissus, and those who are Oedipus. Those who are Narcissus are the characters who identify with objects, essentially reflected images of themselves. The most notable of these Narcissus characters are V. and Pierce Inverarity. Those characters who most resemble Oedipus are the ones who reject the obsession with objects and search for a personal truth in a land plagued by technology⁴; Oedipa and Slothrop most resemble Oedipus but each in different ways⁵.

This dichotomy is most explicit in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Pynchon foregrounds the myths in the names of characters and locations. The bored housewife Oedipa Maas embarks on a journey of self-discovery after she is named executrix of her ex-lover Pierce Inverarity's estate: "As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations" (10). Oedipa's role as Oedipus is established by her given name, the prevalence of theatre imagery and other small details that Pynchon uses throughout.⁶ Pierce lived in San Narciso, and Oedipa must travel there to arrange his affairs. She notices that, "Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a

grouping of concepts...” (13), she also notices the arrangement of the houses and streets: “There were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate” (14). The city is attempting to communicate the suppressed Narcissus myth. The city was built by Pierce’s investments, and thus it is nothing more than his own image—a metropolitan-sized reflecting pool.

For the most part, the tension between the Narcissus and Oedipus myths plays out in Oedipa’s relation to the men in her life, especially Inverarity and her husband, Mucho Maas. Frank Palmeri writes,

In San Narciso, she stays at the Echo Courts motel, whose swimming pool updates Ovid’s pool, and whose thirty-foot sign depicts a nymph holding a white flower (perhaps *Narcissus poeticus*)... The first pages of the novel allegorically associate Oedipa with Narcissus—misleadingly, as it turns out. Oedipa is less narcissistic than the men in her life: husband Mucho retreats to his own world; Dr. Hilarius goes insane; Metzger, her coexecutor and occasional bedmate, runs off with a teenage group; Randolph Driblette, the gurulike director of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, walks into the Pacific; the Innamorati Anonymous iterate in contemporary terms the Ovidian treatment of narcissism as a short-circuiting. Almost all the men Oedipa encounters abandon her and retreat into a self-contained state of fascination with themselves (“Neither Literally nor as Metaphor” 986).

Even the systems she encounters are merely either extension of Pierce Inverarity, or of the dominant system running society. The Trystero, for example, is nothing more than the reflection of the U.S. Postal Service and the government in general. A historian tells Oedipa of his theory about the Trystero’s relation to another more influential postal carrier in Enlightenment-era Europe: “He held, for instance, to a mirror-image theory, by which any period of instability for Thurn and Taxis must have its reflection in Tristero’s shadowstate” (134). Reflective imagery abounds in the novel; in pools, lakes, and

mirrors, characters are haunted by the presence of some shadow other: “[Oedipa] fell asleep almost at once, but kept waking from a nightmare about something in the mirror, across from her bed. Nothing specific, only a possibility, nothing she could see” (81). For Oedipa, who is trying to establish herself as an individual, seeing an extension of herself is terrifying, it is a portent of her fate: to be reproduced sans vitality in repeated images if she does not escape from her position in society.

McLuhan’s interpretation of the Narcissus myth establishes its contemporary relevance and its importance not just in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but in each novel to be discussed in this work. But, on the other hand, it should be emphasized that another modern thinker’s interpretation of an ancient myth shouldn’t be associated with this discussion. Freud’s psychoanalytical examination of the Oedipus myth is not relevant to this discussion of Oedipa’s role within *The Crying of Lot 49* and is important only peripherally to Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Though Oedipa’s relationships with men are problematic, one of the important aspects of her quest is to no longer define herself by her relation to men, thus eliminating the sexual/incestual aspects of Freud’s work. More important for her is the quest for truth. The Sphinx’s riddle plays a bigger role in interpreting Pynchon’s work than the actual content of the truth Oedipus discovers, i.e. that he has fulfilled the prophecy that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother. Like the Sphinx’s threat to kill anyone who answers her riddle incorrectly, Oedipa is forced to confront her mortality in her exploration of the Trystero system. But for Oedipa, survival does not rest in the unveiling of a single answer to Pierce’s riddle, but in the ability to pursue an answer. The multitude of possibilities allows Oedipa to escape

from the living death that is functioning within an oppressive system. For Pynchon, it is the motif of the journey that is important in Sophocles' plays, not the actual truth.

Besides using a mythical structure as an under-girding in their major works, Joyce and Pynchon also focus on the outsider's position within society. Stephen's rejection of his national identity makes him an outcast. He cannot relate to his family, his religious leaders, or his peers. Stephen's isolation is constant; it is his duty as an artist to remain stoic and separate from the rabble. But not all outsiders in Joyce's work are as high-minded as Stephen Dedalus. Some characters are not purposely outsiders; Leopold Bloom, for instance, is a Jew in a Catholic nation. His family line can also be traced back to mainland Europe, thus making him an outsider both in religion and in culture. Because of this, as is demonstrated by the Polythemus episode, Bloom is contrasted with Irish stereotypes, represented by the citizen and his nationalist rhetoric, and the obviously biased tone of the narrator of the passage.

--A wolf in sheep's clothing, says the citizen. That's what he is. Virag from Hungary! Ahasuerus I call him. Cursed by God (338).

By being called Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, Bloom is linked to the individuals found in Pynchon's works. The idea of the wanderer and the outsider are relatively synonymous; neither has roots within mainstream society. Dedalus and Bloom drift about Dublin⁷, while Profane, Stencil, Oedipa and Slothrop move about their respective geographies. Bloom, though persecuted, is an individual; the citizen and those characters Bloom encounters in that scene are merely caricatures of Irish personalities, trapped in a reverence for a nation that never really was, discussing the revival of Gaelic sports and the infiltration of "strangers" into their homeland.

Bloom is also an outsider because he champions love over the jingoism of the citizen and his compatriots.

--But it's no use, says [Bloom]. Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life.

--What? Says Alf.

--Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred (333).

According to Pynchon's view of the world in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the citizen and the other Irishmen are, by constantly contrasting themselves with other countries, unwittingly perpetuating the false differences among human beings that arise because of the imposition of artificial definitions on people. They fail to see that they are being used by those in control, the Elect, to keep them in power by fostering the ill-will that creates wars and revenue for those corporations and governments behind the curtain. Bloom recognizes that such a structure upon humanity is unnatural; it creates emotions that are detrimental to the individual but greatly beneficial to the Elect.

History in Joyce and Pynchon's works is written and is used as a tool of oppression by those in power, by the Elect. Susan Swartzlander writes, "...Joyce and Pynchon address the essential question of what it means to be human by examining life as a struggle between the powerful and the powerless, the elect and the preterite" ("The Tests of Reality" 138). Bloom, like those individuals in Pynchon's fiction who pursue a path of personal meaning in order to avoid being integrated into the system, refuses to participate in the war machine that is fueled by the hatred of the Preterite. Swartzlander again writes,

Joyce and Pynchon are both humanists, drawn to the preterite. They ask us to reject the conventional definitions of history that fail to consider the preterite, humanity. Our society has

not been improved by cause-and-effect history or by a parade of prominent historical figures or even by the progress of modern man. Human nature and the interaction of individuals are the fundamentals of history, in any time and place. In any age, love and the need to connect are ‘the simple intuitions that are the tests of reality (142-143).

Thus, in the face of hatred and dehumanization, Joyce and Pynchon focus on the saving remnant, those who are considered outsiders by mainstream society; those with no real power in the system, but who maintain a sense of humanity that has been stripped from most of the characters in their respective novels. With these few is where hope lies in the wake of two World Wars and an increasing reliance on technology in everyday life.

While Joyce in this context seemed more focused on how the outsider figures into history and society, how society defines itself against an outsider and vice versa, Eliot in *The Waste Land* creates a world very similar to the dehumanized characters and landscapes found in Pynchon’s novels. In “The Fire Sermon” section of the poem, Eliot writes, “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/ Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits/ Like a taxi throbbing waiting...”. This idea of the human as an engine, a mechanical device appears in V. as well:

In the eighteenth century it was often convenient to regard man as a clockwork automaton. In the nineteenth century, with Newtonian physics pretty well assimilated and a lot of work in thermodynamics going on, man was looked on more as a heat engine, about 40 per cent efficient. Now in the twentieth century, with nuclear and subatomic physics a going thing, man had become something which absorbs X-rays, gamma rays and neutrons (303).

Both of these passages view man as nothing more than an aggregate of his functions.

The unnamed female in *The Waste Land* is the epitome of passivity, she allows her lover to take advantage of her: “Exploring hands encounter no defence;/ His vanity requires no response,/ And makes a welcome of indifference”. Afterwards, “Hardly aware of her

departed lover.../ She smooths her hair with automatic hand,/ And puts a record on the gramophone” (250-256). She absorbs his lust, but exhibits no outward reaction to it; she registers no emotion to an act that is the height of passion. These characters engage in action with no inner-life, no attempt at justification, just automatic response.

Eliot is not only concerned with individuals, but with civilization as well. In his notes for *The Waste Land*, he writes that in Part V of the poem “three themes are employed: the journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous (see Miss Weston’s book) and *the present decay of eastern Europe*” (52, Italics mine). Entropic decay is an important theme of Pynchon’s novels; for humanity, it is the disintegration of humanity from the peak of civilized culture in Europe and America to a population controlled by corporations, subsumed by systems, and destroyed in war.

The title of *The Waste Land* works to describe the landscapes Pynchon chronicles in *V*. The term wasteland can be interpreted as a wasted land, barren and stripped of all life; or it can refer to a land of waste—a trash heap of modernity; the detritus of modern society strewn about accumulating into cityscapes. Eliot frequently lists the rubbish of humanity in his poetry; in *Preludes*, for example, he writes: “The burnt-out end of smoky days./ And now a gusty shower wraps/ The grimy scraps/ Of withered leaves about your feet/ And newspapers from vacant lots;/ The showers beat/ On broken blinds and chimney-pots,/ And at the corner of the street/ A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps”. The dual meaning of the wasteland, and Eliot’s preoccupation with the waste of human existence translate in *V*. to the tension between the desert and the city. The desert in *V*. is nothingness encroaching and swallowing up the inhabitable land, and the city is the human desire to fight off its invasion, to build up protections against it. What those

characters in the city do not realize though, is that the accumulation of objects to protect against nothingness, death, actually allows it to infiltrate into human life at an even greater rate.

We see in Eliot and Joyce a shift in the author's position, from the traditional informative God, to a weaver of fantasies, false leads, and fragmented realities, that is increased exponentially in Pynchon's works. He imposes a paranoid structure on the mythical framework of his novels which oftentimes frustrates rather than informs the reader. Joyce and Pynchon, in their respective generations, were writers without a specific form; they were not exactly in search of one, but were content to appropriate all literary forms into one hulking amalgamation of literature⁸.

Pynchon has moved beyond Eliot and Joyce in his first three novels. This is not to say that Pynchon has bettered them in terms of erudition or imagination, but such a progression is necessary because Pynchon inherited a world even more frightening than the modernists'; a world more accustomed to systematic slaughter; a world whose meaning was burned away as quickly as the fuel in a V-2 rocket. With Pynchon we have reached Brenschluss⁹—and it's a rapid descent from here. Joyce after August 9, 1945 is obsolete. Pynchon, though indebted, is left alone to chronicle the terror of the Rocket Age through novels whose plots are purposely cluttered and open-ended, so as to recreate the frustration of the manic search for cohesive meaning in a world where the individual is valued only if he contributes to the system. Pynchon removes the comfort of having the author work everything out for us just a bit below the surface, and forces us to confront either the Void, or an organization terrifying enough to have to hide behind an

edifice of apparent chaos. A choice he and many others had to confront in the post-World War II world.

Chapter 2: *V.*

“this is 20th Century nightmare”: The Manifestation of the Destructive Impulse in *V.*

The world started to run more and more afoul of the inanimate.

--Thomas Pynchon, *V.*

The principle of numbness comes into play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy.

--Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, is, among other things, a last human call for help at the heart of the twentieth century. In depicting the dehumanizing effects of war, big business, and, most importantly, technology, Pynchon expresses a growing fear that echoes the warnings of other prominent philosophers and social critics of the time about the progress of post-World War II America. Pynchon traces a destructive impulse¹⁰ in the novel that manifests itself in the proliferation of objects in modern life and humanity's identification with them, as well as the wasted landscapes (the desert and the city) that the characters inhabit. The consumer lifestyle in the novel comes to represent a subconscious desire to regress towards the inanimate. The embodiment of this regression is the eponymous *V.*, a mysterious female figure who through the course of the novel replaces more of her animate body with manufactured objects. But Pynchon constructs *V.* so that a dialectic is achieved; opposing *V.* and what she represents is Benny Profane, who, no matter the circumstances, can't seem to coexist with objects.

Pynchon's obsession with the Manichean composition of the universe manifests itself in the binary construction of his first three novels. This Other takes the form of a counterforce, a contradiction of the dominant themes or characters in his novels. In the case of *V.*, Benny Profane can be contrasted with a number of characters, including

Stencil, the quester, and his obsessive fantasies of plots and conspiracies¹¹, but, most importantly, V. and the disintegration of her humanity through her transformation into an object. V. represents the ultimate end for all those characters in the novel who develop a relationship with the objects they surround themselves with. Profane undermines the tyranny of objects by simply being a schlemiel, a klutz, a drifter with no real attachments.

Just as V. and the better part of the novel's population, as well as Pynchon's novels, can be better understood when read in light of McLuhan's theories, Pynchon's own later essay (published in 1984), entitled "Is it OK to be Luddite?", gives a better understanding of Pynchon's intentions in creating a character like Profane. His existence is vital, despite all of his supposed "character flaws"¹², because it maintains the tension that fosters change within a democratized society. Without Profane it would be nullified; Pynchon's America would become Hugh Goldophin's Vheissu.

Whereas V. is the human embodiment of the destructive impulse, Vheissu is the destructive impulse exacted upon the environments that humans inhabit¹³. It takes on a sort of Edenic grandeur for V., a reward for the fulfillment of her destructive impulse. Only Hugh Goldophin, an aging British spy and explorer, glimpses its chthonic existence beneath the Antarctic. He says of it, "Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation" (217). This dream of annihilation is the malady afflicting humanity in the twentieth century, and is linked to the growing dominance of objects in every person's life.

McLuhan too sees the advancement of technology in pathological terms. In explaining the adoption of the term "autoamputation" (that is self-amputation) from medical researchers, McLuhan writes: "...they have given us a theory of disease

(discomfort) that goes far to explain why man is impelled to extend various parts of his body by a kind of autoamputation” (42). The amputation of the self through identification with technology creates the numbing effect that separates man from his conscious self; the progression of mankind, then, due to the progression of technology, effectively fulfills the destructive impulse. In other words, it seems in *V.* that humanity as a whole is advancing technologically so as to be able to destroy itself with much more ease and efficiency.

The presence, though brief, of the Yoyodyne Corporation demonstrates the growing demand for more creative and more efficient means of destroying other human beings. Beginning as a tiny toy manufacturer, Yoyodyne’s owner, Bloody Chiclitz (his sobriquet need not be emphasized too much for the reader to see the real commerce he deals in; hint: it’s on his hands), saw a lucrative opportunity by securing government contracts designing gyros for weapons systems. The origin of the name, and the ease and success with which Chiclitz shifts industries suggests a chilling relationship between his former and latter fields: yo-yo of course referring to the childlike simplicity of the mechanical toy; and Dyne, as one of Chiclitz’s weapons engineers explains to him, “is a unit of force.”¹⁴ Thus, the synthesis between the ludic and the destructive suggests a society where death dealing is purely entertainment, a society ultimately obsessed with destroying itself.

This destructive impulse manifests itself in the environments in which the novel takes place¹⁵: the desert/Antarctic/Vheissu, and the city. In an early episode of the novel, the imposition of the inanimate upon even the harshest of environments— the Sahara desert— in the image of trains crisscrossing the expanse, parallels the desert’s ceaseless

encroachment upon those societies that live on its ever expanding boundaries. An unnamed Egyptian, while staring at the Sahara and thinking of the Koran, contemplates the desert's symbolic position within the modern human consciousness: "What a joke if all that holy book were twenty three years of listening to the desert. A desert which has no voice. If the Koran were nothing, then Islam was nothing. Then Allah was a story, and his Paradise wishful thinking" (82). In a rather simple chain of reasoning, this man deconstructs humanity, and the artifice of its belief systems, and attributes it to merely being seduced by the sirens' call to nothingness. The desert is the Great Big Nothing, so to is Antarctica; people do not look out upon these landscapes and see land to develop, they see something that terrifies them, something inhuman that seeks to swallow and bury them, which finds expression in the presence of Vheissu in the novel. They are terrifying, and yet certain men spend lifetimes exploring them and, in turn, exploring their magnetic attraction to such wastelands. That destructive impulse, that desire to be nothing, could be seen then as a valid reason for such an attraction.

If the desert is an abstract symbol of humanity's evolution towards nothing, then New York City is the trash heap of modernity; it is a place where objects have been stacked on top of each other to such a degree that they dwarf an already sprawling human population¹⁶. Norman O. Brown suggests that this accumulation of objects is a result of the fear of death embodied by the nothingness of the desert, a desire to build up a buffer against it: "Pyramids and skyscrapers—monuments more lasting than bronze—suggest how much of the world's 'economic' activity is also a flight from death" (*Life Against Death* 100)¹⁷. The fear of death and the destructive impulse are closely aligned. The destructive impulse, as V. will demonstrate, is a desire to ward off death by becoming

inanimate. This destruction is innocuous enough though: it is simply a consequence of everyday living in the modern world, of being surrounded by objects; or, using McLuhan's terms, it is the daily embrace of technology in every aspect of one's life. In doing so, it causes the individual to identify with an object, an image of himself, which cuts him off from humanity.

Effectively illustrating this process in *V.* is Fergus Mixolydian, self-proclaimed "laziest living being in Nueva York", who appears only once, and it seems, from Pynchon's language, that he only appears as a means of demonstrating Pynchon's theme of dehumanization—he is, pretty much, Pynchon's Narcissus. Much like Melville's Bartelby, he becomes inanimate through willful paralysis, by refusing to participate in any sort of human activity, even those that are required for survival; he becomes a closed circuit. Freud's death-instinct—whereby the individual wishes to return to the stasis of non-living—comes in to play here. But in Mixolydian, Pynchon presents the technological twist that anticipates McLuhan: the fulfillment of the death instinct (or destructive impulse) through identification with an object.

His other amusement was watching the TV. He'd devised an ingenious sleep-switch, receiving its signal from two electrodes placed on the inner skin of his forearm. When Fergus dropped below a certain level of awareness, the skin resistance increased over a preset value to operate the switch. Fergus thus became an extension of the TV set (52).

By surrounding themselves with so many things, the characters living in New York inevitably begin to identify with them, thus subconsciously beginning the process of dehumanization.

Tony Tanner suggests¹⁸ that because of this tyranny of objects, to say that characters inhabit their environments would be erroneous. Rather, because these

characters identify with the objects, the environment inhabits them; they blend in as just another object. Tanner writes that because of this the characters, Fergus being an excellent example, become “figures illustrating a process” (“V. and V-2” 21). The process, in this case, being the gradual destruction of humanity. This identification manifests itself in the perverse relationships some characters develop with their most cherished objects. One character, Rachel Owlglass, treats her car, an MG, as if it were her lover¹⁹. Benny Profane comes upon Rachel one night washing her car: “‘You beautiful stud,’ he heard her say, ‘I love to touch you.’ Wha, he thought. ‘Do you know what I feel when we’re out on the road? Alone, just us?’ She was running the sponge caressingly over its front bumper” (22). Profane stumbles upon what amounts to a sex scene between Rachel and her MG; when she climbs into the back seat and begins fondling the gear shift, he leaves the scene feeling very uncomfortable. Such fetishizing of objects is rampant throughout the novel, Rachel’s being the first encountered and most explicitly romantic though²⁰. It should be noted that, excluding this early scene, Rachel turns out to be a relatively normal person, and, more importantly, a stabilizing figure in Profane’s life²¹. This demonstrates just how deeply perverted humanity has become, so that even those who are well-adjusted, are considered normal, have accepted, with no objections, this utter dependence upon things to the degree that they develop human relationships with them.

Another character begins his apologia, not by laying bare his soul, but by describing the room and the objects within it that facilitated such an outpouring. He reminds the reader that many apparently pure human emotions, such as love and religious faith, are wholly predicated upon the presence of certain objects. He says, “Because, as

the physical being-there of a bed or horizontal plane determines what we call love; as a high place must exist before God's word can come to a flock and any sort of religion begin; so must there be a room, sealed against the present, before we can make any attempt to deal with the past" (325). Thus, this passage undermines the notion that one's emotions come from within or even are one's own. These objects facilitate emotions, in a way; they become, according to McLuhan, extensions of the human being, and are thus completely integrated with the emotion, the human experiencing it, and the scene that this creates.

Beyond just depending on objects to define humanity though, there is a more disturbing trend that occurs among some of the characters in the novel²²: they seek to become objects themselves, thus fulfilling the destructive impulse²³. McLuhan views this phenomenon as more physiological than psychological. He suggests that in this case the destructive impulse is incidental; it is, rather, a by-product, a psychological rationalization for a physiological phenomena. The person's central nervous system is, instead, seeking refuge from the stresses of a hyper-modern world. He writes, "The function of the body, as a group of sustaining and protective organs for the central nervous system, is to act as buffers against sudden variations of stimulus in the physical and social environment" (43). Thus, an object becomes an extension of the self and becomes another buffer against the environment.

The physiological necessity that these inanimate buffers protect the raw nerves of humanity is present in the novel's preoccupation with plastic surgery. Another young female character seeks out plastic surgery because she fears her nose is too Jewish. In doing so, she erases her ethnicity— a unique trait among humans (one character asks,

“Why does she want to get that changed. With the nose she is a human being” (45.)—and replaces it with a model nose—a nose designed to represent a standard of normalcy, so as to be completely unremarkable: “So Esther’s nose. Identical with an ideal of nasal beauty established by movies, advertisements, magazine illustrations. Cultural harmony, Schoenmaker called it” (104). Not to mention, that in going into surgery she is anesthetized, leaving her for a short period in a vegetable-like state. Esther describes the surgery afterwards:

“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 loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: only Being...” (107, Ellipses Pynchon’s).

A note of perversion is present again, because, as Esther enters the doctor’s office, she admits to feeling sexually aroused, and Pynchon makes sure in the course of describing the procedure that the sexual metaphors (the insertion of a needle, for instance: “Stick it in...pull it out...stick it in...ooh that was good...pull it out...”) are kept close to the surface. (Ibid).

Schoenmaker, the plastic surgeon who performs the rhinoplasty, reminisces beforehand about a colleague of his who “favored allografts: the introduction of inert substances into the living face.” It just so happens that one of the patients who received an allograft was Evan Goldophin, the son of the aforementioned Hugh. Schoenmaker describes the outcome of Goldophin’s facial reconstruction: “Thus Goldophin received a nose bridge of ivory, a cheekbone of silver and a paraffin and celluloid chin” (100). The young Goldophin’s plastic surgery, because of an airplane crash, was out of necessity really. But it shows the intrusion of the inanimate into the animate as a consequence of

humanity's obsession with technology. The integration of the inanimate into the animate body is what McLuhan refers to as "a desperate and suicidal amputation", because the body proper is no longer able to fend off the shock of living in a hyper-modern world, and is creating a plastic buffer around it, which, consequently, suffocates its humanity, as it did to Narcissus.

This creates a rather strange effect in the novel: the individual embraces the inanimate in order to escape from humanity's obsession with the progression of society through the development of more and better technology. Though such identification is unconscious, it is not passive. The characters are not opting out of humanity's mad-cap dash towards its own destruction; they are actively perpetuating it by continuing to identify with objects, which are more than likely manufactured as a result of the technology they are trying to protect themselves from, as a coping mechanism, as a way to be comforted. V. is different though: it seems she consciously decides to become inanimate. Where the prior examples were necessitated by physiological needs, V. illustrates this biological coping mechanism—something beyond the mind's control—in the terms of a conscious choice to devolve.

V. herself appears under numerous monikers—Victoria Wren, Veronica Manganese²⁴, Vera Meroving, among others—and is the object of an obsessive search by Herbert Stencil. Pynchon interpolates her narrative, which is actually Stencil's interpretation of her life through evidence he has collected, among the narratives of Stencil and Profane, creating a chronological jumble. Her true identity is a mystery; she seems to appear only at sites of great political or social unrest. A patron saint of chaos, she seems to be. Stencil first encounters the myth of V. while reading his dead father's

papers; the passage, dated 1899, reads: “There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report” (49). After reading this passage, the listless young Stencil decides to make it his goal to track her down, to reveal her true identity. Though Stencil, living in the 1950’s in New York along with the Whole Sick Crew, has evidence that V. perished on the island of Malta during World War II, he continues, in a fit of megalomania, to pursue clues about her possible existence. Even so, her presence is felt throughout each period of history that Pynchon dwells on, whether she is dead or not by that point.

Her presence is often asserted by inanimate objects. At one point Profane, who is unaware of V. for most of the novel, is walking down a city block and notices that the streetlights recede into the distance in the shape of the letter V. Stencil is said to pursue V. like a libertine pursues not a woman, mind you, but a pair of spread thighs, which are, through fetishization, turned into objects. The V shape recurs throughout the novel to characters aware of V. or oblivious to her alike, so that her corporeal existence comes to be besides the point. What becomes important, and would save poor Stencil a lot of searching, is that she has diffused herself into an object, a letter; she has become a part of all the everyday things that surround the characters in the novel, no matter what the historical period. In a sense, she has become immortal by giving up her conscious existence, by destroying her humanity.

This process is readily apparent when the reader encounters her on the island of Malta, disguised as a priest. She is known as the Bad Priest, and espouses to the children of the island the Manichean theology that recurs throughout Pynchon’s works (see the

Scurvhamites in *The Crying of Lot 49*). This idea of a binary power running the universe, absolute good (God) and absolute nothing (Death) as two sides of the same coin, is congruent with V.'s gradual disintegration, and also becomes appealing to an entire population under siege by the Germans. To become nothing, to embrace the Void, is to not have to fear, to not have to love and be rejected, to not even have to wonder what the next day will bring; it is to become, like the prevalent metaphor of the chapter, a rock—Malta—senseless, unfeeling, eternal. The narrator of this chapter recounts her (dressed as a him) preaching to the children:

He taught no consistent philosophy that anyone could piece together from the fragments borne back to us by the children. The girls he advised to become nuns, avoid the sensual extremes—pleasure of intercourse, pain of childbirth. The boys he told to find strength in—and be like—the rock of their island. He returned, curiously like the Generation of '37, often to the rock: preaching that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless (366).

Though she is viewed as sinister by many of the elders, V. provides an alternative to death; she saves people from having to wonder in their bomb shelters how good God can be when coming out of his sky is death without consideration for the individual. She proposes immortality through inanimateness. The rival priest in the town, Father Avalanche, voices the same thought, though hesitantly: “So that to be like God we must allow to be eroded the soul in ourselves. Seek mineral symmetry, for here is eternal life: the immortality of rock. Plausible. But apostasy” (Ibid). The only thing getting in the way of V.'s philosophy being universally accepted is that it is heretical. A human system deems that it is wrong, though it has a natural appeal to a citizenry under siege. She dons a religious disguise in order to espouse a doctrine wholly at odds with Christianity.

What the people of Malta do not realize is that beneath her soutane, V. has been transforming herself into an inanimate object not unlike the allografts mentioned earlier. When she is killed by a bombing raid, the townspeople discover her secret. The children, surprised that she is a woman, begin to scavenge her body for clothes and valuables. In the process they realize: “She comes apart” (369). They remove her wig, her artificial foot, her glass eye; the narrator of the chapter watches passively, thinking: “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” (370). Through their startling discovery, the townspeople find out that V., the Bad Priest, certainly practiced what she preached; she was on her way to becoming the nothing that she spoke of so passionately. It is not only in her death, but ultimately in her disassembly that she achieves her end. The children take pieces of her with them, thus symbolizing her presence being spread about the novel in little pieces of information, seemingly random configurations of shapes, or recollections partially muted by time.

V.’s ubiquity as the embodiment of the inanimate notwithstanding, it is her temporal presence during periods of turmoil that give her the greatest symbolic presence. McLuhan links the process of self-amputation to traumatic events (See page 6); while he uses shocks particular to individuals (falling down), he is ultimately suggesting that it is the state of the modern world that is causing such physical and psychic traumas. V.’s close link, then, to scenes of international strife makes her process of dehumanization take on a dual meaning. As a human being, this process is necessary as a defense against

a hyper modern world. But as a “figure illustrating a process” she is a metonym for that self-same world. Ultimately, she amputates her self to such a degree that it supersedes just being a physiological defense mechanism and becomes McLuhan’s Narcissus, the embodiment of the unnatural separation from humanity.

Whether it’s rioting in the streets of Florence or the bombing of Malta, V. acts as a witness, and participant oftentimes, to a world caught in the process of entropic decay. That she is first present at a small-scale assassination, then a riot, and finally the near destruction of an entire island suggests that just such a process is at work. Her decay is in direct proportion to the world’s. Stencil ruminates over this correlation:

If she were Victoria Wren, even Stencil couldn’t remain all unstirred by the ironic failure her life was moving toward, too rapidly by that prewar August ever to be reversed. The Florentine spring, the young entrepreneuse with all spring’s hope in her vertu, with her girl’s faith that Fortune...could be brought under control; that Victoria was being gradually replaced by V.; something entirely different for which the young century had as yet no name (443).

Stencil, because of his obsession with V. the person, incorrectly views her degradation as a tragedy, as her personal loss of innocence. He fails to see that she is perfectly in sync with the rhythm of the world; the real tragedy is his and the other characters’ failure to recognize what her decay tells them of the world’s. V.’s recognition of the misery of the world is made explicit by her desire to see Vheissu, a land where, beneath a beautiful, multi-colored surface, there is literally Nothing. In contrast to the terror in which Hugh Goldophin experienced his discovery, V. is enthralled by such a place: “How pleasant to watch Nothing” (528). In this sense then, Tanner’s words ring true. V. is not a character, she is a figure illustrating a process; the process being the destruction of the humanity, its inevitable reduction to Nothing.

Despite the perversity of such relationships, those between humans and objects, on the surface, are relatively harmonious; that is, most of the characters are oblivious to the sinister implications of their dependence and subsequent identification with the inanimate world²⁵. Pynchon though seems super-attuned to the sense of growing fear of a totally industrialized world. In 1984, Pynchon published an essay in the *New York Times Review of Books* entitled “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” Though the historical group may be obscure, the question Pynchon asks is an important one. He writes, “Historically, Luddites flourished in Britain from about 1811 to 1816” (40). Though seemingly just making a statement of fact, Pynchon is subtly pointing out that, yes, historically the Luddites officially existed for a few short years, but the semi-absurd myth of a single man’s inability to deal with an increasingly mechanized world carries over, with even more weight, arguably, to the modern world of Pynchon’s fiction.

Pynchon wrote this essay in response to the many contemporary thinkers who had attached a pejorative meaning to the term Luddite; to be called a Luddite meant that one was a militant radical, steadfastly opposed to progress. For Pynchon, that Luddites came to be seen as counterrevolutionaries was incidental, a product of revisionist history. This is because the Industrial Revolution was only termed a revolution in hindsight, decades after the fact; thus, how can one be a counterrevolutionary when there is no revolution? Pynchon views the Luddites as something else entirely, something with an element of humor to it, not so much an organized movement as a few humans reacting naturally to retain the last vestiges of their occupations, and consequently, their humanity. The mythical Ned Ludd, and those who later assumed his name and adopted his image, come across more as folk heroes than militants.

Pynchon gives a brief history of the Luddites, culled from the Oxford English Dictionary:

In 1779, in a village somewhere in Leicestershire, one Ned Lud broke into a house and “in a fit of insane rage” destroyed two machines used for knitting hosiery. Word got around. Soon, whenever a stocking-frame was found sabotaged—this had been going on, see the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, since about 1710—folks would respond with the catch phrase ‘Lud must have been here.’ By the time his name was taken up by the frame-breakers of 1812, historical Ned Lud was well absorbed into the more or less sarcastic nickname “King (or Captain) Ludd,” and was now all mystery, resonance and dark fun: a more-than-human presence, out in the night, roaming the hosiery districts of England, possessed by a single comic shtick—every time he spots a stocking-frame he goes crazy and proceeds to trash it (40).

Pynchon once again goes out of his way to make a distinction between the historical and the mythological in regards to the Luddites. In this case, or in the case of any sort of folk hero, or better yet, counterforce, Pynchon emphasizes that, more often than not, it is the spirit of the tale that prevails. Historical facts are often malleable, or one-sided; but the image of Ned Lud, the accidental hero, spans centuries, and reasserts itself in the looming shadow of the tidal wave of technology in *V*. That if Ned Lud existed at all—most likely he did not—he was borderline mentally handicapped—the town fool—is unimportant; it is the figure he cuts in Pynchon’s imagining of him that under-girds, but is often in dialogue with, Benny Profane’s character in *V*.

In a later passage in the essay, Pynchon lays out the complex relationship between humanity and machines (or objects in general) that is also at work in *V*.:

Public feeling about the machines could never have been simple unreasoning horror, but likely something more complex: the love/hate that grows up between humans and machinery...not to mention serious resentment toward at least two multiplications of effect that were seen as unfair and threatening. One was the concentration of capital that each machine represented, and the

other was the ability of each machine to put a certain number of humans out of work—to be “worth” that many human souls (40).

Though love for objects certainly seems to dominate over hatred of them in *V.*, it does not necessarily eliminate the dynamic. Instead, it suggests, for lack of a better term, the brainwashing of the characters within the novel. Technology’s presence has become so normalized, so omnipresent, that the natural fear, and the natural objections that Pynchon raises have been repressed to such a degree that reliance on objects now seems natural, which creates the perverse relationships mentioned earlier. So that now, the Ned Lud-type hero does not express the fear of the general populace, as Pynchon suggests Lud did in the early days of industrialization, but the voice of the marginalized, the counterforce; it is the expression of the animal unconscious, the last bastion of humanity. Pynchon goes on to express the need for a Lud-type hero, whether modern humanity appreciates it or not:

What gave King Ludd his special bad charisma, took him from local hero to nationwide public enemy, was that he went up against these amplified, multiplied, more than human opponents and prevailed. When times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful, don’t we, in seeking some equalizer, turn, if only in imagination, in wish, to the Badass—the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero—who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us? (40)

That wish for a hero is the subterranean drive of *V.*, because, though Profane can be closely associated with Lud, he certainly is no hero—there are no heroes in Pynchon’s novels. But Profane’s passive revolt against mechanization warrants a comparison to the Luddite movement of early nineteenth century in England.

Unable to reconcile his humanity with the increasing innateness of his surroundings, Profane is Pynchon’s unwitting Luddite; in fact, he is positive that things

are in direct conflict with him. Profane never actively destroys things; it is only accidental, as if there is a natural opposition within his bones towards the inanimate:

He made his way to the washroom of Our Home, tripping over two empty mattresses on route. Cut himself shaving, had trouble extracting the blade and gashed a finger. He took a shower to get rid of the blood. The handles wouldn't turn. When he finally found a shower that worked, the water came out hot and cold in random patterns. He danced around, yowling and shivering, slipped on a bar of soap and nearly broke his neck. Drying off, he ripped a frayed towel in half, rendering it useless. He put on his skivvy shirt backwards, took ten minutes getting his fly zipped and another fifteen repairing a shoelace which had broken as he was tying it. All the rest of his morning songs were silent cuss words. It wasn't that he was tired or even notably uncoordinated. Only something that, being a schlemihl, he'd known for years: inanimate objects and he could not live in peace (31).

Profane's buffoonery allows Pynchon to actively depict a world where, beneath the surface image of a society being bettered by the proliferation of things, those same things are in open battle with humanity. Profane's unique insight allows the reader to see the absurdity of developing a dependent relationship with an object. He is utterly unable to grasp such a concept. Upon seeing a Navy buddy, as if in a religious trance, sitting on a motorcycle in an alley on a bitter cold night, Profane starts to make an uneasy connection: "The enigma or sinister vision of Pig and that Harley-Davidson alone in an alley at three in the morning reminded Profane too suddenly of Rachel..." (15). He then reflects on how he met Rachel: she nearly runs him over with her MG. The narrator alludes to the fact that this was not the first time something like this has happened: "He reflected that here was another inanimate object that had nearly killed him. He was not sure whether he meant Rachel or the car" (17). After witnessing the strange relationship between a coworker and his gun, Profane senses he is missing out on something:

Love for an object, this was new to him. When he found out not long after this that the same thing was with Rachel and her MG, he had his first intelligence that something had been going on under the rose, maybe for longer and with more people than he would care to think about.

All this adds up to a man woefully unprepared to survive in modern society. This sense of unease and his need to move around constantly (yo-yoing, he calls it), keeps Profane pure, in a sense. Ironically, it is his ineptness and complete lack of sophistication that makes him the most clear-headed and trustworthy of all the characters encountered.²⁶

Profane is no prophet²⁷; this much is clear. In any novel written before the mechanized age he would be nothing more than a klutz, a loveable fool. It is only in the postmodern novel that he could be looked upon as an inadvertent hero, fighting against the invasion of things into the human consciousness.

Just as many of the characters in *V.* unconsciously identify with objects, Profane is unconsciously brought into conflict with them. Profane is the suppressed end, hate, of the love/hate dynamic that arose amongst workers during the early stages of industrialization. He is, in a sense, a throwback to a time when people were naturally wary of objects, especially machinery. It was perceived as a threat, and that is certainly how Profane comes to view the inanimate. Profane carries the spirit of Lud inside of him, but, one gets the feeling that for Pynchon it is already too late, that the snowball of the Industrial Revolution has become an apocalyptic avalanche. The advent of the nuclear age has destroyed the idea of a single hero saving the world. The Luddites can burn as many factories as they want, Profane can wage his war one object at a time, but nothing can begin to compete with the Yoyodynes, the Boeings, the whole military industrial complex that relies on the eternal threat of nuclear war for their business. Profane is a Luddite, but he will never be the hero that Pynchon wants everyone to wish

for, because he (Pynchon) is making a point: it's too late; the Luddite spirit, in the modern age, is embodied by a slob, a man as bad at human relationships as he is with objects. He is a man unable to identify with anything—this is Pynchon's way of showing the impotency of the heroic spirit in the face of mindless destruction.

Pynchon, in his essay, links this distancing between humans and their common humanity, through the wedging of objects between them, to “the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz” (41). Profane, at one point in *V.*, takes a job as a night security guard at a lab (a subsidiary of Yoyodyne) that is researching the effects of fall-out on human beings. The lab houses a life-like mannequin called SHROUD: “synthetic human, radiation output determined” (302). Profane is finally face to face with the inanimate incarnate: human in appearance, designed to be that way, but nothing more than materials gathered together. SHROUD is described as being “Frankenstein's monster like”, and it “scared the hell out of Profane the first time he saw it” (304). Over time Profane becomes intrigued and holds searching conversations with it, which reveal the path humanity has taken towards the creation of such an object. In the course of the conversation, Profane questions SHROUD's inanimateness, and more importantly, it forces Profane to question the growing inhumanity of humanity:

Me and SHOCK [another research mannequin] are what you and everybody will be someday.

(The skull seemed to be grinning at Profane.)

“There are other ways besides fallout and road accidents.”

But those are most likely. If somebody else doesn't do it to you, you'll do it to yourselves.

“You don't even have a soul. How can you talk.”

Since when did you have one? (304)

This conversation suggests that much of the blame for humanity's degeneration rests on the expansion of science—Pynchon in his essay calls it the “demystification” of humanity due to the Age of Reason—into everyday life. Not only nuclear bombs, but the quick and easy manufacturing of cars to fill the newly built highways, that were created, in the event of a nuclear attack, for the quick and easy mobilization of forces, as well as for the evacuation of cities, are the greatest threats to humanity. The conversation culminates in what seems to be the albatross hanging over most of Pynchon's early novels (especially *Gravity's Rainbow*), the Holocaust; one of the two great signifiers of humanity's “dream of annihilation” (the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima being the other):

Now remember, right after the war, the Nuremberg war trials? Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car bodies. Schlemihl: It's already started.

“Hitler did that. He was crazy.”

Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele. Fifteen years ago. Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started? (316)

Profane has no answers for SHROUD; the mannequin turns out to be wiser than the closest thing *V.* has to a hero. This once again reasserts the impotency of a counterforce at this point in the post-Auschwitz nuclear age. Such opposition is foolish, but it is in this folly, this inability to comprehend humanity's growing inhumanity that Profane maintains his humanity. His inability to understand SHROUD's logic is really a blessing; he may be no hero, but it is a very reassuring sign—though ever so slightly in the wake of the novel's mechanized onslaught—that at least one character fails to identify with an object.

Pynchon creates a scary world in *V.* Hope is non-existent; characters lose themselves in fantasy (Stencil), or just plain refuse to make concrete connections with people and places (Profane), because the alternative is to become conscious of what they are building artifices against. Stencil and Profane are too weak, too lost already for either man to face the fact that they are actively hiding from meaninglessness, from the systematic destruction of humanity through war, car accidents, plastic surgery, and the myriad of other ways that humans have created in order to kill themselves off. To undermine these things is to be rendered ineffectual, a fool, unable to adjust to society, and thus forced to live a lonely existence yo-yoing through it. V. is the only character to truly grasp the implications of humanity's obsession with objects, but in doing so becomes an object herself, a symbol attached to a meaning, but lacking any real meaning itself. In one chapter of the novel, a character is obsessed with decoding atmospheric signals. The message he decodes reads, "The world is all that is the case." That Wittgenstein's famous opening to his *Tractatus* is ultimately the voice of the universe is possibly the most dour implication in *V.* The world is what can be observed, what is seen: what is seen in *V.* is terrifying for the most part. Nothing, then, can be read into the events and characters, no subversive sub-texts, no hope for alternatives—an empirical nightmare. This puts objects and humans on the same level, in a way. No inner-life is taken into account, because it is unobservable. Thus, this renders humans no different than SHROUD or SHOCK. In light of this, Pynchon turns away from the odious world populated with men like Profane who endlessly drift and are wholly incompatible with not only society, but normal interaction with humanity, and men like Stencil who chase fantasies in order to avoid the truth (V. is dead)—partial Oedipus's-- to focus on

Oedipa's search for truth, and in it, the retention of her humanity in his next novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. Hope is present to a certain degree, because Pynchon shrinks his scope, attempts to shut-out the deteriorating world in an effort, maybe, to remind himself that humans still exist.

Chapter 3: *The Crying of Lot 49*

Narcissus or Oedipus: The Duality of Creation in Pynchon's Second Novel

“The System: ...that the computer program that alarms the banker who alerts the ambassador who dines with the general who summons the president who intimidates the minister who threatens the director general who humiliates the manager who yells at the boss who insults the employee who scorns the worker who mistreats his wife who beats the child who kicks the dog.”

--Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War*

Pynchon introduces in *V.* an important tension that will become ubiquitous in the *The Crying of Lot 49*: the tension between monolithic power and the counterforce that it generates in the form of protest. The Whole Sick Crew of *V.* becomes the Trystero and the sundry malcontents and social outcasts assumed under its auspices. Pynchon exaggerates the absurd elements of the counterforce through the Whole Sick Crew (one character, Slab, practices what he terms Catatonic Expressionism and produces only paintings of Cheese Danishes); most importantly, the sense of their innocuousness, of their paralysis is stressed; their inability to effect change in society—as well as the elitist qualifications for admission into their group. Pynchon openly criticizes the Whole Sick Crew in one scathing passage near the middle of *V.*:

But they produced nothing but talk and at that not very good talk. A few like Slab actually did what they professed; turned out a tangible product. But again, what? Cheese Danishes. Or this technique for the sake of technique—Catatonic Expressionism. Or parodies on what someone else had already done.

So much for Art. What of Thought? The Crew had developed a kind of shorthand whereby they could set forth any visions that might come their way. Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how others reacted they were In or Out. The number of blocks, however, was finite (317).

Such outright scorn is artfully repressed in *The Crying of Lot 49* to a better, more measured effect; but in this passage and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's disenchantment with the counterforce comes across clearly and further adds to the futility

of individual protest in a world overrun by a mechanized, materialistic society, controlled by disembodied powers.

The Narcissus myth's influence upon modern society, as interpreted by McLuhan²⁸, is continued in *The Crying of Lot 49* from *V.*; the disembodied, monolithic power that society imposes upon the individual, represented by *V.*, is reborn as the real-estate mogul Pierce Inverarity, the Thurn and Taxis postal empire and the military industrial complex in the form, once again, of the Yoyodyne Corporation. Opposing them, as the counterforce, are not only groups like the Whole Sick Crew, but also individuals, similar to Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil²⁹, who attempt to subvert the dominant system. But they are not strong enough to oppose it individually, and are thus subsumed—made anonymous—into a system, the Trystero, that does nothing more than systematize and dehumanize protest, and thus mimic the structure of the controlling forces in American society³⁰.

But, unlike *V.*, the rather elemental binary composition, power versus the counterforce, is further complicated in *The Crying of Lot 49* by the introduction of the Oedipus character, Oedipa Maas, whose search for truth and personal meaning helps to maintain and affirm her humanity, her individuality, in the face of Pierce Inverarity's pernicious creation. She is not subsumed by the system into anonymity, rather she uses her role as executrix of Pierce's estate as an opportunity to explore and affirm her individuality within an oppressive system. Pynchon's creative presence is more active and influential than in *V.* He demonstrates that the artist is the only individual who can actually separate himself from the system through his art. The mythic structure of his novel and the number of puns and bad jokes makes, in contrast to Pierce's creation, his

novel playful rather than potentially harmful and demonstrates the tension between benevolent and destructive creation within the novel.

Pierce Inverarity's corporeal absence from the novel is made up for by the pervasive influence of his estate and its innumerable properties and business investments. In this way, he is similar to V: his estate functions as an extension of his body. Thus, though he is not present in body, Pierce becomes immortal through his dissolution into the inanimate. In doing so, he projects an image of himself upon the world he creates for Oedipa by assigning to her the job of executing his will.

The symbolism of Oedipa's recollection of Pierce placing a bust of Jay Gould above the bed they shared is significant in linking Pierce's position within *The Crying of Lot 49* to both V. and Narcissus. Oedipa recalls:

...a white washed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she'd always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them. Was that how he'd died, she wondered, among dreams, crushed by the only ikon in the house? (1).

The ikon of Gould is quite appropriate sitting above Inverarity's bed: Gould's money transformed California into the land of opportunity within the land of opportunity, so to speak; his investments in the railroad made economically viable the westward expansion that created the Southern California of Pierce and Oedipa's time. Thus, in a way, Southern California is an extension of Gould, his existence lives on because of his investments, his railroad tracks, and the culture that arose out of them. That the bust hovers above Pierce, infiltrates his dreams, suggests the power Gould retains to influence another's world; the power to transcend death through capitalist investments. Thus, a historical precedent is arranged by Pynchon so that Pierce's transcendence of death through an extension of himself, his capital, is further concretized.

The bust of Gould, the object, is also the Narcissistic reflection—the image, the extension—of Inverarity. If Pynchon had instead chosen to have a portrait of Gould above Inverarity, the effect would have been nullified—because a portrait, though it is an object, in that it is inanimate, is more an image than anything else. In making the image of Gould an object as well, an ikon, Pynchon reinforces the dehumanizing aspects of identifying with objects from *V*. Pynchon effectively presages Pierce’s influence on Oedipa throughout the novel by not introducing Gould the man, but Gould the object/image, the extension of Inverarity. In this way, Inverarity, like *V*. as well, is not so much a character, but a disembodied force.

It is this disembodied presence that acts as the prime-mover of Oedipa at the beginning, before she takes on the responsibility herself. Pierce, by naming Oedipa executor of his estate, which “had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary” (1), impels her to travel over much of Southern California. Pierce’s power can be said to create Oedipa’s journey; but his act of creation is a pernicious one, rooted wholly in the capitalist system of America. Pierce uses different institutions of society to facilitate Oedipa’s sorting of his estate: she must untangle the minutiae of the legal system, including lawyers, appraisers and estate sales, that are more akin to roadblocks to her progress than gateways.

Oedipa feels oppressed by Pierce’s creation for her: “She felt exposed, finessed, put down. She had never executed a will in her life, didn’t know where to begin, didn’t know how to tell the law firm in L.A. that she didn’t know where to begin” (3). Literally, Oedipa is executing Pierce’s *will*, his desire to enmesh her within his system. Though she does indeed embark on a journey of self-discovery, she never actually reaches the

revelation that should be the logical conclusion to such a journey, that arranges every piece of information she's gathered into "pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (64). Pierce makes it so that the only way for Oedipa to achieve any sort of personal meaning is through the legal system which makes such a revelation nearly impossible: "If only so much didn't stand in her way: her deep ignorance of law, of investment, of real estate, ultimately of the dead man himself. The bond the probate court had had her post was perhaps their evaluation in dollars of how much did stand in her way" (64).

The pernicious aspect of Inverarity's creation is not necessarily the roadblocks he puts in Oedipa's way towards coming to some sort of conclusion about Pierce, herself, or even American society; it's the possibility that once Oedipa circumvents them, there will be nothing waiting for her at the end. A character poses this possibility to Oedipa: "Has it occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?" (138). She responds in the negative, "No...that's ridiculous", but the possibility forces her to examine every piece of information she'd acquired about the Trystero: "Every access route to the Tristero could be traced back to the Inverarity estate". She then asks

Meaning what? That Bortz, along with Metzger, Cohen, Driblette, Koteks, the tattooed sailor in San Francisco, the W.A.S.T.E. carriers she'd seen—that all of them were Pierce Inverarity's men? *Bought?* Or loyal, for free, for fun, to some grandiose practical joke he'd cooked up, all for her embarrassment, or terrorizing, or moral improvement? (140)

Pierce uses every aspect of the dominant system, including his lawyer Metzger, to create something that causes great psychic trauma to Oedipa, even if it does create a "moral improvement" in her. Pierce not only subjugates Oedipa to the legal system, his constant

presence forces her to always be aware that she is subject to someone else's will; someone who is so powerful that he supersedes death:

He might have written the testament only to harass a one-time mistress, so cynically sure of being wiped out he could throw away all hope of anything more. Bitterness could have run that deep in him. *She didn't know*. He might himself have discovered the Tristero, and encrypted that in the will, buying into just enough to be sure she'd find it. Or he might even have tried to survive death, as paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved" (Italics mine, 148).

Oedipa is essentially powerless and dependent on the information of either well placed actors or actual members of society—either way they are still part of a system: Pierce's personal one (that is, if it's a practical joke on his part) or society's.

This ambiguity, this either/or, is present within Inverarity's name and character as well. Pierce Inverarity roughly equates to: piercing untruth. That Inverarity's name has some sort of meaning is very common in Pynchon; very often the name of a character functions as a cheap and easy way to assign a characteristic to them: Oedipa Maas, Benny Profane, Bloody Chichlitz; all these names point to an important aspect of the character. So too with Pierce; but the meaning is ambiguous in the way Pynchon uses it. Read in one way, as a whole, Pierce's name points to the possibility that his system helps Oedipa to pierce through the untruths of society, to reach a personal truth. But very often, Pynchon just uses his surname, Inverarity. Thus, Inverarity the character is presented as untruth embodied. When this is applied to Pierce's presence in the novel, the ambiguities become even more complicated. Pierce calls Oedipa late at night:

It took her till the middle of Huntley and Brinkley to remember that last year at three or so one morning there had come this long-distance call, from where she would never know (unless now he'd left a diary) by a voice beginning heavy in Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-Negro, then on into

hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he'd talked in all the way down to Mazaltan (2-3).

That Pierce does not appear in the novel as a body, but as a voice, Narcissus functioning as his own Echo, who, remember, could only imitate the voices of other people, makes nailing him down to an identity nearly impossible. If these voices function as extensions of Pierce, tendrils reaching out to Oedipa, then at the point Pierce uses them, he is that voice and that character. This ambiguity, this ability to be A and not A and everything in between, demonstrates that Pierce is everything that Oedipa encounters in the Trystero, every coincidence, and obscure piece of information is merely an extension of Pierce, because “[t]he dead man... was the linking feature in a coincidence. It was enough, a coded warning. What, tonight, was chance?” (98).

Situated between Pierce and Oedipa, functioning, at points, as almost a medium between the two, is the Trystero. It, like Pierce, is steeped in ambiguity: it is either the illusion of a system created by Pierce to manipulate Oedipa, or it is an actual system that would continue to exist whether Oedipa had stumbled upon it or not; or it is both: it is possible that Pierce's need for secrecy made communicating through the Trystero more secure than using the U.S. postal system—thus integrating the already established Trystero system into his estate. Through it, as she encounters more Trystero users and gathers more information, Oedipa embarks on her search for truth, but never is she comfortable within the Trystero; it never drops the air of menace. It occupies a sort of middle ground (the excluded middle) that embodies elements of both Pierce (Narcissus) and Oedipa (Oedipus): in its existence as a system, an extension; and in that it is

composed of disillusioned individuals who once sought out the truth that Oedipa now seeks.

In order for it to become a subversive system, the existence of the Trystero is predicated upon the existence of idealistic individuals seeking a way to change society with other like minded individuals³¹. Thus, the individual is absorbed into a system in order to rival the dominant system. Unfortunately, this results in a loss of individuality for the characters; they merely function within, and are defined by the Trystero.

It is important to note that there are no present-tense accounts of the transformation of the idealistic individual into the oft times cynical, and more often crazy, characters Oedipa encounters in her exploration of the Trystero. Rather, they are presented after the fact, after the individual has been absorbed under the aegis of the system. Oedipa's husband, Mucho, is an excellent example of the individual's inability to sustain a prolonged period of protest in the face of the overwhelming power of the dominant society.

Though Mucho is not an overtly political figure, he comes to experience an overwhelming emptiness with his position in society. As a used car salesman, and later a disc jockey, Mucho is troubled by nightmares about his jobs, especially at the car lot:

“The bad dream that I used to have all the time, about the car lot, remember that? I could never even tell you about it. But I can now. It doesn't bother me any more. It was only that sign in the lot, that's what scared me. In the dream I'd be going about a normal day's business and suddenly, with no warning, there'd be the sign. We were a member of the National Automobile Dealers' Association. N.A.D.A. Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering” (118).

Mucho only confides this fear in Oedipa after it has passed, after he has joined the Trystero and embarked on a regimen of regular LSD intake. Just prior to this, Mucho's program director at the radio station says to Oedipa: "He's losing his identity...how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He's a walking assembly of man" (115).

Though Oedipa and the program director view this as a tragedy, to Mucho it is a release from the individual responsibility of facing off against a foe that is pervasive but faceless; he is engaged in communal living within himself.

"Mucho", she said, impatient but also flirting with a wild suspicion. "Is this what Funch means when he says you're coming on like a whole roomful of people?"

"That's what I am," said Mucho, "right. Everybody is." He gazed at her, perhaps having had his vision of consensus as others do orgasms, face now smooth, amiable, at peace. She didn't know him (116).

Remember though, this revelation of Mucho's group consciousness occurs near the end of the novel, in his remembrance of it. Mucho has been involved, it would seem, with the Trystero since the beginning of the novel, since he provides the first evidence to Oedipa about its existence³². Thus, this scene, the last encounter between Oedipa and Mucho, is mostly a recapitulation of the loss of his individuality as a coping mechanism through his involvement with the Trystero. Oedipa sums up his state: "Now he would never be spooked again, not as long as he had the pills. She could not quite get it into her head that the day she'd left him for San Narciso was the day she'd seen Mucho for the last time. So much of him had already dissipated" (118). In not presenting an actual individual in protest, but only the recollection of a time when individuals still stood

outside of a system, Pynchon effectively eliminates the possibility of individual political protest in his world. Such idealism was antiquated, a product of the past; something to be remembered, but not reenacted. There is a safety in numbers that protects against the fear of standing alone beneath the creaking metal sign of N.A.D.A. Or, as one character puts it, “Teamwork...is one work for it, yeah. What it really is is a way to avoid responsibility. It’s a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society” (68).

Oedipa’s encounter with the Mexican expatriate anarchist Jesus Arrabal in San Francisco also provides another instance of an idealistic individual, this time an overtly political rebel, trapped within the Trystero system tracing his transformation from an individual seeking to abolish all centralized power, the heart of anarchism, to an individual easily integrated into the dominant system of capitalist America. When she first encountered Jesus on a beach in Mexico, he was waiting for an antigovernment rally to organize, but “Nobody had showed up” (97). The revolution never happens; Jesus is left alone to fight against the “privilegiado”, the powerful. He tells Oedipa of an anarchist alternate reality: “Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul’s talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself.” Thus, Jesus already has a predilection towards the systematizing of anarchy, where the masses, as one group, work together. To be a lone rebel, for Jesus, is to be a failure, as much as selling-out to the dominant power is failing.

But when Oedipa is reunited with him, Jesus admits he is in exile: “He was part-owner here with a yucateco who still believed in the Revolution. *Their Revolution*” (97). An avowed anarchist, like Jesus, involved in a capitalist enterprise, is, in the eyes of other anarchists, a hypocrite and a failure. He further compounds his failure, his

complete integration into whatever system he can get into, the Trystero or mainstream American society, when he expresses his ignorance about receiving copies of an “anarcho-syndiclist paper” with “the handstruck image of the post horn” from 1904, nearly sixty years earlier:

“They arrive, have they been in the mails that long? Has my name been substituted for that of a member who’s died? Has it really taken sixty years? Is it a reprint? Idle questions, I am a footsoldier. The higher levels have their reasons” (98)

Jesus speaks of revolution as a miracle, ultimately out of the hands of those seeking revolution, as it is “another world’s intrusion into this one” (97). Jesus’ willingness to allow others to decide for him, even if there is no confirmation that there even are any “higher-ups”, demonstrates the resignation to the will of superiors that results from prolonged subjugation to a system. Jesus as an anarchist predicated his entire existence upon questioning the government, and yet, years later, he isn’t even willing to expend the energy to question why he is receiving newspapers from before he was born. This seems to be the fate Jesus has been condemned to: assimilating back into mainstream society, that is, reinforcing its power, but continuing to delude himself that he is still an active participant in the revolution against that same society.

As has already been hinted at by Mucho and Arrabal’s participation in the Trystero, the systematizing of protest fosters an environment of assimilation that mimics the dominant system that is being protested against. Thus, a sense of futility is associated with participation in the Trystero. Both this sense of futility and the Trystero’s identification with mainstream American society are introduced through Arrabal’s former anarchist group. Oedipa asks him, “How is your CIA?” Standing not for the agency you think, but for a clandestine Mexican outfit known as the Conjuracion de los Insurgentes

Anarquistas, traceable back to the time of the Flores Magion brothers and later briefly allied with Zapata” (96). While possibly alluding to the CIA’s (the government agency) involvement in shaping Latin-American politics at that time, what is obvious is that another aspect of mainstream American society is once again being appropriated by the Trystero. The *Conjuracion de los Insurgentes Anarquistas* was dedicated to the overthrow of the Mexican government, but in the end its members are exiled and irrelevant to everyone, even the Central Intelligence Agency.

Concurrent with the futility of participation in a system that does nothing more than ape another more powerful system, Pynchon also associates the Trystero with death and meaninglessness. Almost immediately after Oedipa’s exchange with Jesus, in the last chapter of the novel, in fact, Oedipa learns of the actual history of the Trystero. It began in reaction to the dominant Thurns and Taxis postal system during the waning days of the Holy Roman Empire and later moved to America to sabotage a fledgling U.S. Postal Service that was struggling to keep up with America’s westward expansion. By attaching a history to it, that is, a human presence, rather than its existence being the interference of some sphere of the Other, the Trystero is transformed from the subject of hushed whispers in dingy bars, and symbols etched in bathroom walls to a more well-defined system, organized specifically to work in secrecy within certain esoteric circles.

The more the Trystero solidifies its presence in the novel, that is, the more information Oedipa learns about it, the more menacing its existence seems to her. Oedipa is often apprehensive about finding out the next piece of information she seeks, because a possible end to her search is the confrontation with meaninglessness itself, death:

As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical configuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa’s own street clothes in that game with Metzger in

front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before the Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say goodnight with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear? (40)

The more Oedipa discovers about the Tristero, that is, the more its status as a well established system is concretized, the more it seems associated with death. Yet Mucho Maas bowed out of mainstream society because of its apparent meaninglessness, and found solace in the Tristero for its apparent defenses against it.

This perceived contradiction can be explained by the influence of a radical sect of Puritans, the Scurvhamites, during an early period of the Tristero's development as an underground postal system in Europe. The Scurvhamites developed a dual cosmology where "one part of it...ran off the will of God, its prime mover. The rest ran off some opposite Principle, something blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death" (128). Yet the Scurvhamites are seduced by "the glamorous prospect of annihilation" which "coaxed them over, until there was no one left in the sect, not even Robert Scurvham, who, like a ship's master, had been last to go" (Ibid). The pull of the death instinct (See Chapter 2) has infiltrated the Tristero through its relation to the Scurvhamites. Though a character like Mucho thinks he is becoming part of the Tristero as protection against meaninglessness, he is really buying into a meaningless system whose existence is determined not by its own ethos or goals, but by the existence of a more powerful system to undermine. Oedipa as an outsider notices what Mucho cannot: that in submitting his individuality to the will of a system that he thought would protect

him from the meaninglessness of American society, Mucho is giving up himself to annihilation. Though he may not die, he certainly is no longer alive in that he no longer has any sense of self.

As has been shown, Pynchon's tone is already disdainful of the Whole Sick Crew from *V.*—who are a clear antecedent to the Trystero—but, for the most part, he characterizes them as harmless and engaged in endless posturing. By *The Crying of Lot 49*, a sinister element has crept into Pynchon's portrayal of the Trystero—something disturbing and potentially harmful. This hopelessness, and its close association with death, is embodied in a subset of the Trystero system, the Inamorati Anonymous³³. An “anonymous inamorato” in conversation with Oedipa, says to her, “A whole underworld of suicides who failed. All keeping in touch through that secret delivery system. What do they tell each other?” (94) Suicide is the last refuge of the hopeless, so what sort of exponential multiplication of that feeling must occur at the failure to kill oneself? It must be the ultimate sense of hopelessness, the inability to escape even into death; this feeling is what Pynchon attaches to the Trystero. These counterforces (the historical counterculture included) initially arose out of a sense of constructive hopelessness, a fear that the current society could not improve the future for its youth. But in Pynchon's novel, it has, through the Trystero, been converted into a passive hopelessness—the despair of the ultimate failure.

Oedipa conceives the Trystero system as something singular and monolithic; but in the reality of the novel, it is fractured into a potentially infinite number of subsets³⁴. Oedipa comes to realize this after she spends the night wandering the streets of San Francisco³⁵: “Last night, she might have wondered what undergrounds apart from the

couple she knew of communicated by WASTE system. By sunrise she could legitimately ask what undergrounds didn't" (101). She continues to speculate about the ubiquity of the Trystero: "For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery" (101). How then, after spending the majority of the novel building the Trystero system into some insidious conspiracy, is the reader supposed to reconcile this with Oedipa's conclusion that "this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private" (Ibid), in other words, having nothing to do with a conspiracy, but a collective turning away from the dominant system in democratic protest.

Edward Mendelson, in his essay "The Sacred, The Profane and *The Crying of Lot 49*" solves this contradiction by elevating the Trystero to a religious plane³⁶, equating it to a manifestation of the sacred. He says, "The frequent associations of the Trystero with the demonic do not contradict the Trystero's potentially sacred significance: the demonic is a subclass of the sacred, on a plane of meaning different from the profane and the secular" (122). It is convenient for Mendelson's argument to elevate the Trystero to a level greater than the locus of the novel; "this," as he says, "creates difficulties for criticism." Indeed it does, and for a work concerned with the profane existence of the Trystero, it is a cop-out.

The profane answer stems from the ambiguous nature of nearly everything in the novel, which, in turn, stems from Pynchon himself. By fixing upon the Trystero sinister overtones, and later revealing its patrons to be almost noble in their rejection of the U.S. Mail, Pynchon may be showing his ambivalence towards the counterforce. The

individuals composing the movement may have had good intentions, but in its execution they erred and created an ersatz society which could only exist as long as it had a dominant system to invert; they were reactionaries, and thus could not exist without something to react to.

While noble in a way, those individuals involved in the Trystero often react to Oedipa's inquiries with the sort of high-minded snobbery common to secret organizations (possibly reminding the reader of adolescent obsessions with tree-forts and secret code-words). In conversation with an employee of Yoyodyne, Stanley Koteks, Oedipa attempts to seem like she is part of the Trystero system:

She took a chance: "Then the WASTE address isn't good anymore." But she'd pronounced it like a word, waste. His face congealed, a mask of distrust. "It's W.A.S.T.E., lady," he told her, "an acronym, not 'waste', and we had best not go into it any further" (69-70).

She is rebuffed once again when explicitly mentioning W.A.S.T.E., in seeking confirmation of the Trystero's existence by Genghis Cohen, the philatelist put in charge of appraising Pierce Inverarity's stamp collection:

She asked him then about the initials W.A.S.T.E, but it was somehow too late. She'd lost him. He said no, but so abruptly out of phase now with her own thoughts he could even have been lying" (79).

Finally, at the bar in San Francisco, under the unfortunate alias Arnold Snarb, Oedipa laments over not being admitted to what amounts to an elite club:

"Look, you have to help me. Because I really think I am going out of my head."

"You have the wrong outfit, Arnold. Talk to your clergyman."

"I use the U.S. Mail because I was never taught any different," she pleaded. "But I'm not your enemy. I don't want to be" (90).

The Trystero system, through these examples, tends to resemble something more like the Freemasons, or the Skull and Bones, than an underground postal system for the dispossessed. One could say that this is a defense against the infiltration of unwanted elements, especially government agents, and this could be true; but the overwhelming tone of these passages is of elitism: the puffing out of one's chest when one has access to an organization that another seeks admittance to—whether it has actual influential power or not, the illusion of power is built through a thick-coating of secrecy. Rather than the egalitarian movement it prided itself on being, Pynchon presents the Trystero as an accumulation of holier-than-thou types seeking a specific kind of mind-set for admission into their exclusive club. In this idea, the futility of the Trystero and its close association with death are intertwined.

By engaging in such elitism, the members of the Trystero create a closed circuit. In doing so, they assure that, being so concerned with themselves and who is privy to their secret knowledge, they have absolutely no influence upon anybody outside of their system. The Trystero in its genesis in America was a guerilla band that attacked the equally new U.S. postal service (71). In this way, its members were active and directly influenced the government endorsed system's development. But by the time of Oedipa's discovery of the Trystero, it was concerned with its own machinations and no longer with its influence upon society. Within this closed circuit of futility and self reference, the decay of the system into irrelevance and eventual extinction is the only possibility.

In relation to society and the Trystero, Pynchon establishes Oedipa as the consummate outsider, which, for these purposes, is synonymous with the consummate *individual*. As a young suburban housewife in a pre-feminist era, Oedipa is essentially

powerless within society. She occupies a role: the housewife who has dinner ready and the “twilight’s whiskey sours” mixed “against the arrival of her husband, Wendell (“Mucho”) Maas from work”. The occupation of such a role within a system creates a uniformity in her life that strips Oedipa of her individuality: she “shuffle[ed] back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be first to admit it?) more or less identical” (2). Oedipa’s parenthetical expression of the mounting unease with her position in life at the beginning of *The Crying of Lot 49* establishes her as an individual becoming conscious of her constrained role within society.

Even prior to her role as a housewife, Oedipa felt imprisoned by society. Initially, for Oedipa, Pierce’s appearance in promised to rescue her from the oppressive banality of her life:

There had been a sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. And had also gently conned herself in the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she’d happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass. But dauntless, perhaps using one of his many credit cards for a shim, he’d slipped the lock on her tower door and come up the conchlike stairs, which, had true guile come more naturally to him, he’d have done to begin with. But all that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower (10-11)

That Oedipa sees her life as a movie, that she is only a passive viewer, subject to the caprice of a projectionist, demonstrates her role within this particular system.

Furthermore, not only is she viewing her life as if separate from it, she is doubly removed

from it in being confined to a tower. Oedipa's conception of her life at this point in the novel seems extremely unhealthy and claustrophobic; she soon realizes that the opportunity to escape from her tower that her relationship with Pierce promised was false, because their relationship never spilled out into reality, according to Oedipa, but always remained confined within her tower: "and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape" (11). She goes on, to conclude the chapter:

What did she desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realized that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?

What Oedipa doesn't realize, or refuses to, at that point, is that the cruel, faceless magic controlling her may originate from her "knight of deliverance". It is not that Pierce failed to take Oedipa away from the tower of society; it is that he succeeded, by having her execute his will, in building a new tower and transplanting her to it.

Oedipa assigns two concrete characteristics to Pierce: that he is guileless and a "knight of deliverance. Yet this seems wholly naive on Oedipa's part when viewed in light of the ambiguities of Pierce's character. Thus, Oedipa seems unaware of the machinations taking place *sub rosa*; she fails to realize that she has been transferred, by her involvement with Pierce, from one restrictive tower (society) to another of Pierce's devising. In this naiveté, though, and the growing sense of entrapment, lies Oedipa's saving grace. Had she understood exactly what was going on, that Pierce's estate was

merely another system and that it would carry her into untold convolutions and dangerous situations, she would most likely not have engaged in her task so fully. But, as it were, “She left Kinneret, then, with no idea she was moving toward anything new” (13).

Oedipa’s willingness to execute Pierce’s will, despite her ignorance, belies a tenacious spirit within her to pursue something outside of her role within society. That she needs another system to escape from her current one becomes inconsequential as the novel progresses, because, despite the pervasiveness of Pierce’s influence upon the Trystero³⁷, and nearly everything else she encounters, Oedipa transcends it and commandeers Pierce’s system to escape from her tower; her delving into Pierce’s estate, especially in the discovery of the Trystero, becomes a vehicle for her own personal meaning. Tony Tanner agrees, but he invests the Trystero not with the sense of impotence, but with the possibility for change: “The possible existence of The Tristero is now associated with the possible existence of ‘transcendent’ meaning, almost equivalent to a redemptive vision of another America behind the material concretions of the land” (“V. and V-2 44). Though Tanner is right in essence that the Trystero provides Oedipa with an opportunity for transcendence; he is mistaken, as has been demonstrated earlier, in attributing any sort of positive associations with the Trystero. The Trystero is nothing more than a simulacrum of the American power structure, thus, according to Tanner’s logic, Oedipa transcends one America to another identical America that functions underground. Ultimately, the medium is inconsequential; it is not where Oedipa transcends to, it is that she transcends at all, that she discovers not a new America, but her own individuality.

Oedipa's journey, then, is not only an escape from a tyrannical system, which, albeit, created a sense of comfort, of inertia—one need not extend oneself individually in such a system—but is also a confrontation with the terror and responsibility that being an individual entails³⁸.

Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy—some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles.

She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed rest, and that there was no

Trystero. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so (107).

In needing to be told by Dr. Hilarius, she hopes for another person to take on the responsibility, to relieve her of her individuality, by ascribing the information she has gathered into some sort of nefarious system not to a yearning for truth, but to outside sources: a disease, head trauma—a short circuiting of that part of her brain that allows Oedipa to function within society. The sense of menace, the fear of finding herself as an individual not defined by a system, is what keeps Oedipa going though; she needs to know what causes that fear, what in the possible reality of the Trystero and Pierce's system could affect her so personally.

This sense of a shift from escaping a system to dealing with newfound, potentially unfettered individuality is voiced by Oedipa. At one point, she asks, "*Shall I project a world*" (65). This hesitance, the conditional "shall" as if she is asking for permission from some higher power, demonstrates that Oedipa has not yet achieved autonomy from Pierce's system. She is not yet prepared to accept the responsibility of creating her own world, with her own personal meaning. Later on though, this sense of autonomy becomes more natural, no longer filled with an apprehension that she may stumble upon something too secret, too true for her suburban American sensibility to handle, she seems ready to

accept that she can reconfigure Pierce's system so that she can create her own order, and in this come to her own conclusions:

...she'd gone back, deliberately, to Lake Inverarity one day, owing to this, what you might have to call, growing obsession, with 'bringing something of herself'—even if that something was just her presence—to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations (72).

These constellations, though connected back to Inverarity (what isn't?), become Oedipa's own because she orders them in her way; she becomes Maxwell's Demon, sorting the universe so that it begins to take on her image.

She must get over the sense of being alone though—of not being a woman in relation to men, but an individual; this loneliness is encapsulated in one scene where Oedipa is alone in a bar for homosexuals:

Oedipa sat, feeling as alone as she ever had, now the only woman, she saw, in a room full of drunken homosexuals. Story of my life, she thought, Mucho won't talk to me, Hilarius won't listen, Clerk Maxwell didn't even look at me, and this group, God knows. Despair came over her, as it will when nobody around has any sexual relevance to you (94).

Even by the end of the novel it is not clear that Oedipa has truly embraced the consequences of being an individual: being alone. But it seems by her actions, and by Pynchon's prose, that she is continuing her progression. After being overwhelmed by the prospect of so many possibilities, so many truths, she comes to an understanding that this ambiguity allows her the freedom of choice, to decide which truth will be hers to pursue³⁹. At this point, Oedipa subtly transforms: standing outside the auction house, she, alone, "stood in a patch of sun, among brilliant rising and falling points of dust" (151). Oedipa has been illuminated, she has found the "cry that might abolish the night" among all those brilliant specks of dust, those brilliant possibilities for her life. Within

the auction house, “Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the nape of necks, trying to guess which one was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof” (152).

Oedipa is now less concerned with being alone than finding her answers; the repetition of the possessive pronoun “her” demonstrates that she has taken control and assumed Pierce’s system for her own end. Oedipa does not, and really cannot, ever sever her ties to the system; she is too enmeshed within it to ever separate. Instead, she reaches a sort of compromise where, rather than allowing the system to take advantage of her, Oedipa takes advantage of the system in order to gain a sense of personal meaning in a dehumanized society. It is imperfect really, but it demonstrates an ingenuity and a sense of bravery to exist within a system but not submit to it that is not found in any of Pynchon’s other characters.

Above this all, though, creating the system, creating Pierce, his estate, Oedipa, all the characters she encounters, is Pynchon. Pierce’s system, the legal system, the capitalist system, the Trystero, no matter how accurate a representation they may be, are not real systems—Pynchon created them; he makes the systems subject to his individual creative ability. Whereas Pierce created a system in his estate, and integrated another in the Trystero, that causes terrible psychic trauma to Oedipa, but an opportunity as well to break away from mainstream society, Pynchon’s creation is entertaining, albeit daunting at times, and full of knowledge that does not terrorize, but does not necessarily give one a sense of personal truth either⁴⁰. What measure of self-knowledge Oedipa attains through Pierce’s machinations is gained at the expense of the psychological torture of his creation. But, for readers of Pynchon’s novel, they accept that Pynchon is playing a game with them and participates knowing that they can put down the novel at any point

to escape from his world. Pynchon's fiction is, unlike Pierce and unlike the Yoyodyne Corporation, the ludic separated from the destructive impulse. While Pierce is, in a way, reenacting Gould's influence upon California, pared down to influencing a single person though; Pynchon is extending the influence of a mythical figure through *The Crying of Lot 49* in Oedipus. Pynchon's inclusion of *Oedipus the King* though as a submerged text forces it to be secondary and subject to his creation. It does not exert the influence upon Pynchon's text the way Gould does upon Pierce; rather, it acts as a guide, a familiar text for the reader to use as a sign post—giving them a sense of perspective while immersed in Oedipa's exploration of the Trystero.

Pynchon is presenting, in this development from passive observer to active searcher for a personal revelation within a diseased land, an old story adapted from stage and is using it as a sort of touchstone for the reader in a disorienting world. The dichotomy of acting and being an audience member is a repeated motif throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*. This focus on the tension within the theatre (the fourth wall), Oedipa's feminized appropriation of the Theban king's name, and the familiar narratives woven throughout the novel (detective story, bildungsroman, etc.) make it hard to ignore that Pynchon is presenting *Oedipus the King* in a distorted way that the reader ought to be at least vaguely familiar with.

Certain parallels make for a loose comparison between the two works of literature. For example, Southern California, if read in this way, is Thebes laid waste by a plague. Joseph Slade describes the landscape of Southern California found in the novel: "It is clear that the capitalist-industrialist system has laid waste America. Everywhere Oedipa looks the landscape is garish and uniform, sprawling and sterile"

(*Thomas Pynchon* 134). The plague, then, as could be deduced from the previous chapter on *V.*, is the technology produced and distributed not by angry gods, but by the “capitalist-industrialist system”.

Pynchon rewrites *Oedipus the King* but with major differences outside of the general details of the plot: he does not place Oedipa in a position of power as Oedipus was; and he eliminates the well known familial aspect of Sophocles’ drama of regicide and incest—which eliminates Freud’s interpretation as well (See introduction). It must also be noted that Oedipa is on her journey not to relieve her Thebes of its plague, but to escape from it through the discovery of a secret personal meaning that she finds through the Trystero. The presence of the Trystero though, does add the dark element of the novel that ties it back to *Oedipus the King*. The menace of the Trystero system suggests the violence that occurs onstage at the end of the play when Oedipus finds his own answers. But Oedipa is spared this violence, it is only suggested. Rather, she uses this confrontation with death in the Trystero to feel alive, to escape from the banal oblivion of suburbia into an existence where the world is not felt through extensions that block out the fear of death, or any sensations at all, and experiences the immediacy of life and all that it entails.

Though the differences may outweigh the similarities in a literal comparison of the texts, what Pynchon does is take the core of Sophocles’ play, Oedipus’ journey for truth, and recontextualizes it within modern American society. In this way, Pynchon is able to manipulate not just the system, but ancient, more well-known texts as well. When Oedipa asks “Shall I project a world?” she is merely anticipating the author’s dilemma.

Pynchon never asks though; he creates a world—and it is a world wholly his own, divorced from any oppressive system.

Chapter 4: Gravity's Rainbow

Proverbs for Paranoids: Destruction, Depending on Your Vantage Point, is Creation

What is the city over the mountains

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal

--T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Moving from *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Gravity's Rainbow* an escalation in aggression and overall destructiveness can be traced. Whereas in the previous two novels the destructive impulse was usually confined to an individual or small group of characters, within *Gravity's Rainbow* the growing inanimateness and destructiveness of humanity manifests itself in the Second World War and the V-2 rocket. Pynchon effectively destroys Europe, and in its stead arises the Zone where the veneer separating the individual from the disembodied powers in society is rent for a time, and the vast conspiracy between governments across all nations and big business is exposed as the engine that powers the destructive impulse within society that oppresses the individual and keeps the system in power⁴¹.

The monolithic power of the previous two novels is revealed as a worldwide cabal consisting of multinational corporations—drug companies, oil companies, weapons manufacturers—the government and scientists, otherwise known as the Firm or simply Them. Here, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon gives up on both the Counterforce (called as such for the first time) and the individual (Slothrop) in being able to oppose a power

that is, frankly, unfathomable. With Slothrop, Pynchon demonstrates the danger and futility of the individual's attempt to evade the system's infiltration into his life, and the bucolic peace of simply giving up on evasion, on pursuing a quest, on human logic (causality) even—and ultimately, his individuality. Peace for the individual, according to Pynchon's portrayal of Slothrop's dissolution, cannot be achieved in the system or in opposition to the system; it can only be achieved by returning to a life of simplicity, of using nature, rather than objects, as an extension of the individual.

But, since such widespread opting out, not through identifying with objects, but with reaching a sense of inner peace, is just as unfathomable as a worldwide cabal, there is a gradual elimination, therefore, of the opposition that at least gave a sense of hope in a deteriorating world to the previous two novels. But Pynchon reaffirms, as he did in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the continued autonomy of the last real individual: the artist. This freedom has nothing to do with his resistance to the system in the outside world, but with the power the artist wields within his own work to control and manipulate the system that causes such great anxiety to him in reality.

The central figure of *Gravity's Rainbow* is Tyrone Slothrop; every event and character can somehow be traced back to him. His function within the novel closely parallels the two permanent outsiders, the characters struggling to be individuals, of Pynchon's first two novels: Benny Profane and Oedipa Maas. Like Oedipa, there is the feeling of a nefarious plot hanging over Slothrop's head. But his role as Oedipus is more legitimate because the plot involving him is relatively unambiguous—the truth, as the novel progresses, is eventually revealed to Slothrop. The nature of the plot against him as well makes Slothrop a more complete Oedipus figure: he is to discover that his father

sold him to a drug company that performed conditioning experiments on his infant libido. Thus, the sexual and the paternal aspects of the Oedipus myth, so harped on by Freud, are restored in Slothrop.

The more information Slothrop discovers about himself though, the more he begins to drift away from his pursuit; he becomes aimless and wanders about the Zone engaging in antics that are only tangentially connected to his quest. He also becomes involved in numerous relationships with women that consist of little more than sex and the exchange of information. In these two details, and in the overall buffoonery of his character, Slothrop most resembles Profane. Just as Profane is no hero in *V.*; Pynchon reminds us, neither is Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but instead of hearing those words from a robot, SHROUD, Slothrop hears them from his heart: "...Slothrop's dumb idling heart sez: The Schwarzgerat is no Grail, Ace, that's not what the G in Imipolex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero. The best you can compare with is Tannhauser, the Singing Nincompoop" (370). In a way, Slothrop seems to degenerate from Oedipa to Profane to eventually nothing. He has the advantage of actually discovering in substantial form what he is searching for, unlike Oedipa who never knew exactly what it was she was searching for, but who pursued it with dogged determination anyway. But as Slothrop learns more about himself, he begins to reject his quest, in fact, to reject himself. His individuality is not affirmed by his quest; rather, he discovers that he is not an individual at all but a commodity of interest to the occupying forces of the Zone. The more he is sought, the more his importance to Them is affirmed, the more Slothrop slips into schmeilhood.

Slothrop is an experiment as much as he is a character. During his bildungsroman, his journey of self-discovery, Slothrop is trailed and incessantly monitored by agencies—government and corporate. His movements throughout the Zone resemble that of a rat in a continent sized maze under regular observation. As he discovers more about himself and his status as a commodity to the powers that be, Slothrop is able to elude them, and eventually to fade into the European landscape.

Slothrop is the subject of such an intense pursuit across the Zone because of a deal his father made with IG Farben, a chemical company, while Slothrop was an infant. He begins to realize that there are parts of him that are not under his control when he notices that he is having erections with no discernable stimulus.

He is also getting a hard-on for no immediate reason. And there's that *smell* again, a smell before his conscious memory begins, a soft and chemical smell, threatening, haunting, not a smell to be found out in the world...essence of all the still figures waiting for him inside, daring him to enter and find a secret he cannot survive.

He soon finds out the source of the smell and its connection to his childhood:

Nice way to find out your father made a deal 20 years ago with somebody to spring for your education. Come to think of it, Slothrop never could quite put the announcements, all through the Depression, of imminent family ruin, together with the comfort he enjoyed at Harvard. Well, now, what was the deal between his father and Bland? I've been sold, Jesus Christ, I've been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef. Surveillance? Stinnes, like every industrial emperor, had his own company spy system. So did the IG. Does this mean Slothrop has been under their observation since he was born? Yahh...he knows that what's haunting him now will prove to be the smell of Imipolex G (289-291).

Unbeknownst to Slothrop, he is a Big Deal in the scientific community, especially when it is discovered that his erections prefigure a V-2 rocket strike at his exact location of

sexual conquest in London. Mathematicians, psychologists and physiologists all vie to determine the connection through their particular set of equations⁴²; and thus, the chase is on. Common among the scientists is a propensity to deal with Slothrop in the abstract, as a test subject; a few of the scientists struggle with the fact that what they are dealing with is a human being, but, for the most part, Slothrop is merely a case study, no more vital than the dogs the lead scientist Ned Pointsman conditions.

Fortunately for Slothrop, he is never captured. With the help of the Counterforce, he travels through the Zone as a reporter, a drug-runner, a Russian officer, a super-hero and a mythical pig (seriously), among other guises—eight in total⁴³. As Slothrop learns more about his past, as well as the reasons behind his pursuit in the present, he makes connections that lead him to realize his total lack of freedom. He was predestined to go to Harvard, to be assigned a desk job for an intelligence agency in London, to have sex with certain women; all of this plays into the Calvinist doctrine of the Elect and the Preterite that Pynchon uses regularly in the novel⁴⁴. But to the atheistic scientists, it is not a matter of religion; it is even simpler than that: Slothrop is nothing more than a thing, an unconscious object trained to move in a certain pattern determined by the conditioning process⁴⁵.

Nothing has been in Slothrop's control; Pynchon makes it clear from the beginning that Slothrop is at the mercy of these countless agencies that congeal into a hulking conglomerate haunting his every movement. But he is also at the mercy of his past, of his father, and of his Puritanical legacy; especially his ancestor William Slothrop⁴⁶, who came over on the *Arabella* to the colonies in the middle of the seventeenth century, and wrote *On Preterition* which “had to be published in England,

and is among the first books to've been not only banned but also ceremonially burned in Boston.” In it, William proposed that the Preterite in the Calvinist doctrine, those that God passes over, that is bars from Heaven, were holy too. He “argued holiness for these ‘second Sheep’ without whom there’d be no elect”:

And it got worse. William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite. Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart. How can Jesus be an exception? Could we feel for him anything but horror in the face of the unnatural, the extracreational? Well, if he is the son of man, and if what we feel is not horror but love, then we have to love Judas too. Right? How William avoided being burned for heresy, nobody knows. He must've had connections” (565).⁴⁷

This passage brings out two themes apparent not only in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but the prior two novels as well: the idea of connections; the networking inherent in creating an established system—apparently one so established that Slothrop *files* can trace it back to the seventeenth century; the other, more important theory, being that of the dual cosmology of the universe. The presence of this Other is inherent in the universe; Tyrone Slothrop's entire life, faith and history are based on always having something, some dark other, checking his progress. But unlike William's Jesus, Tyrone's other *is* “unnatural, the extracreational”—it is the V-2 rocket.

The rocket is very clearly an extension of Slothrop; his erections, his sexual needs, are also the destructive impulses of the rocket's designers. Pynchon combines the libidinal (Eros) and the death (Thanatos) impulses of Freud's psychological theories into a perversion of sex—the creation of life—that is nothing more than the harbinger of death. Slothrop's sexual satisfaction is inextricably linked with the death of British citizens. Thus, Slothrop mistakes his sexual urges as his own, rather than being the result

of conditioning, that is, the imposition of an outside manipulator's matrix of urges and the subsequent programming of actions correspondent to them⁴⁸.

Slothrop's journey, then, is to decondition himself, to "approach the Zero" that he was as an infant; it is, really, to become nothing. But unlike V., who became nothing, diffused herself into the inanimate elements of *V.* by identifying with and eventually becoming an object, Slothrop *consciously* rejects the world of objects (which also puts him at odds with his closest corollary, Benny Profane, the unconscious Luddite), and settles into an existence that is not unlike those imagined by Romanticist writers or Thoreau's life on Walden Pond. He leads a simple life in the Zone— sticking near rivers, spending long periods of time by himself, contemplating, observing— that eventually leads to his dissolution into nature⁴⁹.

A contradiction seemingly arises though, because, prior to his disappearance, Slothrop dons helmet and cape and becomes a mythical figure all-over the Zone as the super-hero Rocketman. Does this not mean that Slothrop is identifying with an object by essentially becoming an anthropomorphized version of it? No; Slothrop reverses the process found in *V.* and Marshall McLuhan: the human is not becoming an object; the Rocket is becoming human, is becoming Slothrop, thus breaking its tyranny over Slothrop, and acquiring *his* will and desires. If this doesn't make sense, simply reverse the name: Manrocket. It changes the meaning drastically, a man-like rocket. The character of Gottfried who is placed in the nose of the Rocket 00000 and fired over the Atlantic towards Britain would be a manrocket, a person who succumbs to the design and function of an object rather than vice versa.

By assuming the role of a superhero—who actually, for the most part, functions as a smuggler—Slothrop is attempting to transcend his position in society. Though he fails as a superhero, Slothrop is the most likely of all Pynchon’s characters to assume the role of one. The classic American superhero is usually a victim of the system; he is a little man at the mercy of a vast infrastructure of injustice and oppression. Slothrop embodies the American as a pawn, an object conditioned for servitude that fights back or at least attempts to. Plus, he also, in a sense, has what amounts to a superpower—or at least something that makes him different than the general populace in his special relationship to the Rocket. Unfortunately, within Pynchon’s fiction, the possibility of a single individual changing the world is nonexistent. All Slothrop can do is try to evade his pursuers, and retain his individuality—which in and of itself proves to be too much for him. By discovering the secrets of his childhood, evading his pursuers, and creating a new identity for himself, Slothrop does all that he can to assert his individuality in order to throw off the yoke of society. The irony is, because of Slothrop engages in the blackmarket smuggling of goods for the Counterforce, that, in Pynchon’s fiction, the only superhero who appears functions not to save other people abused by the system, but to subvert the system economically

In the final section of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, entitled “The Counterforce”, the titular group emerges to aid Slothrop in his escape across the Zone. As opposed to the counterforce discussed in the prior novels, this Counterforce recognizes itself as such; it is openly opposed and organized against the dominant powers that want Slothrop⁵⁰. But as soon as the counterforce becomes officially the Counterforce in Pynchon’s novels, it is

already too late, the system has already integrated it into their social schemata as nothing more than an empty act with no true resonance among individuals:

Well, if the Counterforce knew better what those categories concealed, they might be in a better position to disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man. But they don't. Actually they do, but they don't admit it. Sad but true. They are as schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us, and that's the hard fact. The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit. We do know what's going on, and we let it go on. As long as we can see them, stare at them, those massively moneyed, once in a while. As long as they allow us a glimpse, however rarely. We need that. And how they know it—how often, under what conditions...They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical" (727).

The Counterforce last appears in an interview in the Wall Street Journal, an obvious detail that points to their "selling-out" to the mouthpiece of the capitalist system, saying: "We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop" (753). The interview goes on to detail the fracturing of the Counterforce into little esoteric circles over their different interpretations of Slothrop's "meaning"⁵¹. Slothrop becomes as much a cause to identify with to the Counterforce as he is an experiment to the scientists.

Slothrop's radical attempts, then, at establishing an identity are futile, because, to either side, Us or Them, he is merely a figure, a rallying point and not a scared human being. Faced with no real alternatives, Slothrop's physical body simply fades away. This process of dissolution lends Slothrop a respite from his pursuit; in the latter part of the novel, he forgets about what he has been chasing—information about his childhood—signaling the process has begun. "Slothrop and the S-Gerat and the Jamf/Imipolex mystery have grown to be strangers. He hasn't really thought about them

for a while.” Soon “Slothrop realizes that he is losing his mind”, which leads to a warning about his fate: “If there is something comforting—religious if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (441)⁵².

By refusing to see the connections necessary to define the structure of society, cause-and-effect, the connections that hold Slothrop together begin to disappear—he opts out—to the point that, by the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, even his close friends begin to doubt his corporeal existence:

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—‘It’s just too remote’s’ what they usually say). Does Bodine now feel his own strength may someday soon not be enough either: that soon, like all the others, he’ll *have* to let go? (755)

Ultimately, the answer is yes. The last time Slothrop appears, a few pages later, is in a childhood memory; he is no longer in the historical, he is gone⁵³. He disperses like V.: “(Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own. If so, there’s no telling which of the Zone’s present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering)” (757). Thus, Slothrop becomes part of the environment—he transcends individuality and spreads like pollen over much of the Zone. But unlike V., who did so through identifying and eventually becoming an object that was symbolically carried off by the children of Malta, Slothrop does so by rejecting the past that he had been chained to by dwelling solely in the present, in the moment.

This theory is postulated by Kurt Mondaugen, a character who also appeared along with Pig Bodine in *V.*, as one’s “personal density” which is measured by your “temporal bandwidth”:

“Temporal bandwidth” is the width of your present, your *now*. It is the familiar “delta-t” considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you’re having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you’re doing *here*, at the base of this colossal curved embankment... (517, Ellipses Pynchon’s).

After Slothrop discovers his close connection to Imipolex G, his bandwidth noticeably dwindles until it becomes nonexistent. His past is one of betrayal to corporate and scientific interests—and prior to that, in the case of William, heresy and exile back to England. Slothrop possesses no true history, no true sense of self because no action he’s ever taken was wholly his own but the product of cause-and-effect conditioning. Even by the end, he must ask “Is he drifting, or being led?” (566), Slothrop is unable, because of his past, to ever decondition himself, because, not only was he conditioned as a child scientifically, his Calvinist roots tie him religiously and culturally to predetermination. Slothrop doesn’t need to be considered the dependent variable—he *is* the dependent variable.

This is, paradoxically, why, when Slothrop dissolves, gives up his individuality, he is asserting his autonomy for the first and only time by becoming nothing, by rejecting the scientific cause-and-effect rationality of always making connections to the past in order to maintain continuity with the present. Slothrop just is:

...and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural... (638, Ellipses Pynchon’s).

Pynchon reminds the reader that not only does the vapor trail of a rocket create an arc in its rise and fall—an obvious example of cause-and-effect—so to does a rainbow. The rocket is gravity's rainbow—it is subject to a force; but the rainbow has a freedom: no cause and no effect connected to human logic, just a natural phenomenon of light⁵⁴.

Thus, Slothrop is no longer connected to the Rocket or the history that fuses him to it; he is now connected with the rainbow (his penis is liberated from the mechanical and given over to the organic by the imagery; sex is no longer perverted through its connection to death, but restored as a natural process in him), to its ever present now and its peaceful dissolution—the assurance of its presence with no connection to the past or the future.

Whereas V.'s dissolution was a “figure illustrating a process”, the chaotic disarray of the world, Slothrop's is an act of defiance, of going against the process. Slothrop may be just as inhuman as V., but there is not the sense of artificiality attached to it (V. reinforced the process of decay in the world). It seems as though he simply transcended his humanity—became existence itself, pure Being. Whereas Oedipa was vindicated by the chaos of possibilities of being within a system that was not her own, Slothrop eliminates them all, and with it the system itself, and achieves a peace that no other character in Pynchon's fiction can claim⁵⁵. His act of defiance against the system and its agents, of temporal suicide, redeems Slothrop; it makes him a real individual who acts on his own and, in the process, vitiates the experiment and rejected the system's constraints on individuality.

The rest of the world and the characters inhabiting it, though, are not so lucky. Things are getting worse: the world is in decay, in total war, and yet the system flourishes. The scientist pursuing Slothrop, Ned Pointsman, like Pierce Inverarity,

functions as the individual as the embodiment of the system—as one of the faces of Them. Pointsman represents the growing insanity of a system that uses cold logic to destroy other human beings. His obsession with cause-and-effect destroys his humanity in that he no longer sees the dogs he experiments on or Slothrop as anything other than test objects to be used for his gain and then to be disposed of—they become, in other words, extensions that can be exchanged for others.

There is always something insidious about Pointsman: from his inability to comprehend Slothrop as anything more than an experiment; to his hunting of stray dogs in the streets of bombed-out, blacked-out London; to his forcing the senile commanding officer supervising his work for the Allies, Brigadier Pudding⁵⁶, to relive, in vivid detail, his nightmarish time spent in the trenches of World War I in a particularly graphic sadomasochistic scene—Pointsman always has the ability to make those around him feel a bit unsettled. Pointsman, in a conversation with Pudding, demonstrates the insanity of a religious reliance on logic, of the cause-and-effect syllogism, in the use of precedence, affirming the historical, to justify something completely illogical: conducting an extensive scientific experiment on a human being without his knowledge or consent.

“Pudding: Isn’t it all rather shabby, Pointsman? Meddling with another man’s mind this way?”

Pointsman: Brigadier, we’re only following in a long line of experiment and questioning. Harvard University, the U.S. Army? Hardly shabby institutions.

Pudding: We can’t Pointsman, it’s beastly.

Pointsman: But the Americans have already been *at* him! don’t you see? It’s not as if we’re corrupting a virgin or something—

Pudding: Do we have to do it because the Americans do it? Must we allow them to corrupt us?” (85)

But what began as a somewhat justifiable experiment for Pointsman, merely a demonstration of Pavlovian conditioning at the human level, devolves into megalomania and paranoid fantasies over Slothrop. Somewhere in Switzerland Slothrop manages to elude Pointsman's high-priced surveillance: "Damned funding is going to be his downfall, if Slothrop doesn't drive him insane first" (273). Later he says to a colleague: "Mexico, I think I am hallucinating." The roomful of scientists working under Pointsman are obviously bothered by this comment: "Now this is odd behavior from anybody, but from usually correct Mr. Pointsman, it is enough to stop this mutually paranoid party in their tracks" (278). Pointsman's pursuit of a rational explanation for the connection between Slothrop's erections and the rocket strikes leads him to the extreme of the irrational: flat-out insanity; the condition where the irrational is the only thing that seems rational. In his state of mind, Pointsman decides that they must capture and castrate Slothrop in order to complete the experiment.

Ultimately, though, Pointsman is just as much of a pawn as Slothrop, as every other character within the novel. In the end "he'll be left only with Cause and Effect, and the rest of his sterile armamentarium...his mineral corridors do not shine. They will stay the same neutral nameless tone from here in to the central chamber, and the perfectly rehearsed scene is to play there, after all..." (766, Ellipses Pynchon's). One could fill in what Pynchon chooses to omit: after all he had played his role within the scene of his life so well for the Firm. He is left with nothing; sterile, neutral, nameless—these adjectives describe the dehumanizing effects of his reliance on causality.

Pointsman fulfills his role; he reinforces the system with his scientific dogma and is then discarded like his past experiments were. He finds himself even identifying with

the dogs after his disposal: “These days, he finds he actually misses the dogs. Who would have thought he’d ever feel sentimental over a pack of slobbering curs? But here in the Sub-ministry all is so odorless, touchless” (767). He finally sees what he never saw before: life; the vivacity of it; its inexplicable nature; the slovenly, illogical, subjective sensation of being undoubtedly alive. It is too late though, he is consigned a role in the sub-Ministry, ashen gray Sheol; that is, his fate is sealed, his role fulfilled for Them—but he is to die unfulfilled:

In the faces of Mossmoon and the others, at odd moments, he could detect a reflex he’d never allowed himself to dream of: the tolerances of men in power for one who never Made His Move, or made it wrong (767).

He never accomplishes anything; Pointsman and his science were merely tools for those men in power. What he saw as a possible goal, a chance at a Nobel Prize, was nothing more than the illusion of accomplishment while he was locked in a stasis within the system.

Power does not die, is not unfulfilled, it merely shifts. Power is essentially faceless; though Pynchon attempts to give it a face, those characters ultimately fail to fulfill the entirety of power that he suggests runs the system. It is this faceless power *within* (of course, it is Pynchon outside of the novel who is the real creator, more on this later though) the novel that destroys Europe and that creates the Zone.

The landscapes of *Gravity’s Rainbow* are very much like those found in *V.*, except that, because of World War II, the bareness of the Antarctic, the Sahara and Vheissu, and the monolithic sprawl of the city in *V.* are brought together in the rubble-strewn Europe of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The proliferation of rubble acts as a symbol for what Pynchon has essentially done to the West’s conception of history; art, literature, opera, historical and

contemporary figures all seem to be jumbled together in a heap from which Pynchon picks and chooses⁵⁷. He reduces the rational, coherent, linear history of Europe to a chaos of references and allusions, drug induced fantasies and absurd song and dance numbers.

Curtis LeMay's famous warning to the Vietnamese in 1964, that his Air Force would "bomb them back into the Stone Age," seems an apt description for what has happened in the Europe of Pynchon's imagining. A coherent culture is no longer present; instead the invading forces (not just armies, but fringe groups and many other radicals of the sort who can be likened to those who use the W.A.S.T.E. system in *The Crying of Lot 49*) and those shell-shocked Europeans still left alive resemble independent tribes scattered throughout the countryside: "...so the populations move, across the open meadow, limping, marching, shuffling, carried, hauling the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don't yet know is destroyed forever" (560, ellipsis Pynchon's). This, then, is the Zone: ahistorical, borderless, fractured and bizarre.

The Zone begins as a promise, a rainbow after the systematic destruction of the better part of a continent, for the disenfranchised, for the Counterforce. Within this environment it would seem an egalitarian spirit would flourish: the centuries old strict hierarchy of European society is gone; attempting to fill the ostensible void left by the Force are numerous fringe groups oppressed for generations seeking a chance for power. "Even G-5, living its fantasy of being the only government in Germany now, is just the arrangement for being victorious, is all. No more or less real than all these others so private, silent, and lost to History. Slothrop, though he doesn't know it yet, is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days. Not paranoia. Just how it is. Temporary alliances, knit and undone" (295).

Unfortunately, as Pynchon hints throughout, this vacuum of power is an illusion, in fact, the war itself was an illusion in that opposite forces were fighting each other as independent nations seeking to defend the lives of the individuals of their respective countries.

The only divisions are between the Elect and the Preterite, and this division, Pynchon tells us, is more entrenched than we, the Preterite, could ever know. The Elect (Shell, IG Farben, General Electric, IBM, Yoyodyne, etc.) are those that profit not just from World War II but from a constant preparedness for war—a war state, in a sense—and from the patriotic sense of duty instilled in the Preterite. It is a conspiracy, Pynchon postulates, among these corporations to stage wars over perceived differences against a diffuse and omnipresent enemy because, as Pynchon puts it in a rather supernatural passage:

It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted...secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology...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...The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite..." (529-530, ellipses and brackets Pynchon's).

In other words, the proliferation and advancement of technology has made war a profitable endeavor and human life expendable for those behind the curtain⁵⁸.

Even the vacuum of power is an illusion. Instead the Zone represents a transition from an old force to a new force. The nation states of Europe, autonomous and each with a unique power structure and culture, are obsolete. World War I signaled the decline: the

death rates of even those countries indirectly involved in what began as a regional dispute between lumbering empires is staggering enough; but, more importantly, it was also the first war where technology played a decisive role. Machine guns, tanks and airplanes all played a part in some form or another that added to the body count. In other words, it was the first time capitalist designed technology was more decisive than military tactics and training in a major war. The First World War was more the First Industrial War, and signaled the beginning of the government's continuing dependence on capitalist technology to stock their military branches.

Thus, with the ability to secure lucrative government contracts, capitalists now had a vested interest in the industry of war⁵⁹. The period in between the two World Wars was a time for innovation and build-up for this new industry: Hitler would not have been able to conduct his Blitzkrieg with such speed had it not been for Henschel, Daimler-Benz or Krupp designed tanks; and the Japanese would not have been able to bomb Pearl Harbor had Mitsubishi not designed a lighter, faster long-range bomber. Thus, World War II and its aftermath signaled the end of the nation-state and the emergence of the corporate state, that is, the system in which technology and its manufacturers exercise a dominant influence on the decisions of a government.

In Pynchon's *Zone* this is represented by the so-called Rocket-cartel:

“—A *Rocket-cartel*. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it. Even to Russia...Russia bought from Krupp, didn't she, from Siemens, the IG...

Are there arrangements Stalin won't admit...doesn't even *know about*? Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul. IG Raketen” (576).

The vacuum of power—the promise of the Zone as a new beginning—is quickly filled by a technocratic state; it is, more or less, a perfunctory changing of the guard. The rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* is a symbol of the dominance of the capitalist state, and, more importantly, the integration of the destructive impulse and technology as a tool for the system.

The work of the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who melds McLuhan's theory of the extensions of the self through technology and Freud's destructive impulse to explain how modern society is perpetuated by the aggression of the oppressed individual, will be of great help to better explain Pynchon's nihilistic dream of annihilation and its symbol: the V-2 rocket. Marcuse's theory, laid out in "Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Society", is that aggression is merely the socially beneficial aspect of the destructive impulse. The subconscious dissatisfaction with society manifests itself in the destructive impulse; the destructive impulse when directed outward (sadism) rather than inward (masochism)⁶⁰ produces aggression, which can easily be channeled in order to aid the progress of the system. "Destructive energy becomes socially useful aggressive energy, and the aggressive behavior impels growth—growth of economic, political, and technical power" (257). In this war state where science and technology are kings, destruction (or the threat of it, the potential destruction of a rocket bomb, per se) breeds creation: the inefficiency of carpet bombing in the European theatre of World War II impelled the designers of the nuclear bomb to increase their progress on the creation of a weapon capable of wiping out thousands, but it also, as Marcuse points out, created an alternative energy source.

"Just as in the contemporary scientific enterprise, so in the economic enterprise and in that of the nation as a whole, constructive and destructive achievements, work for life and work for death,

procreating and killing are inextricably united. To restrict the exploitation of nuclear energy would mean to restrict its peaceful as well as military potential; the amelioration and protection of life appear as by-products of the scientific work on the annihilation of life” (257).

Marcuse bases his work on Freud’s theories concerning the interplay of the sublimated libido (“preservation, protection, and amelioration of life (Ibid).) and the sublimated destructive impulse, and how they manifest themselves in society. “Therefore, it is only as long as destructive works in the service of Eros that it serves civilization and the individual; if aggression becomes stronger than its erotic counterpart, the trend is reversed” (Ibid). Aggression, then, is checked by allowing it to “explode” in the controlled environment of society through the act of production and through engaging in war.

Because of the constant preparedness for war, the individual is able to channel this excess aggression outside of civilian life (i.e. production) through participating in war itself, by becoming a soldier. Whether a war is actually going on or not is now beside the point, because technology and training allow wars to be simulated. One need not stretch their mind too far to realize the potentially dehumanizing effects of turning a war into a video game or training exercise. The technological aspect of the military creates a new form “in which aggression today is released and satisfied”. This new form Marcuse terms “technological aggression and satisfaction,” in which “the act of aggression is physically carried out by a mechanism with a high degree of automatism, of far greater power than the individual human being who sets it in motion, keeps it in motion, and determines its end of target”. Clearly, very simple parallels can be drawn to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, especially when Marcuse says, “The most extreme case is the rocket or missile” (263).

The V-2 rocket is central to both the characters in the novel and is the main symbol (Profane being the main *character*) around which the novel organizes itself. The rocket, because of the pure symmetry of its flight, the ease with which it is set up, fired and disassembled, and the simple ease with which it at once breaks and utilizes the bounds of nature in its flight and descent, is elevated to a level of near deification by the Allies, the Germans, and anyone else seeking it out in the Zone. In doing so, the characters repress the actual appeal of the V-2: the ease, the range and the effectiveness with which it kills lots of people—mostly civilian. In its arc they see a rainbow, a math equation, the parabola of life; but they never actually see its aftermath. For those on the targeted ground, all they see is Death descending. Slothrop, at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is assigned to investigate the wreckage after a V-2 hit on a house in London:

“Aftermaths. Each morning—at first—someone in Civil Defence routed ACHTUNG a list of yesterday’s hits. It would come round to Slothrop last, he’d detach its pencil-smear’d buck slip, go draw the same aging Humber from the motor pool, and make his rounds, a Saint George after the fact, going out to poke about for droppings of the Beast, fragments of German hardware that wouldn’t exist, writing empty summaries into his note-books—work therapy. As inputs to ACHTUNG got faster, often he’d show up in time to help the search crews—following restless-muscled RAF dogs into the plaster smell, the gas leaking, the leaning long splinters and sagging mesh, the prone and noseless caryatids, rust already at nails and naked threadsurfaces, the powdery wipe of Nothing’s hand across wallpaper a whisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep lawns to Georgian houses long ago, to safe groves of holm oak...among the calls for silence following to where some exposed hand or brightness of skin waited them, survivor or casualty. When he couldn’t help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God, first time since the other Blitz, for life to win out. But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped” (25).

This long passage encapsulates the fear bred among those on the receiving end of the V-2 attacks. Slothrop develops a deep-seated paranoia that the Germans have a rocket with his name painted on it. For those in London, the V-2's are the Beast, a vessel carrying Nothing—it is senseless, mechanical, ever-so anonymous death. But those seeking the mysterious 00000 rocket and hoping to fire it, call it the Holy Grail, they view it as a religious ritual; firing it is the point, where it lands is incidental.

The important point to look at in connection with this is that each end of the Rocket's life is an act of creation for the system and destruction for the individual. Pynchon devotes a narrative to one of the Rocket's designers, thus allowing the reader a chance at glimpsing the progression of the rocket from blueprints, math equations, and the procurement of individual components, to unsuccessful test-runs, and ultimately to the terror rained down upon London. In doing so, the designer, Pokler, becomes lost in the minutiae until he can only relate to the rocket and because of this his wife, Leni, leaves him. "Pokler was an extension of the Rocket, long before it was ever built...Temperatures, velocities, pressures, fin and body configurations, stabilities and turbulences began to slip in, to replace what Leni had run away from" (408). The creation of the rocket for Pokler destroys his humanity, makes him merely a part of the process of creating the rocket.

The creative elements of the aftermath are a bit harder to see though. Slothrop takes notice of it while traveling through the Zone:

"The war has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image. The tracks run in different networks now. What appears to be destruction is really the shaping of railroad spaces to other purposes, intentions he can only, riding through it for the first time, begin to feel the leading edges of..." (261, ellipses Pynchon's).

Another character has this same revelation while approaching a bombed-out refinery that provided fuel *for* the V-2:

“This serpentine slag-heap he is just about to ride into now, this ex-refinery, Jamf Olfabriken Werke AG, is *not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order.* Only waiting for the right connections to be set up, to be switched on...modified, precisely, *deliberately* by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both—‘*sides?*’—had always agreed on...(529, Ellipses Pynchon’s).

This destruction as calculated creation motif conveniently points back to the false dichotomy (“*sides?*”) that stands in for the corporate leviathan ruling over the Zone. The deification of the Rocket and the Calvinist doctrine throughout these passages elevates this destruction to a ritualistic plane; the high priests of the system must sacrifice the individual, must sacrifice an entire continent in order to appease their Moloch trinity of capital, industry and technology. To Pynchon this is indisputable and irreversible; when the system has reached the point where it can dispense with untold millions of individuals, destroy whole villages, plunder great pieces of art and architecture for the sake of stepping up production capacity, it is too late for the individual—especially if he must be involved in this process so that he can provide for himself and his family.

When the mannequin SHROUD warns Profane that “there may be no more standards for crazy or sane anymore, now that it’s started” (*V.* 316), he demonstrates a prescience in knowing that the process of dehumanization has already begun not only in Pynchon’s novels, but in the world outside of his fictions as well. It culminates in *Gravity’s Rainbow* with the systematic destruction of World War II in the European theatre, and in Pynchon’s world in the bombing of Hiroshima, at the push of a button, by America. Insanity, presented by the idea to bomb a few hundred thousand people in

cities that housed no major military operations but huge civilian populations in order to save more lives in the end, is terribly sane in the hands of those in power. There is truly no difference, because those distinctions matter only to the individual, not the to systems that use, and thus, are above, logic to manipulate the general populace into accepting their plans.

Pynchon, though, is guilty too of using destruction, of blurring the lines between sanity and insanity, in order to create his own world that he condemns the system for using. But in his use of destruction is the last hope of the real individual, the artist. It lies not in changing the world though, but in creating his own world separate from the real world. The idea of destruction as a way of creating a subliminal pattern plays out significantly in *Gravity's Rainbow's* relation to the world in which Pynchon wrote it.

By destroying Europe not only does Pynchon mimic a historical event, he acts out the potential fate of America at the height of the Cold War when tensions ran at their highest. History would term one of the most valued qualities looked for in a leader at that time brinksmanship: that is, their willingness to take their country as close to nuclear war as possible in order to get the enemy to back down. The military theorist Herman Kahn was writing abstract volumes on the possibility of surviving an all-out nuclear war, while school-children huddled beneath desks during bomb drills and their parents shopped around for fall-out shelters. To say that *Gravity's Rainbow* is not infused with this anxiety over the escalating arms race and its catastrophic consequences would be to completely misread the text.

This anxiety was pervasive throughout the whole of the American culture; for example, an essay written in 1971 by W. Basil McDermott entitled "Thinking About

Herman Kahn” makes this grim observation: “No society today reveals even the mildest hint of the social and political reorganization necessary simply to survive to the year 2000” (56). He goes on to say: “In all of this, arms control is a necessary step in any long run journey to world peace. Kahn has never blinked at this issue but quite another matter is whether the very ways of his thinking about short run problems will enable us to make it to the year 2000” (61). Clearly, when an intellectual publishing in The Journal of Conflict Resolution (!) is almost wholly convinced that civilization, after five thousand or so years of existence, will not make it another thirty years, it shows the high level of anxiety that that society is immersed in.

This state of anxiety is a direct consequence of the nuclear arms race that was necessary after World War II to keep society producing at its war time rate. This is an example, once again, of the system imposing its will upon the individual to participate, as a producer, in what gives him the greatest fear—the threat to his mortality. He is forced to repress his animal instincts of flight, of the desire to reject his chains, because of the lure of patriotism and the idea of stockpiling against a great enemy in Soviet Russia. To produce nuclear bombs and to support the country to build more bombs through tax dollars seems logical as a defense against attack. But the situation itself is illogical to the point of absurdity due to the almost guaranteed prospect of mutually assured destruction. The only logical end for the production of a nuclear bomb is that it will be used on the enemy, but destruction on that scale guarantees that almost every single individual on the two opposing sides will perish. This is, as Marcuse concludes in “Aggressiveness”, the ultimate manifestation of Freud’s death impulse:

“If Freud’s theory is correct, and the destructive impulse strives for the annihilation of the individual’s own life no matter how long the ‘detour’ via other lives and targets, then we may

indeed speak of a suicidal tendency on a truly social scale, and the national and international play with total destruction may well have found a firm basis in the individual structure of individuals” (268).

Destruction in *Gravity's Rainbow* does not function as an ultimate end though; it is merely another form of creation. On the narrative level, from the destruction of Europe arose a corporate state; on the meta-level the destruction of Europe is a manifestation of Pynchon's nuclear anxiety. It creates a possibility for the future out of the destruction of the past. Stefan Mattessich says of this, “I am able to symptomatize a historical context predicated on a discontinuous temporality. *Gravity's Rainbow* highlights this discontinuity most explicitly through its narrative displacement from America in the late 1960s and early 1970s to Europe in 1945” (*Lines of Flight* 79). The prevalence of rocket imagery is the most salient example of the “narrative displacement” in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Presumably, in 1945 the significance of the rocket as a precision weapon, or as a carrier of nuclear explosives, was not yet as fully realized as it was by 1973. Yet the rocket is pursued monomaniacally not just by those fringe groups who viewed it as a Holy Grail, but, historically, by both the Russians and the Americans eager to find out the Germans' secrets.

More importantly though, there are more characters than just Slothrop who walk around London sensing that a rocket is aimed at them directly; Pirate Prentice feels this same anxiety: “What if it should hit *exactly*—ahh, no—for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull... There will indeed be others, each just as likely to land on top of him” (8-9). The reader himself is actually subjected to this sort of paranoia in the last vignette of the novel as it is revealed that each reader is part of the audience in the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles, staring at

“the darkening and awful expanse of screen” which is showing Gottfried’s last ride in Rocket 00000:

“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” (775).

The presence of Richard M. Zhubb, the “Adenoid”, as night manager of the theatre, acts as a veiled reference to Richard M. Nixon, President at the time of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s publication, and hints through this subversion at the historical present of the novel.

The more significant occurrence of suppressed information acting as a subliminal signifier for Pynchon’s trepidation over the course of American society is his refusal to directly portray the bombing of Hiroshima. The reference made to it is in the form of scraps of newspaper blowing through an empty German street that Slothrop reads, and (after the bracketed ellipsis) the narrator imagines.

In one of these streets, in the morning fog, plastered over two slippery cobblestones, is a scrap of newspaper headline, with a wirephoto of a giant white cock, dangling in the sky straight downward out of a white pubic bush. The letters

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appear above with the logo of some occupation newspaper [...] At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east, head, shoulders, breasts, 17, 36’ down to her maidenhead at the horizon. A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity. She loomed in the eastern sky gazing down at the city about to be sacrificed. The sun was in Leo. The fire burst came roaring and sovereign...” (708).

The images of Eros (cock, the Virgin’s breasts) confuse the oblique references to the bombing (doomed, sacrificed, fire burst) so that only a reader with a historical

perspective could glean any sort of information out of this passage—let alone that it was referring to the greatest single act of aggression in human history.

Pynchon destroys as an act of creating an approximate image of his fears. But since he never portrays them explicitly, he is rebelling against the logical positivism that emerged out of the Age of Reason, which acts as the primary mode of discourse in a scientifically dominated society, through the act of negation. Simply, by not explicitly critiquing American culture or expressing his nuclear anxiety directly—by dwelling in the negative—Pynchon refuses to engage in the positivists one-sided dialectic.

For Marcuse this rejection by the artist allows him to be able to communicate an artistic truth that is no longer permitted in the “one-dimensional society”. This all lies in the contradictory qualities of art itself: “And since contradiction is the work of Logo—rational confrontation of ‘that which is not’ with ‘that which is’—it must have a medium of communication. The struggle for this medium, or rather the struggle against its absorption into the predominant one-dimensionality, shows forth in the avant-garde efforts to create an estrangement which would make the artistic truth again communicable” (*One-Dimensional Man* 66). In the realm of literature, this means “Creating and moving in a medium which presents the absent, the poetic language is a language of cognition—but a cognition which subverts the positive” (67). Thus, Pynchon, the artist, is attempting to reassert the true dialectic: the dialogue between the positive and negative; assent and dissent. In doing so, he must reject the flattened dynamic of positivist thought and reclaim logic as a concept for the free, and not a tool of the oppressors. As Marcuse and Pynchon both demonstrate, logic is so inextricably linked to humanity, that its misuse effectively distorts humanity.

By presenting society as one united whole against the outside Enemy, those in control purposely misrepresent the world. Unity is not so simple—is not so unified. Marcuse suggests, borrowing a concept from Bertolt Brecht, the artist must then purposely misrepresent the world in his piece of art through the use of defamiliarization: “The estrangement effect (Verfremdungseffekt) is to produce this dissociation in which the world can be recognized as what it is”. Marcuse goes on to say, “The ‘estrangement-effect’ is not superimposed on literature. It is rather literature’s own answer to the threat of total behaviorism—the attempt to rescue the rationality of the negative” (67). In doing so, the artist reasserts his individuality and freedom of thought by reestablishing choice; by being able to choose what he will or will not introduce into his art, the artist is able to subvert the system and its stranglehold on logic.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* Pynchon is essentially demonstrating the rationality of the negative. The narrator of *GR* at one point says, “But every true god must be both organizer and destroyer” (101)—that is builder and negator. Pynchon is undoubtedly the true god of this text—the ultimate determiner. But through the act of writing out the bombing of Europe, he is creating the destruction; thus making it positive, in a sense. Pynchon’s intentional suppression of the world in which he is writing *Gravity’s Rainbow*—a reverse palimpsest, where the past is written over the present (or possible future)—though, is where the act of social disobedience, the assertion of the negative, takes its greatest hold. The Counterforce fails because it sought to become the dominant power and thus was assimilated into the system as a sort of ritualistic, non-threatening protestation. Slothrop, unable to truly assert his individuality within the system, slips into apathy about resisting the system and disintegrates from it with no lasting trace. His

dissolution as an act of individuality brings peace to himself, and is an act of protest against the system's logic in the illogical circumstances surrounding it, but it really does not give a positive alternative to oppressed individuals, because he basically commits suicide, though in a non-conventional way. Pynchon succeeds in spite of the dominant system through the creation of art, the refusal to submit his individuality for the "good" of society. By reasserting the forgotten dialectic, and thus freeing logic from its constraints, Pynchon is able to opt out of the total suicide pact with technology that the world both in his fictions and in reality is engaged in. He does not opt out by destroying his individuality, but by affirming it—by becoming the dominant power in a world of his creation where there is no dispute that Thomas Pynchon's individual sensibilities crafted it.

End Notes

¹Susan Swartzlander writes about the ideology of Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist* and how it works out in reality in *Ulysses*: “Stephen rejects all aspects of his father’s world because they make demands on his life. Despite his insistent ‘*non-serviam*,’ Stephen only achieves partial success. By the end of *Ulysses*, there is no indication that Stephen has been able to cast off completely the nets of family, church, and country; we know only that he realizes the necessity of ridding himself of this dangerous historical burden” (“The Tests of Reality”, 141).

²Sara Solberg comments, “All this makes for very problematical comparison. In the case of Joyce and Pynchon, there can be no certainty of direct influence, for the simple reason that both authors are interested in sabotaging all such attempts to achieve absolute clarity” (“On Comparing Apples and Oranges: James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon”, 38). I can’t say I agree with Ms. Solberg. Comparison is unavoidable—Pynchon and Joyce are constantly lumped together. Edward Mendelson establishes Pynchon as the inheritor of the mantle of the creator of the next “encyclopedic narrative” from Joyce (See “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon”). This alone doesn’t establish a connection, but the clear parallels in the use of myth and an explicit reference on page 266 of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, not to mention the year 1904, in which *Ulysses* is set, that is brought up in *The Crying of Lot 49* (98) make for at least for substantial coincidences that link Joyce and Pynchon very closely together.

³ Frank Palmeri supports this idea: “Myths and literary genres, like scientific paradigms, serve as conventional models of explanation” (“Neither Literally nor as Metaphor”, 979).

⁴Swartzlander writes, “We can see that Joyce and Pynchon are both searching for solutions to the individual’s problematic quest for meaning in a modern existence” (133-34).

⁵ For more on this, see chapter 4.

⁶This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

⁷Edward Mendelson sees this constant movement as the height of futility: “In short, the romantic quest is the image of romantic literature’s own condition: purposeless, aspiring to a goal it can never achieve or define. And in *Ulysses*, the circular journey of Bloom, turning in an endless and purposeless repetition, is the culminating disillusioned image of that same condition” (Introduction to *Pynchon*, 13).

⁸See Mendelson’s “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon”.

⁹The point where the rocket’s fuel stops burning and begins its descent towards the target.

¹⁰ I have adopted this term from Freud. It is to be understood, for the purposes of this chapter, as a desire to return to the inanimate, whether through death or, in using McLuhan’s theories, through identification with an object. I will not discuss Freud, save for a brief mention when appropriate, because it is only the understanding of this simple concept that is needed for my point to be made. For more on what Freud termed the “death instinct” see his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*.

¹¹ The relationship between Profane and Stencil has been likened to Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom’s in *Ulysses*. Richard Patten in his essay “What Stencil Knew: Structure and Certitude in Pynchon’s *V.*” says of this: “The coming together of Stencil and Profane and their subsequent splitting apart has, along with the obvious maternal implication of V., reminded a number of critics of *Ulysses*” (28). Roger Henkle continues the comparison: “Stencil, like Stephen Dedalus, is engaged in a Jesuitical search of the past for its ‘meaning’; Benny, like Bloom, is immersed in the experience of the everyday” (“Pynchon’s Tapestries on the Western Wall”, 103). Henkle also makes an interesting comparison between the theme of degeneration in *V.* and the comparison to *Ulysses*: “It is as if Benny, the son of a Jewish mother and Catholic father, were a degeneration from Bloom, for Benny’s mind has completely and lazily succumbed

to the profane; it has none of the rich imaginative variety of Leopold Bloom's. And the science that so fascinated Bloom has really got Benny down" (Ibid).

¹² Henkle unfortunately condemns Profane as nothing more than a stereotype (I say unfortunately, because I find Profane to be the most sympathetic character in the novel): "Benny Profane, though modeled partly on absurd literature's bum, is a *reduction ad absurdum* of that favorite American novel device, the 'honest, neutral' protagonist-observer who is sensitive but nearly inert; he is a logical step down from Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway and [Nathanael] West's Tod Hackett" (103).

¹³ Michael Vella suggests that Vheissu is a pun that locates it within the reader, thus fusing the outer environments of the novel together with the interior landscapes of the characters: "In a play on words, Pynchon tells us as much: For 'Vheissu' is nothing less than the paronomasic encoding of 'V is You.' With that pun Pynchon interjects the visionary experience of *V.* into his readers once and for all" ("Thomas Pynchon's Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain", 139).

¹⁴ Joseph Slade makes a similar observation: "A principal symptom of decadence is its affinity for the mechanical, and to strengthen the appropriateness of his metaphor Pynchon associates the yo-yo with a second child's toy, the gyroscope. The entrepreneur Bloody Chielitz is content to manufacture such mechanical playthings until he discovers that gyroscopes are more valuable in missile guidance systems. Converting his toy factory to a 'defense' plant, Chielitz names the new corporation Yoyodyne: the dyne (a unit of force) is put to mindless and lethal use" (*Thomas Pynchon*, 90-91).

¹⁵ Tanner notes this: "The book is full of dead landscapes of every kind—from the garbage heaps of the modern world to the lunar barrenness of the actual desert. On every side there is evidence of the 'assertion of the Inanimate'" (21).

¹⁶ Henkle equates the desire to create cities with the desire to have plastic surgery performed: "The city is a form of plastic surgery on a grand scale—an attempt to cover up... [p]lastic surgery is a way of avoiding the truth" (26-27).

¹⁷ Tanner makes a similar suggestion in relation to the idea of paranoia in the novel: "What Pynchon manages to suggest is that the fantasies we build to help us live represent, in fact, an infiltration of that death we think we are so eager to postpone" (36). Thus, as McLuhan suggests, if objects become a part of the body, as a buffer, they also represent the fear of death. By surrounding themselves with inert objects, they need not recognize what the quick and what the dead is; only what is and what is not.

¹⁸ "For the proliferation of inert things is another way of hastening the entropic process. On all sides the environment is full of hints of exhaustion, extinction, dehumanization; and *V.* is a very American novel in as much as one feels that instead of the characters living *in* their environment, environment lives *through* the characters, who thereby tend to become figures illustrating a process" (21).

¹⁹ McLuhan says of this: "One of the merits of motivation research has been the revelation of man's sex relation to the motor car" (46).

²⁰ Stefan Mattesich focuses much of his book *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* on fetishes and perverse sexuality in Pynchon's first three novels. He also provides a very interesting take on the counterculture and the portrayal of time in Pynchon's novels.

²¹ Slade comments on Rachel's presence in the novel: "Put simply, she is good because she 'cares' about other people. As she matures, Rachel discards her fondness for the inanimate MG in favor of involvement that is painful but necessary if humans are to survive. ... Free of the [Whole Sick] Crew's inertia, determined to live in an animate world, Rachel pins her hopes on Profane, but runs up against his usual ambivalence" (107). He goes on to claim "Rachel is one of Pynchon's most fully-realized figures" (110).

²² Tanner agrees: "What [Pynchon] shows—and here the juxtaposition of the historical and the personal dimensions is vital—is a growing tendency, discernible on all levels and in the most out-of-the-way

pockets of modern history, for people to regard or use other people as objects, and, perhaps even more worryingly, for people to regard themselves as objects” (22).

²³ Mattessich notes the perverse sexuality that arises between objects and humans, and its deeper meaning for human sexuality: This litany of near disastrous encounters with various man-made tools underscores the relation between inanimate and animate, tools and their users, that the novel is constantly troping. For Profane, that relation is complicated by desire for the inanimate and desire as the inanimate in us. This is why the novel abounds with characters who are in love with machines (Rachel Owlglass with her MG, Pig Bodine with his Harley Davidson), and why, more disturbingly, characters reveal themselves to be machines, rigged with switches or constructed out of synthetic plastic. Sexual desire, Profane observes, reduces people to the level of objects, inserts them within a machine of imaginary projections and partial objects made to bear the weight and function of an irretrievably lost and full presence (31-32).

²⁴ Manganese: iron-like metal. Used in production of steel. As usual with Pynchon, names often signify an important attribute of a character’s personality as a way to reiterate a theme. In this case, V.’s changing her surname to that of an element further reinforces her process of turning herself into an object.

²⁵ Kenneth Kupsch has a different view of what Edward Mendelson terms “the decline of the animate into the inanimate” (Introduction to *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 6) in *V.*: “If anything in *V.* can be said to have become meaningless, it may be the distinction between the words *animate* and *inanimate*. Indeed, it is almost as if they would be forged into some new word that could contain both ideas simultaneously. It has been thought that *V.* single-mindedly depicts a decline in the world from the animate to the inanimate, but this view really only represents half of the novel’s more complex and subtle equation. For each animate being that can be seen to have become somehow less animate, there is some inanimate object, like Benny’s garrulous robot-antagonist SHROUD or Rachel Owlglass’s sensuous sports car, that has become to some degree newly animate” (“Finding V.,” 441). Though he goes on to contradict himself by wholly separating the two words, Kupsch’s idea of animate and inanimate being two sides of the same coin is very interesting. This is because both take place because of a *single* process: identification with an object. The human being becomes less so by identifying with the object; while the object assumes the human qualities projected on it. McLuhan’s theory of self-amputation easily clears up what Kupsch views as a major oversight on many critics part.

²⁶ Josephine Hendin also sees the pure and heroic in Profane: “...Benny Profane, a man whose nightmare is that his ‘clock-heart’ and ‘sponge’ brain will be disassembled on the rubble strewn streets, but whose grace is his ability to be a perpetual motion machine who rolls on too fast to lose his heart or let anyone touch the controls of his mind. The profane Christ is the one who won’t get crucified” (“What is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?”, 42-43).

²⁷ Slade rejects Hendin’s suggestion that Profane is analogous to Christ; he does not see a redemptive quality in Profane, but he too, in this instance, takes a similar sympathetic tone when speaking of him: “The tension between Profane’s desire to be an object of mercy and his fear of becoming inanimate produces just enough vibration to keep him moving, but not enough to let him bestow any salvation” (95). Slade for the most part though is very critical of Profane adopting an ambivalent tone when discussing him: “Generally, however, Profane prefers to leave no trace of himself, by escaping all but the most minimal contact with others. A romantic trying to hold on to what illusions he permits himself, he does not rebel against society; he merely declines the ‘communion’ with others that he senses leads to the homogeneity of the mob and the decadence of the age” (92). He also writes that Profane “Intent on coolness, i.e., non-involvement, he can not care” (112). Slade seems to see the idealized figure that Hendin sees in Profane, but Slade refuses to let Profane off the hook for the actions (or rather inactions) that he performs in order to become such a wholly separate, relatively pure figure in *V.*

²⁸ Thomas Schaub also notices the applicability of McLuhan to Pynchon’s second novel: “The origin of Pynchon’s use of the Narcissus myth is Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. The world of *The Crying of Lot 49* is built around those ‘extensions’: word of mouth, cars and mattresses, the written work in plays and bathrooms, even the configuration of cities and towns. In

McLuhan's view, all these are the narcissistic extensions of man whose medium is the message of his culture" ("A Gentle Chill, An Ambiguity: *The Crying of Lot 49*", 54).

²⁹ Tony Tanner makes a comparison between Oedipa and Stencil that deals with the duality of Oedipa's quest throughout the novel: "At the same time she is involved in a quest like Stencil's, a compulsive and widening effort of 'synthesizing' which may be hallucination and maybe be discovery" ("V. and V-2", 39)

³⁰ Paul Maltby in his work *Dissident Postmodernists* notes how such mimicry can be put to use by the dominant system (this too is discussed by Marcuse in the next chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow*): "[Pynchon] subscribes to the characteristically postmodern view that, in the late capitalist era, oppositional movements may work to the advantage of the system against which they are directed" (148).

³¹ Maltby concerns most of his chapter on Pynchon on the parallels between the Trystero and the counterculture movement in *The Crying of Lot 49*: "While the term 'Tristero' denotes groups which cannot simply be identified with the New Left or countercultural radicals, one can see how, for a politically conscious author of the mid-1960s, the alternative communications network might also serve as a symbol of mass alienation from the official culture, as an expression of 'a profound rift within a community'" (138).

³² "It may have been an intuition that the letter would be newsless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside, when it arrived. At first she didn't see. It was an ordinary Muchoesque envelope, swiped from the station, ordinary airmail stamp, to the left of the cancellation a blurb put on by the government, REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMASER" (33). This transposing of two letters, a subtle hint of subversion resembling at a cursory glance a normal piece of postage, is a common tactic employed by the Trystero, as Oedipa is to learn.

³³ See also ACDC, the Alameda County Death Cult. "Once a month they were to choose some victim from among the innocent, the virtuous, the socially integrated and well-adjusted, using him sexually, then sacrificing him" (99).

³⁴ Robert J. Hansen comments on what would happen if a system as scattershot as the Trystero became a dominant system: "Yet the conception of anarchy as a harmonious coalition of have-nots ignores significant tensions within and between marginalized subcultures; it depends upon a single us-them dichotomy (between the official order and the users of the Tristero), when in fact there is a *proliferation of us-thems*" ("Law, History, and the Subversion of Postwar America in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, 607).

³⁵ Frank Palmeri compares the fictional San Narciso, and the Trystero, with the real San Francisco, and the numerous fringe groups and outcasts that Oedipa encounters in her journey through the night: "Fictional San Narciso is the source of seemingly objective but always inconclusive evidence of Tristero's existence, such as Wharfinger's play and Inverarity's stamps. One the other hand, San Francisco, which refers to the world outside the text, produces a hallucinatory sequence of misfits, invisible people, and parodies. But the seeming hallucination paradoxically opens Oedipa's eyes to convincing evidence of objective, anonymous dispossession" ("Neither Literally nor as Metaphor", 992).

³⁶ Palmeri notes the different interpretations of the Trystero and how they all point to a history outside of the novel: "In political history, Tristero is revolutionary and reactionary; in economic history, it is sinister and saddening; *in the religious realm, it includes both the miraculous and the demonic*. With the clues about Tristero, as with the concept of entropy, Pynchon points out that our paradigms are tools to think with. In the gaps between them, however, he registers a historical truth that the paradigms themselves either discount or ignore. There may be no conclusive evidence of the historical existence of Tristero, but there is still all the widely dispersed evidence of historical disinheritance that Oedipa and the reader can gather under the heading of Tristero. The name itself is a red herring, but it points to an important truth" (Italics mine, 991).

³⁷ Tanner calls the Trystero, as one of the possibilities for its interpretation a “second and hidden America” (42)

³⁸George Levine comments, “More important than the possible resoulion of the quests is the disorientation and almost visceral disturbance that comes of being forced into them. Such disturbance is a condition of growth for the characters and for the readers. Pynchon evokes the terror and anxiety of the disturbance as he describes the feelings of Oedipa, in the last moments of her novel, awaint silently the crying, the annunciation—of what rough beast?” (“Risking the Moment”, 114).

³⁹Frank Kermode says of Oedipa’s relation to the Trystero and its ambiguities: “We can’t of course, be told which, and we question the novel as Oedipa does the Tristero plot. The plot is pointed to as the object of some possible annunciation; but the power is in the pointing, not in any guarantee. One could talk for hours about this remarkable work, but at the bottom of all one said would be the truth that it imitates the texts of the world, and also imitates their problematical quality” (“Decoding the Trystero”, 166). In other words, the truth is that there is no truth in the objective sense. The ambiguities make for numerous interpretations, and thus all truth is its appeal to one particular person’s sensibilities. If one is allergic to the sense of a Platonic capital T Truth, then they need not worry because to them *The Crying of Lot 49* is not concerned with truth.

⁴⁰Kermode says of the Trystero: “The messages sent by the illicit system are normally without content; this could be true of the novel” (165). I don’t necessarily mean what Kermode means when I say that a personal meaning isn’t exacted from the book. I just mean that there isn’t that sense of seriousness of purpose that is clearly attached to Oedipa’s journey through the novel. Since one singular meaning does not arise out of the novel does not mean that it is without content, it just means that it is not one of those books with a single clear moral that allows for the reader to make an easy identification with it.

⁴¹ Steven Weisenburger writes, “In turn, reality in the novel often seems to the characters to be an elaborately scripted fiction put together by “Them” with the intention of deflecting the characters’ concern away from the very real nightmares around them” (“Pynchon and the Uses of the Past”, 59).

⁴² Christopher Ames in his essay “Power and the Obscene Word: Discourses of Extremity in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*” discusses the antagonistic relationship between mathematical imagery and obscenities, including graffiti in *GR*. Equations, according to Ames, act as the tool of the Elect, those in control, while obscenities are acts of defiance for the Preterite.

⁴³ For more information on the importance of the number eight in *GR* see Weisenburger’s *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*, pg. 152.

⁴⁴ See Ames again.

⁴⁵James Earl concurs: “The struggle between freedom and determinism is played out large in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in Slothrop’s Progress: whether or not and how Slothrop can free himself from the control of Jamf, the IG, Pointsman, and the Firm is the central issue of the book’s main plot. By the time Slothrop enters the Zone, our impression (and his too) is that he is the totally conditioned man, programmed, manipulated, and monitored since infancy by conspiracies within conspiracies; he is a test case, the perfect ‘fox’ for testing and perfecting Pavlov’s and Pointsman’s theories of behavioral determinism” (“Freedom and Knowledge in the Zone”, 229).

⁴⁶Much of this section is actually from Pynchon’s own family history. See Matthew Winston’s “The Quest for Pynchon” in which he traces Pynchon’s family line back to the eleventh century. William Pynchon sailed on either the *Ambrose* or the *Jewell* with Governor Winthrop and published *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* in 1650, which was ceremoniously burned in Boston. The family name Pynchon also appears in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*.

⁴⁷ See also Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Three Versions of Judas” for a similar reinterpretation of the meaning of Judas within the Christian tradition.

⁴⁸See “The Penis He Thought Was His Own” (219) for a rather rousing number about Slothrop’s misconception.

⁴⁹Joseph Slade’s chapter on *Gravity’s Rainbow* “Living on the Interface” in his work *Thomas Pynchon* and Lance Ozier’s “The Calculus of Transformation” for more on Slothrop’s dissolution into nature, and the Rilkeian overtones associated with it.

⁵⁰ Profane, the “counterforce” in *V.* is really only a foil in the sense that he contradicts the prevailing trend in the novel. No one could confuse him for an actual force, a representation of the Counterculture that the Trystero functions as in *The Crying of Lot 49*. But even the Trystero is not a counterforce in the true sense; it exists less in protest and more in rejection of mainstream society. It seems to function not to subvert the dominant force, but establish a new system independent from it. Therefore, it does not seek to improve, or check the dominant force as a true counterforce ought to, instead it just seems to function in ignorance of any other system, even the one it incidentally subverts.

⁵¹ Mendelson in the Introduction to *Pynchon* writes, “And similarly, the book’s vision of Slothrop’s personal *disconnectedness* (what the book calls ‘anti-paranoia’) has its correspondences in the political chaos of the post-war German Zone—a chaos that is about to be ordered once again into bureaucracies, just as the vacancy left by Slothrop’s disintegration will be filled with comforting explanations and organized memorialists” (14).

⁵² An interesting comparison can be made to Marcuse’s “Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Society”. Marcuse writes, “unemployment as normal condition, even if comfortable, seems worse than stupefying routine work” (255). By being unemployed one cuts his ties with society, they are no longer a functional part of society and thus they are outside of it. It is man’s nature to recognize cause and effect, the connections between things and also to participate in society, to be functional. Slothrop, in accepting anti-paranoia, no longer acts as a part of society.

⁵³ There are competing theories on Slothrop’s dissolution. Joseph Slade in his work *Pynchon* says that, “He is beyond control, perhaps beyond zero; he is free and yet he is not, not as Weber defined freedom, which consists in exercising the choice of design which paradoxically makes us prisoners. Slothrop has freed himself from karmic cycles, but he has no choices and therefore can not be said to be free. He cannot affirm death and for that reason can not affirm life” (209). But it is the position of this paper, and the position of Lance Ozier that Slothrop’s dissolution is the transcendence of an oppressive society. Ozier says that belief in paranoia and cause-and-effect makes one unable to transcend, but rather creates a stasis. Using the few lines of Rilke that appear a few pages before Profane’s ultimate disappearance as a signal for Pynchon’s true intentions, Ozier suggests that Slothrop is approaching “pure Being” (“The Calculus of Transformation”, 198).

⁵⁴ Things do get a bit complicated here. Gravity is a part of nature as well. But it has also been coopted by science and integrated into the system. Gravity is, in a sense, exploited by the system, used *contra naturam* as a destructive force and is thus, in this comparison, the opposite of a rainbow. People lived millennia without a scientific explanation for gravity; it had a mythology attached to it, but it certainly wasn’t a governing principle of life. In other words, it wasn’t functional within society; it couldn’t be rationalized. The rainbow has no inherent function, it can be explained as a scientific process, reflection of light, etc., but not rationalized. It cannot be put to use by society.

⁵⁵ For literary corollaries see Remedios the Beauty in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who inexplicably ascends to heaven one day; and Enoch in Genesis: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him” (6.24). Ozier and Slade also mention Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

⁵⁶ See Paul Fussell’s “The Brigadier Remembers” for a discussion of Pudding’s symbolic presence in *GR*: “The presence of Brigadier Pudding in the novel proposes the Great War as the ultimate origin of the insane contemporary scene. It is where the irony and the absurdity began” (215).

⁵⁷ More extensive discussions on Pynchon's use of history and his conception of time can be found in Steven Weisenburger's "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past" and Lawrence Wolfley's "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel".

⁵⁸ This reference to the "Wizard of Oz" is not inappropriate as *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds with references to the famous film (see Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*). The epigraph for part 3 of *GR* ("In the Zone") is taken directly from the film: "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore"; this suggests the fantastic nature of the Zone, the probability of the improbable, etc. For more on the presence of film in *Gravity's Rainbow* see Antonio Marquez' "The Cinematic Imagination in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*".

⁵⁹ See the genesis of Yoyodyne in Chapter 2.

⁶⁰ See Norman O. Brown's chapter "Death, Time, and Eternity" in his book *Life Against Death* for a more comprehensive definition of how the death impulse outwardly manifests itself among individuals within society.

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